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Stolen

Jason J. Markle

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By

Jason J. Markle

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Jason J. Markle June 2, 1974

ABSTRACT

STOLEN

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Stolen is a collection of short stories that deal with the lives of people immersed in a world of conflict. Though the stories are not connected, the reader should notice that the people themselves are inherently connected due to the violent world that we are all a part of. The title was chosen because it echoes the tragedy that all of the characters must endure – their lives, at the emotional and mental level, are stolen from them because of what they have had to endure. In some cases, the people around them are stolen by conflict itself.

Although the stories in this collection are fiction, the reader should notice the connection to real world events that have engulfed the world over the past two decades. In creating these stories I have used my experience as a soldier, my knowledge of these conflicts, and through conversations with those who have experienced these conflicts first hand. By doing this I hope to capture a realistic view of war and allow my readers to understand its effects on humankind.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Nicki Markle, the men and women of the US ARMED FORCES, and all those who have suffered and endured the global conflicts of the last generation.

ACKNOWLEDMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Ronald Johnson, for his patience and dedication in assisting with this project; John Smolens, for his unwavering support and critical advice; Jennifer Howard, for her inspiration and constant optimism when discussing this work. Without the help of these people and many others, this project could not have been completed.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

When I first endeavored to write this collection of stories I was unsure of what I was trying to accomplish. It wasn't that I felt I had nothing to say, but rather that I had so much within me that I felt I could not get out. This, of course, is probably the curse of all writers – in us there is a limitless amount of ideas and desires that we feel we must convey, but finding the right way to do so is often quite a chore. But instead of being shackled down and plagued by indecision, I decided to write whatever came to mind, then piece it together the best way I could. Fortunately, as I wrote these stories I began to discover a voice inside of me. One that, I believe, has something important to say. My hope is that when people sit down and read this work, the voice will speak loud and clear.

Why Write?

I never wanted to be a writer. I suppose it is just something that happened to me. As a child I loved to read and when given the opportunity I would spend most of my time in a library. Writing, however, rarely crossed my mind. That's not to say that I hadn't attempted it. I took creative writing courses in high school. I dabbled in

writing a fantasy novel. But I never felt the desire or need to place something on paper – I felt that I had nothing meaningful to say. This changed, however, mid-way through my undergraduate career at Northern Michigan University.

College was not my first choice. I grew up in a military family and from a very early age I decided that that was the place for me. After graduating high school I joined the Army and volunteered to be a paratrooper. Throughout my nearly five years of service I was deployed to Uganda in support of operations in Rwanda and Zaire weeks after the 1994 genocide. I was also one of the first combat troops deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995. These experiences had a deeply profound effect on me in that I experienced the horrors of combat and bore witness to the bloody aftermath of war and genocide, but I did not know how to account for it. For the years that followed, I had a difficult time dealing with the things I saw and had no release for the emotions I kept secure inside of me.

Eventually, as my enlistment in the Army came to a close, college became an option that I felt was worth considering. And when I finally decided that it was a move I wanted to make, I felt confident that I knew exactly

what I wanted to achieve. I had always been an amateur historian, so teaching history seemed to me to be the most obvious route to take. I excelled in my studies and was very content with my decisions, but there was a part of me that sought to make sense of the images that constantly tormented me. I needed an outlet and writing was a discovery that I truly just stumbled upon.

I wrote my first real story – I say real because any other attempt beforehand had been half-hearted and unworthy of that classification – in my first fiction workshop class during my junior year of college. It was an amazing experience for me because it gave me the opportunity to explore the tragedies I witnessed and the horrific things I was a part of while I was in the army. It was the outlet I was craving because I felt that I could let myself go and let the story take hold of me. It was from that moment on that I knew that everything in me had changed; that I had to write.

For years now, I have let writing take hold of me and I have seen myself develop as a writer. At first writing was a release, a chance for me to relive and reimagine the world and the events that I will forever feel a part of. But as I have grown as a writer I have began to find my voice, my purpose, that drive that tells a writer that they

must put words on the page. I believe my readers will recognize it when they experience my stories.

Inspiration

I believe it is obvious to anyone who reads my work that my experiences as a soldier have been a tremendous inspiration for my stories. For most writers it is easy to write what we know, that is why we give others that advice. However, I feel drawn to writing about soldiers because I want readers to understand our men and women in uniform. It is easy for us to forget the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines that stand on the front lines and do what our country asks of them. We see them on television or hear about them on the radio and when they do something good – we applaud, and when something goes wrong – we place blame, and when they die – we say it's a tragedy, and then we go on with our daily lives and we forget. I do not want that to continue. I want my readers to see these people for who they are. I want them to see down to a soldier's core and if, for just one moment and in just the slightest way, they can understand and experience what it must be like, then I feel that my work is successful. And maybe they won't forget.

Over the past few years there have been reminders of experiences I had that compelled me to write. In both 2004 and 2005, the world remembered the ten year anniversaries of the Rwanda genocide (April 1994) and the Bosnia War which ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord (November 1995). Both of these events signaled in me a desire to write about how the West turned their backs on these tragic events. I must admit that it was difficult for me to do so, but to miss the opportunity to remind readers of the importance and the relevance of these events would have haunted me.

One of the most influential occurrences that aided me in writing this thesis occurred on the 11th of March of 2006. The death of Slobodan Milosevic, aptly dubbed by the West as "The Butcher of the Balkans," has had a profound and eerie effect on me. I am not a Yugoslavian. I have no ties to the region. But the carnage and the destruction that I witnessed in the wake of the mid-90's Balkan War will never be forgotten. For years those images, and the images of Rwanda as well, have haunted me in a way that is hard to explain or understand. Though the death of this man should not have significant meaning to me, I have come to see him as a symbol of the atrocious nature of modern man. In a sense, I feel he represented all of those men

who raped and killed without mercy from Central Africa to the Middle East and from the Balkans to Asia. And when the International community finally took a stand and took this man, this criminal, to trial, it seemed as if there was a chance that all of those who suffered would finally experience justice. Unfortunately, that was not to be – the world was robbed.

Now the world stands, in the midst of a global war in which the sins of the past are being revisited, and we do nothing. This has been difficult for me to understand. There is a problem with America in that we are deeply rooted in hatred and mistrust and we direct it toward ideas and cultures that we do not understand. I feel that through my writing I can speak out against these problems and at least allow my readers to see another point of view that they may not have seen before.

Influences

My desire to tell war stories started at an early age. I have always been fascinated with the concept of war since I was a boy and would spend countless hours pouring over history books and first-person accounts of combat from the Civil War to Vietnam. In college, though, I was introduced to three writers that have had the greatest influence on me

as a writer: Tim O'Brien, Michael Herr, and Tobias Wolfe. All three wrote about their experiences in Vietnam, but they are all vastly different in experience and approach.

