

ESCAPE ARTIST

by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis, *Escape Artist*, is a composite novel written as a fictitious memoir, similar in style to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, that describes my experiences between the years 2001 and 2011. During that time I went through Marine Corps Boot Camp, became a military police officer, patrolled Yuma, AZ, was sent to Iraq for a seven-month tour as a security detail just before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and made it back home four years later. The novel also looks into my struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, how they affected the people around me, and what I've been trying to do to remedy them (or ignore them).

I dedicate this novel to my parents and brother, who never stopped listening, and to the counselors at the University of Central Florida, who showed me how to tell my family. This novel couldn't have been finished without their guidance and support.

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NOMENCLATURE OF A PILE

Imagine a bedroom with blank-white walls, a bare mattress in the corner, and next to that mattress, at the center of the room, is a Pile. Throughout your life you've discovered piles like this, full of late-night clothes exchanges for the dinner plans with smokey-eyed men in grocery stores, of last-minute packing for cross-country drives to a mother with strangled cats for coughs and blood on the collar of her nightgown. Or maybe the girl with inked sleeves and knitted stockings said yes and would rather you paddle across the Gulf than leave her bed cooling down. Imagine a vanishing point of bedrooms and piles littering the horizon, each summing up a moment in your life.

It's taken years, but now, now I've found them all.

I stare at the mound in my room, a collection of clothes, books, garbage, electronics, mail envelopes, and scraps of paper bundled up into one dark mass.

Like yesterday, the things I need are harder to find on top, inside, and the collection of forgotten things puffs and swells like a bruise, a mountain. And like a mountain, I can see layers in the Pile. The space on top, with belts, shoes, work polos, one pair of black jeans four sizes larger than a comfortable fit. The clothes I now wear for work, for class.

Where the peak starts to crown, I see an off-white mass of boxers stained with cheese grease and musk, tattered with rips along the crotches. A tower of pizza boxes buckle under their own weight, dripping with the stink of rank onions. Those are from the days when I don't come in to work, the days between rush-hour slogs through downtown,

when the nailed curtains on my walls beat the sunlight down and make my room as dark as a cell, except for the light from a monitor at the end.

The boxers and trash rest on a bed of jagged bits of cellphones and plastic cups I'd thrown against my bedroom walls, scraps of land-line phones that smashed on impact with my tiled living-room floor—a sound more satisfying than a dial tone. Stacks of photos and framed college diplomas in broken frames.

Below the photos and papers, a growing laundry list of clothes that I can't even stretch a calf through, the dress shirts once worn for job interviews, for anniversaries, and for women maybe growing closer than friends: a sweater picked out for me; a concert t-shirt pock-marked with holes that, deep in its fibers, still holds a woman's smell, the one who begged to borrow it on the latest and fastest of Friday nights.

And at the base of the Pile, two tumbled sea bags spilling four years of forest green and camouflage across the floor, earth colors in pixelated patches and starch-hardened shirts with holes in the breasts and collars where medals, ribbons, and chevrons used to be. Plastic canteens and Camelbaks still crusted with old sweat and the grit of foreign sand. Packets of discharge papers, medical records, and photographs of young men with green suits and wooden faces.

The evidence of a life in one Pile, and I'll peel it away from the top.

FALSE POSITIVE

Getting up used to be as immediate as a sit-up, shocked awake by something heavy on the radio, a jump out of the bed and straight to the showers. Like a sprint, the anabolic rush forward to milk the minutes out of the day. The last time I woke up with a rush was some time during my undergraduate education, when class was exciting and I still felt that pride of identifying with a larger community of Marines. That was five years ago, when everything was still fresh. Now I feel like a part of the veteran community that can't adjust.

But those hours used for education and networking are now reserved for simple, feel-good wastes of time. Fewer things to do and even less motivation to do them. But a group session is an open forum to say this out loud, and so I sit up, blanket wrapped around me.

Spent fast-food wrappers crunch under my feet as I stand. The Wendy's across the street. It's been too long to remember what I ate.

Clothes cover most of the floor, laundry and the unfolded mixed together—I skip the shower and sort through the top of the Pile for something that smells clean enough and less wrinkled. I leave the clothes from the closet alone. The wire-framed shelving and clothes racks buckled under the weight of half a decade of textbooks and paperwork. The wires broke free one early morning and spilled the closet out into the rest of the room. That was five weeks ago. I'll think about moving what fell out onto the Pile after the session.

The funk coming from the mattress and carpet used to be noticeable when you walked into the room, but the musk fuming from the bathroom is even worse. Weeks ago, a dark fungus sprouted from the shower tiles like shadows. Little splotches by the corners, then smudges almost as thick as my hand seeped into the grout. The black fungus, that's where the smell is coming from.

I stare into the shower from the door frame. No pleasure in this shower; no pleasure in the mirror, either. I got back on a liquid raw-food diet and lost thirty pounds over the summer, but it took less than six months to gain it all back, with over 100% interest. I wager I'm closer to 250, maybe 260 now. I know the news is bad. I don't need a mirror to tell me.

Besides, I can feel the scales growing, and I don't want to look at them. They started after I went off the diet, at least that's when I recognized them, their shape: pinkish-red, sprouting around the moist areas of the skin—the armpits, the waist, even in the hair. At first they flaked like specks of dandruff, but without maintaining, they adhered to the scalp, almost like a bumpy shell. I stopped trying to pluck them off or sand them down.

Only forty-five minutes left until the group session and I have two weeks' worth of social exercises to make up. I search for them in my backpack, a worn-down relic from high school, maybe eleven years old. No more clasps to strap it tight. If it can still hold books, it's still available.

I look through the bag and find the exercises I should have completed for today's session:

Flexibility Exercise #9: List four situations that might anger you. Reassess the situation, provide a problem-solving plan and an assertive response.

It's easy to make up answers that sound right, assuming it's what the therapist might want to hear.

Situations that might anger you. That group of situations has been growing and sprouting hair since I was discharged. Dinner conversations, loud laughter, dogs wearing clothes, late-night animal noises, the sprinklers at 3A.M. There are the choices the therapist wants me to make, the well-plotted assertive choices. They're easy to develop and almost as easy to fall back on when those situations occur, but they're never the first reactions. No, the worst and most violent retaliations are the first to come to mind: interrupting dinners with relentless shouting, slamming laughing faces into counters, howling myself hoarse at the animals, ripping sprinklers out of the ground.

But that's part of the reason why I get up at 8:00 on Wednesday mornings, right? To improve, to get back to a positive mindset, to make life changes? Get a better job and “meet a gal?” I have a job and another woman is the farthest thing from my mind right now.

Thirty minutes to make it to the anxiety clinic on campus, fifteen minutes to write two weeks' worth of “improvement.”

Situation that made you angry: Hearing students at work shouting from one floor of the library to the other.

Re-evaluation: They're enjoying themselves and don't register that they're being

loud. They're not doing this to me.

Problem-solving plan: Get their attention and get them to understand what they're doing.

Assertive response: Excuse me, can you please keep it down? People are working down here.

That sounds about right, what I'm supposed to think and do, what's expected, natural. The daily shrink-work for a week, done in a few minutes. But is it really the natural thing to do, or, on the surface, is it expected? Do they want to stop me from barking back in order to play along? The idea of natural behavior: what is “natural?” Is that what we are or what we make?

I don't know what's harder to do now: to take one solid swing at an unsuspecting open mouth—ramming through a rot-wood jaw, knocking teeth into teeth like the clack of dominoes—or to hold inert a coal-hot fist at my side, let the blood bulging at my temples shrink back, slow the ticking of pendulum breaths, and quit these dark fantasies, if I can.

I scribble in the rest of my answers to the therapist and toss them into my bag, then continue to collect clothes from the top of the Pile, smell-check them, iron, cologne, and leave.

*

The first solid year back since Yuma and I sure as hell don't miss the humidity. Orlando can be oppressive in June and it's hotter than I remember it being in high school.

The VA Medical Center is blasting its air conditioning, but there are too many people crammed into this pharmacy. Too many warm bodies in one tight space.

I've been sitting here for about forty-five minutes. The monitors on the walls flash white names on scrolling blue slides. Each person on the slides is a person with a pharmacy order waiting for them, but they still need a ticket to wait in line. The ticking number by the four vendor windows is at 27. The ticket I took at the front of the pharmacy: 59. I wager I'll be able to relieve a dry throat and full bladder after I pick up the meds. Until then, enjoy the seat.

We're packed in, every seat occupied, and one TV showing a loop of weather reports and car-dealer commercials. The large window catches the morning heat and we are sweating, baking in our seats.

I think about the first days I came here, to the Veteran's Medical Clinic, when dozens of veterans received benefits briefings and had their vitals processed en masse. We're split into different care teams assigned with different colors: Purple, Green, White, Orange, and Teal. For my team, Teal Team, it could be several weeks before nabbing an appointment, yet there are on average only four patients waiting to be seen any time I walk in. We'll hurry up and wait for a row of empty seats, but not at the pharmacy.

I'm noticing a trend with this hospital, too, something I didn't get to see at Yuma's Naval Clinic. Every, and I mean every, veteran in this pharmacy is either in their late forties or older. At twenty-four, I am the youngest one here, and one of the healthiest without a doubt. There's a man in the corner by a table with fake plants, breathing oxygen through a mask. Another with frizzy, balding, white hair and a matching Santa beard

sulks in his two seats. And behind me, out of sight, someone turns inside-out with coughing. Every salt-and-pepper face I look into here has a similar expression, somewhere between defeated and doomed. It's an offbeat Norman Rockwell.

I lost track of the ticket counter; the light has changed to a 32.

There's a table underneath the TV with a spread of magazines. I scan their covers—car magazines and *People* issues with over-medicated celebrities holding up their children with god-awful names. I put the magazines down, look back at the TV and weigh my options. There's a man and woman smiling and holding a spotted Bull Terrier on the hood of a truck. I decide to take a magazine at random. I gloss over the articles on celebrity babies and find a short piece on a lesser-known Nigerian actor making it on a television show I haven't seen yet but can't stop hearing about.

I hear a whirring next to me, an old man in an electric wheelchair sits beside me. I consider how much I need this medication waiting in this room with other men like him, who are more in need. What I'm waiting for is something just as effective as whatever you can buy in the hygiene aisles at a grocery store. I'm sitting in the same space as men still suffering from decades-old service-related injuries, others who have severe breathing problems, possible heart-attack survivors, and some still fighting symptoms of PTSD. But here I am, picking up meds for a fucking rash.

I lose that wager, stand up, and head for the bathroom, then take some gulps from the water fountain next to it. A loud conversation breaks the silence, one between a slender man with thick glasses and an agitated man with a black t-shirt and a shocked expression that reminds me of Charles Manson: Mr. Glass and Mr. Black.

“At least you can get a job,” Mr. Black says. “I can't hold a steady one.”

“Neither can I,” says Mr. Glass. “I've been searching for a job for months, and nothing's coming up but pencil-pushing jobs. I can only find part-time stuff here and there. I want to get back in the field, but there's nothing out there.”

“No, what I'm saying is you get to *look!* If I could hold a steady job, I'd lose benefits. I'm one-hundred-percent psychologically disabled. I can't take a good job, but you *can.*”

What does that mean, to be one-hundred-percent disabled? Physically disabled, he'd be unable to get up for work with a walker glued to his hands, or stuck in a wheelchair with an air mask. You can picture complete physical disability, someone who can't use his body to earn a living anymore.

But completely disabled by PTSD, you could have all ten fingers and toes and still be kept out of work. Living in your own head, afraid of the world, forgetting the names of your friends and family, scaring them with unpredictable fits of rage, or unable to even take care of yourself on basic terms.

Right now I'm into my second year of college, have a steady job, the MGI Bill, and a good relationship with family. Why am I here? For cheap meds?

I'd rather not stand around for my number and prescription anymore. There's a bald, sweaty man in sweats sitting in the chair I was in minutes ago, and he should have it.

*

I go into the University of Central Florida's Anxiety Disorders Clinic, an office

building much smaller than the rest on the west side of the Memory Mall. Rows of chairs line the walls in the waiting area. On the opposite side of the waiting area is an assistant's desk with a security window in front of it and a door next to it with an electronic lock. I've never understood the need for so much security at a psych clinic. They have offices and classrooms with dry-erase boards.

But the virtual reality room, that's right. Lots of technology in there. The Virtual Baghdad machine must be worth at least a grand. Virtual reality training, high-tech exposure therapy for veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I've been wanting to get my hands on that machine since I heard about the clinic, but I've scored out of it, not in as much need for it as I thought. Loud explosions and crowds still have an effect on me, but I'm sure there are other veterans that need VR therapy more than I do.

Hector and Jason might already be in the group room; I'll need to catch up once I get inside. The young woman behind the desk—it's always a different lady up in front, and never a guy. Why is that? Are female psychology majors the best fit for secretarial work? Does the psychology field have its own gender-bias ladder to climb?

And besides the one rather large girl (too large for her age), they are all beautiful, like sales reps at a retail store at the mall. This one (I never remember their names), in a smooth black blouse, thin gold necklace, and blue jeans. Simple clothes, but it's her posture, the way she smiles when I speak.

“Hi, good morning, I'm here to see Doctor Rafinowicz. I have an appointment at ten.” She rises from her seat. Her movements, calm and measured, as she scoots her butt away from the chair. There needs to be a better word than *butt*. It's too unrefined; she

deserves better. *Posterior!* Yes, much better.

“Good morning. Do you need a vehicle pass?” I nod. She slides her *posterior* from the chair, rises, her arms dancing over manila folders and ring binders until she finds the papers she needs. “About how long are your sessions?” Even her voice has posture, measured, as if she's practicing her bedside manner the same way a young woman would practice balancing a book on her head and walking at an old-fashioned finishing school. She catches me off-guard just speaking.

I say, “Just, ah, about an hour and a half, until 11:30? Noon?”

She reassures me with a smile and writes the information down on the pass. Without wrinkling or folding the pass, she hands it to me. I move in closer and take it from her; I notice her smile fade, the corners of her mouth dropping. My scales—she can see them, I know she can, the small patch forming at the bridge of my nose, the dry scales that fall and fleck my eyebrows and mustache. The stubble on my face, unkempt goatee, and overall bagginess, like I slipped off the bed of a work truck.

Young lady, I used to be a man in uniform: military law enforcement, did you know? All polish, starch, and razor burn. I used to run three miles and do a dozen chin-ups, one-hundred sit-ups on average. You should see me getting pepper-sprayed and how I can still make an arrest. Believe me, I used to defend bases, defend supply convoys, patrol bombing ranges and neighborhoods at night.

Little girl, I can shoot someone in the face from half a kilometer away. I'm pretty sure I still can.

“Thanks.” I tense up and smile back, for a moment forgetting how to walk

straight.

*

It's taken two years of being “normal” to return to the VA Medical Center. “Normal” is what the psychotherapist told me—a veteran fitting back into the outside world. One year out of the military, inactive, and treatment felt like a healthy choice. Two years later, it feels like a necessity.

The automatic doors to the VA lobby slide open and the shower of cold air chills my skin. But it's the hallways that keep my attention, like vanishing points where white lab coats and wheelchairs appear and vanish in an off-white hue. And the smell, stale and lifeless as potted silk. The intercom, clear as a bell, calls for a doctor's attention.

This time the patients look even younger, more veterans in their thirties and twenties, fresh from discharge, some still in high-and-tight haircuts, reviewing their paperwork, ready to take advantage of two years of free VA healthcare. With constant deployments and such long occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq, I see the number of young veterans seeking affordable medical care reaching numbers too difficult to handle well.

The clinic handles patients by appointments, and sometimes they also take emergencies, but I never see where they take them. I see the EMTs careering through Baldwin Park on the way to the clinic, but I never see where they send their patients, and I've never seen the stretchers roll by. It's as if they warm their sirens and do laps around the clinic for fun.

I follow the signs leading to each clinic: Cardiology, Surgery, Prosthetics, *Mental*

Health. Second floor, the elevators in alcoves, hidden away from the flow of flat hallways and offices, large enough to move bed-bound patients from floor to floor.

The doors slide open and I find my way to the Mental Health waiting area: two dozen stuffed chairs crammed into the middle of two hallways, with a lemonade stand for a reception desk. Packed seats with veterans filling out packets of paper on metallic clipboards. The rest rock in their seats and sit on their hands until someone tells them what to do.

At the desk, a nurse with wide-framed glasses scribbles on her own clipboard, busy enough not to notice me standing in front of her. Middle-aged, silver hairs swirling in her receding brown dye. Her nametag says Maureen. She looks like a Maureen.

“Hi there, is this where—”

“Stand behind the line, please.” Maureen doesn't lift her head from the clipboard when she says this, just points to the floor: a black line of electrical tape surrounds the kiosk. I take a step back and point my feet behind the line, with no one in front of me. Now she lifts her head.

“You'd like an assessment?” she asks. I don't know what that means for sure.

“Yes, I think so.”

“It's a PTSD assessment, right? Do you have insurance? Your VA identification card?”

“No, I—”

“Just your driver's license, please.”

I hand her my license and she scribbles my information down on her pad, then

rifles through her folders and hands me another clipboard with a stack of sheets on them.

She says, “You'll need to read and fill these out before seeing the therapist. Give it back to me once you're done.”

I nod and find a seat next to another man in a black t-shirt and jeans, his arms folded and the rest of his body propped like a plank across the seat. I flip through the pages: basic wavers, permissions, acknowledgements, and three pages of checklists and charts. Many questions I've answered before, but I don't remember this many forms. Last time it was a simple consultation with a psychiatrist in his office, a mental check-up and well-wishing. Now I have to talk to a clipboard first. Drug-related questions, reoccurring-memories questions:

How many drinks do you have a month?

Drinking isn't an issue and I know plenty who drink more than me and function on both feet. No, I've had drinking binges, but those are miles apart. I've broken enough club fights, detained enough violent drunks, and fished enough Marines out of gutters who had been paralyzed by drinking on their own. I don't need to join them, but a dozen or so drinks is more than enough to sustain me for the month. So, fifteen.

Do you have thoughts about harming yourself and/or others?

There'd been fits, momentary irrational rages on myself, on objects in the room, holes through walls, through doors, and the scars on my hands to prove them. Thoughts of slamming complete strangers into traffic, beating them senseless. An hour won't go by without them. Yes.

Do you have reoccurring dreams of a service-related experience?

They mean nightmares, flashbacks, and no, the dreams don't come on their own, not shocked to life, not in the way the paper wants it. Fantasies and memories, yes, but not a jump into them, the sharp stab of instinct, being in the moment, a pedestrian world burnt away to reveal a flaming desert underneath. Fear and anger can control posture, but not what I see, not what I hear. Just what I feel, the compression of fluids through the body, waves of pressure collapsing my chest into bone chips, punctured by white sparks burning through my limbs. Where torches blast at a concert's first song, where crowds bury the exits, where families celebrate their freedom by bombing the sky, that's where it lives, and I am grateful it's left my dreams years ago. The answer is no.

Do you sometimes fantasize about suicide?

No, not exactly, but when traffic stops and cars limp in feet and yards, why not get out of the car? Why not? Find him, the lynchpin holding back the rest of the rush hour crowd, and mash his mouth into the curb, and when the cops come, you know, you've been trained to know, that if their guns aren't ready when you cross that line and become a threat, they won't be by the time you reach them. Pure attack, flood them until your limbs fall to pieces, and die with their skin between your teeth. No, there has to be another name, not suicide. Self-detonation. But still, a no.

I answer the rest of the questions they ask, lengthier than they are difficult. Maureen sits where I left her, wading through her sea of papers. I stand on the line until she waves me closer, and I hand her the list.

“Please have a seat and we'll call you once the therapist is ready to see you.”

Half an hour rolls by before another lady in white, glasses, and fading brown hair

visits me at my seat.

“Hi...Alejandro?” She pronounces it with an English J, like January. “Hi, my name is Dr. Patterson.” She offers her hand, we shake. “Could you come with me, please?”

I follow Dr. Patterson to an office a few yards away: marble-style linoleum, a collection of diplomas in a huddle around one of the mint-green walls. There are two puffy chairs on my side of her desk. Group counseling must be one of her responsibilities, too.

“Please, have a seat.” She looks over the papers in her hand with a serious frown. After a moment, “So, you've been out for three years?”

I nod. “That's right.”

“And when were you deployed? Iraq? Afghanistan?”

“Yeah, Iraq in 2003, February to September.”

She sucks in her teeth and flips back and forth between the pages. I wonder how the usual evaluations work and if the human plank in the waiting room will be judged in the same way. Or maybe he's already been judged and is standing by for the next leg of treatment. Does every veteran have to go through this type of questioning, or do some look so at-risk on paper that they skip this entire process and go straight to counseling?

“Good, so one tour to Iraq?”

“Yes, that's right.” Thank goodness. Along with base patrol back in the states, one tour was enough.

“Do you get along with your family?”

“Yeah, pretty well,” I say. “We spend Sundays together. My parents are separated, but they live nearby and my brother and I visit them every weekend or so. My brother and I live together.”

“That's very good. So,” she continues, “How do you feel about your drinking? It says fifteen for the month. Does that seem like a lot to you?”

This feels like a trick question. It's not a lot to me, but to her that might be pushing it. There's a margin of relativity to it, right? Does she know that it's not a lot for me? Whatever, just answer honestly.

“No, it doesn't seem like a lot,” I tell her. “Sometimes I might even have more.”

What the hell did I just say? Did I just brag to a doctor about how much I can drink, and then tell her I can drink *more*?

“I see.” She's scribbling. What is she scribbling? Defining mental illnesses? Future prescriptions for Paxil?

After a few more basic questions, she puts her papers down, takes her glasses off, squeezes the bridge of her nose, and puts them back on.

“From what we have on here, and what we've been discussing, it doesn't look like you have PTSD, not *really*.”

This doesn't make sense, not the complete prognosis I was ready for. *Not really*, like a pseudo-syndrome, almost treatable. Sorry, but your symptoms fall outside of our psychotherapeutic jurisdiction.

“You might have related symptoms, but not the major concerns to consider for extensive treatment. You're not suffering from flashbacks or hallucinations, for example.

Again, it might be adjustment disorder. We do offer scheduled one-on-one therapy sessions and group sessions. I wouldn't recommend those, but you could visit the group sessions, if you feel they'd be helpful. Do you really feel like that's something you'd like to do?"

It's not so much what she said but how she said it, her tone, like I was inconveniencing her, like a professor eager to go home early, but there's one student in the front row who still has questions. And her eyes, the way she tilts her head to ask this, as if I shit in her chair. Should I join them, or should I wait and improve on my own? From her tone, I know I am not a solid fit.

I remember one Vietnam veteran confessing to me that he needed to pull the bottle from his hand and the gun from his mouth. Men like him need this and I feel too young, too connected to fall out of sight. There are veterans with deeper, darker wells than mine.

"No, that's alright," I tell her. "I'll be okay."

Back down the hallways and through the lobby, I feel relief that I'm better off than some, but there's even less that I know now than when I came. I'm leaving with so many questions and now I don't know who to ask.

*

I get out of the anxiety clinic, slap the pass on top of my dashboard, and come back to see Dr. Rafinowicz holding the door open for me. Her neck-length blond hair and bulbous forehead stretch out from the door jamb.

"Alex!" she says. "Good morning, glad you could make it."

It was five past ten a few seconds ago.

“Sorry, I would've come in sooner. Are the rest of the guys coming in a little late? I didn't see their cars outside.”

Dr. Rafinowicz holds the door for me as we both walk down the hallway.

“Yeah, I just got a call from Hector saying he's going to be a little late, and it's taking a bit longer for Jason to come down here from Kissimmee, too, so you're our number one.”

“Thanks, I can imagine,” I say. “That's, what, an hour with traffic?” We head down the hallway and the thumps of muted mortars and small-arms fire rock the right walls heading in—someone going through treatment with the Virtual Baghdad machine. From what I've learned about it, patients describe their experiences in combat to the therapist and they develop a list of program parameters in order to cater the program to that veteran. This way, the veteran experiences a VR scenario resembling their combat situations as much as possible. If fireworks can frighten me to tears, I know that the veteran in that room has been crippled by what happened to him.

“Yeah, about an hour,” Dr. Rafinowicz says. “He shouldn't be much later than fifteen past.”

We walk into the group room, not much more than a dry-erase board and two small, trapezoidal tables put together. There used to be six of us sharing these tables, but two of the guys left the group. One of them seemed to be doing alright (I think his name was Walter), but Barry would've gotten a lot out of working together on these things. He said he'd been on drugs since he got out, and that he just recently left prison and cleaned

up. Social cues, conversations, anger management—he needed time with this, something positive like this with the rest of us.

But the group we have now—Hector, Jason, me—is even. As the doctor explained, we take different approaches to working with people. Hector is relaxed about working with others, and he exudes a very passive way of collaboration. Jason, the most headstrong and unapologetic out of all of us, is also the most aggressive. I fall somewhere near assertive: firm when I need to be, but able to shut up and listen.

Assertiveness, though, is an ideal, not the real me. I'm much more passive than I think Dr. Rafinowicz believes me to be, more passive than Hector and Jason, both husbands and fathers who have to take charge with their children and deal with maintaining a family. If I were more aggressive, or more trusting, I'd have a family, too.

We each take seats at opposite sides of the table.

“Well, it's good that we both have a little time before the other guys come in,” she says. “I wanted to talk with you about one of the exercises from last week. The one with the body chart?”