Michael Herr's, Dispatches, is a nonfiction account of his experience as a journalist in Vietnam. It is an unflinching and unbiased look at the war with the focal point being the siege of Khe Sahn. Tobias Wolfe's, In Pharaoh's Army, is his memoir of his time as an army officer serving in the Mekong Delta. Both have provided a strong influence in my writing despite the fact that they are nonfiction.

However, Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories, The Things They Carried, has probably been the greatest influence on my writing because of the way O'Brien approaches the subject of war. The stories study the psyche of soldiers in combat and tell their story in the most honest way. In his story, "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien discusses the truths about war in a way that I can relate to and in a way I hope to convey in my own work. He says,

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War

is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. (O'Brien 87)

…To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil – everything. All around you things are purely living, and you feel among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. (87)

…For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel - the spiritual texture - of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are or why

> you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.
>
> In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true. (88)

I want my readers to understand the essence of war from a soldier's perspective and I believe that O'Brien has thoroughly explained how this should be done. In a sense I want to take these truths and apply them to my own work, much like he does in his.

Style and Technique

Within these works there was a conscious effort to experiment with style. There have been many authors that I have come to read and admire over the course of my graduate career and each has their own way of expressing themselves on the page; therefore, I felt it was only fitting to try to emulate their styles in order create one that is unique to me. Two of the authors, Earnest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, played an important role in my search for style. Their ability to be spare within their prose, the complexity of their ideas written in simple sentences,

forced me to analyze my own work where I strive to accomplish the same thing. I desire to be exact and precise within my work and I feel that many words are unnecessary where as the right ones are.

In some cases certain stories or techniques by these two writers gave me ideas for my own work. For example, in the story "Pazite Snajper," I relied heavily on dialogue to propel the story forward much like Hemingway did in "Hills Like White Elephants." By doing so, it allowed me to focus on the political statement that I am trying to make instead of the intense drama that is unfolding on the city streets. Here, the reader can focus on what is being said, while the sniper battle is merely a backdrop that illuminates the complexity of the conversation.

My Writing

Raymond Carver, in his essay "On Writing" says that "Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications" (Carver 1607). In a sense I feel like that was not only what I achieved in these stories, but really my goal. That is not to say that my rendering of these political and social conflicts are of my own imagination, but rather that my intent is to highlight those conflicts that seemed to have been lost,

forgotten, or even unrecognized by the West, in particular the United States.

At first glance it is difficult to see a thematic connection with the works in this collection. Obviously one can make the assumption that all of these stories are about war, but I feel that to say so would marginalize what should be broader meanings behind the individual works. To look on the faces of these stories, it is easy to point out that they are about a myriad of issues. Genocide and war are at the forefront, but the loss of hope, personal sacrifice, guilt, and regret are thematic resonances that can be found as well.

In the end, though, I do not want my reader to look at my work in terms of just theme. Instead I want them to, as Flannery O'Conner wrote, experience the meaning. She says in her essay, "Writing Short Stories" that

> When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate if from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story

> because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully. (O'Conner 1667).

My hope is that my stories carry a complexity in them that cannot be separated - they must be experienced. For that reason, I was intent on creating and constructing stories that should speak to a reader on a multitude of levels. I want my stories to be an experience and from that experience I hope that my reader can walk away with a new understanding of the world around them.

Fear

I wasn't afraid when I stepped toward the ramp of that C-130 the morning of my first jump. It was the final week of jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and my class had just endured two rugged weeks of preparation, building both our bodies and minds for the thrilling task of Army parachuting. We were elated when the day of our first jump was at hand. For weeks the notion had been just a dream. We talked tough about it, building ourselves up, never acknowledging that we were about to take a death-defying leap from a perfectly good airplane. That was incidental; it didn't matter. We were going to be paratroopers, the elite.

As I moved through the prop blast and felt the surge of warm air against my face, I could feel the adrenaline build. It was an overflow of energy that burst through my skin, forming sweat beads that lingered in my armpits and trailed down my back. It was electric; the hair on my arms stood at attention anticipating the feel of flight. I wasn't scared. That's what I said.

Soldiers are taught not to fear. It is brainwashed into us the moment we enter basic training. We are trained

to fight. We are trained to kill. We are told to blind ourselves from this natural human instinct. Yet we are taught these things by fear itself. It is all around us the moment we enter basic training. We fear the new environment, the rules we must follow. We fear our drill sergeants, loud overbearing men and women who seem all too willing to rip our hearts out and stomp them with their steel-toed combat boots. We fear the power of the weapons that are placed in our hands; we fear the responsibilities they come with.

They crammed us into webbed seats that ran down the center of the cargo hold. Sixty-four of us stuffed like socks in a drawer. I sat awkwardly positioned between two other soldiers and struggled to find some sense of comfort. After some time I finally gave up and rested my head, which was cradled in my Kevlar helmet, along the skin of the aircraft. Fortunately the flight was brief and before the droning of the propellers lulled me to sleep the moment was upon us.

"Ten minutes!" yelled the jumpmaster.

We echoed the words like a refrain, slowly swaying back and forth, elbowing the person next to us to wake them up. I began adjusting my equipment, but found it difficult

to move with my arms pinned to my sides by the bodies of the other soldiers.

The first time I was deployed to a combat zone was in 1994. Our unit was sent to Uganda to set up a base and monitor the civil unrest and genocide in the Central African nation of Rwanda. The flight was fourteen hours long, and we sat, crammed into a C-141, with all of our equipment. No one spoke and the eerie silence of the men kept me awake. I played with the muzzle of my M-16 and thought about my family. The day before we left I talked to my wife on the phone. "Do good things over there," she said. "Remember that we love you and we're proud of you." I did not know how long we would be gone. I did not know if I would come back. I just knew that I was going somewhere that we weren't wanted and that scared the hell out of me.

"Stand up!"

Slowly we struggled to our feet, pushing off and pulling each other until we could form a line.

"Hook up!"

I unhooked my static line, which was draped over my shoulder, and connected it to the wire that ran just above

our heads. I hoped that when I jumped out of the aircraft the static line would pull out my parachute from the pack. Otherwise, I would be dragged by the plane, or fall to my death.

"Check equipment!"

I carefully checked the chinstrap of my helmet and tugged and pulled at all of the straps and belts connected to my parachute. All secure. Then I checked the chute of the soldier in front of me. As we worked, the safeties moved along the webbed seats, checking our static lines. When one of them got to mine he checked it then leaned over close to my face. "This one's got a fray on it," he yelled. "You might not want to jump with this chute." I looked at him wide eyed. He laughed and then moved on.

Asshole.

I was in Bosnia the first time someone shot at me. We were on a patrol through the town of Tuzla and were moving through a neighborhood where previous sniper attacks had taken place. I was the radioman, or RTO, for the mission, which made me a walking target.

About a half hour into the patrol we came to a crossroads surrounded by large, two-story, stone buildings. They all had bullet holes in the walls, the windows blown

out. One of the buildings had collapsed on one side, probably from the impact of an artillery shell. All of the buildings seemed empty.

I was standing next to the Captain when the shots came. The rounds hit the concrete in front of me, spraying me with dirt and debris. Everyone ran for cover. I dropped my rifle and dove to the ground. I laid there for a moment, feeling the gunfire erupt around me. The sound was deafening. I knew I was going to die. But just as fast as it started, the firing stopped. Slowly, I lifted my head and looked around. The Captain was kneeling next to me, the hand mic still in his hand. He smiled and said, "That was a close one, wasn't it?"

"No shit, Sir."

"Sound off for equipment check!"

Each soldier in turn slapped the back of the man in front of him calling out "Okay!" until it reached the final man, who proclaimed, "All okay, Jumpmaster!"

Then there was the waiting. I stood there staring at the door, which was only four people in front of me. I could hear the soldiers shouting, building each other up. "Huah!" one would shout. "Yeah, baby!" yelled another. I

couldn’t breathe, and felt nauseous. The reality of the situation now came crashing upon me and I felt it in the waves of sweat that poured out of my Kevlar and down my face.

I felt a tug at my shoulder and heard the voice of my buddy, Jastro, behind me. “You ready, man?” he said. I turned my head trying to look back at him. I wanted to sound confident but the words came in an inaudible howl. Then I turned back and stared toward the portal that led to my fate.

I remember the man I killed. We were on an ambush along the Zaire-Rwanda border. There was a feeling of anticipation as we lay in the tall grass waiting for our prey. We maintained our silence, not wanting to compromise the mission, but our eyes spoke for us and we conveyed our thoughts, our fears.

Up until that moment I believed I was ready for anything. I believed that I could kill. But as I stared out at the red clay road, my finger on the trigger, that belief quickly disappeared. I had no lust for blood, no reason for vengeance, but here I was, poised to kill, and I realized that I didn’t have the nerve for it. I didn’t want to take another man’s life.

When the trucks came carrying those young men it was a slaughter. Claymores and machinegun fire ripped through the vehicles, shredding the occupants. I pulled the trigger of my M-16, firing arbitrarily at the vehicle in front of my position. Then I saw him. He climbed out of the gun jeep and began moving toward me. His face was dark with short black hair. There was blood running from a gash over his right eyebrow. He was young, probably sixteen or seventeen. He wore an olive green fatigue top and blue jeans with a hole in the left knee. He carried no weapon. I aimed and fired two shots: one in the chest, one in the face. His body collapsed to the ground and disappeared from my sight, which became obscured by smoke and flame. I listened as the sound of gunfire ceased. Fire crackled as the vehicles burned and our victims moaned in pain. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on my arm.

Moments later I found myself moving through the carnage. Our team had to move deliberately through the kill zone searching for intelligence: maps, documents. We wore latex gloves; Africa is infested with AIDS. I moved from one body to another, tearing open pockets of shirts and pants. Eventually, I came to him. There was a gaping hole where his right eye had been, blood and mucus ran down his cheek. His shirt was soaked from the hole in his chest.

I tried not to look at what I had done, but I was drawn to it. Death is so final and I had condemned him to it. And I was afraid.

"Sixty seconds!" yelled the jumpmaster.

My mind raced, tried to formulate a plan of escape. But I knew that the only way to get off this plane was to take the plunge.

"Thirty seconds!"

A ball formed in my throat. I was going to vomit.

I once met an old World War II vet while visiting Rome during the fiftieth anniversary of its liberation by the Allies. I walked down the rows of crosses and Stars of David, reading the names of the dead. He leaned on his cane in front of a cross, his veteran's wedge cap in his hand. As I passed him he looked at me. I smiled.

"This was a friend of mine," he said. "Died while fighting outside of this city."

I stopped and looked at the name. Private Fredrick K. Barnes, Arkansas.

"Met him in Basic, and was with him until the day he died."

"I'm sorry," I said.

He took off his glasses, wiped his eyes, and smiled at me. "So am I, but he died for a good cause." He slipped on his glasses and looked over my uniform and at my red beret. "Paratrooper, huh? So was I. Can't say I liked it much. I always felt stupid throwing myself out of those things."

"Were you afraid?"

He laughed. "'Course I was. Anyone who says he isn't is a liar."

I asked the vet if he were ever afraid of dying. He looked at me and smiled. "That's not the problem," he said. "We're all afraid to die. But you got to understand that when you go to war you must recognize one clear fact."

"What's that?"

"That you're going to die. Whether it's in battle or sometime down the road, you are going to die. You must surrender yourself to that fact. Once you understand it, when you come to grips with it, well, Son, your problems just disappear. Then you can carry on the mission."

"Go!"

The line slowly shuffled forward, and I was pushed forward with the others. As I moved closer to the door I

was able to see the ground racing under us. I could see the trees and then the field that was to be our drop zone. Finally, I was at the door. There was no point in turning back. My time had come. I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and walked into the sky.

Wasteland

There is a stand of trees on county road 553, near the town of Gwinn, Michigan, that always triggers a memory of death and decay. It is right where I turn onto the airport road, where the trees come to an end and the logged-out wasteland begins. The image passes quickly though my mind, like the trees do when I pass them by, but still it haunts me. I dwell on it and wonder. I try to speed up, hoping to run away, but it stays with me, condemning me, as if it were my fault. And I feel guilty. Sometimes I pull over and breathe, deeply. But usually, I race to the first signs of civilization. At home the memory is gone, blocked out by my children and my beautiful wife, but in the back of my mind I know it will still be there, not only in those quick flashes of memory but also in my dreams.

When I first heard that my unit was going to Bosnia, the country seemed a mystery to me. Sure, I knew some of the history: it was once a part of mighty empires ruled by Greeks, Romans, and Muslims; it was the center of the Orthodox Church; and the First World War basically began with an assassination in its capital, Sarajevo. But despite this knowledge, I didn't really know what to

expect. Like most soldiers on the verge of deployment, I glued myself to the television and watched the reports on CNN. I wanted to know everything about this place. I wanted to be prepared. Apparently, the end of the Cold War had plunged what was once the country of Yugoslavia into a civil war, with each of the main ethnic groups gaining independence and creating their own autonomous states. However, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a region shared by the three main ethnic groups, the Serbians, Croatians, and Muslims, continued to be the center of intense fighting as each of these groups tried to gain control of the government.