I nod. Yeah, I remember the body chart. *Show anger reactions in the body and what you're thinking*. I remember pulling it out at work and scribbling in answers because I couldn't get any reading or writing done for class, unable to deal with the barking laughter and bullshit conversations from my co-workers. In those moments at work, in that heat, I wrote multiple things for every part of the body on that chart, with anger that seemed unlike me, at least from the group sessions. The easiest exercise in treatment: describing anger.

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “Yeah, I had a lot to write about that one.” She nods in agreement.

“Right, right, you wrote a lot of surprising things on there.” She pulls out the paper from her stack of completed exercises from the group, point at areas, then circles her hand over the entire sheet. I don't think she can pick out just one thing. “You want to smash your co-workers and students into walls? They're nasty, incorrigible people?”

I don't think my therapist needs to know about everything. But she knows now and it's time to confess. It is what it is and maybe she'll make sense of it for me. It feels like I wet the bed.

I say, “Yeah, I know. I get pretty pissed at work. I can't get the time I need at work to read or write, and it's pretty trivial stuff they're asking me for, or stuff I can't fix, or they just can't be quiet.”

She looks surprised, and I don't feel better off for telling her.

“How often do you feel like this?”

It's layers of confession she's digging through, and there's a sharp sting with each layer she peels back.

“When *don't* I feel like that? It's like that every day.”

“Well, it's a good thing we'll be talking more about anger management today.” We both get to laugh.

*

The heartburn hasn't been this bad since I was with Victoria. An unstable relationship will do that, cause your body to attack itself because it knows better than you

do. There wasn't a comfortable position to be in and it burned like a muscle tear from my throat to my belly button. This is the last summer I can use free VA healthcare, before my post-discharge VA benefits run out and I start paying for individual insurance. My part-time job has no benefits and twenty hours a week as a librarian isn't enough to take the new costs. I've had this pain for weeks and I know it won't stop on its own.

I get up from the living room couch and head to the bathroom. I've been wasting time watching my brother Marco play a videogame on the television. I walk to the bathroom and grab the antacid from my medicine cabinet. Three is the max, but chewing a handful won't kill me, and whatever I'd feel after can't be worse than this.

It's half an hour until work at the library. I don't think the triage system will pencil me in after my shift and I doubt I can make an uninterrupted personal call to the clinic while on the job. It's better now than too late.

Automatic-rifle fire blasts from the living room speakers. Marco's killing spree is too loud for the phone call. I take a quiet seat in a patio chair outside.

After sitting through fifteen minutes of automated phone menus and elevator music on the way to the triage system, I hear the ring-and-click.

“Hello? This is the Orlando VA Clinic triage system. My name is Claudia, how can I help you?” The voice at the other end of the line speaks with a sway in the rhythm, but her tone is lifeless and beige. A sharp accent with rigid vowels and punctuated consonants.

I say, “Yes, hi. I was hoping to schedule an appointment with my care team.”

“What is your care team?” she says.

“Teal team.”

“What do you need an appointment for?”

“I've been having this chronic chest pain and it's not going away, even when—”

“Uh-huh.”

“Even when I stay away from trigger foods—”

“Yeah, mhm, mhm.”

“No trigger foods, right? And I don't eat before bed.” I pause. It's not difficult to let the pain interrupt my thoughts. The lady on the other end, Claudia, isn't helping with her yeahs and uh-huhs in the middle of my sentence. “It feels like someone digging their heel into my sternum.”

“Okay, alright, has this happened before? Does this happen to your stomach a lot?”

“No, it's only happened once, but never this long and this hard. It's been like this for two weeks straight.”

“What are you doing with it? What are you taking?”

“Not much, just antacid. It went away on its own last time, so I thought it'd be a matter of time, but this is too much. I think something is definitely wrong.”

“Okay, yeah,” she says. “Let me see what time I can make your appointment. Okay? Hold on.”

I hear the keys clacking on her computer and her heavy breathing. Alone on the line, I scratch at my sternum. It doesn't relieve much, but it's preoccupying me. It's the absolute least I can do.

The clacking stops. “Hello?” she says. “Are you still there?”

“Right here.”

“Okay, the next appointment I can give you is on June 23rd at 9:30 in the morning.

How about that?”

June 23rd, next month. It's May 15th, that's five weeks from now. Five weeks with a hot coal sewn in my chest. I won't survive it.

“Is that the earliest I can make one?” I say. “I could really use a doctor for this.”

She sighs. “That's the next possible date. The next thing you can do is keep calling to see if something opens up. I can't change your date if you don't call, okay? Anything else?”

A receptionist without a stick up her ass would be nice. I'll have to keep calling and hearing her breathing and monotone voice, or someone else that sounds just like her. Steady government pay and still so unhappy. It's easier than other government jobs. Does she speak to the other veterans that call her like this, or is this directed at me, like a non-serious case with a simple cure? It's not a heart problem and it's not a debilitating mental illness, but it's burning and it's right now. I can't wait five weeks, but I'll take it anyway.

“Alright, June 23rd is okay.”

She asks, “Is there anything else I can do for you?” *How about a moderate sense of care and patience?*

“No, that's all, thank you.”

“Then thank you for calling the Orlando VA triage system have a nice day.”

Middle-aged men with shrapnel in their legs, crippled knees and backs, poisoned

by herbicides—they've been through this Limbo for a very long time. They have priority, and well-deserved, but now the new veterans are coming back with brain trauma and severed limbs. We're clogging an overworked system and I don't doubt that our benefits will suffer. Medical aid outside of the system might be a necessity for me very soon.

*

The door slides open and both Hector and Jason walk in. Both of them are in the National Guard and have worked close to one another, but they never crossed paths. They're new friends, but they have lots in common to talk about. Hector strolls in with jean shorts and a faded t-shirt on. His perpetual smile, tighter than I've seen anyone hold a smile, like he has a bowl in his mouth and its edges raise the corners of his lips. Always looking happy with a can't-care apology in his eyes.

I wasn't in Group last week and Jason's uniform startles me: he's back in his Army camouflage suit, the digital kind, with a collection of patches about the blouse. Same glasses, same sideways, trouble-maker's smirk, but the beard he came in with months before is gone; he looks younger, but less at ease. I know he's been on his way out of the Guard for medical disabilities, and he's spoken about how his local unit is still processing him through a medical board, so it's surprising when he comes in dressed for military work. Something is wrong.

I greet them. “Hey, guys—Jason, they put you back in the saddle? What's going on?”

His smirk switches sides and the pock-marked lizard skin on his cheeks moves with it.

“Some bullshit,” Jason says. “*Inconclusive* bullshit. Since they're still trying to figure out what to do with me. Apparently I'm not damaged enough, so they put me to work again.”

I remember him telling me how he felt about the uniform, how he couldn't stand wearing it again, a constant reminder of his service and his deployments overseas. His tense and wired twitching, excited speech, withdrawal from clear explanations, signs of discomfort in his own skin. And when he's angriest, his pores hiss with steam that coats his eyeglasses. He scoots his chair back and the heat radiating from him burns like noon sunlight.

He's been trying to distance himself from service already, in his mind, but to the National Guard, his discomfort in uniform must be negligible. Or maybe he hasn't expressed everything he's discovered in Group to his superiors and they don't know how it feels to strap himself back in. As far as his military service is concerned, he is fit for duty until his papers and the medical board say he's not. I wonder what the strain has been like for his wife and little girls.

“That's not cool at all,” I say. “Haven't they looked over your treatments? I mean, you are getting evaluations. Aren't they taking those into consideration?”

“They're making their little processing. My case manager is looking at it and he has my back. It'll just take more time, I guess. Bunch of bullshit.” He takes his glasses off to wipe the fog from them.

Even as Jason, Hector, and Dr. Rafinowicz discuss the situation in further detail, there's little that I understand of it. There's a process and several formal steps to reach a

decision. I know this, but it sounds more like a bureaucratic stalemate. I have a feeling they're going to keep him working for however long the rest of his enlistment will take, whatever amount of time his medical processing takes, and they'll let the VA healthcare system handle him afterwards. The Army might take care of his immediate medical concerns, but there's permanent damage to his rotator cuff, and it'll need more attention than the Army can give when he's discharged.

And that's not to mention psychological disability, which veterans can qualify at the VA for. From what he's worked on in Group, I'd say he's a solid candidate for some co-pay percentage for disability. And for those permanent injuries, he'll have his scheduled treatments, and he'll have to face the triage system, which weighs veterans' symptoms and injuries and schedules doctor's appointments by degree of severity and immediacy, which might or might not work out for Jason. Just going through the VA system after four years can be a hassle, as it was for me.

“Alex, what do you think about all this?” Dr. Rafinowicz asks. I lost track of the conversation in that wave of bureaucratic connect-the-dots.

“About the jumping-through-hoops thing?” I lean forward in my chair and feel the muscles in my neck tighten. “I think that's fucked up. How can you go through surgery, chronic pain, therapy, all that, and they still keep you in work? I don't like it at all. And the VA can be slow as hell to help out, there's so many of us. There are still a lot of guys not collecting, so imagine if they decided to take advantage of the VA all at once. We'd be screwed.”

There are stories of VA laptops full of patient medical records going missing,

patients contracting STDs due to unclean medical equipment, of sexual assaults on patients, and the rat-infested hallways of Walter Reed's Building 18.

Stories like those hardly ever make the news, and you don't hear about them firsthand, not often enough. I've had my difficulties with government assistance, but they pale in comparison to what guys like Jason are going through with military aid. I feel less confident that we'll get the help we're looking for from the VA and there's only so much help a college campus can do for us. Only a few more weeks left of group therapy, and I doubt another round of it will make a difference. It's pointless to keep this going any longer. When it's over, I'll be better off on my own.

TAKOTSUBO

The coffee was piping hot when I poured myself a cup this morning, but now that I have a break at work with enough time to enjoy it, it's lukewarm. A quiet day is hard to come by, and they mostly come between semesters. The rest of the year, law students own this school with their demands: study rooms, books on reserve we don't even own anymore, extra hours of operation for study sessions they don't commit to.

Lauren, today's reference librarian, waddles in from the lobby, neck hunched and eyes in slits. The scraggly strands of her blond hair stick to the sides of her moon-shaped face. I wonder what else is wrong with her today. On average, she walks in looking over-medicated, complaining about migraines lasting for a long and indeterminable amount of time, dizzy spells after a wide range of non-strenuous activities (like standing up), a general haziness that her daily three liters of Diet Coke can't cure.

Ernest creeps out of Library Circulation's back offices with a large bowl of barbecue chips. He sits back at our long desk, scratches the bald spot in his puffy hair, and shoves a handful of chips in his mouth. I wonder why Ernest has trouble chewing with his mouth closed. If I listen closely, I can make out what he's eating in another room just by the sound his lips make when he smacks them. I pop my headphones on and blast Metal to drown out his chewing.

The cold coffee loses its edge and I consider munching on something from the back myself.

“Hey, Ernest, I'm going to make some more coffee and have a bite.”

Ernest turns around with eyes so wide, I might as well had told him I was getting married.

“Go right on ahead, Mister Alex,” he says. “Take your time.”

I hang back, make another pot of coffee, and grab a handful of chips from one of the re-purposed pretzel jars my boss Moira holds onto.

I walk back to the Circulation desk and already the line of students reaches all the way to the exits. All of them, 1L students, fresh from undergrad, starting off their legal careers and trying to check out the same textbooks on reserve. The problem isn't that we don't carry enough of their textbooks—not many law schools offer brand-new texts for students—it's the student-loan situation. At Florida A&M, it can take several weeks for students to receive their loans. That means many students suffer issues with paying their bills, supplies, and textbooks. Those that do manage to pay for their books with time enough to complete their first-day assignments won't receive those books on time. Some of these students may spend over two-hundred dollars for each textbook and receive a small fraction back for them if they decide to sell them. They have little choice but to fall behind and wait in line here until the school or their bookstore sends them good news. Until then, the lines stay long.

Classes always let out at around lunchtime, and right on cue, Ernest stands, adjusts his tie, and announces he's leaving.

“You're going to be okay?” he asks. “You set? Got everything you need? You got to go to the bathroom?”

He's like a cuckoo clock that pesters you about how you're doing, and he goes off at least every half hour.

“I'll be fine,” I tell him. The line of students grows longer.

“Are you sure? Moira is right there if you need her, too.”

“Seriously, I'll be fine. Enjoy your lunch.” I'd rather struggle through work than listen to his jackhammer of a laugh.

He walks out, shuffles through the students, and escapes the library, leaving me with the afternoon rush.

Dozens of students toting rolling backpacks and three-inch notebooks ignore the waiting lanes in front of the long desk and decide to surround it with mindless chatter.

“Okay,” I say, “can I have everyone's attention, please?”

Their gaggle of conversations are more important. Even the quiet students let them speak.

“Hey, listen up!” Bewildered and dirty looks all around. “To get this line moving, I need you all to split up. Everyone needing books, form a line on the left. If you're checking books back in or requesting a study room, make a line on the right.”

A few pay attention and split into lines. The others chatting and texting wander in behind them. The right side of our desk fills with book returns and small huddles of students while the left line stays long. Now I have two lines to worry about. I don't know if that was the best thing to do. I've made more work for myself.

I handle the checkouts, the rooms, and the line shrinks one by one. Then the most-requested textbooks fly from the shelves, and none of the checked-in books are what they're looking for.

“Everyone,” I tell them, “Glannon's *Civil Procedure* is gone.” A few of them groan and move out of the way. “But we do have a few Xerox copies of it if you want to make copies of your own.”

Our law library can't afford to buy several copies of the newest texts every semester—now it averages to one or two copies for each class, so students have to settle with copies we make of the most-requested books, or they'll have to wait. We used to buy three to five copies of the same textbooks. Where did all our money go?

One of the students that left the check-out line walks to the public-computer terminals and talks on her phone, almost loud enough to follow the conversation.

INT. LAW LIBRARY - DAY

LAW STUDENT CACKLES with a cellphone glued to her face.

LAW STUDENT
You should've seen what she was wearin'
last night. What a hot mess!

ALEJANDRO (O.S.)
Excuse me, Miss?

She turns away.

LAW STUDENT
Ain't no girl that fat got business
wearing that top. She knows she's nasty.

PUBLIC PATRONS wince and stare at her by their computers as she talks. They turn their heads to see ALEJANDRO—a muscular Latino with bald head, leather outfit, and beaded goatee—standing behind the student.

The cellphone SQUAWKS on her ear. Alejandro's fists CRACK as he clenches them. His face hardens.

The film progresses in slow motion:

TIME LAPSE

- The student turns, holding her cellphone slightly away from her face.
- Alejandro's right hand opens and tightens, he winds up.

LAW STUDENT

Yes, yes!

- Alejandro's hand SWATS the cellphone off her face.
- It SHATTERS against the wall.
- The law student stares at the phone and turns to Alejandro, startled, speechless. He gets in close, breaks her comfort zone.

ALEJANDRO

No, no!

She falls back, against the wall, panting. Alejandro turns to look at the public patrons. They SPIN around and continue working.

When you're angry enough, every word is an incitement to violence, every motion

a swing. The students, an obstacle to keep me from my work. I need to daydream about yelling them silent, but the daydreaming causes about as much stress as they do, so I do nothing and wait for the situation to correct itself.

“What did you say?” a student in front of me asks. I’m getting too carried away and they’re starting to notice. He holds his driver’s license out in front of him.

“Sorry,” I tell him and grab his ID. “Just mumbling to myself—you don’t have your Rattler ID with you?” He shakes his head.

“Nah, they haven’t issued me one yet.”

I type his name into the system—*Harrison Baker*—and nothing shows up. I haven’t noticed him before; he’s probably a new student.

“No problem, sometimes that takes a while. You’re a 1L?”

“Yeah,” Baker says. “Can I get Civ. Pro. For section 302?”

“We don’t know any of your class sections,” I say. “Do you know the title of the book you need?”

He looks confused. I’m sure the rest of them are confused, too.

“Check your syllabus, it should be on there.”

I write his personal information down on a manual check-out sheet while he opens his backpack and searches for his syllabus. Fifteen students in line sigh at the same time. If he can’t figure it out, neither will the rest of them.

“Hey, when you come up here, please let me know the title of the books you need.”

The students look at each other, puzzled, then open their bags like they’re being

inspected by the TSA. I hate the first week of classes.

I look at the student to my right, a skittish blond-haired guy in his late thirties.

He asks, "Can I get a study room?"

"Sure, where's your group mate?" He stares at me. I might as well have asked him for a stool sample. "Yeah, those rooms are for group study only." He looks at the other students, looks behind, then back at me.

"Then where am I supposed to study?"

INT. LAW LIBRARY - CONTINUOUS

Alejandro reaches across his desk and grabs the BLOND STUDENT by the collar.

ALEJANDRO

It's been an entire week. Where the fuck have you been?

The blond student STAMMERS. Alejandro POINTS to the ceiling and the student follows his finger.

Alejandro twirls his hand at the three floors above them.

ALEJANDRO (O.S.)

Here's this massive, beautiful library with cubicles and desks waiting to be discovered. Lawyers are good at discovering things. See what I'm getting at?

The student LAUGHS sheepishly and points to the ground.

BLOND STUDENT

Oh, I thought that this was the library.

Alejandro palms his own head with a SMACK.

ALEJANDRO

How the fuck did they accept you here?
Go! Look around, find somewhere to sit.
The world is yours, trust me.

“I think you should find a cubicle on the second floor,” I tell him, “or one on the fourth floor. The fourth is all quiet-study.” He has an aha moment, then walks away.

My cell phone vibrates and I take a peek at it before the line grows longer. A text message. It says, *Come upstairs whenever you get a chance*. It's my mother, another employee of FAMU. She's been feeling neglected lately. Most of the time it's something she needs to tolerate. Her little boys are grown nine-to-fivers with circles outside the family and trips beyond the dining room. Now, more often, she's right. I've been ignoring her and the rest of my family. No good meeting them without progress to report. What would I tell them anyway? I don't want to be exposed as a liability to my own family.

My co-workers Ernest and Gladys take seats around me, surfing the Web here, flipping pages there. I'm sure they crave Gossip Time.

“Hey, guys, I need to run upstairs for a moment,” I tell them. I don't feel the need to tell them what for, and they don't even ask. For better or worse, they'll figure it's something important.

I take the door by our circulation area and call the elevator, but even the elevator takes its time, pausing at each floor.

My mother felt compelled to connect me with the Director of Circulation at the Florida A&M College of Law when I started college after getting an honorable discharge

from the Corps. She mentioned that they were hiring for part-time work, but I could put in more hours than the standard twenty their law students are forced to settle with. I could work full-time hours and study while it was quiet in the library. Before being *too qualified* to work somewhere became an issue, my new boss Moira thought I'd add a lot to the library as the books were being unpacked in FAMU's newer building.

Almost five minutes and the elevator decides to make its way down from visiting all the floors as the professors inside speak with their students across the atrium.

I take the fourth floor, where they stashed my mother, the law library's Office Manager. She buys the library's office supplies and manages our paychecks. It's a job for one dedicated person. No assistants, and now, no peers within sight. She used to be a part of the library staff, but now she comes in alone, works alone, has lunch alone, and goes home to an empty house. Ever since she moved into her new house (just three minutes away from me), and her new office, she's been starving for attention.

Her office door is closed, and on the thin glass pane in the door, she pasted photos with peace symbols, doves, and banners reading *Support Our Troops*. She's not conservative in the least, but with two sons coming home from deployments in the military, she has a deep understanding of what a sacrifice it is for other American families, with their son's and daughter's made beds growing colder with each passing month they're empty. So many silent dinner tables with aging couples trading worried glances, news tickers scrolling across their faces, a constant stream of fatal gunshots and missing limbs, an infinite record of horrifying scenarios with their babies.

Our mother spent four years in fear of what might happen to us. Since we came

back, she's tightened the grip on our family even more. She wants the Three Musketeers back.

I rap on my mother's open door while she flips through paperwork. She stays focused on it for a moment, stares out her door, and recognizes me.

Her smile is tired. Under her workload, that smile is pressed into a thin curve. She waves me in, an entire office's furnishings crammed into the dimensions of a broom closet.

“Hola, hijo,” she says. *Hi, son.*

“Hi, Mom.” We hug like boxers in exhaustion.

“How have you been? I never get to see you.” She hugs a little harder and I want to pull away. “I can ride with Marco to work every day, but Alex, it's like, if I don't make an effort to call and make plans with you, I'd never even have you over for dinner.”

All I can say is, “I'm sorry, Mom. I know.” I'm sure I can explain myself if I wanted to, but I don't.

“It's just, you need to make time for family. I feel like you don't love your mother as much anymore and you're drifting away from us. What's going on, hijo?”

I hate explaining myself more than anything, because I have no explanation I can give. Just the same answer. And what an unfair question to ask someone struggling with too much work and not enough time to do it. Not enough energy, anyway. I can't look at her when I talk about these things.

“I have a lot on my plate right now,” I tell her. “I have this thesis, I'm trying to get this vet-counseling thing off the ground, I'm trying to get published, and somehow get

another vet event running. I have so much to read. I'm just trying to get by.”

Her eyes beg.

“But Ali, you have to make time for family. If not going out somewhere, at least come visit me.”

It's tightening, all the muscles in my shoulders and arms. Sometimes speaking to family triggers fight or flight. I can't get away from family, and I can't fight her (I know she's right). But my body needs relief somehow and my brain wants to solve conflict.

She continues, “I mean, don't you have anyone helping you with this?”

I say, “I don't have help and I don't want it. Other people can do more than I can. I need to be able to do what they can do and more.”

The blood in my temples pounds like fists into sheets of latex. I'm rocking, I know I'm rocking. I can't help but show it in my body now. She's standing still, worried, loading more questions and we're both unsatisfied with my answers.

She rests a hand on her desk and holds her hand out to explain herself.

“Look, you've gone through what a lot of people will never go through. Most people don't understand. Maybe you should give yourself the credit you deserve. You've made it this far, Alex, and that's saying a lot. You've survived a war. You had to deal with bad, mixed-up people, but you came back, went straight to college, and you've held the same job for years. Not everyone can do what you did or what you're doing now.”

I hate knowing that my best isn't half of what other people ten years younger than me can do, and my best years were spent learning things that wouldn't matter for the rest of my life. I've been frozen and transplanted someplace foreign, a non-here.

“Why is it,” I say, “that some people can just coast and it takes so much for me to get anything done? Most of the time I'm just trying to not let the stress kill me, and not even for big important things.” I don't have to think too long to give her an example. “Finding something to wear and leaving for work makes me sweat. At work, when it gets loud, I try to concentrate, but all I can think about is the tone of somebody's voice, how stupid their conversations are, how grating their laughter, and I look up, I freeze, and the rest of my day gets used up for trying to forget how stressed I am. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how easy work was or how much reading and writing I got done. I am absolutely spent.”

This is it, this is what she's going to get, what she's been wanting all along. She wants my weakness and she can have it. I'm tired of keeping it from her so she can nag me about it. The fight is over with her. I can feel that tightening in my throat.

“I spend days now on the couch. It's where I eat delivery pizzas until I get sick enough to puke, where I watch mindless T.V. and drink until I pass out and start it all over again the next day, and I'd do it in my room if I could live in it. I have to literally climb into it and I haven't even seen the bedroom floor for over four months. Nothing is getting better and I feel lost every day.”

She heard it in my voice. I know because her eyes glass over and she can feel the weight of every word I throw at her like stones.

She clears the crying from her voice.

“Mi hijo, I thought you were doing better. You were on the mend. I'm sorry, it feels like I couldn't do anything for you. Are you seeing somebody?”

“No more counseling,” I say. “I’ve been doing it for almost two years, that’s enough. There’s nothing they can tell me now that’s going to make any difference. I can’t keep going back for the same problems anymore. Nothing else works if I don’t *make* it work.”

She struggles for something to say, like she was told something impossible. For a moment, I feel unrecognizable to my own mother.

She says, “You can take a break from classes. We’ll take care of you for a while. You need a long vacation to get rid of all the clutter and come back better. Marco and I can cover your expenses for a while, you know, whatever you need. I can’t see my son like this.”

We’re both shaking now and she eases us both with a hug. This isn’t a mother’s grip on her little son, but I feel at home against her, like I am young and vulnerable again, but safe with her there. It’s taken so much of me to bring this out, and I know the waiting has taken its toll on her, too. My family is ready, has been, to step into my life and help me along. They want me as I am, and I want to let them help me.

But not until I work as hard as they’re willing to work for me. I can’t cry at work, it’s taking so much careful breathing to keep it from happening.

“Thank you so much, Mom. I’m sorry I haven’t talked about this before. I just haven’t wanted to look like I can’t handle things.”

“It’s okay if you can’t because you will. You just need time to heal. You’re my son. Be good to yourself, okay?”

We pull away from each other.

“Okay, Mom. I can do that.”

“I can talk to Moira and Marco about you taking some time off. They'll understand.”

“It's okay, you won't have to do that. I think I can manage. I just need to do what's been helping, what I know helps. I just need to put them into practice.”

She holds my arm for a second.

“Okay, but if you need anything, let us know, okay?”

I'm still raw, but I can smile.

“Okay, thank you. I love you, Mom.” We hug again.

“I love you too, hijo. You know we can always talk about what's going on in your life. It doesn't always have to be good news.”

“I know.”

“But you *have* to call your mother, alright? Can't leave me out in the cold. And you should come over so I can make you something yummy and we can talk. What would you like to have?”

She knows I like to go to restaurants instead of making my own food sometimes, and she thinks it's worse for me than if she makes it herself. Again, she's right. And when I'm down, I'm craving Italian.

“How does stuffed shells sound?” I ask her.

“Oh, Alex,” she says with a note of pity in her voice. We both laugh because she knows it's my comfort food. “That sounds fine. I can make enough for you and Marco, and his girlfriend, if she'd like to come.”