As we prepared to deploy, our company received intelligence briefings almost daily. These briefings, which were dispersed between hours of intense training and equipment preparation, were usually held at the base theater. There we were shown slides and videos by intelligence officers and medics on a multitude of subjects such as troop strengths and equipment, how to survive in a cold environment, how to find and disarm mines, and the history of the region. We also learned that there was a fear that the war could slowly spread throughout the Balkan Peninsula and into the rest of Europe. What made matters worse was that the Serbians had begun a quest to ethnically cleanse the region. As I watched video showing the bodies

of the dead, I was reminded of the Holocaust and senseless slaughter of civilians. I felt tortured, angry, and though I was afraid of the unknown, I had an unyielding lust for vengeance and could not wait to leave.

My unit, Alpha Company, 3/325th Airborne Battalion Combat Team, deployed to the UN occupied airfield near the town of Tuzla, Bosnia on December 23, 1995. Tuzla is located about sixty-five miles northeast of Sarajevo and about thirty miles away from the Serbian and Croatian borders. It sits atop the northeastern plateau along the ridge line of the mountains that dominate most of the country's landscape. It was the perfect place for a base: close to the borders of the two combative countries and in the midst of the heaviest fighting. Before we arrived the UN had used this airfield, along with the Sarajevo airport, as a main base of operations. When NATO moved in, Tuzla became the headquarters for the U.S. contingent to keep the peace in the war torn region.

My first impression of the country dealt mostly with the cold and the gloom. The sun was rarely present; a thick grey sky dominated the land. There were always long stretches of precipitation as the Mediterranean air currents constantly poured over the rugged Balkan terrain

dumping rain or snow. During the day the country was tolerable, but when night came, the cold set in. Pulling guard duty along the airfield perimeter became almost unbearable. It was tough enough going without much sleep, but it was even worse when I couldn't stay warm. I would stand in the bunker, weapon slung over my shoulder, stomping my feet and rubbing my hands together. We all learned quickly to cover up as much skin as possible because it wouldn't take much for the cold winds to bring about frost bite. I learned this lesson the hard way when I nearly froze the tips of my fingers on a vehicle patrol because I didn't wear the proper gloves. I was lucky; the skin turned a dark purple, but didn't turn black. If I had left them that way any longer I surely would have lost them.

For the first two months in Bosnia we spent most of our time patrolling the area in and around Tuzla and guarding the perimeter of the airfield. Each of the three platoons ran two or three patrols a day, and each squad from the platoons rotated so that each would take a turn. During these patrols the squads would leave the safety of the guarded airfield and venture into the town of Tuzla and the villages and farmland that surrounded it. These patrols, though usually quiet, were always extremely

dangerous. The land was covered in mines. There was also the possibility of snipers and full blown ambushes by rogue Serbs still trying to carry on the war. I hated going on patrol, but I was the radioman or RTO (Radio Transmission Operator) for the company first sergeant, First Sergeant Jorge, a short, over-exuberant Puerto Rican who loved to walk. He wanted to go on every patrol that he could. "Let's go, Taylor," he would say. "We're starting to get fat." It wasn't uncommon for me to go on two or three patrols a day.

The worst thing about being an RTO on patrol was that I was a walking target, since I was always located next to someone in command. The Serbs, who we considered to be the enemy, obviously recognized this and had become extremely adept at taking out the radio operators of the Croats and the UN troops. They placed mines up in the trees with trip wires running well above a person's head. The antennae from the radio would pull on the wire when the RTO walked by and when it detonated the mine would rip the members of the patrol to pieces. The Serbs also used snipers to take out RTO's when they traveled through villages, because it was easier to hide among civilians than to come right out in the open and attack. These attacks continued when the U.S. troops finally arrived. Fortunately we were able to

avoid the mine trick, but that didn't stop the occasional sniper fire. In these situations, while walking through the shelled-out villages, the dirt, mud, or snow kicked up near me, and the sound of the firing echoed. I'd hit the dirt, my weapon held out in front of me, and claw my way to safety. I was lucky, though, because neither I, nor any other soldier in the battalion, was ever hit by sniper fire. I figure it was either because the Serbs were the worst shots in the world, or they were just trying to scare us. They succeeded in one respect, though, because I was always afraid every time we went out. Thankfully, sniper fire was not an everyday occurrence.

Around the middle of February the battalion was given the mission of creating a weapons cache on the Serbia-Croatia border. Here, the soldiers from both sides, in accordance with the armistice agreement signed in Dayton, Ohio, in November of 1995, would come and turn in all their weapons, including small arms, mines, explosives, even vehicles and artillery pieces. This mission fell to Alpha Company. Our commander, Captain Burleson, sent two platoons to set up and man the cache and left the other in Tuzla to continue the patrols. I was fortunate enough to

get to stay in the rear, but I would usually accompany First Sergeant Jorge to the cache every other day.

The position was set up right at the point where the three borders (Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia) meet, which is about six kilometers southwest of the town of Brcko. The area had been the focal point of intense fighting. It was a wasteland scarred and cratered, the forest torn to shreds. The villages outside of Brcko lay in complete ruins, many of the people having deserted them long ago. What was particularly interesting about this area was that it was populated mostly by Muslims, holdovers from the great Ottoman Empire that dominated the Balkans until the late 19th century. Every once in a while we would run across some of these people; most were refugees moving from place to place, settling in larger towns like Brcko and Tuzla, but a few would try to stay in their homes. It was strange though, because most of us could never remember seeing a male who wasn't extremely old or very young. It was as if they had vanished. On one occasion, during a patrol, Captain Burleson finally decided to approach one of the women we came across. She was old, but sturdy, and wore a handmade, multi-patterned dress with a thick wool coat and a dark blue scarf over her head. She was standing next to a cart, while what looked to be her grandchildren,

and a younger woman, possibly her daughter, loaded boxes of canned foods, pieces of furniture, and clothing onto the donkey drawn cart. Her face was uncovered and as we walked by she stared at us through dark, almost hollow, eyes.

When we came to a halt, she stopped working and flashed a toothless smile. The captain turned to the translator, a frail, almost sickly looking young man who wore olive green fatigues that seemed two or three sizes too big. "Ask her where all the men are at."

He walked over to her and took off his green cap. He spoke to her quickly in Slavic, and her response caught everyone's attention. She started screaming words hysterically, her arms flailing. The children stopped and watched us in horror; the younger woman ran to the old lady's side. Finally, she dropped to the ground and held out her hands, sobbing. The translator, taken aback by her reaction, quickly walked back over to the captain.

"She says that men with guns took them. She says that she and her family have tried to stay, but they are afraid they might come back."

The captain tilted his head slightly. "What do you mean 'come back'?"

The translator looked back at the old woman, who was silent now. "There are rumors," he said. "Whole villages,

slaughtered. These men, the Serbs, they would come into town and round up all the men and boys they could find."

"What would they do with them?" asked First Sergeant Jorge.

"No one knows for sure. The woman," he nodded toward her, "she seem to think that they murdered them."

"I also heard…," I interrupted. All eyes turned toward me. "I'm sorry, Sir, to interrupt, but I also heard, from one of the ladies who do the laundry, that they would force the men to fight."

The translator pointed at me. "What he says is true. I saw it happen in my village. The Serbs would come and try to get men to join them, and those who resisted were taken away. But this has not happened for a while."

"When?" asked the captain.

"I do not know. Possibly up to six months ago."

The captain shook his head, and walked back to the men. We took about ten minutes and helped the women pack up their cart. Before we left I walked over to the kids. There were four of them who were now seated on the back of the cart. I reached into one of my pockets and gave them each some Lifesavers. They smiled and as the cart pulled away they waved. I had two young sons of my own back home

in Michigan. I had not seen them in almost nine months, and I missed them terribly.

It was the last week of February when the Russians arrived, and we could not have been more excited. Their arrival meant that we were one step closer to heading home and preparations began in earnest for the changeover of the weapons cache to the capable hands of our Russian counterparts. The day before the change of command, First Sergeant Jorge figured it would be a good idea if we did one more patrol, but I knew he was really interested in figuring out what happened to those missing men. He paced back and forth in the command tent, rubbing his hands. "I'm going to find out what happened to those fuckers," he kept saying. I, on the other hand, was not so inclined to revisit that place, though I, too, was curious about what had happened to them.

We arrived at the weapons cache late in the day, just in time for an early evening patrol with a squad from 1st platoon. First Sergeant Jorge could not hold back his enthusiasm as we walked up to the patrol and asked Lieutenant Smith if we could tag along.

"What's up, First Sergeant?" asked the young lieutenant.

“I’m back,” said First Sergeant Jorge raising his hands high above his head, “and stronger than ever.” This was a favorite term of his and it was always accompanied by a hearty slap on the back. The lieutenant rotated his shoulder as if to work out the sting from the first sergeant’s meaty hand. “Do you mind,” the first sergeant paused, hands held out in front of him pointing, “If we tag along?”

The lieutenant looked at me and I rolled my eyes. He smiled knowingly, sharing a private thought of the first sergeant and his boisterousness. “Yeah, sure. You guys are welcome to come along if you want.”

First Sergeant Jorge clasped his hands together. “Excellent.”

The patrol route took us through the same village where we had encountered the old woman, but apparently the patrol route that we had previously taken had evolved since we last came, because we marched much closer to Brcko. As we moved close to the town we noticed there were a lot more people than we had seen on previous patrols. Many were living in makeshift houses built quickly from wood and stone from the destroyed structures that littered the landscape, while some just lived in tents. In either case,

it was quite obvious that the town was too full and that the refugees had to make do with what they could.

We tried our best to stay away from the concentration of people, but the sides of the roads were flooded with cars and wagons as people just found a spot and set up. Finally, the lieutenant decided we had to turn back, so we followed an alternate route back towards the weapons cache. The first rule of patrolling is never go back the way you came, so inevitably we had to move through the muddy fields populated by the homeless.

As we made our way through we were met by throngs of children asking for candy. They pulled on our jackets and grabbed on our gear. We gave them all the food we had, but that turned out to be a big mistake since more and more children kept coming. Eventually we were surrounded and unable to move. Our interpreter yelled at them, waving his hands trying to shoo them away, but they would not go. Finally, we heard the voices of women chattering in Slavic, pushing their way through to get to us. We all felt very uneasy, and I remember my thumb applying pressure on the selector switch of my weapon, just in case I needed to move it from safe to semi. But the women posed no threat and actually helped the translator get the children away from us and sent them back to their homes. Once the children

had left we began to move again, but the women blocked our path. There were five of them all dressed in patchwork dresses, thick wool coats, and scarves. One of them, an older lady who reminded me of the one we met on the earlier patrol, began speaking, while the others stood and listened.

The lieutenant grabbed the translator by the arm. "What the hell is she saying?"

"I don't know. Something about the men…the people…a big grave." The translator shook his head and spoke to the woman, but she wouldn't listen. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him. The other women walked up and started pulling on the lieutenant as well.

We followed them out into the mud fields for about 500 meters. As we broke through the last few tents we noticed a group of people, women, children, old men, standing together. Some carried picks and shovels and were working vigorously at digging up the mud.

It was the smell that hit me first. The weather had warmed up over the past week, just enough to begin to thaw out the land. It had also rained consistently for the past three days. That day was the first day it had stopped, but the ground was a mess. Every step in the fields required extra effort as our boots would get stuck in the mud. Our

footsteps created a constant slurping sound as we trudged toward this distant objective. The whole place had had a sour smell that reminded me of the coming of spring and how everything seemed to stink like mud and shit when the snow begins to melt, but this stench was considerably different. It still had the smell of muddy decay, but an unknown scent seemed to burn my nose and make me gag. I covered my mouth with my hand in an effort not to vomit.

As we neared the people, those who were digging stopped and stepped out of the hole they had begun. The others who were watching just stepped away. The women guiding the translator stopped, pointed, and began to wail. Lieutenant Smith, the first sergeant, and I stepped forward and walked toward where they had been digging. It was then that I saw an arm, two arms, legs. They were dirty, naked, decaying. I pulled up my scarf to cover my mouth and nose, but it didn't help. We just stood there peering over the edge, staring at the voiceless mass of humanity. Their bodies were contorted, limbs lay in all directions. They all seemed linked together, naked, like some deadly orgy or a dance of death. Men, women, children, everyone; an entire village.

The lieutenant pulled me to him. "Call someone. Anyone. Tell them we've found something."

I fumbled for the radio mic that was attached to my web gear. I couldn't think straight; I couldn't look away. I pressed the receiver and tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, I just stood there staring at the bodies and feeling an overwhelming surge of guilt.

I talked to my twelve year old son, Jonathan, about Bosnia the other day, but I could not bring myself to tell him about this story. Instead we talked about the mountains and the bitter cold. I told him about patrolling, and what it was like to pull guard duty in those long Balkan nights. But Bosnia is more than just a country with an unforgiving landscape. It is a place with an unforgiving past. A place that has seen countless centuries filled with the horrors of war.

On our way home we drove by that clump of trees near the logged out wasteland and I began to remember. The sky was thick with gray, and snow covered the ground and the trees. I looked at Jonathan, young, innocent, naïve to the ways of this world, and wondered how he would react. Would he just think it was a terrible tragedy and think of all the people that lost their lives? Or would he understand the guilt that I feel, the guilt we all should feel when the innocent are flung so recklessly aside? But I don't

say a word. Instead, I smile and rub his head and try my best to forget.

Pazite Snajper!
(Beware Sniper!)