“Okay, Mom. Sounds good.”

We hug a third time and I let her know I should be heading back downstairs to work.

It's draining, talking to my mother about these things. I know she wants me to be happy and healthy, but I want that on my own terms. She wants me to uncover everything, give everything away, until I'm naked and have no pride left. Could I be any less proud than when I open up to my own mother? Is it like this with other sons and mothers, this stripping down? Is it selfish for her to want attention and a chance to be needed? If it is selfish, is it necessary?

I do a head count on my way back down to Circulation. Forty-seven students packed into this small library. Ernest and Gladys go back to their desks behind the Circulation area, leaving me to sit front and center for library service.

I sit down at the computer and open my notebook to continue writing, but writing at work, at this library, is a tease. Students find the most unusual requests to busy us with, public patrons beg for us to take on City Hall for them (free of charge, of course), and professors surprise me with massive projects at the most inconvenient time frames. And sometimes the jobs sound too difficult, out of my pay grade, but all it usually takes is plugging in a power cable or wiggling a wire to fix them.

I remember on one night a student asked me to fix the projector in her classroom. Time was burning and she needed to start a graded presentation. She confused me with my brother (also employed by FAMU), who works in I.T. I explained that to her, and that he wasn't at work that late, but I didn't think there would be anyone else available who

could fix a problem like that. So I followed her.

When we got to the classroom, forty students looked up at me, the stand-in computer guy, as I stared at the projector mounted on the ceiling. I noticed a little button on it glowing green. The projector was just out of reach, so I jumped up, managed to press the button once, and the projector went on in an instant. Forty students cheered for me as if I discovered cold fusion. An entire classroom packed with future lawyers, and not one of them thought about turning the damn thing on.

I see Professor Lincoln, one of the oldest law professors in the university, walk from the elevator, towards me. His face is a light brown, like worn leather, and it matches his beady eyes and turtle-like face. They disappear into his face when he smiles. I respect him for being an Army veteran and an intellectual, but I'm amazed he's made it this far without knowing how to work a computer.

He needs help with the tech, all the tech, and his assistants are overworked already, struggling to meet the demands of forty-two high-maintenance professors, so he's looked outside of the proper channels and found me. He's looking right at me, eyes flagging me over for the next mission.

“I'm going to need to book some flights when you get the chance,” he tells me.

“Do you have the time?”

Now or later, same inconvenience.

“Sure, I can help,” I tell him. It's quiet now, and maybe I can take care of his flights before the students leave classes and roll in.

A librarian that books flights for professors. I don't know if anyone else working

in the library will help him, so I feel obligated to help. He's old, busy, and his personal assistant quit a few weeks ago. At least that guy got paid for this.

Booking flights for Professor Lincoln involves more than tracking prices. It's an exercise in data retrieval, number-crunching, adapting to last-minute changes, and list compiling (not to mention maintaining patience and even blood pressure).

He leans over the desk counter and takes a moment to explain himself. I expect the worst.

“Here's what we need. I have a convention I'm going to with my wife, and we're going to be traveling separately, but we'll need to come back on the same flight. We'll need flights to Chicago for Thursday, preferably in the morning, and we want to come back at the latest on Sunday night.”

This is a favor. I'm not being paid for this, I can say no anytime I want. But I can handle more work. I know I'm capable of more; I've been through worse. I can man the Circulation desk and book his flights, so I will.

“Using Southwest Airlines again?” I ask. His face scrunches up. More complications.

“Yeah, but let's also check Delta and Jet Blue. Sometimes they'll have better deals at different dates during the season. Do you have my Fly Rewards numbers? My old confirmation numbers? You can use those for credit before using my cards. Do you need my personal information again, or my wife's?”

I say, “No, I should have all that.”

He grins like a toothless turtle.

“Good! Then can you print all that out and highlight the earliest flights? Please give me a call when you're ready.”

“No problem, professor.” I say, then he walks out of the library.

I don't have to. In fact, I shouldn't, not on the clock, and my coworkers don't say a word about it.

Gladys and Ernest mumble to themselves about the daily on-line news.

“He must've been on something to act so crazy,” Gladys says at her desk. “You can't be in the right mind to eat at somebody like that. Where'd you say this happened?”

“This is Miami,” Ernest says. “They say he was on some new drug. What was it, bath soaps? Bird salts?”

Stop listening, Alex. Keep searching for flights and don't say a damn word.

“Hey, Alex, you know what we're talking about?”

Keep me out of this, you asshole. You know I'm busy with or without booking flights. I should be writing right now or finishing a book, something more productive than talking to both of you.

“You know about the cannibal? The zombie? The Miami cannibal? I don't know what they're calling him now, was he on something? Do you know?”

“Yeah, they're called Bath Salts,” I say, hoping that'll make him shut up.

Southwest has nothing under \$210 at any time and Delta is even worse. I need to call Professor Lincoln back so we can work out a different schedule. Now it's me, the flights, the incoming waves of day students, and writing I know I can't get to inside of this place.

No cheap flights for Southwest, worse deals from Delta, and the Lincolns aren't signed up for any benefits for Jet Blue. I find Lincoln's office number and ring him up while the noise stays low in the library. He picks up, but the muffled laughter outside comes inside.

“Professor Lincoln speaking,” he says right before another mob of students comes into the library and makes its way to my desk—and it's a large one, at least three classrooms of students pour into the lobby of the library. When I'm nervous, my fingers tense and clench through the air.

“Hello, professor,” I say with a pause, unable to make my problem come out in words. “Just wanted to let you know I'm having trouble finding your flights.”

Half a dozen students stack their books in front of me. Others stare and wait for me to finish my phone call.

“You couldn't find any flights for those times?” At least he's pushing us through the conversation. The next student moves his lips and points—*Con Law*, I read from his lips.

“No, sir,” I tell Professor Lincoln. My damn phone cord won't reach the end of the shelves where the constitutional law textbooks are, so I pull the receiver off the desk and let it dangle in midair as I stretch the line tight and grab a copy.

“Remember what I said about calling me sir, now,” the professor says. I know he was enlisted, and right now I don't care about how he *worked for a living*.

The phone receiver bangs and scrapes against the floor as I walk back to my desk. Ernest's laughs travel through the walls, as clear as puncture wounds. I set the receiver

back and pull up the student's Circulation account.

“That's right, professor,” I say and check out the textbook. Another group waits for a study room.

“Here's what I'll need for you to do next,” Lincoln says. “See if it'll be cheaper to fly Friday morning and check flights returning Monday morning. Could you do that? And please print out your results and I'll let you know which flights are okay for me.”

Thursday to Sunday, Thursday to Monday, Friday to Sunday, Friday to Monday—Southwest, Delta, Jet Blue, *Con Law*, group study rooms, white-noise cell phones, cackling through the walls. I feel a pinching through my chin, behind the muscle, the carotid arteries tight like halyards twisting down my chest, the electric throb in my neck.

The student in front of me sees something awful in my face. He'll see something worse if he keeps staring.

“I'll get right on it, goodbye.” I can't understand what the professor says as I hang up.

I whittle the line down and Lauren comes back to take that huddle of students for the tour. There's a piercing sensation when I breathe, like barbs wrapped around my lungs. My arms and legs go numb. My body is quitting, I'm having a heart attack.

When the last student disappears, I stumble into the roaring laughter of my coworkers and consider how much better it would sound to hear blood gurgling from Ernest's neck. I let them stop laughing. Gladys glances at me, unamused, and Ernest jumps to his feet.

“Everything okay, Mister Alex?” he says. I twist an invisible pencil in my hand.

Try saying that with lead in your throat. “Need some help out there?”

INT. LIBRARY OFFICES - CONTINUOUS

ERNEST'S mouth is wide open as he LAUGHS.

A wet SMACK, Ernest's face goes slack, and a pencil pokes through his neck. His head SLAMS into his desk.

Alejandro stands over him, a tight scowl on his face, and hand stained with blood. He stares at his hand as it shakes. His face grows frightened.

“Of course! I'll go out there. Need something more to eat or anything?” He approaches me like he's going to touch me. I step back.

“Just ten minutes, thanks.”

I limp to the reference-staff's offices and take a seat with my laptop open. I am stuffed with burning coals, but if I push past the sting and take deep breaths, maybe I can relax my heart enough to keep from a heart attack. Just breathe over the fire, stay in the cool air. Over the fire, into the air. Ten deep breaths, expand the lungs, let the blood find its way through the body. Ten deep breaths.

One—

The door leading into the reference area opens and Professor Lincoln walks in. I can't help him now, not when he's keeping me from calm.

“Any luck with those flights?” he asks. I stare at the blank screen of my laptop and refuse to look at him. If I do, he'll know.

I say, "I'm sorry, I haven't had time. It's been busy here."

He comes around my desk and looks at my black screen. I look at his reflection and he stares at the screen, and back at me with worry on his face.

"You are as white as a ghost! Are you alright?"

It's too obvious now—the shakes, my face, the palpitations—but I don't want to give it up, not all the way, and it doesn't help talking to someone I could've worked for in the military. I am not a liability, not to him, not even to family.

"I'm feeling a bit sick at the moment," I tell him. He squeezes my shoulder and I flinch. I wasn't ready for that test. Now he knows, he felt it in my movement, my face. He knows more than what I'm telling him.

He taps my shoulder.

"You don't have to handle that right now, it's okay." His voice, although always calm, is even cooler, more measured, like he's pressing a confession out of me.

"I'm sorry," I say. Sorry to give a little weakness. He's allowing me to, but it's always harder to allow it myself. "I'm just stressed out at the moment."

"Okay," he says. "You've had a lot of work come your way, I take it."

"Yeah," but not really. It's never about the work. Just about how to handle it.

"We can handle this another day." Not later, but tomorrow, time to relax, drink, pass out, fast forward. He wants me to stop, and I need to stop.

"That's good."

He leaves without another word, just a wave and a smile. Ten deep breaths, expand the lungs.

After ten numb minutes, the tightening in my neck and chest dissolves, the tension in my muscles softens, and the relief feels like a fleece blanket on my shoulders. Maybe it was a panic attack.

There is no one around to hear me sob.

YOUNG AMERICAN FUN

There's nothing to do in Yuma: a town so desolate and unforgiving, a blue-and-brown oven so drab that not even *Star Wars* and *Planet of the Apes* could make it popular—and they were both filmed there. America's own desert world. My first duty station before deploying to Iraq, and definitely my last. Being stationed in the desert for four years makes for a terrible first impression of enlistment.

The club at our air station never really interests me either: drunken Marines fighting over pool games and local women. After helping close the club every two weeks or so for a year, breaking up scuffles, shuffling drunks back to their barracks, the excitement of knowing that the Marines have the best club in town wore off.

Every now and then a friend would tell me about a bar or a strip club and drag me out of the barracks. That's how I found out about The Gallery, a strip club hanging off the side of Arizona. Just west enough from the state line for another two hours of drinks at a nearby dive. Cheap cans of PBR in a never-ending supply, but that bar is a hot-spot for fights between the locals and Marines stationed back at MCAS. It's the closest place to get drinks, though. The Gallery, the strip club next-door, doesn't serve beer.

I hop out of the cab and walk towards The Gallery, a club built with an architectural motif somewhere between a Roman coliseum and a medieval dungeon. Swirling Corinthian columns line the outside walls like ribs and between those columns are sculptures of women reclining and stretching with pleasure.

Rhythmic bass buzzes through the front doors, ten-foot wooden, with golden

loops as handles. I pull open the right door and it's dark inside, just enough pink light to see the dancers grinning at me.

Natasha (probably her stage name)—a top-heavy blonde Russian in a pink see-through nightie and white shorts—looks me over.

“Nice ass,” she says in her feather-light accent. I don't know what to say, so I smile as she passes. I pay the guy at the door and brush my collar before swimming in the bass and the black light.

Sconces lit up and suspended on chains flicker under the stone ceiling of the club. At the far end, a familiar Mexican dancer whips her black hair and spins behind the pole on stage, fully naked, gyrating her dark, wide hips. Two other dancers mount their patrons across from each other.

Andrea mans the candle-lit bar to the left: blonde, wavy hair with dark roots, gap-toothed, black blouse, pants, and knee-high boots. Compared to the dancers, she's casual. Andrea sells the young Marines soda, water, juices, and energy drinks. They don't have a liquor license, but new Marines still blow their first steady paychecks on tips at the pole and lap dances. High-regulation haircuts, polos, jeans, green wrist watches, and the sneakers they went running in that morning—we make the usual clientele.

I smile to Andrea; she grins and flags me over.

At the bar, she says, “How's it goin', hon?” and rocks on her crossed arms, closer to me.

“It's my three-day break,” I say. “Just got off work.”

“Mmhmm? Maybe I'll see you here more often, yeah?”

I remember the first time I saw her: off-base housing. She's probably still married, but she likes to flirt anyway. Not sure if that's how she acts here or how she acts everywhere.

"Maybe." I ask for an orange energy drink and take a wooden chair by one of the stone tables.

The Mexican pole dancer looks very familiar. When she slows down, I recognize her face, but not her name. She's passed through the base's main gate when I've worked there, pretty sure with her baby and her husband. I concentrate on tracing my finger over the rim of the drink. Good thing it's her last song.

"Give it up for Marisa!" shouts an invisible DJ. The Marines hoot and clap as she picks up her thong and top. "Up next, it's Jenny!"

I didn't know she was working tonight. She comes out of the changing room all sky blue: ankle-high boots, white-trimmed miniskirt, tight top with spaghetti straps. It's all new gear because she just started working here. Ever since that amateur night, she got hooked into it, to the attention and quick money.

She's pulled her dirty-blond hair back tight. If brunette, she'd look like Christina Ricci. The same doll-like roundness of her face, same slender nose just pointing up. She's all teeth when she smiles. Eric should've told me when his wife worked.

California, one of Eric's favorite Tupac songs, *knows how to party*, booms out of the speakers. *California*, she wrings out her arms, *knows how to party*, and rocks her hips back and forth.

In the city—she winds her petite body around the pole and swings with her legs

out. She lands on both feet and slides her back on the pole, pulling her shirt up just enough to show the shadows of her breasts when she goes down. As she pumps and bounces, the crowd whistles and claps for her, waiting for that shirt to rip open. Only about two weeks and she can twist in the air like a lasso—she’s a quick learner. I stare at my drink.

They hoot and yell around her and I look up to see Jenny tugging her blue shirt up to expose her breasts. She flings an arm over her head and the shirt sails in the air behind her. Eric’s a lucky man.

Then the tipping starts. A Marine in a white cowboy hat slips singles underneath the gold bar at the lip of the stage and catches her attention. Jenny saunters closer, returns his half-grin, leans over him, and pulls off his hat. She dons the cowboy hat and plays with the fuzz of his hair. More of the men approach her. I slouch in my chair. One of them whistles and holds up a \$5 bill. On her knees, she clasps the tip of the bill with her cleavage. If Eric were here, I wonder how long he could stand this. He was here on amateur night, though. Maybe with the money, the discomfort became negotiable.

Her miniskirt is off and she snaps bills in the skinny band of her G-string. The song ends and I’m relieved they only do two songs each. But at the second song, they usually go full-nude.

Why on Earth does it have to be Kenny Chesney?

She thinks my tractor’s sexy, Jenny straightens her legs and back, it really turns her on, with her fingers tugging the G-string. She’s always staring at me, she drifts down, while I’m chugging along, and palms the floor. Whoops from the crowd. I wonder what

else Andrea has at the bar.

I grab a Monster while Jenny's naked legs flail behind my back. Andrea tries to persuade me to stick around for a party at "Shit Creek," a spot of land off the main road outside of the club, past the tree line. They'll have a keg and whatever beers they can get their hands on. Her, the dancers, and their boyfriends. I say I'll think about it and sit back down.

The music winds down and so does Jenny. In a few more seconds, the country-music-and-naked-wife show is over.

"Let's hear it for Jen-ny!" the DJ hollers out from the speakers. Jenny takes her clothes, her wads of money, and leaves to cheering.

I take a seat closer to the stage with enough room to pull back for a lap dance or tip the next girl on stage—a gothic beauty with electric-blue eye shadow and powdered skin underneath thigh-highs and patent leather. She slithers across the floor to the rhythmic crunching of Industrial music. Very thin, but I love her style. So different from the rest of the desert women with brown tans and burned-in freckles. I feel the urge to slip cash to her, but the changing room by the stage opens up and Jenny walks through in a black bikini and heels. We make eye contact and she's all teeth.

"Hey, Alex!" she says. We make brief small talk, then, "I saw you earlier, was wondering if you could give me your opinion on something. I wanted to give you a lap dance. You'll tell me how it goes?"

"Um, okay," I say. "I'd like to help." Either Jenny's way too okay with this or I just became one of her girlfriends. Jenny holds me by the shoulder to motion me to my

feet.

“Let’s sit over here.” She lets me go and pulls the chair back, clear for enough wiggle room. “Okay, it’s ten dollars for topless and twenty dollars for all-nude.” That’s not an option. I hand her a ten-dollar bill and she pulls off her bikini, the top and the bottom.

Jennifer Reynolds, just a hair above five-feet tall, stands over me with nothing on but her shoes and the band around her hair. Sun-stained arms stretch over the back of the chair as she undulates in circles and waves over my body. Our eyes meet again and I think of how Jenny and her daughter’s eyes share such a deep shade of blue. Her hips rock closer to mine and I see everything: the pale, tender skin between her thighs, the curve of her stomach down from her navel, the shape of things I shouldn’t see. She turns her back and glides above me; I can smell light cigarette smoke and hints of sugar. If this happened anywhere else, Eric would beat me to death.

Jenny pries herself off and I am allowed to breathe harder.

“What do you think?” She asks like a little girl who learned how to do a cartwheel. Jenny puts her bikini back on.

“That was great,” I say.

“Really?” She beams.

“Yeah, great job, good work.”

“Thanks, Alex. I really appreciate it.”

Jenny hovers around the room, looking for more commissions, when a lanky man in a white t-shirt, jeans, and a red baseball cap walks in. It’s Eric, here to pick up his wife.

His still, emotionless eyes meet mine and he pumps his head back and nods once to say hello. I wave and try to smile.

It's a Wednesday afternoon, months later, and I'm driving through MCAS Yuma today in a police cruiser with Trevor, a buddy from Military Police school. The base is maybe five miles around, just small enough to circle it on foot. Just a speck of concrete in a sandbox. We stopped at all the guard shacks (all three of them) and checked on the gate guards. After lunch we worked on traffic tickets near one of the only four-way stops on base. No streets larger than two lanes and no traffic lights except for the entrances. We do off-station checks whenever we can. It's more of an excuse to escape the base than anything.

The day winds down with only a few traffic stops and a money run from the bank. As the sun sets, we wind through the loops of base housing, past the obstacle course. Its wooden beams and pull-up bars stick out from an empty soccer field. Its ropes hang dead-still in the windless Arizona air. Pockets of dry earth riddle the field and telegraph where stationed units hold their fitness formations.

All the homes in on-base housing look the same: boxy and white with walkways leading from the sidewalk, a helping of grass around them with random specks of trees. Like Styrofoam coolers on a red beach. In the hottest days of the summer, the grass dries like snake skin. Base landscaping keeps up appearances by spray-painting it a lively green. I know it's all a show, everybody does. They could leave it as is and I'd be happier. Keep it natural.

Trevor points to the front of one of the houses to my right.

“You see that house with patio furniture out?” He says. The chairs are propped up on the table.

“Yeah, what about it?” I say.

“Why aren’t they around the table? You ever see that before?”

“No, never noticed.”

“Tackett said that, when we were on deployment, some of the wives had a code for letting guys in the house. Sometimes they’d have a colored light at the front of the house. Sometimes they messed with lawn furniture and other stuff.”

“Green means go, I guess,” I say. “That fucking pisses me off. Remember when that one Motor Transport guy got a Dear John letter in Kuwait? He couldn’t stop talking about it and his whole Motor T shop sent her hate mail.”

“Serves her right, man,” Trevor said. “And she got off easy. If Christy and I were married, and she pulled that shit on me, I’d fucking kill her.” Trevor shakes his head and we sit in silence.

There’s a story I was told by another patrolman about one of the only murders that happened on this base: a sergeant choked his wife to death while she watched TV one night. Maybe the sergeant spied on her off-base and found her flirting with a local. Maybe he had been deployed one too many times. They were both sitting on their couch watching when it happened. It was a blood choke, a way to squeeze someone’s neck to cut off circulation in the arteries. Ten seconds can be enough to kill a person, but he choked her paling body for thirty minutes before burying her in the yard.

“Let’s check on Eric,” Trevor says. “We’re close by, anyway.”

I drive towards the back of the base, near the trail where Marine units do their formation runs and physical fitness tests. It’s a stretch of dirt followed by a chain-link fence. During our runs, we need to tone down our cadences so that we don’t disturb the families at the other side of the trail. The early birds get to enjoy watching Marines soak their green workout gear.

Eric and Jenny’s home sits on the last loop of housing. It’s twilight and the porch light is on, lawn furniture is out. Trevor and I get out of the cruiser, walk up, and he rings the doorbell. Eric sees us from the glass panel, then answers the door.

“What’s up? Come on in.” His face is straight and still. There’s a lift in his voice; he sounds happy, but he doesn’t show it. T-shirt and basketball shorts on, how he usually tries to stay comfortable.

The duty belts chafe and weigh us down. Inside, Trevor and I unsnap our duty belts and leave them on the tiled floor next to the closet, pistols and all. Being inside another MP’s house means we can relax. I put a radio in one of my leg cargo pockets, just in case we’re needed. “We were gonna have dinner.” Eric heads into the living room. He has a game of *Halo* paused on the Xbox. I take a seat next to him on the blue couch while he goes back at it. Eric has been milking every playable hour out of the game, beating it on the easiest settings and working his way to the hardest. Sometimes I think shooting aliens is his greatest joy in life. Trevor goes over to the crib to play with Eric’s two-year-old daughter, Maggie.

Jenny is in the kitchen preparing a dish of scalloped potatoes and macaroni and

cheese.

“Hi, Alex; hi, Trevor!” Jenny smiles and flails her hand around to wave.

“How’s it been, Jenny?” I ask. She rips boxes from shelves, making considerable noise. Her feet patter across the kitchen tile so fast they sound like drum rolls. Jenny is cooking in fast-forward.

“Fantastic, Maggie and I went for a long stroll on the trail—it was gorgeous this morning, wasn’t it?—I did a little cleaning around the house, got some shopping done. How’s work?”

“Same old thing,” I say. “Nothing really happens here, it’s so quiet.”

“That’s great—hey, you guys gonna stick around? I can make some more food, if you like. I also have some brownies in the oven, do you like brownies? Eric loves brownies.”

“You know how to please us fat boys,” Trevor says and leans over the edge of the crib. “What’s up, booger?”

“You guys want some lemonade?” Jenny asks. She already has two glasses ready and hands them to us. She looks more excited than usual, her skin radiates considerable heat, and her complexion’s a little red, like she’s on the verge of a breakout.

A few more minutes of baby cooing and laser blasts and Jenny calls us in for dinner. Eric shuts the TV off but keeps his game paused, ready to burn off carbs on the couch. We trail into the dining area: enough space for us to huddle around a small circular dinner table.

“Who’s watch commander tonight?” Eric asks. Since Eric is on another shift now,

he doesn't know who works besides his friends.

"Staff Sergeant Carlson," I say.

Trevor huffs to match the disgust in my voice. "Fucking Timmy," Trevor says.

"Always got a stick up his ass."

"Sucks to be you." Eric cracks a smile. "I hate that guy."

I curl my fingers and speak like Timmy from *South Park*, spouting gibberish and little bits of "Timmeh!" It'd get more laughs if they didn't actually know Ssgt. Carlson: a Staff NCO as by-the-book as he is condescending. The other two just sneer.

"Jenny, are you gonna eat?" I ask. Jenny races a sponge over the stove top.

"That's okay," she says. "I'm not all that hungry and I want to get some more done around the house."

Eric stares at his food a while before he shovels it into his face. He's been more distant than usual, almost gloomy, embarrassed. It goes quiet and I follow suit, plowing through the meal on my paper plate.

Moments after, Trevor and I shuffle out of Eric and Jenny's house, rubbing our stomachs. It's dark out and time to head back to the station and drop our gear. We jump in the police cruiser and drive.

"Hey, Mujica," Trevor says. "You notice something about Jenny?"

"What are you talking about?"

"She's usually pretty laid back. Didn't look so laid back tonight."

"Well, yeah," I said. "She's got some energy, sure."

"Man, no. You notice her face? The acne?"

“Yeah, I mean, I didn’t really think much about it.”

“Any night I go over there now,” Trevor says, “I get a feeling like something’s up with her. She’s all jumping around the house like she can’t sit still.” We’re out of housing, headed towards the Base Exchange. “I think she’s using.”

“Holy shit...you think so?”

“I never seen her with breakouts till she’s been stripping.”

“Damn, she’s gotten really thin, too,” I say. “Do you think Eric knows?”

“Sure as shit he knows,” Trevor says, “and he’s looking the other way. This is not good. And Mujica? Don’t say anything to anybody else.”

What can you do when you’re a cop and your best friend’s wife does drugs? What everybody else does. We kept quiet and waited for things to get better.

It’s sundown; Eric and I play *Halo* together. We’ve been going at it on and off for weeks, about the time Jenny’s teenage cousin, Daniel, started staying at the house. Daniel comes out of the bathroom after showering and getting dressed. *The Two Towers* just came out yesterday and all three of us are going to watch a matinée showing. *The Fellowship of the Ring* was a huge hit with most of the Marines at the Provost Marshall’s Office and we couldn’t wait to watch the next one.

“About fucking time,” Eric says. He really couldn’t wait. Daniel bops down the stairs with baggy jean shorts and a Slipknot t-shirt on. “You waste water when you jerk off in the shower.”

“I wasn’t jerking off, man!”

Jenny comes downstairs with a heaping load of laundry to deposit. She said there were too many dirty clothes to take care of and she wanted to get a jump on them. Eric pauses the game and turns off the TV.

“Are you guys leaving?” Jenny asks.

Eric says, “Yep, should be back in about three hours.” He gets up from the couch, to Jenny.

“Alright, let me know when you guys come back so I can make some sandwiches and things for dinner.” Eric and Jenny lean in to kiss. There’s cold comfort in that kiss, like an old habit, routine.

“Alright, see you later.” Eric collects his keys and we head out the door.

Fifteen minutes on the way to the theater, Eric asks Daniel to check the movie times on the newspaper.

“The movie doesn’t start till eight,” says Daniel. “We’re, like, an hour early.”

“Shit, alright,” Eric says. “I’m not gonna wait there. Let’s go back.” We turn around and drive back to the base.

We head inside the house. The washer hums and swishes like an endless wave. Maggie sleeps in her crib. Besides the laundry, the house is silent. I sit on the back of the couch, looking up as Eric and Daniel climb the stairs. Daniel opens the door to his room and whimpers.

“Oh, my God.” He stays frozen at the door; this gets Eric’s attention. Eric looks in, pushes Daniel away and jumps in the room and slams the door shut. Through the door, I can hear Jenny screaming.

“Don’t hurt him, no!” Crashes and the thuds of bodies slamming erupt from the room, through the floor and walls, like the room is coming loose from the rest of the house, and I am frozen from the sound. Just upstairs someone is being murdered. Another slam shakes me loose, I jump off the couch and sprint up the stairs. Daniel slumps on the tiled floor, crying, rocking.

“Why in my room? Why in my room?!”

I grab the doorknob—locked—and shake it.

“Stop it, Eric,” Jenny cries, “stop it!” The pounding mixes with the smacking of meat, fists making impact. A fist cracks through the wall by the door and leaves a smear of blood around the hole.

“Come on, Eric,” I say. “Open the door, man. Let him go.” Little Maggie, startled awake, wails in her crib downstairs. Wringing the knob doesn’t work, so I land into it with my shoulder. I hear metallic pounding, like pistons bashing together. “Don’t do this, Eric. Open the door!” Eric found another man in bed with his wife and he is beating him to death and there is nothing I can do about it. His career is over, his family is destroyed. I do not want any of this.

There is nothing to do but go downstairs and try to soothe Maggie who is hoarse from crying so hard she chokes on the cracks in her throat. It’s too much for her little body to take. The bedroom door opens and a young guy in jeans and a blue t-shirt hobbles downstairs as fast as his bruised body lets him. I follow behind him as he leaves the house. He gets to the tossed lawn furniture and turns around. I can’t tell the extent of his injuries with the porch light off. I stay by the door. I can’t see the face of the bastard

who just broke a family.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

I say, “Go, get out of here.” He stumbles forward in half-apology. “I said get the fuck out of here.” I yell it in a whisper to not excite the neighbors. We don’t need attention. I don’t need attention. The guy pauses, then limps away, deeper *into* housing. Officer’s housing. The home-wrecker is an officer’s kid.

When I can’t see him through the darkness, I head back inside, close the door, and climb the stairs. Eric and Jenny are back in their bedroom, the door closed. In Daniel’s room, I find a weight set thrown on its side, the plates scattered across the floor. In a corner, a twenty-five-pound plate lies on the floor smeared with blood. Little dark puddles of blood dot the tiles and seep into the grout. The laundry stops and wet sniffs and sobbing echo through the doors, the walls, the hallways. I listen to their cries and wonder if they’ll be able to hold together, if Eric can forgive his wife, if Jenny can make things better, if Daniel can rest in a room drenched in so much violence.

Eric opens his bedroom door. Everything is quiet on the other side. He doesn’t look at me when he says, “I think you should go.”

I almost thank him.

“Please don’t say anything,” he says.

I nod, and say “Of course,” then leave the house.

CRUX

Eric and I kept the beating a secret for over four months, yet he still got into it with his wife. Tempers stayed high ever since he caught Jenny in bed with the officer's son. Then one day Eric lashed out at her, smashed up the house, and got suspended from patrolman duties because of it. With domestic-abuse cases, Marines are suspended from using firearms, so a patrolman can't do his job. It could've ruined his career, but the higher-ups cut him a break. He was good at what he did and they wanted him punished, not removed. Now Eric works in Administration at the Provost Marshall's Office, filing away suspect-detention forms and field reports. It's a regular nine-to-five-type job, so it actually works out for him and the family.

It's been months since I stepped foot back in the Reynolds house, and everything seems to be back to normal. Eric and I get along like before. It's Thursday night off, we're both on *Halo* again, our favorite game since we became friends. He's more of a team player now—better aim, better temper. The doorbell rings and I hear Jenny shout "I'll get it!" from the kitchen. The tapping of her heels echoes on the tiles. Some of Eric's buddies are going to do a little competitive *deathmatch* with us tonight.

I hear the door suck open; laughter and raised voices fill the living room. Eric pauses the game and meets with the company, so I follow suit. I turn around and see only four other guys. I was hoping for a full, four-on-four competition, but this'll do.

Jenny presents the crew to me. Introductions and handshakes all around: Marco, Maria, Lucas, Jonathan, and Matt. They all look humble in their pastel polos and jeans.

Maria and Jenny match with summer dresses of different hues. But where are the chips and dip? Where's the beer? They all look like they just got back from church.

"Alex works with Eric at the PMO," Jenny says. "Alex, these are all friends from Generations Church. You should come join us sometime." The five others nod their heads together.

"Magicman," Eric says, "we're doing some Bible study before we get started, if you want to join in." The words *Bible study* sound foreign coming out of his mouth. I wouldn't have expected him to be a Bible thumper. I didn't even know what he believed in. I don't want to be rude, but Bible study wasn't something I was planning on. That's something I wouldn't just jump into, ever, even if it seems that they did. Why didn't Eric tell me? "Or you can get started without us, whatever you want."

"I'm okay, thanks," I tell them. If Eric asked me seven times, then seven times I'd want to choose *Halo* over Bible study. But Eric has always been a good friend. I know he wants things to go well for me and, even if I disagree, I'll consider going along as long as he's trying. Maybe I'll owe him one of these days. Just not today. After helping them move and rearrange the chairs in a circle, I plop back on the couch and unpause the game.

When was the last time I wore a tie for anything but an inspection? It wasn't the prom. Maybe a wedding from way back. Either way, it's better to dress down when you're there. I wrap and loop the tie around into a half-Windsor knot. I finish smoothing out the folds at the top of the tie when I get a knock. Eric creaks my door open and

squeezes in. He's wearing khakis and a sky-blue shirt. In anything outside of uniforms or lounging clothes, he looks like an alien pretending to be human.

Eric says "What's up, you all ready? Sorry, I wanted to get there a little early for parking."

I open my wall locker.

"Yeah, just getting my jacket."

"Nah, man. You won't need that. It's not that dressy. Anyway, it's hot as balls out there." He pulls at the tips of my tie. "And you can lose this." I pull down the tie and drop it on the bed. "It's not like that there. They're more laid back, you'll see."

We make our way out and down the PMO steps to the back door. Their white sedan is parked across from the patrol cars and Jenny is in the back seat next to Maggie in her safety seat. I ride shotgun with Eric. We don't even get past the main gate before I see the tip of the church, its cross shining under the sun. But it isn't just the sun that makes it glow; from the top to the base I can see rectangular mirrors plated around it—spinning, too, like a disco ball.

I ask, "That's it right there?" I rest my hands on the arm rest and press my face on the glass. Generations Church towers like a blue monolith above the sand. "It's bigger than a Costco!"

"Yep, that's it." Eric beams. "Biggest church in Yuma and it's right across from the base. How's *that* for skating?" Eric pulls right and takes us two blocks down to the parking lot. Behind its iron fence I see rows upon rows of vans and trucks, jeeps and sedans, packed side-by-side, disappearing into the horizon.

“I wouldn’t say we’re skating yet, hon,” Jenny says.

“You know how long it can take to dress Maggie up,” says Eric. Jenny and Eric trade words back and forth while I watch the church come closer: tanned walls with a tight grid work of electric-blue-tinted windows. Gold frames line the corners and rooftop like a jewelry box.

“I can’t remember them building this place,” I say. “How long did it take them?”

Jenny says, “It’s been a few months, maybe four.”

“Maybe you should stop messing around on the computer and get out more often,” Eric says. Jenny smacks his armrest. “Hey, he’s always in his room. I bet he hasn’t even seen the spotlights on at night.”

“They have spotlights?”

Jenny giggles. “You’re right, Eric.” She latches onto my head rest. “Alex, where have you been?”

I lean over the headrest. “What? There’s nothing to do around here. You know that.”

Yuma is cheap real estate for sci-fi movies and bomber pilots. After driving for hours, the occasional, unwelcome snow bird might find a spot of farm land with tangelos or run into our air station and ask for a tour that we can’t give them. Besides that, it’s Hollywood’s barren wasteland on a budget. This town is so dull, the only decent club in Yuma is on our base. If the locals have to come to a military base for a good time, then I might as well stay in my room.

It takes us fifteen minutes to find a spot to park and make our way to the front doors. As lavish as the building looked in passing, it's nothing in comparison to the mural at the front. Life-size sheep play on rolling green fields, coming together at the portrait of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. He raises his sculpted arms out of the mural in a V over the front steps of the church. Kids smile and pose in front of the mural while their parents snap pictures with their cell phones.

“People told me what it looked like,” Eric says, “but I didn't believe it until I came and saw it for myself.”

I trail behind Eric, Jenny, and Maggie as we ascend the steps under the arms of Jesus. His palms hang parallel to the ground as if to lay claim to the earth and all the people below.

“I can't believe it either,” I tell him. I feel heat coming from the mural's rocky palms and wonder if they'd come down and smash me. I center myself between the arms and head straight for the door.

“You'll get used to it,” Jenny says, holding little Maggie on her shoulder. “It's amazing what they did in such a short time, right?”

We make our way through the front doors and into a lobby packed like a wedding reception. All unfamiliar faces, but smiling, clear-eyed, and receptive. A cacophony of laughs and squeals of children. The doors leading into the nave are wide open and only fifteen feet away.

Jenny veers away from the doors. “Hey, y'all!” Marco and Maria, the Mexican-American couple from last week's Bible study, stand by a brochure table. They smile and

wave us over. We trade hugs and handshakes. “Alex wanted to join us this morning, isn’t that great?”

“That’s wonderful,” Maria says in a musical, drawn-out way.

“You want to find us some seats?” Eric asks me. “Close to the front?”

“Absolutely.”

I head for the doors and into the dim lights of the nave—they’re changing color: large, rectangular panels several stories overhead glowing in blends of blue and green, purple and orange. Churchgoers sit shoulder-to-shoulder on black-mesh benches drooping down to a stage lit up by theater screens. Televisions surround the benches along the matte-black walls. Lines of yellow light peak from the rows leading to the benches like a movie theater. The entire church feels as wide as a stadium.

I search for a spot of room that’ll fit the four of us. The closest I can get to the front is the far right corner next to a wide-screen television.

I get a text from Eric: *were r u*. I raise my phone and wave it like a lighter until he signals with his own. In a few minutes they make it to our bench.

Eric asks, “Nothing closer, huh?” I just shake my head. Better for me, at least. Less conspicuous. I don’t even want to try and blend in.

The lights dwindle out except for the center theater screen: a red, wire-framed globe spins on the screen, its right side on fire. It’d look better on the front of a nightclub. Then, I feel rumbling bass rattle through my tail bone.

“Yuma, Arizona,” says a radio DJ’s voice. “Prepare to have your spirits lifted by God’s grace. Are—you—ready?” I feel our bench bow out as everyone on it stands up

together. They hoot and cheer on their feet. “Then give it up for the one, the only, Pastor Dick...Whitmore!” Christian Rock pours out of the speaker system, the right-side screen shoots up, and reveals a live band. The pastor—with frosted hair, purple-tinted glasses, a thin goatee, dressed all in black—sprints from behind the band to the front of the stage. The ground shakes under everyone’s pounding feet and my ears pop from the shouting.

The logo on the center screen dissolves into live-camera footage of the crowd and displays the song lyrics like a karaoke video: *Unveil my eyes / so I can see Your glory. / Unveil my eyes / so I can know You’re here.* Jenny stays seated with Maggie on her knee; she pumps it to the rhythm of the music. Eric leans forward and mouths out the words the way Lurch would at choir practice. I clap and play along, but every word itches the back of my throat. Every movement is a conscious, painful decision. My body knows I shouldn’t be here. I might as well be wearing a clown wig.

“Alright, Generations Church,” the pastor yells into his headset. “Give a shout-out to God tonight. Are you ready to worship?” I don’t even feel the need to clap, but the church is hungry and I go along with it. Pastor Whitmore cheers for the audience. “Yeah, I’m loving your energy, praise Him.” He skips over to the lectern, a Plexiglas stand with a Bible and notes. “Thank you, it’s always a pleasure to have you all visit this house of God. We want you to feel right at home.” He flips through his notes and says, “Tonight, I’m going to talk to you about the Circle of Love and why *you* need to make it grow.

“Now, let’s say we have some co-workers that we don’t quite agree with. Maybe they don’t believe the same way we do, or, to us, they dress a little funny, like they wear all black, do up their hair and wear funky sunglasses or something.” The audience

chuckles. “Let’s bring up the lights a moment. I want to get a good look at all you funny people.” The ceiling lights dissolve to white and I can see everyone. Pastor Whitmore picks his Bible off the lectern, bounces to the edge of the stage, and scans the crowd with a hand over his eyes.

“Uh-huh, okay, nothing out of the ordinary here...ooh, ma’am, I would’ve stayed in today.” Everyone bursts out laughing. “Everyone, look to the neighbor on your left... now to the right...alright, that’s enough for one day, my goodness!” He makes the *kill it* sign with a hand across his neck and the audience loses it. The pastor shuffles to the left. “What did we see there? Everyone is just a bit different. Even some new faces in here today.” Eric elbows me in the side with a smirk—not the best time.

Pastor Whitmore raises a finger to make a point. “Yet, here we are—different shapes, sizes, colors—under the same roof, in God’s house. That’s a pretty large circle, but God’s Circle of Love is even bigger, because He loves every single one of us. Isn’t that something? An example to reach for, don’t you think? Let’s learn how to expand our Circle of Love, shall we?” He turns back to the lectern and opens the Bible. “Looking at John 7:24, it says ‘be honest in your judgment and do not decide in a glance, superficially and by appearance’.”

I zone out during his lecture. The words get muffled and I can just make out his tone. The pastor makes a joke, the audience giggles, so I smile. He gesticulates and darts from one side of the stage to the other; I pretend to listen in. When he reads from the Bible, the verses of interest come up like a PowerPoint presentation on the center screen.

I can nod and follow along without even listening. I might as well not be here. I shouldn't be here. Why did I agree to come along?

When a new song starts to play, I get up, mime it, and plop right back down. Three lectures pass by, three songs, and I'm a little sweaty and uncomfortable, but fine. Then a spotlight comes on and crawls over the benches.

"Folks," Pastor Whitmore continues, "this is the point in the day when I like to ask you all some very important questions." The band's pianist pings away a sad melody, the pastor slides off the stage and takes the right aisle, our aisle. "Right now, someone next to you is feeling a pain in their chest, something they haven't felt in a really long time, maybe something they haven't felt before, until right now, right here." Eric puts his hand on my shoulder and it almost burns. The pastor comes closer. "That pain is feeling God's presence, feeling His love." Pastor Whitmore looks through the crowd, arms clutching at his chest. "Someone out there is feeling it right now, that they need Jesus in their heart. Who here feels it, that they need to be saved? Who here is ready to answer the call? Just raise a hand." Closer now, the pastor and the spotlight are coming.

"Mujica?" Eric whispers.

"No."

"Come on, bro."

"*No.*" The nerve, the fucking nerve. I shouldn't have come along with them. I didn't expect Eric to try and push me like this. Maybe I should have.

Somebody raises their hand and that hot searchlight sprints away from me, to a bald-headed man. A church representative holds the man's hand and pulls him off the

bench. His head is hanging low as if he's crying. Another representative comes from behind and they both whisk him to a room behind the side of the stage. The bald man and representatives disappear in an eruption of applause. The pastor asks again, and again I stay silent. Eric doesn't egg me on this time. The questions stop and we stand through one last song.

The service ends and we say hi to more churchgoers on the way out. Heading back to the car, Eric stands for a moment to catch me side by side with him.

"Hey, Mujica," he says, "how come you didn't raise your hand?" I know he means well and I know he thinks I'm a decent person, but he's not winning points for being pushy. And when did he decide I needed saving? I didn't brutalize a man sleeping with my wife. I didn't get thrown off patrol duty because I resented Jenny becoming a stripper. I wish I could tell him that, but if I do, our relationship will change.

Relationships like these always do. We might grow distant one day, but I don't want us to grow ugly.

"I just don't feel it," I tell him. "I don't feel the need to."

"Alright, it's okay. Maybe some other day."

"Maybe." And I hope he'll let it go.

Weeks roll by, it's the night shift on a Thursday at the air station, and I'm riding with Steve, a boyish Arkansan with the energy of a hummingbird. He's a tiny guy, too, like booster-seat tiny. He's almost too short to drive a police cruiser, but he sits up, leans

forward, the steering wheel catches him at nose-level, and it works. Watching him drive from the side of the road is like watching a shark part the water.

“Magic, we need to get you laid,” he says. “It’s no good stashing yourself like a barracks rat. Come out with me and Nancy again, we’ll sing some karaoke, we’ll find you *somebody*, and maybe you’ll get to bump uglies.”

“Are you shitting me?” I ask. “The last lady you tried to get me with—hell, the few teeth she *had* were grey.”

“She was a woman, wasn’t she?”

“She looked like if Howard Stern ate a truck.”

Steve laughs and swerves onto the sidewalk.

“Easy there, short stack. You hit a mailbox and I’m taking pictures.” Steve grabs me by the bullet-proof vest.

“I will haunt your fucking dreams, Spaniard.” That gets a chuckle from me.

“Let’s check 371’s barracks,” I ask him. “Something stupid’s always happening there.” We turn around and head for the barracks.

“Mujica, I’m going to a barbeque on Saturday. Eric’s gonna be there and you’re coming with me.”

“Oh, really?” I lean towards him. “Since you asked so nicely, anyone else going that I’d know?”

“Maybe,” he says. “Some of Eric’s friends. Pretty cool people. How about it?”

“Hey, you know I can’t say no to a free meal.”

“Yeah, you fat fuck.” That gets me laughing hard.

“Any of them cute?” I ask.

“Yeah, some Yuma Yummies, but you take what you can get. They have a pool, too, so bring your trunks.”

We arrive in Steve’s truck (not as scary as it sounds, Steve driving a truck). It’s a little, flat house, L-shaped, hugging a small pool. I meet Hector, the host, and change in the guest bathroom. I run into a few familiar faces, but I can’t make out where I’ve seen them before. The food isn’t done and whoever isn’t mingling is in the pool—mostly the little ones. I decide to visit the kids.

Children with water wings and inner tubes compete to make the biggest splashes. I take up toober-fencing with a little Latin boy. The sparring takes to the deep end and the little boy struggles to keep afloat and on the offense. While we’re locking swords, another boy jumps into the fight and unloads his Super Soaker on both of us. I look over at the serving area for signs of people eating, but the food is still not done yet.

Thirty minutes into pool-time and my eyes and skin are on fire. Chlorine is great for urine, but terrible for everything else. Another look at the food and no one is even holding a plate.

“Alright,” Hector says. “Let’s get everybody out of the pool, we’re about to start.” It’s about time! My mouth aches from the rush of saliva. I leap out of the pool, wrap up in my towel, and put my t-shirt back on.

“I want to take this moment to thank everyone who could make it here today,” Hector continues, “and thank you to everyone that brought something extra-delicious to

share.” Hector points to someone inside the house. “I’d also like to give a special thanks to Pastor Dick Whitmore for performing his services today. Let’s hear it for Dick!” And there he is, in a black t-shirt and trunks.

Now I know where I recognize them. Marco and Maria, Lucas Mike, Jonathan. They’re all from Generations Church. Steve didn’t tell me this was a church function.

“Pastor,” says Hector, “would you like to get started?”

Pastor Whitmore moves to the center of the crowd, by the pool steps.

“Let’s form a line by the steps here,” he says. Six people move from the huddled crowd to the front of the steps. I see the bald-headed man there from weeks before. Then the pastor addresses the crowd.

“These people we have before us today,” he begins, “are taking an important step in their lives. They are answering the call to join us in God’s presence. Let’s give a round of applause to them!” The church crowd cheers. Pastor Whitmore lowers himself into the pool and turns to the bald man. “Gary, let’s start with you.”

Gary smiles and follows him into the pool. The pastor puts one hand on Gary’s back and the other on his shoulder.

“Gary Horbach,” he says, “do you take Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior?”

“I do.”

“And do you believe He is the son of God and that He died for your sins?”

“I do.”

“And do you believe He rose to Heaven three days later?”

“I do.”

“Upon your profession of faith and in accordance with the Lord's command, I baptize you, Gary Horbach, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Buried in the likeness of His death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection.” Pastor Whitmore presses his hand against Gary’s forehead and dips him into the water. Gary comes up from the water to a round of applause.

Five more are baptized, then four children, but still we don’t eat.

“Now, is there anyone else that would like to follow their examples?” the pastor asks. “We have time for more to join us. Anyone?” My eyes sting and my skin itches from the pool water. I wait until the pastor gives up and we move onto the actual barbeque. And now that the show is over, I have less of an appetite.

The ride back to the air station starts quiet. Steve and I rub our stomachs and sigh; it ended up being a very satisfying meal, at least. The baptisms, I wasn’t expecting them, and I wasn’t expecting Steve to stab me in the back.

It’s easy to be dragged around by someone when you waste time with no one. Even easier when you can feel a community growing around you, one that you’re not a part of and you don’t belong to. Even though church has never been a part of my life, the promise of feeling like part of a larger group, of a larger family, is something that I still crave. I think everyone does. I still want to feel like I belong with someone, anyone, even if I’m a hypocrite for thinking about it. But we’re all hypocrites looking for an escape.

I find myself back in the church, and this time with Steve, at a nighttime service. I know he means well and, for his sake, I go along with it one more time. Three more rounds of quasi-rock and blind arm-waving, three more lectures with PowerPoint slides from a man preaching in a clubbing outfit. Again, the spotlight comes on and Pastor Dick lowers himself from the stage.

“Is there anybody here who’s hearing the Lord’s call?” he asks. “Is there anyone who needs to be saved?” I’m sitting on the edge of the bench and the pastor comes so close he almost knocks into me. I can smell his cheap cologne he’s too close. “Is there anyone out there who needs Jesus in his heart?” He pauses next to my bench and hangs in the air like a scarecrow. What feels like minutes tick by and the ceiling lights glow dark-red.

“Well, then,” he continues. “I guess *no one* needs to be saved tonight. I guess *no one* needs Jesus into his heart. We must *all* be fine, then.” He shouts this over me, but I *know* it’s directed at me. Steve and the pastor get along very well; I know a bet was made. There’s a sour taste in the air and it lingers until the white lights come back on.

I ride back to the air station with Steve and the night’s early, but it’s over for the two of us.

“I’ve never seen Pastor Whitmore act like that before,” he says. Maybe not on stage, anyway.

“That was kind of strange, right?” I say. “He just sort of flipped out on everybody.” Silence seeps in for a moment.

“How come you didn’t raise your hand?” he asks. “And at the pool party, how come you didn’t go for it? A lot of people have; it was a good time to do it. How come *you* didn’t do it?” As if it’s what I’m supposed to do. It’s like Eric again, pushing me where I have no business going. No desire, no duty, no void to fill. Even that loneliness of not being a part of something isn’t enough to join in for good. I wish I could tell Steve how much I don’t care for church. I want to tell him that I’ve never prayed or felt the need to. I want him to be okay with the fact that I just don’t believe.

“It’s not for me, man,” I tell him. “I live a decent enough life. I try to do the right thing. I just wasn’t brought up with it.” Steve’s silence is so loud I can hear thoughts tumbling in his brain.

“Sure, that’s good and all,” he says, “but it’s not going to get you into Heaven.”

As calm and as measured as he could, Steve just told me that how I live isn’t good enough. If I didn’t believe, it didn’t mean much. To him and Eric, I might be on the good side, just not on the right side.

EVENING CHOW

Just last week our chow hall in Parris Island was a cacophony of squeaking boots and grunts. Our drill instructors sped us through the chow lines, snapping us into place, watching as we shuffled to the left with our trays in our hands. Our elbows locked at ninety-degree angles, tucked into our sides, holding our trays like rifles. Everything we held in our hands was like a rifle: canteens, books, our covers indoors—all in an effort to mold our movements. Everything had a purpose.

It's quieter now, ever since the Twin Towers were attacked this morning. I don't know the details of what happened. All I know is what the drill instructors told us. This morning, after physical training, we marched to a large classroom for our bank-account brief. We received packets of information regarding the benefits of using Navy Federal over the standard Fort Sill. We browsed through examples of debit and credit cards, then Staff Sergeant Kolchak busted through the classroom door.

“Guess what? We're going to war!”