My interpreter, Mateja, wishes for the war to end. He says it has gone on long enough. I am sitting beside him in a bar in Sarajevo, smoking my last cigarette and counting up the cash in my pocket, hoping I have enough money for more. Random gunfire from an unseen assailant and the steady driving rain has driven us to this sanctuary, and although it is nice to get off my feet, I am beginning to find Mateja's complaints to be rather annoying.

"It is time for the war to end. I am sick of it." And he pounds his fist on the table rattling our coffee cups and causing the other patrons to stare. "Are you listening, Conner" he says.

I look at him and nod. "Yeah, I heard you."

"So?"

"So what?"

Mateja shakes his head. "What do you think?"

I smile and shrug. "I think I need to get more smokes. And we need to get back to work." I look down at the money in my hand. Five Marks. "Do you have any money on you? I don't think I have enough."

The Bosnian sneers and rubs his hand over his balding head. “You Americans are all the same. You only care about yourselves, not the rest of the world. Here people are dying. Right here in the streets. But you do nothing. You look at your money and think about only what you want. It sickens me.”

As I look around the room, the staring faces quickly turn away, but I can still hear them whispering. “Look, Mateja.” I press my cigarette into the ash tray, then sit up in my chair and look the man straight in the eyes. “What do you want me to say about this grand declaration of yours? Of course the war needs to end.” I tap one of my coins on the table and stare out the window at the empty street. Then I turn back to him and whisper, “And you’re wrong about me. I do care about what’s going on. That’s why I’m here.”

He doesn’t buy it. “Bullshit,” he says. “You are only here for your story.”

I shake my head. “Are you finished?” Slowly I climb out of my chair and put on my jacket. “Listen, I’m going to walk up to the shop on the corner and pick up some smokes. Besides, we’ve got to get over to the airport. I’m supposed to have something for those bastards back in

New York by the weekend and all I have is a few pages of notes scattered around my room. You coming?"

"Are you insane? People are dying out there. Just this morning a young woman was shot walking past that very same corner store. The snipers, Conner, they are ruthless. They will –"

"I know all about it, Mateja, and I know how to take care of myself. I've been around war before, and I've been here for a few months. So don't tell me –"

The Bosnian holds up his hands in defeat. "I know. I know. But please, I beg of you. The streets, you see they are empty. It is for a reason that the people do not go out. Don't needlessly risk your life over a pack of cigarettes."

I slide the chair under the table and lean toward him and smile. "But I might just die if I don't get some more."

But my humor is lost on this man who has become my partner and my guide. I start to head toward the exit, but he is quick. He moves from his chair and has me by the arm before I can touch the door. "Don't leave," he says. "Stay. I know that someone in here will sell you cigarettes. Maybe even the vendor." Then he shouts in Slavic and I know that he is asking for more smokes. And

the people look at me with sad pathetic stares and for a moment I am embarrassed and I really want to leave. But then people are holding up cigarettes - whole packs even. Mateja pulls me by the arm back toward my seat. “See,” he says. “They will sell you cigarettes. Cheap, too.”

*

“The woman who was killed today, they say she was trying to buy some bread for her two little children.” Mateja is nursing a glass of vodka. When he drinks he can only talk about the tragedies of this place. “Sarajevo is an unforgiving city, my friend.” And he takes a sip from his glass.

I just nod and arrange my newly acquired smokes. I was able to buy a full pack of Primas, four Vatras, and even two Camels for only three Marks. Carefully, I line them up on the table in front of me. I decide to smoke the Vatras first. They are a cheap Ukrainian brand and they taste a little stale, but the filters are short, so they last a little longer. The Camels will be saved for later and I put the Primas, which are the easiest and cheapest to get, in my jacket pocket. “I wish I had some Marlboro Reds,” I say, lamenting the prospect of being stuck with

poorly made European brands for at least the next few weeks.

Mateja downs the rest of his drink and places the glass upside down in front of him. His breath smells sour as he leans across the table near my face. “Will you stop worrying about your fucking cigarettes for one minute and listen to what I have to say? A woman died today. Does that mean nothing to you?”

For a moment I say nothing; I just light my cigarette and take a long hard drag. The soft murmur of the other patrons and the occasional clink of silverware is the only thing that interrupts the silence between us. Outside a steady rain falls onto the empty city street and I stare through the window searching for signs of life.

“Well?” says Mateja, interrupting my trance.

“Well what?” I say. “Women die here everyday, so why is this one any different?”

“What do you mean – different? They are all different. I am talking about people. A person. An innocent person was shot on the street, during the day, in the rain.” He pounds his fist on the table rattling our glasses and scattering my cigarettes, sending two of them to the floor.

“Calm down,” I say and I push my chair back and kneel on the floor to retrieve them. One has rolled toward a table close by, so I crawl over to it and pick it up. At the table are two men, probably in their mid-forties, staring down at me like I am some pathetic dog.

I flash a brief smile. “Sorry,” I say. “Dropped my smokes.”

The two men glance at each other, shrug, then continue on as if I were just a small nuisance in their daily routine.

At the table, Mateja has poured himself another glass of vodka. “Will you take it easy?” I say. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“You are embarrassing yourself,” he says in disgust. “All of you Americans are. You act as if you are kings of the world. Your talk is tough, but there is no action. Where is America now, eh? Where is your president, Clinton, and all of his talk of peace and prosperity? Doing nothing, that’s where he is. Sitting in front of his television set like every other American, that’s where he is.”

His eyes are lit with hate and he empties his vodka in one quick swallow, than places the glass upside down on the table again. For a moment he stares, daring me to say

something back, to defend the actions of my country, my people, my president. But I don't, I just stare back at him and take a long drag from my cigarette. And I wait for his next move.

*

Outside, there is movement on the street. A UN armored vehicle is making its way down the road. The loud rumble of its engines, the large wheels navigating over the worn paved road, shakes the tables. Glasses rattle as the walls vibrate with the quaking of the building. It comes to a halt just across the street from the café. Behind the vehicle stand five figures. Four males and a female. They are all wearing an assortment of military camouflage and civilian clothing. They all are carrying guns. Three of the men enter a nearby building, its walls riddled with bullet holes and torn on the right side from where an antitank missile had penetrated it. It used to be an apartment building.

Mateja has finished another glass and is getting up on his feet. He steadies himself with his chair, then, with obvious effort, he maneuvers himself closer to the window.

“Sit down, you drunken fool,” says the vendor, who has posted himself near the door to observe the activity in the street.

Mateja waves him off, then puts his face up to the glass. “They are searching for the sniper.” He turns and looks back at me. “Maybe the road will be clear soon.”

I shrug my shoulders and play with my Zippo, clicking open the lighter cap with a flick of my fingers.