In a short time, some of the new Marines learned about what happened, saw clips of the towers punctured by jets. Only a few got to see the television broadcasts in passing, the flames spewing, bodies falling. Without getting to see any of it for myself, I only have their stories to go by.

We march past the chow-hall sign bolted to its brick walls: *Second Recruit Training Battalion: Messhall 600.*

Marines in our platoon march through the entrance of the chow hall, with two of

the Marines in front holding the doors open. Past the rushing air vents and into the clinical smell of steam and floor cleaner. Posters adorned the hallway: grizzled Marines in perfect poses swinging rifles by their barrels, colliding with enemy troops throughout history. The paintings hang between cubed windows that glow like compound eyes during the day and sat flat-black at night. I avoid looking through the pitch black windows and follow the Marine in front of me.

We snatch gray meal trays from a rack and pull the flatware we need from steel bins. Quick, sharp, but without motivation. We're all drained—our last week of training and we enter a war.

We survived the Crucible, a sleepless three-day marathon of war games and physical training sandwiched by two nine-mile hikes. We earned the right to wear the Corps insignia on our uniforms. Chow-hall recruits don't slap small servings onto our trays anymore. We can now call ourselves Marines.

We take our chicken and broccoli with mashed potatoes, fill our cups, and, in groups of four, sit in unison. Marco, my brother, sits face-to-face with me. In three months of combat training and evening-PT sessions, he's shrunk to a size-31 waist, and the fat on his face peeled away and left the hard edges of his cheek bones. Though we're twins, he came into Boot Camp just heavier than me, enough to earn more physical-fitness training and smaller rations. He's leaner now and his cheeks are as dark and sunken as his eyes.

Marco and I slice the food into chunks before eating, dip everything into the mashed potatoes to save time and make something fun out of the meal. We can enjoy the

food, as long as there is something to enjoy. On the whole, Boot Camp chow-hall food is serviceable, made by recruits as pre-Crucible hard labor. After preparing the chicken and broccoli, we poke, dip, and swallow, with our left hands on our knees and our right hands on our forks.

Next to him is Lopes, another high-schooler with a rifle. He came from a conservative family of service members and veterans with tobacco and cordite in their blood. A family raised on pro-wrestling and TV dinners. Like Marco and I, Lopes spent high school in Junior ROTC training—his branch, Army; ours, Navy. For Marco and I, the military seemed more like the next best step. For Lopes, it was expected.

I imagine that, unlike his family members, Lopes doesn't fit the stereotypical build of a fighter. As motivated as he is, and as much training as he's done with us, his face and body are still puffy. He's also the shortest in our platoon, ranking in at five feet, three inches. But he has heart and heart goes farther in Boot Camp than being tall and fit. He doesn't know when to tone it down, though.

“What do you think is gonna happen to us?” he asks, as if there's a simple answer. He doesn't let us say anything. “I bet we're gonna be the first ones in the front lines. They're gonna make us 0311 infantry, everybody.”

“That's bullshit, Lopes,” I say. “Just eat the damn food.”

Lopes shovels his spoon through the mashed potatoes and into his face. We starve for every meal and eat as fast as we can to fill ourselves, to have enough by the time our drill instructors get up. It's up to our squad leaders to have everyone finish at the same time, and that time is when the DIs are ready to leave. It's better to stuff our stomachs

first and worry about digestion on the march back to the barracks.

PFC Benson, thick-jawed and towering at almost six-and-a-half feet, sits across from Lopes. During the Crucible, Benson became a mortar “casualty” and we needed to pick him up and across the war-game field. Staff Sergeant Kolchak picked him on purpose. Benson was the largest of our graduating platoon, and the most muscular. If not in camouflage, he'd look like a lumberjack.

“Nobody knows anything,” he says before his packed fork makes its way to his mouth.

A handful of our platoon is from New York, or has family in New York, and Benson is one of them. When he heard the news, he almost cried on the spot. He is wearing full-grown dread on his face and Lopes is adding to its weight. Lopes beams while Benson averts his eyes and chews his food. “Nobody knows a goddamn thing.”

“I don't think active-duty Marines would be the first to go,” my brother Marco says. “That's why we have reservists, right? I don't really know, but that's what I've heard.”

Lopes still keeps positive. “Come on, man. Don't you want to go fuck shit up?”

“They already have trained grunts for that, *Lopez*,” I say. Even though he doesn't identify himself with a Latin background, Staff Sergeant Grimm pronounced it *Lopez* and that's how it stuck for three months. He doesn't correct us anymore.

“I hope we get to see our parents,” Lopes says. “I don't like how they're going to put the base on lock-down now. Sounds like we won't get a chance to stay long.”

I say, “I don't think we'll get to see the inside of Parris Island, either.”

I spend three months in a straight line and, when it's over, they won't let me get off the tracks to look around.

Marco and I cram our dinner down. Lopes leaves the broccoli and Benson stares at his tray, full of food, except for a few bites.

“I'm sure they're okay,” Marco tells Benson.

“They work next to the towers.”

“Still, you would've heard something from Staff Sergeant Rogers or somebody. Your family's probably just scared.”

Benson doesn't answer, just looks through his plate.

The drill instructors creep up from their tables by the back chow-hall doors and the squad leaders call us to our feet. One day done, closer to graduating and who knows what else.

*

Its 0430 and our air station is dead quiet, except for the 24-hour workers and a few motivated joggers in green skivvies. I'm driving a patrol car, Corporal Albino in the passenger's seat. There's nothing on the radio worth listening to, and Albino took it upon himself to provide the Country marathon when the radio station ended with “The Star-Spangled Banner” by midnight. What's left on the dial is a collection of Mexican Banda music and power ballads about women and food.

I don't know any other Italian man that loves Country music as much as Albino does. He makes the stupidest gestures when he sings, and he's as tone deaf as deaf can get. And Toby Keith is overrated.

“Soon as we could see clearly through our big black eye, man we lit up your world like the fourth of July.”

I am not a fan of Country. Less now than ever.

“Damn it, Albino, you're more deaf than deaf people are deaf. How do you do it?”

He extends his arm out like he's serenading me with a half-serious, half-pained expression on his face.

“You gotta sing it with heart, fucker—'Uncle Sam put your name at the top of his list and the Statue of Liberty started shaking her fist'—let's get some chow, I'm fucking starving.”

“What, off-base?” I get a terrible craving for Jack in the Box, now that I'm on the west coast. It's chunks of beef and cheese patted with the skinniest burger buns. Next to the shady taco truck downtown, it's the best place for a quick bite so early in the morning.

“Mujica, what's on your right?” Albino says, mispronouncing my name *Meh-hee-cuh*. He stares at me while I look at the base chow hall.

“No kidding,” I say. “I didn't know they were open.”

“It's early-bird chow, jackass, and they just opened a minute ago. C'mon, let's park. You've been stationed here how long? I can't believe you haven't heard about it.”

“I usually just get Subway or whatever,” I answer. As a patrolman, I'm not signed up to use the chow hall. Com-rats—commuted rations, extra pay usually given to married Marines and Marines with anytime jobs like ours—makes up for this. Most of the time it allows for trips to take-out and drive-thru, but we can pay for what the chow hall is able to offer. With chow hall food, you get what you pay for, and you don't pay much.

I park the cruiser back-end first so we can fly out if need be. Waiting in the drive-thru for fast food is a liability for cruisers, since being pinned by drive-thru traffic keeps us out of emergency calls, but at least we can jet from the chow hall this early in the day.

We exit the car and readjust our camo blouses, have them flush in the front and folded in the back like tails on suits. The cold air stings and send a chill down through my body. The Arizona winters are still uncomfortable for me, still need some getting used to. It can be in the high 80s during the day and drop to the 50s by nighttime. Hot wind blows through infertile land. Rain is a brief spectacle and we're left with bitter cold. Just like the surface of Mars.

Albino leads me to the door, opens it, and the rush of ventilated air crosses me from both sides. I take off my cover and feel the air tickle the sandpaper-thin hairs on the top of my head. Through the air jets I smell the lukewarm odor of fried eggs mixed with tap water. That's because the cooks work next door to the scullery.

A Marine sits at the center of the chow-hall lobby behind a large, U-shaped wooden table, like a curling diner counter. He sits up when we approach him, but we're just as bored as he was thirty seconds ago.

“What we got today, bud?” Albino asks. The chow-hall Marine looks up, cocks his head, and leans around to get a better look at what's being served up. “Hell, I could've done that.”

“It's just eggs and bacon, biscuits. The usual, probably.”

“Gravy?”

“Yeah, gravy.”

Albino's eyes go wide. "Fuck yeah, I haven't had biscuits and gravy in forever." Usually Cpl. Albino has two personalities to share, depending on the situation. When he's working with PMO staff and when he's off-duty, he throws his voice like a sling and his energy can give off heat. When working with the public as a military police officer, though, his attitude changes—he gives direct information in a clear and measured tone, as if on the mic at a beauty pageant for police officers. Every now and then his decorum cracks enough for him to drop a *fuck* or he does that combative walk someone does when they're frustrated. Most of the time, though, he drops the act for food.

"Got your chow cards?" the cook asks.

"Just out of pocket, my man," says Albino.

"Alright, it's gonna be one seventy-five." He motions to the clipboard with a sign-in sheet on the table: names, monetary transactions, and social security numbers. One thing I've learned early about Marine life is that your name and social are currency within the system. Medical check-ups, shot records, rifle rentals for training—a Marine's social is given out almost as much as an ATM card.

We sign in our information and pay the \$1.75 for our breakfasts. At that price for ala carte, I consider visiting the chow hall more often, just not at half past four.

"That's friggin' cheap," I say. "Why didn't I know about this already? It's like five bucks at BK."

"Cause you're a dumbass?"

"Fucker."

We grab our flatware, our trays—the same gray fiberglass trays from boot camp—

and head towards the chow-hall line.

From the front doors to the seating area, Yuma's chow hall is already a welcomed relief to the factory farm at Parris Island. Instead of two large chow lines with metallic siding and those brown, metallic fast-food tables, this one is furnished with circular tables of real stained wood wrapped with table cloth. Booths with caramel cushions line the perimeter of the dining area, with a center strip of seats dividing it in half. In addition, only a half-dozen Marines dressed in green coveralls huddle together around a couple of the tables. They must be flight-line workers or motor-transport mechanics. They pound coffee over empty plates without saying a word to one another. I bet they're wasting time just before mustering for work.

“So, Magic,” Albino says. “What's the story with deployment training? They give you all a starting date yet?” The training is something I'd rather not talk about. The threat of deployment has been looming ever since the end of boot camp, but my parents and brother needed to feel like that was an impossibility for me. Then the threat of Iraq harboring Al Qaeda, of stockpiling WMDs, started to scare my parents. My father in particular was convinced that the U.S. would send troops to Iraq and an armed response would begin. It took several conversations over the phone to convince him and my mother that I was not going to be deployed. But since the unit I'm attached to deploys during wartime, that means I'm a candidate to go. When I told my parents I was preparing to deploy, I could hear their hearts twisting in their voices.

“In two weeks,” I tell Albino. “We're rounding up our gear now. We got our checklists and there's so much shit I need to buy.”

Albino says, “Don't lose your gear next time, dude.”

“You hand your glove liners to somebody and forget to get them back, or you leave your stuff back home. Most of my issued socks have holes in the heels and I have two left-handed gloves. How the hell did that happen?”

“Sounds like you're not getting a clothing allowance next year. It's all going now, so don't get fat.”

Albino and I are the only ones in line for chow and there is enough to choose from to satisfy the both of us and the rest of our night crew: sausage patties about the size of my palm; a line of thirteen cereal dispensers with a wide selection ranging from the usual General Mills variety to the rare gravel-type granola cereals; bacon strips the length of my forearm; and fresh loaves of wheat and white bread glowing under the heat lamps.

Everything we could want for breakfast, but a few things on the menu are underwhelming. No matter how much variety they have, the scrambled eggs at the chow hall don't change: the same eggs from Boot Camp, looking like they were prepared the same way. Back at Parris Island, the cooks didn't break open real eggs from cold storage. They used white bladders filled with what looked like liquid eggs when you poured them. They'd cook them and then run whisks through them to give them that scrambled, fresh-off-the-pan look.

Albino drools over the biscuits with a thin sheet of glass separating them from his slobber, but, just like the eggs, they're hardly to swoon over. They're scattered over a pizza tray and they look like hockey pucks dipped in off-white paint. To the side of them, a lidded tub with a ladle sticking out of it. Probably the gravy. I reach for the sausages, a

handful of biscuits, skip the gravy, and stop at the eggs. It's all gourmet to me except for those goddamn eggs.

Albino pats me on the shoulder. “Skip that, Mujica. That's for the shitbirds that can't get here on time. Go get eggs made to order.”

What a cruel joke for the uninitiated. “Seriously? Then what about omelets?”

He nods to the cook by the end of the line with a hot plate and skillets ready.

“You need to get in on this more often, bro.” Clean stalls, soft light—I'll make this a habit while I can.

“Don't mind if I do.” I wave a hand to the cook. “Hey, can I get some eggs with onions and mushrooms?” He nods back and splashes a ladle full of eggs on the grill, dashes the onions and mushrooms on, and blends it all together. In an instant my salivary glands swell and flood my mouth.

We grab coffees on the way to our seats—disposable cups and lids, just in case we want them on patrol. Cpl. Albino tilts his head down and closes his eyes for a few seconds—saying grace. I busy myself with slicing the biscuits open and splitting the patties and omelet for each biscuit. Albino looks over to me.

I say, “What? Never had an omelet breakfast sandwich before?”

“That's the fat boy in you talking, Magicman. No wonder you have those child-bearing hips.”

“That's messed up, man.” I continue preparing the sandwiches—sausages for the base, eggs on top, and a dash of hot sauce. I have a hunch that the Marine Corps only buys two brands of hot sauce: Tabasco—that horrendous stuff that tastes like thermite—

and Texas Pete—milder, even sweeter, and almost as available in chow halls worldwide.

Albino smiles. “You're gonna make some new daddy very happy.”

I shake a sandwich-packed fist at him and tell him to fuck off.

He laughs and coughs through his clenched jaws. My radio receiver crackles awake.

“Seven-hundred, Control,” it says. Dispatch wants the main gate's attention. The half-asleep Marines in coveralls tense up and look at us for a short moment.

“Send it.”

“Code four?” *Is everything alright?* They ask less out of courtesy than making sure that the gate guards are still awake. It's common for the most tired guards to want a nap this late on the night shift. A little buzz from “master control” makes those on dispatch feel more secure about how steady and alert the detail is working.

“Ten-four. No traffic for a couple hours now.” I'm sure one of the gate guards sent to us from another unit has been bobbing for sleep since one in the morning and got a break from the actual patrolmen on duty. With three guards at the main gate, they can afford for one to snooze in the bathroom. They can catch a few winks on the toilet seat.

The radio traffic settles and I raise a prepared sandwich to my mouth. Juices drip from the eggs with a sucking sound as I press the biscuits together. I take a bite large enough to get a full taste of its salt and grease, animal fats and starch. A sloppy meal slapped together for an army of early risers. My roommate calls it *gut food*. I call it enough.

Albino stuffs his mouth with eggs and keeps talking. “Deployment training, what

are they going to have you do?"

"Just classes, crew-served weapons, I don't know what the hell. Probably NBC training. We're not really going into it with prior knowledge. Just refreshing and taking care of the combat training we didn't get in Boot Camp."

"Shit, that's not much time, right?" Albino splashes hot sauce on his eggs. "You guys should be doing this kind of training for months. You don't even have much time to take the crew-served stuff out onto the range, do you?"

"I don't know, I don't think so." I stuff the last bite of the first sandwich and grab the second one.

He brings up an unfortunate point. We're preparing to leave and getting crash courses to fill in the gaps of our training when we should've done it months ago. We'll have to grow comfortable with our gear once we're there.

"Once we're done preparing," I say, "we'll go back to work until we find out when we're leaving. We'll have to be ready to go in no time at all."

"That sucks, Mujica," he says. "I wish I was going out there with you."

Albino works under Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, the non-deployable branch of our shop. It's a toss-up whether new Marine MPs coming to Yuma work through H&HS or the Marine Wing Support Squadron 371, my unit. Whether they do or don't deploy is not up to them. It's up to the needs of the Corps and the new Marine has no choice but to adapt.

Albino finishes his last mouthful of eggs and looks at his empty plate.

He asks me, "Did you write a will?"

A few days ago, our deploying group was sent to the Legal Services Center to take care of powers of attorney and other legal documents, including wills. MWSS-371 didn't leave for Afghanistan and it had been long enough that I'd ignored the possibility of leaving for another war. I'd forgotten how serious the prospect of war-fighting was. I'd lived in positive neglect about it and now I'm ending magazine subscriptions, shutting off my phone, preparing to leave this country. I was sent to write a will and I'm not even old enough to drink yet. We're all going through the motions and knocking out the bureaucratic bullshit before we leave. We're sliding towards the edge of a cliff.

It might be too short a time to train for me, but I'm training to fight and defend. I'm not training to die.

"Fuck that," I say. "Signing a will is bad luck. No, I'm going there and back, then taking some damn leave."

"Attagirl," he says. "Not like you get much money here, anyway."

We finish our food, leave, and weave our cruiser through the base until the sun rises. Against Albino's crooning, I think of the days of regular work I have left and what my new prep schedule will allow me. How will I spend my last nights in Yuma, on familiar ground?

*

It's the second month in-country and it feels like the two days we spent driving through Iraq are too far away. Three weeks ago our convoy took RPGs and small-arms fire as the daylight faded out. Tracer rounds flew through the dark like hot needles, Rodriguez's hot brass stung as it fell from our mounted machine gun to my neck. Our

missing Marine, ejected during the fire fight, faded from immediate memory. The threat of mines around our sleeping areas, gone. No one spoke of what happened on the way here, to Qalat Sukkar, an abandoned air base. Now our time on the ground is filled with the duties of a constant patrol, daily routines, and an overwhelming urge to spend time.

“Goddamn, I am getting fucking hungry,” Corporal Chiles says with his legs shaded underneath our truck and a Maxim magazine over his face. Chiles made the trip with us to the air base, but in another vehicle. When we arrived, our fire team leader Staff Sergeant Favre made Corporal Johnson the leader and had Chiles sub for Johnson as the driver.

“We have like eight crates of MREs, Chiles,” Johnson says, reading an Anne Rice novel in the driver's seat. “Why are you whining?”

Chiles flips the magazine off his face and props himself up to look at Johnson.

“No, I don't want more space food,” he says. “I want some tray rats, man.”

“You know it's the same, right? Same shit, bigger bags.”

“But they have *trays*, man. You gotta serve it like a chow hall, right? Can't be the same.”

“Just wait until we get relieved and go back to HQ, then you can have your food. Just try to sleep or something.”

“I'm trying, it's too damn hot.”

“Then go visit Fifi,” Johnson says. Fifi is an improvised sex toy made of a latex glove, a towel, and petroleum jelly. Chiles scrounged up the supplies from his personal medical kit and, to break the ice, showed some of the other Marines how they could make

their own. According to just one of them, Corporal Stetson, it was a good idea.

“Fuck you, goodie-goodie.”

There are eight of us now in our patrol area, two fire teams of four Marines: our MP convoy team and an attached LAAD team, Low Altitude Air Defense. The MP team deals more with any problems on the ground, including detaining enemy prisoners of war. The LAAD team, the “grunts of the skies,” is tasked with taking out enemy jets and helicopters with their personal Stinger missile systems and their Avenger: a Hummvee assembled with a fully-controllable anti-aircraft battery, a modified .50-caliber machine gun and repeating Stinger missile launcher on either side of a joystick-operated cockpit. It looks like the body of a robot with wheels. The LAAD Marines showed us how to operate the vehicle for night watches, so we can track and range-find anything from fifteen feet in the air. And since nighttime fire watch provided us some privacy, they also kept a cover-less porno mag inside.

Lance Corporal Oguntade—Ogre for short—and Private First Class Anders calibrate the .50-cals on the Avenger. The spacing and timing involved for our own .50 cals are difficult enough for us POGs (People Other than Grunts) to figure out. I can only imagine what Ogre and Anders need to do for them. They also space their belt-fed ammunition with tracer rounds in order to track their shots in the low-light. According to Ogre, the guns are modified to fire faster than the regular, crew-served weapons mounted on tripods or on top of Humvees. The speed and force of their rounds should be able to punch through armor.

Rodriguez, my assistant gunner, disassembles his rifle with his headphones on. He

breaks down the hand guards on his M16 and stops, sighs, and opens his CD player.

“Son of a bitch,” he says. “A CD player was a bad idea.” He turns to me.

“Frisbee?” He chucks the CD at me and disassembles the lower receiver on the rifle. I put down my pad and paper and grab the CD.

“You're not going to miss much,” I tell him. “Disturbed sucks, all their songs sound the same.”

“Magic, you don't know what you're talking about.”

I stare at my reflection through the swirl of scratch marks on the CD. The dirt goes so deep into the skin out here, it's impossible to stay clean for an entire day. At least now we don't have to wash ourselves out of ammo cans. The new field showers near the CO's quarters allow us to wash off the grime, and with about a dozen hours of the Iraqi sun boiling the shower's water bladders, we can enjoy a few minutes of a warm shower.

“What do you think it's going to be?” I ask Rodriguez. He winces as if I asked him to check my breath. “Maybe something fresh, like roasted chicken with the skin on it.” Chiles hears this and moans.

“Stop, I don't know,” Rodriguez says, “I really don't care. We're in the middle of nowhere. Our food can't get that much better.” Chiles moans louder.

Back when we were all on our way to the air base, Rodriguez helped reload and maintain our machine gun. That's how it worked out at first, but Rodriguez and I swapped positions each time our convoy took off for the day. When Rodriguez sat on top, I stayed inside with my own rifle. Each time I rode on top, our convoy sailed without even the slightest hostilities, not even an angry look from a villager. Rodriguez, though, he drew

the short straw every time he got on the gun. Tracers, missile fire, buildings crumbling right next to him—he saw everything up-close. But even when it wasn't his turn, he insisted he wanted to ride on top, his self-asserted death wish. He's braver than I gave him credit for.

We joke about how he doesn't look like a Rodriguez, with his light-brown hair, pale skin, and beady brown eyes. He looks more like Mike Myers than anyone. We listen to the same types of music, though I'd go harder with my choices. Metal to his Hard Rock, Hardcore to his Trance. But still, when we had the opportunity to listen to music, it was tolerable, most of the time.

Lance Corporal Rios—one of the LAAD Marines, a Californian also fresh out of high school—shared the music he brought with him, but the selection was slim: bubbly Techno and a demo of House music that one of his friends made. If Rodriguez and I are losing music because of the sand, maybe that's all he's left with. He's taking a swig from a Masafi water bottle in the driver's seat of the Avenger, scanning our convoy's setup. He's not the fastidious type, over-prepared; I imagine he's looking out past the posts and over the perimeter of sand walls surrounding the base, to something else. All this sand with no water.

Rodriguez holds the bolt of his rifle in his hand and mashes the gear-like back of the bolt into the bolt carrier, then flicks the bolt carrier to let the bolt extend outward. That way he makes sure there are no obstructions and the bolt's assembled pieces slide together with ease. It's a rhythmic *click-flick-click*, like a toy.

“Are you lubing it up?” I ask him. Using lubricant on a rifle in the desert is risky

and not recommended by most of the Marines I talk to.

“Here? No.” *Click-flick-click.*

“How far are you going to break it down? You haven't really fired your M16 much.”

“That's it, just scraping the carbon off. Don't want the pins to roll away.”

“Like the corpsman with his pistol?” I tell him. He winces again. “You remember that, the corpsman who cleaned his pistol and ended up launching the recoil spring into the sand? I hear he never found it.”

“Yeah, what a tool,” he says. “That's like taking jewelry to the beach.”

The radio in our truck crackles.

“Papa Six, Papa One,” the voice at the end says. Sounds like Sergeant Olivar, one of our MP watch commanders. Cpl. Johnson picks up the radio handset.

“Ten-five,” Cpl. Johnson says.

“We have four ten-twelve for changeover. Copy? Over.”

Chiles yells, “Praise the Lord!” We're being relieved for chow.

“Lima Charlie,” Johnson says. “We're ready, over.”

“Ten-four, at your twenty in five mikes, out.”

The hot gases in my stomach gurgle and expand. Now I'm sharing Chiles's hunger pains.

Johnson gets out of the truck and surveys the team.

“Okay, let's do two LAAD and two of us—Stetson? You guys figure out who's going from your team. Chiles, Mujica, you can go first. I'll stay back with Rod.”

I pack up the writing gear in my pack and take a seat in the passenger's side. My salivary glands stiffen to the point of aching. Chiles swaps with Johnson in the driver's side. He flicks the ignition switch back and forth, ready to rev the engine and leave. Rios and Stetson finish talking and come to a decision: Stetson and Anders hang back while Rios and Oguntade hop in the back of our truck with their flak, kevlar, and weapons.

“How about you, Ogre?” I ask. “What's on the menu?”

Oguntade keeps a low profile most of the time, even when a group discussion comes up, or when we're just playing grab-ass. He keeps to himself, contemplative unless spoken to. He looks into the corner of the door frame and snickers, bashful.

“What's on the menu?” He smiles and nods. “I say...beef.”

“Beef?” I ask. “What do you mean beef? Kobe beef? Beef Stroganoff? Ogre freezes more to defensive questions than anyone I've worked with, and that's what drives me to prod him.

“I don't know...just beef, like, uh, beef steak.”

His answer is leading to the one menu item I hate more than the rest.