Irritated, he turns his attention back to the street. The female soldier has taken up a position behind the armored vehicle. She is kneeling, her weapon held to her cheek, eyes staring down the scope. Slowly she moves, searching from building to building. Then she says something to the armed man who has taken position behind a wall a few meters in front of her.

“I wish I knew what they were saying,” says Mateja.

“And I wish you would get away from the window,” said the vendor. “You are going to get yourself killed.”

Mateja holds his hands up in mocking surrender. “Okay, okay,” he says as he returns to his seat.

I pour my friend another glass of vodka and push it toward him.

He smiles, raises the glass in salute, then downs it quickly and places the glass upside down on the table.

“Thank you, Conner. I needed that.” He looks back toward the window. “Everything is so frustrating. It is always the same thing. A sniper kills, the city defenders hunt, and more people die. Even when they are able to get one, it seems as if there are hundreds more to take their place.” He turns back to me and rubs his balding head. “If only the army could break out and clear the hills. If only the United Nations or the United States would intervene with their jets. If only…”

I shake my head. “Look, it could be worse. At least the shelling has stopped. The UN made sure of that.”

“Yes, but that has not put an end to the war. The snipers, they still occupy the hills. Every day Serbian troops attack various places around the city. The killing is continuing.” He pours himself another drink, then asks, “And what is anyone doing about it?”

I glance around at the other patrons, but their eyes are either fixed on the events outside the window or the drinks in front of them.

“Nothing. That is what they are doing. The people in the city suffer and the world does nothing. If it were not for the tunnel, the city would not survive. That is the only way to get supplies, the only way for relief, the only

way the people can arm and defend themselves. No one else will defend us."

"Take a look outside, Mateja. What does that vehicle outside say? What are those black letters printed in bold on that white armor?"

"A few UN peacekeepers haven't changed a thing, my friend, and you know it. All they do is serve to remind us that the outside is aware of our situation and will do nothing to help us. Remember that young boy that we talked to near the market the other day, the one who was looking for relatives in the city? He said he was from Srebrenica."

The boy had told us how the Serbs had come to his village and taken the men away and killed them. He said he barely escaped.

"And who was there protecting them?" He points at the armored vehicle and sneers. "The UN has done us few favors, Conner."

As Mateja drinks from his glass, I turn my attention outside and watch the steady rain fall. The woman is still kneeling, her body leaning on the wheel of the UN vehicle. And I know that Mateja is right.

*

We have been here for hours and I'm running out of smokes again. I had pulled out my notepad and tried to detail the events outside, but the lack of action and Mateja's seemingly uncontrollable desire to advise me on what to write compelled me to put it away. I pull out one of my camels, light it, and toss my Zippo onto the table. Mateja is at the window again. He is waving his hands and arms about in intricate motions trying to capture the attention of the woman soldier. If she sees him, though, she doesn't show it. Instead she looks down her scope for a moment, then talks to the man a few meters to her front.

"I think they spotted him." Mateja has his face pressed up against the window. "I think he is in that apartment building there on the corner. You see it?" he leans back, face still against the glass, and points. "That one there. You see?" As he turns back to me his eyes narrow, waiting for an answer.

"Yeah, I know the one you're talking about."

"You know," he said, "You're stuck in here, too. You could at least feign some sort of interest."

"Yeah, I could." I tap my cigarette and watch as the ashes fall into the tray. "You're right. I could get up, walk to the window, smash my face up against it, and

present a perfect target for that Serb out there. Just because we're inside doesn't mean that he can't hit you."

Mateja turns and looks at the glass, then leans against it and peers outside.

"That sniper," I said, "may be in that building and he may not. But I guarantee you one thing, if he sees you in that window, and don't think he can't, he will shoot you." I take another drag from my cigarette. "Right in your head."

The Bosnian jumps away from the glass and backs toward our table. Quiet laughter fills the café. The vendor who is still near the door says, "That is what I am trying to tell him. But he does not listen. You can get yourself killed, you fool. You could get us all killed."

I pour two glasses of vodka and slide one over to my friend. "To your health," I say and I swallow the dry alcohol and place the glass upside down on the table. Mateja looks at me for a moment. His hand is shaking as he holds the glass. Then, slowly he drinks it down and places his glass on the table in the same fashion.

"Why must you frighten me, Conner?" He pours himself another glass, spilling some of the contents onto the table.

I shake my head and look out the window. The woman has moved toward the front of the vehicle and looks as if she is preparing to fire. For a moment, the only sound is the soft beating of the rain, but the crackle of rifle fire causes us both to jump. There is a metallic clang as a round ricochets off the armor of the UN vehicle. The woman is yelling something and crawling on all fours toward her original position.

"I think they found the sniper," I say.

Mateja is up on his feet, but will not go near the window. "Did the woman get hit?"

She has finally made it to the rear wheel and she is leaning her back against it. Her legs are stretched out in front of her and her rifle lies on her lap. Her chest rises and falls in a quick rhythm. I can hear her voice as she screams to her comrades.

"I don't think so," I say, but I really can't tell.

Mateja runs to the door, but the vendor stands in his way, both arms raised. "Get out of my way," shouts Mateja. "She may need help." The old man yells back at him in Slavic and I get to my feet thinking I may have to intervene, but Mateja pushes him aside and leans up against the door.

“Be careful,” I say, “You’re too important to me to die.”

The Bosnian nudges open the door. He yells something to the woman, but I do not understand. She yells back and waves at him to go back inside. But Mateja is persistent and continues to shout to her. Finally, when she raises her rifle and points it at him, he quickly closes the door.

“She is all right,” he says, nodding quickly.

“That was dangerous.” I return to my chair and pat my breast pocket searching for my last cigarette.

Mateja sits down and leans across the table toward me. “What was that you said?”

“When?”

“Before I walked outside.”

I place the Camel between my lips and shrug my shoulders.

“I can’t die because I am too important to you? Is that it?”

I try to answer but he cuts me off.

“What is it with you Americans? You only care about yourselves. What about Mateja? Don’t you care about me?” He motions to the people in the bar. “Don’t you care about them?” He points outside. “That woman, out there fighting, don’t you care what happens to her?”

“Wait,” I say, “I didn’t mean it –”

“Yes you did. That is exactly what you mean. My only importance is my use to you.”

“Hold on a sec –”

“No, I will not. You see, my friend,” he says that last phrase with obvious strain, “you are just like your countrymen. That is why they do not help us. That is why we are here suffering and dying. No one will help because we are no use to them. That is why this war carries on.”

I shake my head and place my cigarette on the table. “Okay,” I say, “I’ve heard enough. As far as our relationship goes, we are friends. I only said that to get your goat.”

“Get my goat? What does that mean?”