“You don't mean like one of those shitty pepper steaks like in the MREs, right?” I get him laughing his nervous whisper of a laugh. “Those are older than dirt and they taste like leather. For crying out loud, they're menu item number one. That's, like, the first MRE they could come up with.”

“Naw, man,” Ogre says, “it's not bad, not that bad.”

“Alright, here's our relief,” Chiles says. Down the string of broken asphalt, a soft-back Hummer heads in our direction. The heavies are still used for patrols and convoys,

but most of the Hummers I see going back and forth with troops and supplies on this base are the basic trucks, sometimes the ones with railings and canopies. Just like this one, with four Marines hanging off the sides.

“I guess we're hitching a ride,” Rios says.

The Hummer parks in the dust ten feet away from ours and Sergeant Olivar walks out of the driver's seat—flak, Kevlar, and his sunglasses on. I can't remember the last time I've seen his eyes. He waits for a moment in front of our driver's-side door, then slips his sunglasses down and gives Cpl. Johnson the come-here finger. Sgt. Olivar is a stickler for rules and regulations. Him and Johnson never worked together outside of the convoy to the air base, and Olivar stays by the book for anyone new under his command.

“How about reporting your post, devil dog?” Olivar says. Johnson scoots away from the MRE box he was sitting on and snaps to attention.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant. Corporal Johnson reports Papa Six all secure. All orders remain the same. There is nothing new or unusual to report at this time, Sergeant.”

Sgt. Olivar says, “Carry on,” and waves for all of us to leave the vehicle. “You won't be needing the Hummvee this time, we'll drive you to the HQ and back.

“Aye, sergeant,” Johnson says, and mimes Olivar's wave to us.

The other POGs on the soft-back truck hop out, and we climb in.

Posts like ours litter the strips of road and concrete on this air base: an aerial drone detail to our left, another security patrol to our right, a tanker truck ahead of us. Beyond our camp, bits of Iraqi civilization linger beyond the horizon. Adobes, tan and squat, huddle several hundred yards away from our furthest post. Behind them, a trail of

power lines trace the blinding light on the horizon. This place is so desolate and remote, it's as if we built it all ourselves. As if, until we got here, it hadn't existed at all.

“I wonder who lives there,” I say to the others, “or used to live there. Do you think villagers settled here first and then the Iraqis built the base?” The huts curve at their tops like mud-brick igloos. I want someone, an old man or a little boy, to leave one of those huts, some sign of an outside life. Without stirring, our settlement feels like Mars. Insular and vacant without life. Wind sweeps sand and trash in endless circles, and our time passes without purpose.

“There's no one there now, for sure,” Rios says. “I think they've been cleared already by Recon, or else we would've checked them out already. I bet the Iraqis that ran this base used to live there, kind of like how Alcatraz had houses for the prison guards.”

“Why not?” I say. “This place feels like a fucking prison.”

Chiles keeps his head down and massages his temples.

“Shit, might as well be,” he says. “Ran out of dip yesterday. Don't know when and where to get some more. Can't send it through the mail, neither.”

“A friend in Bravo Company thought of a way to do it,” I tell him. “Back in Ali al Salem, he figured that you could fit a log of Copenhagen in a can of Pringles. Maybe put some chips back on top and you're good. You should tell your wife to do that.”

Chiles looks at me, defeated and annoyed.

“When the hell is the mail gonna get there? By the time she gets my letter and tries to send the shit, the war will be fucking over.”

“Just a thought, man.”

We got our mail briefing a few days ago. They told us that packages wouldn't arrive for weeks, if not months. I bet that, depending on how much our convoy moves, it might take even longer.

Rios smacks me on the shoulder and points to the clearing at the other side of our base.

“Over there, we're going to demo the Avenger later,” he says. “By that broken Light Armored Vehicle. We're going to use it as target practice, man.”

I say, “Dinner and a show.”

“They'll be able to punch through the armor on that thing, man. On top of that, you'll hear them go higher when we rev them up to shoot faster.” Rios makes a kazoo sound and ups his pitch.

Watching a robot shoot holes through armored transport—just the fact that it's something different is what I care about.

Our truck slows down next to a large, metal generator on wheels. Beside it, one Marine plugs hair clippers into it while another sits and waits for his haircut. Another group of Marines sits on cots and plays cards on top of a makeshift table made from an ammo can and a wooden board. Next to them is the CO's mysterious, air-conditioned tent, our massive supply tent, and a newer, longer tent, with the smell of tasteless steam dripping for the entrance. Our temporary chow hall.

Silver bins and utensils shine from the air-circulation gaps between the tent walls, accompanied by the rhythmic rattle of ladles and pans clanging together. In a moment, the steam grows in volume and taste, the thick and salty stench of meat and starch. I can

lick the juices of bulbous chicken breasts, salt-stained beef dripping like sponges, strips of pork slathered in dark sauces. It's getting stronger. Let there be bread, real bread with sprinkles of powder on top, the white fluff expanding from the sides, big enough to mop the left-over juices on the tray. Even stronger now, hearty flanks of cow soaked in salted butter. Whole chickens with spice-crusting skin to break apart with grease-stained hands. I want something real in my stomach, please.

I lay on my back and fantasize about the coming meal until Rios shakes my shoulder. A Marine with a cooking apron and gloves opens the flap to the field kitchen and gives us the arm signal to rally.

“Form a line, please,” he says and points to the ground by his feet, “right here. Chow's about ready. We'll be letting you all through in a few minutes.” It didn't take more explanation than his gestures to get us to jump into place. A line a dozen Marines long forms in a blink.

“Settle down,” the cook says. “There's gonna be enough for everybody. Just take what the other cooks give you and keep moving down the line.”

In a moment he fastens the tent flap to the side and waves us in. The first thing I see inside the tent is a row of aluminum trays on both sides, the kinds with circular cutouts and thin handles at the centers. The cooks remove those lids with little puffs of vapor behind them.

What's inside smells better than it looks. Blocky chunks of meat, maybe beef, stew in one bin. Ogre was right, beef steak. Shaped, packaged, and served hot. Even with the supposed grill marks painted on them to make them look fresh out of the pit. The bin

beside it holds green beans with that familiar cafeteria smell. I receive my two pieces of meat, the scoop of green beans, and move to the next table.

Mashed potatoes in the other bin. Shapeless, colorless goop. I can tell they're powdered just by the way they lay flat in the bin without the fluff and puff of real potatoes. Not even the specks of pepper or yellow puddles of butter on them. At the end of the chow line a cook drops a glob of chemical paste on my tray out of an aluminum drum with the words *Fine Tapioca Pudding* pasted on the front. And the blocks of bread look like bubble wrap.

This isn't a kitchen. This is worse than chow hall food. This is prison food.

The team and I stare at our trays and take them to the large cement slab by the supply tent, a space we use for dropping off and assembling our gear.

I'll go for the meat first, wondering what it'll feel like. I hold a piece in one hand like a sandwich and notice it has the same smooth texture that lunch meat had in high school, that same freeze-dried, heat-up meat made from reconstituted scraps. There's a springiness to it when I wag it. The other Marines see me play with my food.

"Mujica, just eat it," Chiles says with his eyes back down, looking through his tray. I sniff it and notice the lack of carbon, that coal-like, crispy smell of cooked meat. It could've come out of a microwave.

I take my first bite and my teeth go through it without the fibrous resistance that regular cooked meat has. They cut through it like gelatin.

The same cook that led us through the field kitchen comes out with the woodland-green pouches the meat came in and dumps them in a trash barrel at the corner of the tent.

It's space food all the same. Ogre and Johnson both called it. MRE beef steak in bigger bags. Maybe things will only get better when they're over. Maybe our first real meals will be back home. Marines have been through worse and that's what we'll have to look forward to until we fly back to the States.

A few Marines walk over to that barrel and slap the rest of their meals into it like a bell. Either they're finished or they lost their appetites like I have, but I continue eating, because it's almost something new. I dip the bread through powdered mash potatoes and chew on the beef until it's gone.

Rios takes his half-full tray to the barrel and slaps it against the side of it, too, looking at the small puffs of dust as he drags his feet across the ground.

“That was a waste of ten minutes,” he says. “What the hell do we do with the rest of our time?”

MUSCLE MEMORY

I browse through the comic and memorabilia aisles at Megacon, past the mobs of Jokers and white-wigged cosplayers, looking for something I can gravitate to. The LARPer's rattle the side of the convention center as I pass them. They crowd around a fantasy duel; pock-marked warriors lash at each other with their foamy swords and axes. After collecting enough points for a win, they hold their Nerf-light weapons in the air and cheer.

Further down, replica swords and axes with triple-digit price tags lay out on display for people to hold and fantasize about what kind of damage they could do. Another booth down and I find the replica firearms: pistols, shotguns, rifles—an M4, charcoal-black, leaning against the metal grill of a display wall.

I hold it by the hand guards and the buttstock, about five pounds in my hands, just like the M16, the weapon I got to know for four years inside and out: the way the forward-assist button's grooves felt on my thumb and sprang back as I pressed it; the sharp, flimsy metal flap of the ejection-port cover; the selector switch (Safe, Semi, Auto). From the lower receiver, everything is the same. It has been years since I held one and its familiar shape is comforting, like a favorite pen, a tool, shaped by muscle memories—everything fits into place, everything, the perfect shape.

After one month of Bootcamp, after a grueling six-mile hump into another part of the island, we were finally going to learn about the rifles. From the chow hall, we

marched with our rifles and packs to an open field with skeletal huts to hide from the sun and receive our first instruction. Not long through the day and my camouflage blouse and trousers grew moist in the jungle heat of Parris Island.

Our three drill instructors sat us down and we faced a weapons instructor: a ruddy-faced man with a thick chest and a bottom lip spilling with snuff tobacco. An easel with diagrams stood next to him. The weapons instructor had his own rifle and he held it up with one hand.

“You see this?” he said and smacked the side of the rifle. It made a dull rattle, like a bike falling over. “This is a bitch.”

Our DIs stayed in the background as the weapons instructor conducted the course. We went over the different parts of the M16A2 service rifle—from the compensator at the tip of the barrel, to the cleaning gear in the hollow of the buttstock—and he pointed to each part on the charts on his board. We went through the positions, the aiming, calibration, and breathing techniques.

Over the next few weeks, our classes migrated from the huts to the fields of the rifle range. We sighted in, fired our weapons, and calibrated them in preparation for rifle quals. We flipped through our notebooks and filled in numbers for clicks and distances, along with our scores for the firing exercises. In no time I was dialed in, the elevation and wind knobs tweaked for my anatomy, the shape of my face and my vision. It was made for me.

Days began with a focus on calm, measured breathing. The DIs yelled less, my blood pressure stayed under control, and my world dissolved into a narrow stretch of

field, with my firing station at one end, and the target at the other. I had found a perfect rhythm. *Bone support, muscular relaxation, sight in, breathe in, breathe out, stop breathing, pull the trigger, slow and steady squeeze, and let it fire.*

Each day flowed with a gentle breeze and the rising of the sun, with the sounds of nature muted and mixed with each measured breath. Each day brought me closer and granted me a better shot.

It was Election Day when I invited Victoria to a comedy show at UCF. I drove the two of us to the campus arena. The Student Veterans Association scored front-row seats, along with other student organizations, so we sat with the other members and their dates. I brought a video camera to capture the event, so we could post it on our website, maybe make a video collage. When Victoria was looking away from me, I pointed it at her. She turned to face me, then ducked back.

“Hi there,” I said. She said “hey” back with a bashful grin. “So, you’ve never been to a comedy show?”

“Yep, this is my first time,” Victoria said, looking away from the camera.

“Are you excited?”

She said, “I think it’ll be a lot of fun,” and I pulled the camera away from her face. Her shyness was adorable.

Three comedians came to the stage. By the beginning of the third act, Victoria said she was hungry. We stopped at a Steak and Shake near the campus. A chicken

sandwich for me, grilled cheese for her. She unfolded her napkin, and draped it over her thighs, and ate her sandwich with the tips of her fingers.

“I haven’t been on a date in two years,” she began. “My sister almost had to drag me to your Halloween party.” I dressed as Riddick from *Pitch Black*, she wore an Army camouflage jacket with her last name on it, her father’s jacket. Victoria Bird. Interesting last name for a Puerto Rican girl.

I said, “I’m glad you did.” She pursed her lips when she smiled. A little pale crease grew at the corner of her mouth. Her eyes, dark and honest, hid behind the light squinting of her eyelids. Carefree, seductive. Her thick brown hair curled at the sides of her face like an ornate frame.

“I’m glad I did, too.”

We spoke about funny, trivial things, but she focused on the serious things from the start. She asked me if people are defined by what they do or what they think of themselves. I argued that, though we say we are something, what people understand from us are our actions. She felt differently and said you truly can’t know someone anyway, all of someone. I wasn’t used to how straightforward she was when I talked with her. It was our first date and she told me that she had been to rehab for several months for painkillers and alcohol. She also said she used to cut herself. I told her everyone deserves another chance. It’s not what we’ve done but what we do with it that matters.

As much as she laid out to me about herself—how being raped had made it difficult to share her bed with a man, her alcoholism—she learned from me, little by little—about my relationships, family life, experiences in war, PTSD, binge drinking,

everything. I wanted her to know that, when it came to making mistakes or getting lost, she wasn't the only one.

Several weeks passed by and, while I held back about my thoughts and experiences, she was reserved about her body. Growing up, Victoria's mother put her on strict diets. At one point she signed her into a Jenny Craig program. Though she didn't have an eating disorder anymore or a bad diet, she still felt insecure about her body. On top of that, Victoria had an STD scare with another partner; the ex-boyfriend could've passed something to her. Before we could have sex, she wanted me to go to Planned Parenthood and get a full STD test done. I argued that I had nothing from past relationships and honesty should make the difference, that there was nothing to worry about. But I had the test done anyway. She didn't wait for the results.

One night we watched *The Shining* together, wrapped around each other on my bed, the large grey-and-black comforter over our legs. I cradled her with one arm and massaged her chest and stomach. We let the movie play as we kissed. I learned her sensitive spots, passed my fingers over the tender skin behind her ear, around her chin and her neck. I rubbed the spot below her waist, just above her pubic hair. Victoria was extra-ticklish there. She tugged on my bottom lip with her teeth and giggled.

We took off each other's shirts and warmed our bare skin. With a free hand I flicked the snaps on her bra and unhooked them. Her bra loosened and dropped to her shoulders.

"How do you do that?" She sounded baffled, as if I had removed my boxers with my pants still on.

“It’s the front snaps I have trouble with,” I said. “Go fig.”

I pulled the bra off and threw it on the office chair. I kissed her, tracing a line from her neck, over her collarbone, to her large, pale breasts. Then she pulled back.

In between kisses, “Alex—you really don’t have anything, right—I mean, you’re okay?”

She looked worried, but I smiled.

“I’m alright.”

“Oh, Alex.” She was ready. We kissed, tasted each other, and explored the curves of our bodies, molding each other in the dark.

After Bootcamp came North Carolina, MCT. I still needed to get used to calling superiors by their rank. No more sirs, we were all Marines at that point. We took classes on MOUT and patrol tactics. After that, “practical application.” We walked from station to station and picked up new information we’d be applying to exercises later. Basic training required personal discipline and a general understanding of weapons and gear. MCT required more teamwork than before, more trust and faith. After learning how to “leapfrog,” it was time to apply that knowledge, with live ammunition.

The training camp lay on a flat plane, bare except for dirt and short grass. We traveled from the wood-frame hooches where we camped, past the common training stations, past the beams, ropes, and bars of the obstacle course, to a corner with large staggered mounds of dirt and sand. On the command to line up, our platoon formed four straight lines in front of the mounds. At the head of the line, each Marine received

standard 9mm bullets and loaded his magazines. We hadn't touched live ammunition since the relative safety of a firing range. I checked the selector switch to make sure my rifle was on Safe.

The trainers went over our instructions and emphasized that we keep our fingers off the triggers until we hit the deck and prepared to fire. When given the command, the first four Marines (a "fire team") went through the drill. While two Marines bolted towards the flat ground, the other two opened fire into the mounds a few feet away from them. We stretched our necks to get a better look at them as they ran and roared with bullets cracking through the air. A few Marines stumbled as they sprinted down the course and flagged the rest of their fire team. Our trainers yelled at them to keep their fucking weapons pointed downrange and to not kill the other teammates. They advanced until they reached the end of the course and got in formation beside our lines.

Little by little the lines shrank in front of us. I looked at the Marines to my sides and gauged their competence with loaded guns. Some looked hard, some worried, others excited, as if they waited in line for a roller coaster and just heard the passengers screaming in front of them as they took off. The scared ones made me worry that they'd trip, a finger hooked around the trigger, sending a shot through my ribcage or my jaw. I'd choke and drown on my own blood.

Our fire team came up to the front of the line. We received our instructions, but I had already heard everything the instructors said before my turn and the exercise was well-rehearsed in my mind. Easy enough: run in a straight line, yell "I'm up, they see me, I'm down," drop down, shoot at the mound in front of me, get up when the Marine next

to me provides covering fire, rinse, repeat. It seemed simple to follow, but I still wasn't sure about the others at my side. I barely knew them and didn't trust them not to kill me. They probably felt the same way.

I got ready, put the weapon on Semi, and at the "Go!" I yelled and ran into the firing range.

"I'm up, they see me, I'm down!" I smacked into the ground and got in the prone position. The teammate to my life ran ahead, I opened fire next to him, he didn't slow down. Then he also hit the ground, I picked myself up and ran with him to the end of the course, everything intact.

Victoria and I grew inseparable. When she and her sister Beatrice moved into a condo with their father's help, I stayed there most of the time. We proofread each other's scripts, swam together, played games together, slept together—we found a rhythm: after my classes and work, I'd go to the condo and spend time with her. She'd be ready for dinner or bed by the time I got there, but I'd stay the night. If I had the weekend free, I'd spend it with her.

The sex had its own rhythm. We tried different positions, breathing techniques, worked on climaxing together, multiple orgasms. Our bodies tuned into each other. Some nights we'd carry on until five in the morning, raw and sweaty. Sometimes Victoria and I had the place to ourselves for several days. Those days the house was quiet except for moaning and laughter.

We enjoyed the stillness after sex, a reflection point when we'd talk about the future and what we were thinking. A peaceful moment of absolute exhaustion and dreaming. We thought about how life would be for the two of us years from then. In ten years, in a private life, I saw myself living in a house in the woods, somewhere in New England. She saw herself working in movie production in California. I told her I loved the hills there and the weather; I'd follow her, even though I hated the traffic. Ten years from then, I couldn't see my life without her.

Victoria learned through meditation how to find a comfortable place in her mind, how to project herself there and discover things about herself. As we lay together one night, bodies drenched and heavy, Victoria told me about a vision she had.

"Everyone discovers their own place," she said. "It takes a lot of practice to find it and to stay there, but I found it. Mine is a beach with white sand, clear-blue water, and one palm tree. One day I saw my old dog Coco by that tree. Coco died years ago, but I could see her there, when she was young and healthy. And she spoke with me."

I stroked her hair, stared into her eyes and listened.

"I asked her if she knew when I would meet the one I wanted to spend my life with. And she spoke of a soldier, a man who fought in war, someone with kind eyes and a good heart, and I would meet him sooner than I thought. Then one day, you wrote to me in class. I didn't know who this 'Alejandro Mujica' guy was, but I do now." She cupped my cheek, looked into me as if she had given birth to me. "Did you dream of me?"

"I wish I could see things the way you do," I said and leaned in, kissing her forehead. "You know I'm skeptical, but now I think about the day I chose that

screenwriting class. I spoke to the program adviser and asked about my credits for graduation. I needed more workshop credits and I asked about screenwriting. She said they just started giving creative writing credits for the class. I checked the course out as soon as possible. When I found it, I saw that there was one seat left, like it was waiting for me. And that's where I met you."

"Do you believe in fate?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I never did, but I'm starting to wonder."

We lay there, tracing each other's lips with our fingers, holding each other, growing warm again.

In the field, we had to qualify with the M16 every year. That meant taking a week out of the year to prep your issued M16, calibrate it, practice, and finally take the qual exam. When we weren't firing, we pulled the targets up and down, stuck up scoring disks in the bullet holes on the target, then pasted over them. We'd switch out in the middle of the day, but it didn't matter what we started with, targets or firing; we sputtered out by the first half regardless.

Marksmanship became routine, something to knock out for a week before going back to work. Some days it'd go smoothly and target groupings were tight. Other days there'd be a jam or you'd forget to set up calibrations for the right distance and that'd fuck up the scores. The rifle ranges in Yuma didn't slope and it never rained on a shooting day, but some days the wind on the range became a natural disaster. I'd see the wind pick up the weather flag and pull it at a tight, right angle. We'd get gusts over twenty miles per

hour, and then it'd die down causing us to finger with the sights and throw off our rhythm. In 2002, after Bootcamp qualifications, the wind had its way.

I tried different kneeling positions at the 200- and 300-meter lines: the high, middle, and low. During the week, in the high kneeling at the 200-meter line, my camouflage pants, brittle and thin from repeated starching, ripped right at the crotch. They got worse as I sat down for the 300-yard firing. My clothing allowance wouldn't kick in for another two years. I would've had to either pay out of pocket or sew them shut. I went with the latter and, during practice quals, they ripped open again.

During Bootcamp, the 500-meter test got me a Sharpshooter's score and its distinct, cross-shaped medal. With fluctuating winds and the constant fingering of the wind knob, I lost that cross and got the Marksman medal, a fucking square with a target in it—the “pizza box” medal.

After rifle quals, we had a mandatory three-day rifle-cleaning period: in the middle of work, after lunch, I visited the unit's armory and cleaned the M16 with an endless supply of swabs, cloths, and lubricant. The bristles on my metal bore brush collapsed from too much hard scrubbing and still the armorers found carbon in the bore or carbon inside the bolt. I'd strip the weapon down to its smallest pieces, including that bolt, but it seemed to do no good and the weapon turned up dirty until I stayed late on the last day and either I got it right or they gave up and let me go.

Either I didn't do something right or I didn't do it enough. I should've gotten a better score. Instead I almost failed it.

Victoria got a urinary tract infection. She said it was because she got diarrhea after eating one of my father's raw-foodist cookies—a mix of chocolate, honey, and other dehydrated ingredients—and she thought shit particles ended up in her urethra. I didn't think they were that bad, but she brought up how she threw up the night she ate one and had the runs for a while after that. I said that I was fine; she insisted I had a stronger immune system for that stuff. Her allergies were bad and complications came out of nowhere. Sometimes from seasonal allergies and sometimes, apparently, they came from me: I'd fight a cold for a few days and be without symptoms, but residual germs devastated her.

After three times taking antibiotics, ingesting smelly cranberry pills, and wearing a heating pad on her back, she said that I might have something, that maybe I've been reintroducing the same germs and bacteria that wore her down. One of her doctors mentioned something about "Streptococcus," so she insisted I get checked out.

As I sat at my computer and played games one night, she called.

"Alex, we need to talk about what's been happening with me," she said. "In all my life I've never been this sick, and things started happening after we started having sex."

"But I always wear a condom," I said. "How could I be giving you something with a condom on?"

"I don't know, but the doctor says he keeps finding this thing. I did research on it and it's something people in third-world countries get! You said you grew up without your Dad paying medical insurance. Don't you think there's a possibility that you didn't get this cleared out?"

“But I’ve been healthy my whole life,” I said. “I didn’t need medical insurance. The one time I needed to go to the doctor was when I broke my arm.”

She sighed in the phone and the line went quiet.

“Alex...if I started getting sick when I met you, what does this mean? Why am I not getting better?”

I hid the anger in my voice. How could she blame me for her immunity problems? I’d pass a cold that’d floor her. Dealing with sickness the old-fashioned way, without doctors, without antibiotics, kept me strong. She grew up in a well-to-do family and everyone saw doctors all the time. Victoria went to a rehab clinic voluntarily and my father had to cut his habits on his own. She thought the bacteria in the raw fruit and vegetables I ate could’ve made problems for her, too.

“I don’t know what this means,” she continued, “but I’ve done some thinking and I made a decision. Until I’m much better and until we know there’s nothing else wrong with both of us, we can’t have sex.” A difficult decision for both of us. A difficult decision made without me.

“That’s heavy,” I said.

“That’s heavy? What are you saying, that you can’t go without sex, for us? If we can’t survive without sex, what kind of relationship do we have?”

I tried to let her know that she misunderstood me and things got calmer. And I agreed to get checked out.

Kuwait, Ali al Salem airbase. The off-duty security detail—a group of MPs and other Marines in our collective unit, including cooks and IT workers—rested for the day. Most of us grabbed food at the chow hall we called “the clam shell,” but the food quality was shit. We still got a massive supply of MREs and some junk at the mobile Base Exchange (the BX). About five of us sat in a circle inside one of our green tents. I heated a pack of Pasta Alfredo and slipped in a convenience-store-like apple pie beside it.

We traded stories of what and who we did back home, before some of the guys settled down. One Marine, a PFC Redding, talked about his single life, cocaine and sex, with a mix of longing and disgust.

“One time I got some shit and had to get my bore punched,” Redding said. Some of the guys winced in imagined pain.

“That fucking sucks, man,” another said.

“What does that mean?” I asked. By the looks on the rest of them, I had an idea.

So his story went, “I fucked this girl one night and a few days later it felt like I was pissing fire. When the pain wouldn’t go away and I couldn’t take it, I went to Medical and got checked out. The doc said I got Chlamydia and had to get swabbed. He said ‘Drop your pants, this might hurt a bit.’ So I dropped them and he had me lay down. He got this long-ass swab almost the size of my forearm, with a big head of cotton. He asked ‘Are you ready?’ I nodded. And he stuffed the cotton swab up my piss hole, gave it a twist, and yanked it out. And it fucking *hurt* so goddamn much it changed my life.” His story rang like the testament of a born-again Protestant. After that, we all sat funny.

I visited Dr. Watzman at the family medical center near my home on Semoran. I waited half an hour beyond the scheduled appointment time before I made it into his office. Pictures of Disney characters hung on the walls, some toys and children's books lay on his table. When Dr. Watzman walked in—a tall, wiry man with glasses and a large head of curly hair—I told him my predicament, about my girlfriend and her frequent UTI problems, about the Group B Strep. He mentioned, with a stuttering bedside voice, that Group B wasn't necessarily an issue, that it was asymptomatic in adults, but he'd get me tested anyway.

“In order to test for Group B,” he said, “we'll need to take some samples, some cultures from you.”

Sounded like blood work. He asked me to remove my shirt. He saw a swollen mark on my chest (really from an ingrown hair) and pinched it with a small needle, then capped it.

“Secondly,” he continued, “since you said your girlfriend has had frequent urinary tract infections, and there's a possibility of passing something through intercourse, we'll need to collect more cultures with what's called a urethral swab.” I felt instantly ill.

“Now, what we'll need you to do is pull your pants down, and your underwear.”

“Okay,” I said. With his back turned, I pulled my pants and boxers down. Dr. Watzman turned back around with something long in his hand, a thin, plastic instrument with a hard, paddle-like head. It could've been used to stir coffee.

“This will feel a little uncomfortable,” he said, “but if you need to, you can hold onto the edge of the desk.” I realized he was going to stick that thing in with me standing

up. I spread my legs a little more, bracing to buckle from the understated pain. “Okay, here we go.”

At first I felt nothing. Then he scraped the walls and my hands found the edge of the desk fast. Quick, sharp bits of pain shot up my penis with each swab. That stirring straw felt like a spatula. As soon as he finished and pulled out the swab, my legs wobbled.

After the doctor’s visit, I told Victoria what happened.

“Aww, honey, I didn’t know they were going to do that,” she said. “But thank you, sweetie. I love you.”

In about a week, the test came back positive for Group B. I asked if there was anything I needed to take to get rid of it and he mentioned again that it wasn’t an issue.

“I think we’d both feel better if I got rid of it,” I told him. He acquiesced and gave me a weak antibiotic to knock it out.

Victoria and I had long talks about Strep B and cited the knowledge from our doctors and individual research. After taking the tests, Victoria agreed that I wouldn’t have to take the antibiotics. I told her I’d do what I could so she’d feel safe again. She said she didn’t want me to go through another antibiotic fit like she had. I was relieved, but it also felt like what I tried didn’t matter. Her mind was already made up.

First night in Iraq and our convoy got caught in an ambush with mortars and a long bout of small-arms fire. I saw the ground vomit sparks as the mortars landed and shook through the Humvee. A few meters to the left and all the convoy would’ve been

destroyed. We suffered casualties in our convoy and so did the soldiers camped nearby. Lance Corporal Calvin got shot in his stomach and it came out his ass. Staff Sergeant Dobson took shrapnel in his gut. All the Marines in the back of the convoy, with me, were okay. Most of us didn't even participate in the fighting because we were so far away. I ran with my fire team towards the fight, but I forgot my gas mask. By the time I got to it, we decided to stay with the vehicle and dig a fighting hole. If I had the gas mask on me during a gas attack, I would've been safer from it, but not from the fight. A lucky turn of chance I forgot something so important.

But as we approached An Nasiriya, we heard unlucky news. The convoy in front of us took RPG fire and we were heading in straight after them. Straight into a firefight with broken gear.

Our mounted machine gun worked perfectly during the test fire, but without a proper vehicle mount, we couldn't keep it steady on the roof of the truck. When we hit potholes, the gun dismounted and rattled away. We tried to keep it tight on the mount with bungee cords wrapped around four ammo cans. Lance Corporal Rodriguez and I filled the ammo cans that afternoon and linked the ammo belts together. Four ammo cans, 200 rounds apiece. At least we didn't have to worry about reloading.

To remedy the lack of communication throughout the massive 100+ vehicle convoy, a few line-of-sight hand-held radios were dispersed among the higher-ups and the rest of the convoy used a "flag system." It consisted of several wooden tent stakes with multicolored sand bags: yellow, green, purple, red. A red flag meant someone

received enemy fire. We were supposed to copy that flag and pass the message all the way up and down the convoy.

Other fire teams were even less lucky. Some vehicles had no armor, only soft, flapping jeep covers. We strapped an automatic grenade launcher to a flat-bed truck with benches. The weapon could only face in one direction. If they needed to redirect fire, they'd have to break from the convoy and turn around.

Rodriguez took to the mounted machine gun that time and I stayed in the back with both of our M16s. The sun set as we approached An Nasiriyah, and the whispering of gunfire echoed in the dark. I raised the windows of the Humvee's back windows just enough to aim my rifle. "Bullet-resistant" glass is better than open air. Over a hundred vehicles with weapons drawn, we looked like a metal cactus. Undeterred, the convoy moved on.

Twilight dimmed to darkness and the sky lit up with the red streaks of tracers. Deeper in, our vehicle took fire; tracer rounds zipped over the truck and some rounds bounced off the roof. I aimed at the tracers and shot back.

After my second shot, the rifle jammed.

Bullshit! I tried Immediate Action—tapped the bottom of the magazine, racked the charging handle back, fired—and got off another two shots before the rifle jammed again. *Fuck! This isn't happening.* Immediate Action again, but the rifle kept jamming.

That piece of shit is fucking spotless! Remedial Action—checked for stoppage. The rounds didn't feed into the rifle. After another jam, I tossed my M16 away and grabbed Rodriguez's rifle.

Bang-bang-click—

Motherfucker, fucking bullshit! Again.

Bang-bang-click—

I grew deaf to the sounds of gunfire outside, and the hot brass and ammo flak pouring from the machine gun above me, and the punching of grenades, and the clanging of metal rounds into metal walls, but the sounds of my own swearing rang louder. I babied that weapon, slobbered it with lubricant, brushed every nook and cranny, punched the bore until every flake of carbon, every microscopic fiber, was gone. Everything I learned about maintaining that machine, at that moment, meant nothing. When I needed it the most, it failed me.

A helicopter churned overhead and lobbed Stinger missiles into the building where the ambush came from, a chest-pounding thud, and all the firing died down.

Little fights punctuated life with Victoria and me. Health issues, misplaced feelings, family problems, traffic—in less than a year, those fights defined our relationship. For Victoria, one event caused everything to fall away from her; for me, it was just a worry.

Lakisha, a student that knew me well at work in the law library downtown, asked for my opinion on buying a laptop, and for my number so she could reach me later. We exchanged numbers and she texted me right back. The exchange felt strange, dangerous, so I texted her back and said my brother worked in IT, that he'd be better to handle it.

“Are you pawning me off on your brother?” she asked. That could’ve been a joke, but to me, it sounded like flirting. I said yes and she never bothered me again.

A day later, I told Victoria that the student approached me about laptop help, she asked for my number, and I sent her to Marco. She was okay with that, but I didn’t tell her about the number exchange, thinking that could make her worry. But she found that out later, by accident. She didn’t like that I withheld that from her. To Victoria, that would’ve been the whole truth. To me, it was complication.

Victoria went cold. We’d talk and I felt withdrawal in her voice, in the way she moved around me, sometimes away from me. We had less sex and when we had it, there’d be moments of sadness and anger, of drying up or going flaccid. One night she scratched, bit, and pounded her hips into me, an angry fuck, “revenge fuck.” She later told me that I wounded her trust in me, that if only I had told her the truth, she would’ve been fine. I told her I didn’t say anything about the numbers because she’d be jealous and worried about it. She said it was because I wanted to make myself look like a better boyfriend. We were both right.

For our one-year anniversary, I ran to Publix, bought a bouquet of roses in a vase, a card, and that morning’s breakfast. Victoria woke up to the smell of fresh croissants, crackling bacon, brewing coffee, with her gifts on the coffee table.

“Happy anniversary, babe.” She thanked me and said she enjoyed the card, what I wrote in it, the flowers, everything. It was more than she expected. I expected a little something, though. Something, anything.

Unless you see how someone reacts to every situation life can throw at them, you can't understand them as well as you'd like to (or as well as they'd want you to). To really understand someone is impossible, but if I had known how Victoria would've reacted to what I told her the week after our anniversary, I would've stayed quiet.

Victoria and I made progress one night. She had been feeling like I didn't appreciate her as much as she wanted to be, so we talked and I expressed all that I felt about her. She later told me how at that moment she felt new hope for the two of us. We smiled and laughed. I felt lucky, filled with new life. So I told Victoria that I had given Lakisha my email to contact me about the laptop instead. The week after our anniversary was the day it all fell away from me.

"I can't believe you, Alex. I started to feel better and you say this? I felt loved, I felt aroused again. Why did you give her your email and not tell me until now?" I tried to calm her down.

"I only kept it from you because things were getting really bad between us and I thought telling you would make things worse" But that didn't work.

"You gave her another way to reach you, but why? If you thought she was flirting with you, why did you give her your email?"

"In case I overreacted and she was honestly asking for help." She didn't believe that either. We both shut down that night. The things I said, the things I did and tried to do, didn't matter. She let me sleep in her place that night, but I headed back home in the morning after she woke up. I needed time to think, to reassess our problem.

I thought about the fights, about the health problems, the way we tried to get along with each other's parents, what were lies, what was true. I thought about what all of that would do to the two of us ten years from then. We could not survive ten years of that. We both felt there was little chance for happiness left. I didn't trust her jealousy and she didn't trust my fidelity.

I repeated it over and over, but I couldn't believe this one thing: you can't expect anyone to make you happy.

That evening, we broke up. She packed my things away: my clothes, movies games, and the little things that reminded her of me. Everything but the gifts. I had only a few of her things; her condo was our space, after all. Two full boxes of tissues gone in three hours of crying. We had such good things to say. I told her that she helped me find my spirituality. She said I helped her find hope. We realized we could be the best to each other, but for each other, it couldn't happen. We kissed and held onto each other as long as we could, and after all the beautiful things we said, I had to grab my things and leave her bedroom. She couldn't take seeing me go, so she turned away. I heard her sobbing grow louder through the closed door.

It could've been the springs in the magazines that didn't feed the rounds in right. It could've been a gas tube. Maybe it was a slight imperfection in the magazine well or the bolt. I didn't know what happened. I still don't know what caused the jam and I don't think I'll ever know, yet I still miss the ribbing of the hand guards, the clicks of the knobs, the throttling of a fresh round in the chamber, the smooth curve of the trigger. I

miss the smell of cordite and molding the rifle's familiar shape in my hands. But the sounds it makes and what it does—it's comforting and frightening, all at the same time, and I don't know if I could fire one more round again.

LIGHTSKIN

We pant into each other's ears, drenched with sweat. My arms buckle and take me to her side. I rub a finger across her inseam so I can hear her voice. I get to her hip before she punches me in the chest and knocks me off the bed, into the wall. Now we're both moaning.

"Shit, hon, sometimes you don't know your own strength," I say.

Demi, drained, takes a moment to register what I said, then holds her hand to apologize.

In a quivering voice, "Sorry, baby. I'm still sensitive."

I pick myself up and limp to the bathroom. I turn on the light and the first thing I notice in the mirror is a long, pink gash from my right pectoral to my left side. As I'm checking the damage on my body, I feel the hard smack of Demi's hand on my butt.

"How many marks are you going to leave on me tonight?" I ask her.

She peeks over my shoulders and her thin, almond-shaped eyes grow wider. She notices the gash.

"I did that?"

"No, apparently a bear did." Sweat seeps into the tender slash. "We should take a shower."

Demi wraps her thick, black arms around my stomach and curls me into her.

"I just got caught up in it, Ali," she says.

"Please, don't call me that. Only my father calls me that."

Her dreadlocks brush against my face, dense and spongy. Even through the musk of our mingling sweat I can still smell the Shea butter in her hair and the rich, earthy smell of her skin.

“How about Alejandro?” She says it the right way. I wrap my arms around hers and lean into her cheek.

“Alex is fine.”

She lifts a hand up to my chest and strokes the hair. I weave my fingers between hers as she does this.

“I can’t get over how soft it is,” she says. Our bodies are tangled in shades of tanned red and brown. We stare at each other through the mirror.

I ask her, “Have you ever been with a Hispanic guy before?”

She shakes her dreads. “No, never.” She interlocks her fingers with mine. “Not with a Hispanic guy, white guy, Asian. You’re my first.”

I pull one of her hands close and kiss it. “Then I’m glad I got to be your first.” We pull apart and face each other. She cups my chest and massages her warmth into me.

“Funny, I’ve never had this closeness so soon; it’s only been a week.” I cup my hands below her arms and find my way down to her broad hips. “You’re very touchy, you know that? That’s what I love about you.”

“My mothers were really affectionate when I was growing up,” she says, “so I didn’t grow up funny about it. And you must’ve been, too,” Demi says. “It’s going real fast, but it still feels good.”

I lower down to kiss her neck and her breathing goes faster.

“You’re very sensitive, too,” I say. The most sensitive, I want to tell her. Jaya, Jennifer, Victoria—none of them opened up to me like this, with this physical sincerity. This feels right, the two of us twisted around each other, and I feel the safest I’ve been since Victoria. It’s been a difficult year living with her ghost, but I’m feeling better again.

She grips my waist and inhales as I bite her neck. With closed eyes I find her lips, powerful against my own.

“You like finding my spots,” she says, “don’t you?”

We both giggle then hear playful laughter from the other side of the mirror, the next-door neighbors.

“Them, too?” I say. “Not just the couple above us, but the people right next door? What is it about you that’s so contagious?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Ever since I could remember, whenever I was sad and crying, other people would just cry. If I was really happy and laughing, other people would laugh, too.”

“Does it happen all the time?”

“Only when I’m really feeling something, that’s when it happens.”

Her round, rosy cheeks raise as she smiles, then she dots kisses down my neck. “Stay the night,” she whispers. With her teeth, she gives my ear a tug, just enough to surprise me. “Please?”

For a year, I’d been sleeping on an inflatable mattress next to Victoria’s bed because the rape she went through left her too uncomfortable to sleep with a man. Demi asks me this so soon, and she’s so willing to have a man to wake up next to on the first

week. After begging for a year to share Victoria's bed, Demi's offer feels like a reward.

“I'd love to.”

She curls into my chest, then takes my hand and leads me back into her bedroom. The couples above, behind, and to the side of us—their moans and laughter echo through the walls as we tumble in the dark.

Demi is late and she can't find her way to Lake Lily. My friend Amy—a wire-thin brunette in flower-pattern stockings—invited me to her poetry reading at the park, and the farmer's market was something different for me on a first date. Something new for Demi, too.

Amy finishes her last poem and has a seat with me in front of the stage. She said she wanted the chance to meet Demi. It's been a very long time since I've had a good feeling about dating and she knows.

Another poet, an older blonde-haired woman, makes her way to the microphone and introduces herself, then begins reciting her first poem. Something about flowers. My phone vibrates—I slide off the bench we're sitting on.

“Hello?”

“Hey. Sorry I'm late,” she says. “Where can I park?”

“You're close?”

“I have no idea,” she says, and punctuates it with a hoot of a laugh. “Did I miss Amy?”

“Yeah, that's okay. You'll still get to meet her. Turn a left before the train tracks.

There's a church on the corner, can't miss it."

Demi and I met online before we'd seen each other at the College of Law. Working in Library Circulation, I must've seen her pass by dozens of times and didn't know who she was until we started chatting. What caught me was her picture, the cover art for an Erykah Badu album: a woman, naked except for her wrapped head, scaling a bare tree sprouting from the singer's statue in a forest of peacock feathers. Like Alex Grey's portraits of transparent humans with rainbows of chakras glowing in their bodies. I wanted to know more of her, to actually see her face.

We continued to chat online for only a few days, the two of us showing off our music and books. She appreciated my love of African American literature, for Langston Hughes and Saul Williams. She, like me, is a rabid sci-fi fan, keeping up with shows like *Doctor Who* and *Stargate*. She said her parents are gay, that her biological mother fell in love with a woman after separating from her ex-husband. A good sign that Demi has to be a tolerant woman.

The phonecall keeps me away from the flower poet long enough to skip her first poem and head to her second. After her third and final poem, Demi arrives—I spot her copper car inching up the road and away from the church parking lot.

"I think she's here," I tell Amy, then climb the hill to the parking lot. When Demi swings back around and into the church parking, I flag her down. She passes me three times before a spot opens up for her. The car door opens up and a black woman comes out with dreadlocks, a stretched-out orange t-shirt, and blue jeans clutching her large, muscular thighs. Though not a thin woman, the shapes of her bust and hips give her a

curvaceous hourglass frame. She's a perfect size.

"I made it!" she says as she walks to me.

"Thanks for coming, sweetie." We hug and the strength of her arms surprises me.

Not because she's strong but because of what the tightness might mean to her.

We walk over to Amy; her friends hang by the bench while we stand by a thin tree. Amy gives the shiest wave and smile. I introduce the two before Amy leaves with her other friends.

"She's real nice," Demi says. "I wish I could've seen her."

"That's alright, I'll try to throw my stuff out there; you can see *me*."

"Is that a promise?" she asks. "I'll hold you to it. I love this park!"

"Let's take a walk, then."

We turn away from the farmer's market and head around the lake, passing old ladies and young families. Cement sidewalks flow into wood and we hold our sweaty hands together. Our talks flow from literature to military. I tell her that I wanted to pursue a literature degree after reading whatever fiction novels I could find in Iraq. We discuss phobias and how she can handle snakes, but not spiders. We also discuss her family life. After a few laps around the lake, she learns more about my life in the desert and I'm relieved to know that two gay black women can raise such a beautiful and smart child in this country.

It's not long before we let our hands go and hold one another by the hips, then shoulders, back to locking our fingers, never letting go of one another. It's this touch, so soon; I'm not used to it, but I love how she feels.

We duck under the canopy of trees shading the farmer's market and can't find one booth that's offering a well-rounded meal.

"Either tomatoes, hotdogs, or kettle corn. What a selection."

"That's bad, Alex," she says and chuckles. We pull away from the booths and take a seat on a bench and let the cool summer breeze tickle the hairs on our heads. With our arms locked around each other, I see and feel her face tilting, coming closer, until we find our lips and kiss. We hold each other on the bench and I see other couples hugging, kissing each other as they pass.

I pull away for a moment to show her the romance around us.

"Look what we started."

My mother says that dating women from work is dangerous, even though I'm staff and they're taking classes here. It's dangerous for two reasons, she says: for one, it'd be like dating co-workers; if things didn't work out, the office would get uncomfortable. Maybe one or the other would decide to leave, or if co-workers made a stink they'd be asked to break it off or leave, too. Then there's another reason: culture. People from different backgrounds with different points of view, it might be enough to keep the relationship from working out. Black and Hispanic. It's not a problem as far as we are concerned. As far as the gossip, we're discreet.

While I'm on the clock, Demi stops by the circulation desk, her grey sweats and hood wrapping her curves. I remember what she said about the gossips on campus, so I

keep some distance.

“What are you doing here on a Saturday morning?” I ask. “I thought you never came here over the weekends.”

“If I can avoid it.” She purses her lips when she grins. “I’m hoping you can do me a big, big favor. I’ve got to get some papers scanned for an internship later and I don’t know where there’s a scanner here. Do you know, please?”

“I have an idea,” I say and grin back. “There’s a printer in IT that’ll scan to your email.”

“But IT isn’t here on the weekends,” she says.

“But I have to access card to let you in. All the librarians do.”

“Yes, great!” She makes fists and pumps her elbows back, then stares at the circulation desk. “Do you think you could help me use it? I’ve never done it before.”

“Yeah, of course I can come with you.”

I ask my co-worker Gladys to watch the desk for a few minutes while I show “the student” how to work the fax. We head out of the library, through the lobby, and swipe our way into the IT department—half the lights shut off, not a soul around.

I run the documents through the scanning system and to her email. Little time passes, extra time, and Demi’s voice hums down from her lips to a whisper.

I wrap my fingers around her hips and we kiss, grinding our lips together, fast and forceful. My hands slip under the hoodie and find the elastic band to her sweat pants. She moans into my mouth when I reach underneath.

“The sweats were a good idea,” I say as I massage her thighs.

“I was planning on it.”

“Were you now?” We both giggle. “Better than the microfiche room, huh?” I ask her. Thursday’s fun, it’s been on my mind since we dipped into that room on Thursday.

“No cameras,” she says. “You didn’t know that secret camera was there?”

“Maybe I just forgot about it.” She knocks me in the thigh with her knee and it sends us laughing. These things—making out the first date, groping in public—I’ve never done them with anyone, never felt the desire to. But with Demi it’s automatic, that sexual freedom to express it how and when you want to. Each day we spent time together this week, this first week, we’ve had to pull each other away.

It felt rotten to leave Demi for work on a Sunday morning. A perfect time to stay in and stroke each other awake in the early afternoon. On the up-side, the library is dead on summer Sundays, and I can write in peace. Or try to write, think about writing.

I take a moment from the blank pages and find Demi is online.

You there? I ask her. In a few moments, she responds.

Still sleepy.

Thought you’d feel great this morning. How was church?

My hips don’t feel great ;-) *I had a nice time.*

Me, too ;-)

Some time goes by without students or public patrons to pull me away from the keyboard. Then she asks,

What church do you go to? Not worried, just annoyed at the assumption, but I

understand.

I don't go to church.

Why not? Aren't you Catholic?

I wonder if Demi knows how large that question is. There are lots of reasons people don't go to church: not being that serious about it, they spend time with their family at home instead, they don't want to go out of their way for a better church, etc.

I don't really have a religion. It's as close to the point as I'd like to get. No religion means not having guidelines on a god. It doesn't mean *no god* yet and I wish she'd ask much later about this, or never. Just one week and now I have to hear those questions I'd been trying to avoid.

Do you believe in God? I didn't think this would be a problem, the questioning of faith. Why does she need to know to be happy? The answer should be personal, not evidence.

I believe there are things I don't understand.

But do you believe in God?

There's only one answer she wants now, I'm sure of it, and it's not the one she wants.

Not really. I never wanted to have to answer this. It shouldn't be anyone's business but my own. Why does she need to know?

Honey, no. That's my deal-breaker.

I get the feeling in my chest, that hollowing, the stripping off the bones, gutted. Just a week, from Sunday to Sunday, and it still feels like a break-up.

I'm glad we didn't speak in-person and she told me what she wanted, but I need to see her again.

*

I clear the cobwebs from her doorway with a shoe before she answers. She'd been trapped in the house for days once because of spiders; I can't see her without doing something about them.

She answers the door in her sweats, dressed down from Sunday services. She looks at me just long enough to acknowledge me.

"Hey," she says behind the door.

"Hey." The door creaks open across the tile and I walk in. "Sorry, for a moment I forgot how to get here."

"Oh. You could've asked me."

"I know, but that's how I learn my way." I try to smile, just enough to show that I'm joking, but it's a lie. After what we wrote about while I was at work, I couldn't ask for directions. Too embarrassing.

I find my way to her time-beaten couch, where we both became so comfortable in just two days of dating. We lost ourselves in what we've needed for too long: real company.

She asks, "Do you want some water?"

I don't want to prolong this. I want to make my peace and leave. "No thanks," I say.

I went into this with her wondering if it could be an issue, our religious beliefs

getting in the way. I ignored that fear when I should have brought it up.

Demi scoots to the far end of the couch. Earlier today we woke up wrapped in each other, stroking our bodies awake; now we can't even make eye contact.

“So.”

“So.” The air conditioner kicks in with a rumble and the air pressure causes the bedroom door to slam shut. Both of us sit still.

“How was work?” she asks, an empty question a part of me is thankful for.

“It was quiet,” I say. “You know, it stays quiet on the weekends.” Just two days ago, Friday after classes, we ducked into the microfiche room and made out like teenagers. Besides Demi's two best friends, no one at the law library knew we had been seeing each other. Our private affair and break-up, if you can call it that. Even though I didn't agree with the secrecy at first, I appreciated the escape. It was *ours*.

“I'm sorry,” Demi says. “I really like you, but I just can't do it.”

“I know. I understand.” I stare into the curls on the carpet. No, I don't understand. Earlier today she wrote *if a man is going to love me, he needs to understand that God made me in His image*.

I've sacrificed a lot in the past for other women, more than I should have, and I was getting ready to sacrifice more for her, for someone who, even with all our little differences, made me feel safe again. “I'm sorry, too. I wouldn't be honest with you or myself if I said I believed.”

“No, honey,” Demi says. “I wouldn't want you to lie to yourself like that. I won't lie either. I'm disappointed, but I understand.”

I'm disappointed.

It burns like a hot palm to my face to hear this, that my best is too little, that I'm ready to accept her for who she is, yet Demi, the daughter of gay parents, can't accept me. It's frustrating to hit such a wall with someone you've fallen for, to find that finality, that breaking point. I can't yell over the feelings I still have for her, so I cry.

Demi scoots closer and cradles an arm over my shoulders.

"I wish I could be loved for *me*," I say to myself. "I'm always afraid something like this will happen."

"I'm so sorry," she says again, hugging me from the side. "But we can still be friends. We don't have to stop seeing each other. It'll just be different."

It's not what I want because it never works. We'll both be unhappy and drift apart, ignoring each other's calls, passing off invitations, until we're strangers again. We can't go back to friends.

"I'd like that, too." I hug her back.

"Okay," she says, patting my back. "Will you be all right?"

"I think so," I wipe my face with the back of my arm. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

"Good, I just need for you to leave." She lets go of me. "Could you?"

I'm not sure if she's disappointed or sad.

"All right, I'll go." I give one last sigh before I get to my feet.

"Please let yourself out."

"All right."

Demi stays seated as I open the door and look back. She stares at the floor,

waiting for me to go.

The door closes behind me and I lean against it to take a breath. Then I hear her low wailing, the bass of her voice coming through the door. It's a wounded, haunting cry, like just before a widow mourns in silence. An honest cry.

As I step away from her apartment, I hear different voices, weeping through the neighboring doors, echoing through the hallway behind me.

BOMBING THE CUL-DE-SAC

Getting fireworks isn't my idea, and I can't remember the last time I considered it a good one. The Independence Day BBQ party dies down and the guests leave a trail of paper plates and empty beer bottles on their way out the door. The three of us rub our stomachs, tight and solid with pounds of packed chicken and starch, sleep pulling at our faces, but my brother Marco wants to drag me and his girlfriend Angelina for a last-ditch fireworks run to celebrate the Fourth.

I've expressed to friends that I'd been thinking about shooting fireworks again. More of a daydream. It's been twelve years since I threw one firecracker. After my enlistment, I avoided anything packed with gunpowder or lit from a wick: pistols, smoke bombs, jumping jacks—no mortars.

Definitely none of those, no thunk of a hollow tube, the screaming through the air, the white sparks crashing through the sand. They're not as colorful as fireworks, but their impact is enough to throw a Marine out of a Hummvee and into the road. I remember how they pounded as they came from less than a block away, down the entire length of our convoy, each one slamming the dirt like the hoof of a monster.

“How about it, bro?” Marco asks. “You think you'd be up for it?”

He looks ready for disappointment. Angelina knows a bit about my phobia, but she never got to see the worst of it like he did, the concerts and basketball games, with me bawling in my seat after pyrotechnics blazed across concert stages.

It's the concussion, the deafening blast and slam to the chest that brings it on. No

time to remember I'm safe. When I'm blown to pieces in my chair, I feel as helpless as a child, and the sounds I make are a child's sounds. My brother and I remember what it sounds like to be afraid of everything. Even decades later, he knows what that cry means.

“Would you like us to bring something back for you,” he continues “or are you okay?”

He's giving me a way to back out because he cares, but he doesn't understand how much I need to keep moving forward. Avoiding it isn't how it works and it won't help me anymore. Over time I've found more things to avoid, more things to be afraid of. So I'll stand up.

“Let me get my sandals.”

The netting over the white fireworks tent looks like the same twine they use to wrap pine trees for Christmas-time sales. We park in the dirt lot across from the tent and search the netting for an entrance—one in the back. A tall, gangly, blond-haired boy in an extra-large white t-shirt approaches us.

“Welcome to Red Dragon Fireworks,” he says, as if we're going to remember. The way he looks and stands, he gives me the feeling that he used to work in a traveling carnival. “Can I help you find anything at all?”

“We're just browsing right now, thank you,” Marco says.

“Actually, where are the Roman candles?” I ask.

“They're on the other side of this aisle,” he says. “They're buy-one-get-one.”

I thank him and turn the corner to the candles. I made up my mind on the drive

here. Working my way up will do better than a cold-turkey celebration with anything thicker than my wrist. I have no desire to browse.

The only candles they have will pop after flying, so I have to be ready for the firecracker sound. I take two four-packs.

While Marco and Angelina plan their domestic light show, one of the fireworks carnies gets my attention and the other nearby customers. He points to their fireworks display several hundred feet away from the tent (for safety's sake). They demonstrate near-professional fireworks, and we have the opportunity to buy them, the kinds that light up community festivals, ones with "ator" at the ends of their names. The lights expand like boulders.

While the white sparks scamper closer, a series of mortars blast to my left. At once my knees buckle and I feel the muscles in my chest tighten like a ceramic plate. I grow heavy and my body prepares to duck and dive. But it's not as severe as it used to be, that's a good sign.

Marco finds me and pats me on the back. He caught me at the ready. Too shocked to let myself feel embarrassed. He smiles, but that way someone smiles when there's little they can do or understand.

He and his girlfriend finish browsing and decide on an assortment in a long, thin package, the kind with a mix of smoke bombs, sparklers, and a few other classics.

I set my Roman candles down on the counter.

"That's it?" the cashier asks, almost taunting me to go around for something bigger. My fourteen-year-old self should be laughing at me. This should be enough for

the night.

I take the pilot light from the kitchen and walk out with my roman candles. Short blasts in the distance punch through the droning of crickets and soft hum of traffic. Not loud or hard enough to frighten, but enough to warn me.

Marco already has a few favorites spread out on the driveway, some happy showers and a few boxes packed with dozens of small tubes each. He also carries a strainer filled with a line of firecrackers. I'm staying clear of those, at least for now.

No one else is shooting off fireworks in our cul-de-sac. Just us three with fifty dollars' worth of black powder. I lay out the candles on our patio table and dig out the wicks with my fingers. Tiny green wicks, sometimes too short to pull out of the tube. I hold the first Roman candle in my left hand and the lighter in my right.

I remember group therapy, those days at the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at UCF. They call it *exposure therapy*. I still know little about it, but the concept makes perfect sense: if you're afraid of something, you can treat it with gradual exposure, build up a tolerance to it. People with fear of dogs, for example, sit in a room with a dog and are pushed to the limits of their phobias. There are virtual-reality programs for people afraid of spiders. There's even a "Virtual Baghdad" program for veterans and service members suffering from PTSD, a program that can be dialed in to the specifics of that patient's experiences—from the foot traffic on the road, to the smell of cordite in the air. This is my exposure therapy.

I light the wick of my Roman candle until it flashes red and flees down the tube.

The first ball fizzes out and hits our tree with the amplified sound of snapping fingers. My grip is too light and the tube slides down, but I hold it tighter and point it past the tree. *Fizz-pop, fizz-pop*, ten in a row. Just like target practice. For the first time in years, after avoiding them for so long, I'm allowing myself to feel in control.

That candle doesn't last long enough, and it takes no time to finish the first four-pack. I decide to save the other pack so I can share them with Marco and Angelina. Marco and I take turns flinging jumping jacks into the street. Most of his flash on one side and burn out, but mine whiz on the ground like gangs of fireflies. I take handfuls of them and light them one after the other. I dig my hand into black powder, throw bombs into the air, and I am less afraid.

Even when Marco lights his little SAM-rocket boxes—the kind that squeal in jagged streaks through the air like Screaming Mimis—I don't cower or feel tears coming. They stun me, but we control where they go.

By ten to 11:00 PM, we go through half a dozen fountains, over forty jumping jacks, eight Roman candles, and those two boxes. Marco lays out his yard-long train of firecrackers, and I'm ready for the successive popping and flashes.

I remember our house in Miami, our ten-year-old selves lighting firecrackers, dashing across the street, and covering our ears, waiting for each blast and swarm of color, the familiar smell of cap guns and snaps, the smells and sounds of innocent mischief.

My brother lights the wick and runs back to me. For the rest of the night, we cackle and ignite the sky.

APPENDIX A: TRIGGERS (WRITING LIFE)

In the Summer of 2010, I joined a mentoring fellowship for graduate students, the first class I had to take for the MFA program. The goal was to conduct a research program with a professor and present my findings to an audience of students and faculty at the end of the semester. My research covered wartime literature and how creative writing can be used to remedy service-related PTSD in a community-workshop environment.

What I found in the literature I read and the videos I watched pointed to a lot of shared traumas and the ability to negotiate the memories of those traumatic experiences through writing. But I didn't know what effect the research would have on me and on my own writing.

The novels, memoirs, and compilations I read directly related to my own experiences in Iraq, experiences with Marine life in the States, how enlistment affected my relationships, how dark humor helped during troubling situations, and how I adjusted back home. There were also additional texts that helped me with drafting my own stories and balancing elements of fiction and nonfiction into what later became this composite novel.

Though this started as a memoir, it is labeled as a novel because my intention with writing this novel was to incorporate magical, fantastic elements into nonfiction. The idea came about during last year's AWP convention in Washington, D.C. I attended a panel, called "Metafiction Latino: Beyond Magical Realism," which featured Latino writers that introduced Magical Realism into post-modern fiction and poetry. Each presenter offered samples of their fantastic stories with their unique styles, like *The People Paper*, by

Salvador Plascencia, that reads with the perspectives of two characters narrating simultaneously—a character's narration in one column with another character's narration in the other. I was impressed with their unique storytelling and how each story connected back to an influential genre—their stories both reflected this genre and kept it fresh.

What I noticed about their examples, though, was the lack of warfare, the battles I'd read about in Marquez's work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I wanted to know what kind of influence Post-Modern writing and Magical Realism had on the War on Terror. I asked the panel, “Is anyone using Magical Realism today to write about our current wars?” To my surprise, the entire panel didn't have an author, a poet, or even a creative-writing student in mind.

Maybe that's because bookstores are saturated with true-to-life memoirs, stories of soldiers and sailors who went through combat. America is hungry for confessions, and the war memoir was a genre I was losing interest in. I wanted to try something else. I considered a “magical memoir,” something with the unapologetic aggrandizing of Tim O'Brien and the rarities of Laura Esquivel and Ralph Ellison.

Besides the canonical Magical Realism novels I'd read, the novel that most influenced my new ideas was O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. In it, he acts as the memoirist telling a fictional version of his experiences during the Vietnam War. Much of what he writes could fit into a war memoir, but O'Brien uses many fictional elements—even calling his own credibility into question—with chapters full of the supernatural and strange. In one chapter, sites where fellow soldiers died are revisited. But in another chapter, a soldier buys his girlfriend a ticket to Vietnam and she slowly transforms into a

nocturnal predator. In another chapter, O'Brien writes about his first kill—a lobbed grenade at a young VC's feet. He goes into the goriest details to both humanize the man and to reflect the horror he felt when he saw his body. He didn't actually kill him, though; he felt as if he did when he saw the man's remains. It's not veracity or fantasy that he's after, but the feeling he's trying to convey of the madness he experienced in war. It's O'Brien's distinction between the “story truth” and the “happening truth.”

That “story truth” is what I intended to express throughout the novel, whether through the bureaucratic mess of a V.A. Clinic or through the powers of a reverse empath (someone who can project their feelings onto others).

I wanted to represent the mental-health department in the clinic as this boxed-in, makeshift waiting area to express the difficulties the Department of Veterans Affairs has been having with such an influx of vets seeking treatment. The actual mental-health department looks much more manageable—the entire clinic does, including the individual care-team facilities—but the impersonality I felt walking in and how I felt about the changes was what I needed to convey.

In “Lightskin,” the goal was to give Demi's character magical properties that expresses her charm and my desire to love her quickly, as if her emotions and personality are infectious. The scales referenced in “False Positive” are based around a simple rash that I'd developed in the military and that had grown worse since being discharged. I wanted these scales to be more pronounced, distinct, and to represent a physical symptom to the anxiety I was feeling at the time. I wanted it to be something just on the surface, something I hoped didn't draw attention.

Besides O'Brien, other authors that were most influential were Anthony Swofford and Nathaniel Fick. Swofford's *Jarhead* has the imagery and cadence to sell an elegant memoir of wartime's stresses and minutiae. His second memoir, *Hotels, Hospitals, and Jails*, also deserves merit for its father-and-son dynamics and its hints of wartime stresses and the physical costs on service members.

What attracted me at first to Swofford's *Jarhead* was the God-awful movie. I had the desire to redeem Swofford in my eyes through his memoir. The cuts on the film, from the original subject matter, are severe and the memoir feels more cohesive, meaningful, and well-rounded in comparison. The narrative writing style is very dry and direct through many of its chapters, but there are eye-catching visuals and moments where the narration blends into poetic, stream-of-consciousness writing. A great example of his waxing poetic through narration is when he gets briefed in case he's interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter while in Kuwait. He runs through an interview scenario in his mind.

“I'm twenty years old and I was dumb enough to sign a contract and here I sit in the hairy armpit...of the world, and I can hear the bombs already, Mr. Times, I can hear their bombs and I am afraid.”

That paragraph is one of the most telling at the beginning of his memoir, since it shows how he drops his composure through his thoughts and the readers get to see through the bravado that some service members put up as a show of force and defense. That paragraph is also very personal and meaningful to me and my own experiences, since it shows a taste of how that bravado can be used to mask uncertainty, or a liability.

It was very difficult for me to address problems I'd faced since being discharged in 2006, like the rage and anxiety issues I represented in "False Positive" and "Takotsubo." In these chapters, I wanted to give concentrated examples of some of the more extreme symptoms I'd dealt with, but illustrate them through stream-of-consciousness. I wanted to express those symptoms from their darkest foundations and most violent conclusions. In these chapters, the narration swings from a steady cadence to a rushed and illustrative one.

Chapters like these were the most personal and most challenging to write, mostly because I was still dealing with these symptoms at times, and visualizing those scenes became exhausting. Writing those scenes required time and patience, but so did some of the reading.

The book that gave me the most difficulty was Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away*. In it, a Second Lieutenant goes through Officer Candidate School and his missions as a Recon officer in the Marine Corps. In this memoir, Fick shows a meticulous level of detail in his descriptions and the events he describes in Iraq are similar to the ones I went through.

Fick describes the fight in An Nasiriyah, nicknamed "Ambush Alley," and the trek to Qalaat Sukkar, an abandoned flight line in the middle of the desert. These were locations our convoys navigated through during the war on Iraq. The convoy I was a part of went around Ambush Alley when the higher-ups realized how dangerous the route through town was. We also arrived in Qalaat Sukkar near the same days Fick's Recon detail did, and the convoy I was a part of was mentioned in his memoir. He wrote about

the trip through the town of Ash Shatrah on the way to that flight line. Our supply convoy was ambushed by small-arms fire and RPG blasts, and one of our trucks fell over during the attack. Fick wrote about how one of the Marines we lost, when the truck tipped, was captured, hanged, and possibly mutilated. His name was Sergeant Fernando Padilla-Ramirez, a member of my parent unit. This small detail could have been glossed over (after all, it was only one Marine among many, regrettably), but he kept it and showed how important Sgt. Padilla-Ramirez's death was to the Marine Corps during the war. To Fick and his Recon team, the sergeant became a symbol for revenge.

I stopped reading for half a week and started to binge eat, binge drink, smoke, and lose sleep. I wasn't ready to be reintroduced to something so personal. That reintroduction of war stress and anxiety became a consistent struggle through the material I read and the short memoirs I tried to write.

I avoided pieces like “Muscle Memory,” because that story dealt with a stressful relationship I left just before joining the MFA program, and it also dealt with describing the ambush at Ash Shatrah in detail. In time the stories stopped coming, classwork took a hit, and I disregarded my health. For a few semesters, I avoided writing the memoir almost altogether.

It took until the end of the first year of graduate school to seek help again, but not through the VA clinic like before. At the Veterans Academic Resource Center—the new veterans offices on campus for financial and academic assistance—I asked for treatment options. Since I wasn't registered for classes at the time, they encouraged me to speak with the counselors at the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at UCF.

At the clinic I met with Dr. Sandra Neer, whose goal in her program was to first provide an evaluation for the veteran, then help the client decide whether they should continue with treatments, what kinds, or direct them to another organization for treatment or consultation if necessary. The questions Dr. Neer asked were more in-depth and varied, even though she started with the standard questions about drug use and flashbacks. Her questions went beyond the basic PTSD questions and I learned new terms: Adjustment Disorder, Dysthymia, Hypervigilance. Treatment didn't require post-traumatic symptoms or a history of drug abuse. She said I certainly had PTSD for some time after service, but there were related symptoms still lingering and group counseling was encouraged.

I spent last Summer visiting the clinic, going through lectures on medications, how PTSD-related disorders worked, and spoke in a small group (only two of us, for most of the time) about my challenges and how to overcome them. I also learned the names for the obstacles I was trying to negotiate, but didn't understand.

I passed from Dr. Neer to Dr. Rachel Ruffin, who focused on teaching practical exercises for veterans to adopt for stress management. In a small group of three veterans (half of the original group), I learned how to recognize my stressors and find better ways to negotiate them when they presented themselves. I decided to show pieces of these moments in my writing, when the exercises and training were supposed to work, but the remedies worked better during therapy than after.

For the story "Takotsubo," my plan was to show another condensed moment, outside of the military, where several stressors combine and put therapeutic advice to

task. I tried to get across a few key topics related to veterans issues and their military-to-civilian transitioning.

1. To many service members, showing weakness is a liability, so “stowing it” is instinctual and hard to shake in and out of service.

2. It's easy to maintain a heightened state of alertness, even during trivial, mildly inconvenient circumstances.

3. They may feel alone with their symptoms.

4. There's a comfort and enjoyment factor with flying off the handle, and fantasizing about it.

5. Prolonged stress without maintaining it may lead to health issues.

It wasn't until I had one-on-one sessions with a therapist, who focused on veterans at the VARC, until I started putting these stress-management tools to consistent use, and I rediscovered other tools to help with improvement, mainly journaling. The memoir and guide book, *Write for Life*, by Sheppard B. Kominars, became a crucial component to my well-being and to my progress with this thesis. In his book, Kominars theorizes about traumatic memories and how they can become recursive. In a way, we replay certain memories out of habit and as a sort of threat assessment, and trigger avoidance becomes paramount. Personally, crowds, driving, and pyrotechnics were the things I avoided since enlistment, and they affected my social life. Pleasure-seeking, escaping, was the go-to self-treatment, and I made very little progress with symptoms. I did, however, pick up journaling because of how Kominars relates writing to psychological and physical benefits.

Shepperd starts journaling because of a doctor's prescription in order to remedy his migraines. His doctor recommends two weeks of daily journaling for at least twenty minutes—not word processing, but tangible, freehand writing. At the end of his two weeks of writing, when he returns to his doctor, he tells him that, even though the migraines are still there, they aren't nearly as severe. It's a habit he's been keeping for decades. I thought that, if this guy could make it a part of his daily routine for that long, maybe there was something to gain from the practice.

Write for Life is full of exercises to go along with the reading and journal writing. Some exercises might be as simple as answering life questions, could be a graph of personal accomplishments, five-minute freewriting drills, or “legacy letters” for our children and grandchildren. What I found most helpful was how easy it was to collect my thoughts while I was writing by hand. It was tactile involvement with the subconsciousness, stroking on paper to make it real. This freehand writing was what I appreciated most from this new therapeutic hobby.

I wrote in my journal from day to day after completing all the book's exercises. Not only were the journal entries written by hand, but also the manuscripts I wrote for this thesis. With a pad and paper, my writing became open, boundless, without distractions and interference. Revisions to typed manuscripts were also conducted by hand, and the productivity saw less slowing down.

In addition to using freehand journaling to assist with therapy, I found literature on faith and philosophy, but mostly from a secular perspective. Books like *Waiting* cover several philosophical subjects I'd been struggling with as an atheist. It addresses hope and

faith from outside organized religion, even though the program the author is involved with caters to the spiritual and religious. The author, Marya Hornbacher, is a recovering alcoholic who struggles with bipolar disorder. She goes through A.A. and feels out of place with the twelve steps of sobriety as a non-religious person. The original Twelve Step Program features God in five of the steps, including “turning our will and our lives over to the care of God” in the third step. To her, that feels like an insurmountable impediment to progress.

Marya dedicates herself to rephrasing the program's steps into workable alternatives for non-theists and skeptics. For example, the third step requires giving ourselves over to a higher power, and Hornbach's interpretation of what this step demands is a simple one: There is a natural order to our lives and we need to let it take care of itself, whether listening to what must be done or having patience when life is off-track. The stars in the sky will not burn out because of our personal problems. Anyone, no matter their personal beliefs about what keeps this world running, can accept that what landed them in this recuperative position is a relatively small problem, that it is negotiable, and will not have complete control over their lives for long. Patience and acceptance are virtues anyone can adopt.

As it shows in “Takotsubo,” it's difficult to allow yourself to accept treatment and be patient when not wanting to become a liability to your family, friends, and coworkers. Asking them for help means admitting, in the wrong state of mind, that you can't be there for them, that you can't do your duty and protect them. At the end of the story, though, I

show myself starting to give up and admit that there was a problem (at least to my mother).

In time, strides were made. I spent more time out in crowds with friends, I became better at readdressing those common stressors, and I confided in my family with my symptoms. I also lit my first fireworks since I left the Corps, and my family and friends were right beside me. On July fourth of this year, my brother and his girlfriend stood by me as I lit handfuls of fireworks, even though they still reminded me of ordinance up-close. With the help from Hornbach's advice on letting go, and the advice from Kominars, I wrote about that night in my journal, as soon as the night was over. The literature I chose for this thesis not only helped frame what I was writing about, but some of it enriched my life.

Books like *Write for Life* and *Waiting* were helpful accompaniments to counseling, and they allowed me to move on with difficult subjects I needed to write about, but not all my stories about military life were violent and serious. Many exhibited dark humor to lighten the subject matter and provide an appropriate tone to the narration. In a way, dark humor makes positive contrasts with dark storytelling.

Max Uriarte's *Terminal Lance* comic series (referring to a Marine who ends his four-year tour as a lowly Lance Corporal), is a perfect satire on life in the Marine Corps. Uriarte exposes some of the backwards goings-on in the life of Marines outside of leadership positions, how they're "voluntold" for duties, and the bureaucratic nonsense that happens off the field. Several personal experiences relate to his comics, like my time in Boot Camp and eating at different chow halls around the world.

Many of his comics worked in several scenes of my stories, primarily “Evening Chow.” The story focuses on the slow transitioning from Boot Camp Marine to field Marine in Iraq, and how our meals transition from Boot Camp to garrison duty, and then to Iraq. In the comic “Old Timer,” Lance Corporal Abe begins to tell a group of Boot Camp recruits about Iraq, and the looks on the boots' faces show that wonder that new Marines have about deployments. I remember going through Boot Camp in 2001, just as 9/11 happened on our last week of training, and how all of us young Marines had no idea where we would end up. Private First Class Lopes, one of our more motivated Marines, wondered about what was going to happen to us, as newly trained Marines without Military Occupational Specialties (our professions during enlistment). According to Lopes, all the new Marines were going to become front-line infantry, something he desired and I denied.

In the second part of “Evening Chow,” my goal was to satirize how base-duty chow halls can cater to a Marine's indulgences, regardless of how strict their fitness requirements are. A lot of on-base Marines fall for the chow hall food, and my base—Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona—literally has the best one. We learned that we could spend very little money there on too much food, then pay for our overeating later on formation runs around the base. Even when we ate like pigs at the chow hall, our work and exercise routines burned so much of our intake that we could maintain a caloric deficit. The comics “Freshman Fifty” and “Too Much Chow Hall” poke fun at this split between diet and performance.

In that second part, I show the dread of telling my family that the war is unavoidable, since my unit was leaving for Iraq in February, 2003. The third and final part shows the inevitable: life in Iraq. I wanted to highlight our living conditions and behaviors while on deployment, and how the higher-ups could fail at improving morale. The instance I cover is my introduction to the field kitchen, a mobile cafeteria that serves tray rations, pre-cooked food that's very similar to MRE food (Meals Ready to Eat). The quality of our food was not at all what I'd hoped for. Uriarte's "Fresh Meat" illustrates how I felt about the tray rations and MRE's. In the comic, children visit a farm and the farmer giving the tour explains to the group that the sick and malnourished cattle are sent to the military for their meals. I wanted to make that meat as underwhelming as it's presented in the comic. I showed the meat having the consistency of rubber, how it bent but didn't break.

The *Terminal Lance* series is excellent in showing the Marine Corps's comical shortcomings from a young bachelor's eyes, but there's also the Marine family to address, and Siobhan Fallon's *You Know When the Men are Gone* is all about how relationships can start, struggle, and fail in the military. Dependent wives and spouses cover most of the issues in this composite novel. Of particular interest were the revenge stories, like "Leave." A soldier suspects his wife of cheating on him back home, so he takes his leave without her knowing, then breaks into his own house and waits for his wife to slip up.

It covers a specific moment of promiscuity (among many) in the military. Like the protagonist in that story, the husband in "Young American Fun" can be capable of anything if his unchecked emotions get involved. I needed to expose at least one of the

complications for a family living on base, and that was a spouse's adultery, and how it can affect the relationships of friends. Like "Evening Chow," this story is split into three pieces, with the first piece showing a stream-of-consciousness narrative that covers me seeing a friend's wife naked by accident at a strip club, and how uncomfortable it was to think about our friendship and fantasize about being with her. The second piece shows complications arising when my friend's wife started using drugs on the job. In the final part, I show the wife having an affair with an officer's adult son, and my friend almost beating the man to death. I wanted to show the extent of their barbarity from both sides of the relationship: examples of infidelity and brutality. It can be easy for some military couples to let their stresses overwhelm them to the point of adultery and violence, and this example was one of at least a dozen that I responded to in my four years patrolling the Arizona base.

That violent experience stayed with me for years before I felt ready to write about it, along with many of the other experiences I tried to avoid, but journaling and counseling allowed me to keep pushing through those difficult experiences and maintain a personal dialogue that's so necessary for nonfiction writing. From seeking help came the opportunity to handle my symptoms healthily, then the chance to journal about those symptoms, and use those entries for the thesis, and for closure. Not only were those novels and memoirs fodder for my stories, but they became my therapeutic tools. They helped me process my thoughts, bring back memories about my own enlistment, helped me understand the symptoms that I struggled with, and how to address them with both seriousness and humor. Each of those books coincided with the life I wanted to write

about, and those stories provided the closure I needed. They have been the therapy that helped me the most since I decided I had stories to tell.

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