I shake my head. “You know, pull your chain. Fuck with you. A joke to annoy you. It doesn’t matter. What matters is, you are my friend and of course I want you to be safe. I want everyone to be safe. You’re saying that I am indifferent but you know that’s not true. I just understand that shit like this happens all the time and there is really nothing we can do but see it for what it is and tell the truth. You think this place is any different from Africa, the Middle-East? You didn’t see the West jumping through hoops to help them out, did you? Of course

not. That took time. And what's more important, it took something of importance to get countries like the US to react."

For a moment I pause and light my cigarette. The café is silent; all eyes seem to be on me. "You are right though about one thing, Mateja. Those big countries, they are definitely ignoring this place. Sarajevo may be a part of Europe, but it really has nothing of value to offer. Sure it is a wonderful city, or was, but those big countries aren't going to get involved unless they get something in return. Which in some cases is just good press and a positive image in the world. But just remember, most of the world sees this on the TV and all they see is a Bosnian problem, a problem that is up to Bosnians to solve."

Mateja is silent. His head is bowed as he stares into his empty glass. I take a drag and continue. "All day we have sat here and I have listened. And the only thing that has come out of your mouth is blame. It's America's fault the war continues. It's America's fault that people die. That's bullshit. I'm not going to defend America. But the people of this country are the ones that are fighting. Serbs, Croats, Muslims, everyone is to blame for the killing and only they can stop it. People are caught up in

this war and it is a tragedy that both you and I have seen first-hand, but all we can do is watch and report. Maybe one day that will convince people to act. But that is for them to decide. As for me, though, I'm sick of it. I'm tired of all of this just as much as you are. But lucky for me, I can leave whenever I want."

Mateja looks up at me for a moment and stares deep into my eyes. "What are you saying?" he asks, but I know he knows the answer.

The rain has stopped. I press my cigarette into the ash tray and walk to the window. The silence is interrupted by three bursts of rifle fire that rattle the glass. A voice calls and the woman climbs to her feet.

*

"The woman, her name is Zlata, she says that they had been hunting that Serb sniper for almost two weeks." Mateja runs his hands through his thinning hair and leans up against the UN vehicle. It is early evening and it is finally safe. Across the street, two buildings past the café, five soldiers with blue helmets carry the body of the sniper out of the building and lay him on the ground. "She says he is responsible for the deaths of at least twelve people."

I jot the information quickly onto a notepad then ask, “Is the woman, Zlata, okay?” There is a small dent from where the round struck the UN vehicle. The paint was chipped off. Below it, small traces of blood were splattered along the dull white surface.

“She is fine, but lucky. The bullet was close, but only grazed her.”

Zlata is sitting on the side of the road; a UN medic was patching up her forehead. For a moment, she looks at me. At first I want to ask her questions, get something from her that is worth submitting to my editors, but as I approach her and smile, she does not smile back. Her eyes are hollow; her face gray and withdrawn. She was probably beautiful once, but years of conflict have worn her down - now she seemed a ghost.

I place my notepad back in my jacket and turn to walk away, but her voice, raspy yet soft, gets my attention.

“You are an American, yes? A journalist?”

I nod my head.

Slowly, using her rifle for leverage, she struggles to her feet. The medic tries to help her but she pushes him away, muttering something in Slavic. Her hand moves to her forehead and she touches the wound, then checks her fingers

for blood. There is none. “May I ask you a question, American journalist?”

Again, I nod, but I can hear the anger in her voice, the disgust. And when her eyes again turn toward me I recoil a little.

“Tell me,” she says, “why has the world forgotten us?”

I turn to Mateja, but he shakes his head slightly and looks away. For a moment it seems as if the world around us has become silent and her question hangs poised between us like a bullet frozen in mid-flight. I want to lie. I want to tell her it will all end soon. I want to give her hope – but I can’t. Instead, I look at the ground and shake my head. “I don’t know.”

I can feel her staring at me, but she does not say a word. Finally, she slings her rifle over her shoulder and walks away.

“Come, my friend,” says Mateja, “we must get to the airport.”

He places his hand on my shoulder and tries to pull me along, but I stand fast. The rain has stopped, but the gray sky still lingers. Around me people begin to take to the streets once more. The city blocks that were deserted only a few minutes before, seemed to come to life as if nothing had happened. This was Sarajevo, where street

signs proclaim ‘Pazite Snajper!’, but the world fails to recognize any more than that.

“I’m sorry about what I said earlier, Mateja,” but he only smiles and motions for me to follow.

Along the streets the people walk; each of them has stories to tell. I do my best to listen.

Betrayal

The night the killing started I still felt ignorant of the situation. I had been teaching Composition and Rhetoric at the St. André Primary and Middle School in Kigali for about eight months to children of white foreign diplomats and the rich aristocracy of the local population. I knew little of the history or the politics of Rwanda, but it was obvious after only a few short weeks that there was a problem. Tribal rivalry. That was the way the school's head administrator, Pierre Fouchard, explained it to me. "Hutus and Tutsis, James. Nothing," he said, "that is of concern to us."

And that was that.

Hutus and Tutsis. Apparently my class had both in almost equal number, but the only way I knew was by asking. The difference, I was told, could actually be seen in their physical features. Tutsis tended to be of lighter complexion and were usually taller. The Hutus were as black as charcoal.

At first I failed to see the difference. They were all African, so in a sense, they all seemed the same, but after a while I began to place names with faces and faces with ethnicity, then these differences became all the more

clearer. However, that did little to explain the problem. As students, as people, they were the same as any other children I had encountered during my ten years of teaching. They all desired attention from both adults and their peers. All had the eagerness to learn in their own way. Of course there were subtle differences between individuals, and their surroundings afforded a much different perspective than the European children I had been used to teaching, but all in all, children were children regardless of their tribal ancestry.

"The problem," said Mr. Owen, the History and Cultural Studies teacher, "is imperialism. This was once a colony of Belgium and it was the Belgians who favored the Tutsis and left them in charge when Belgium interests were abandoned. Now that the Hutu are in charge… Well it is obvious that some Hutu have no problem displaying their desires."

Nowhere was this apparent more than on the streets of the capital, Kigali. Tension seemed to ooze from every crack in the street and resonate from every building. The people themselves were soaked in it like the perspiration that clung to their bodies due to the hot equatorial heat. Here the line between Hutu and Tutsi was very distinct and made all the more clearer in the way they conducted

themselves. The Hutu, especially the men of the Interahamwe or militia, would congregate on the street corners in large groups. These were mostly poor jobless men, unwilling to conform to a united Rwanda and afraid of the power wielded by the Western whites that owned or sponsored all of the major business. Most of them were usually clad in bright multicolored pattern shirts and bandannas, colors representing the Hutu tribe, and they wore them with pride, careful to make them visible to any Tutsi that would walk by.

From beyond these groups, on radios and echoed in their voices, came the propaganda of Radio Rwanda, which called for the "total annihilation of the Tutsi cockroaches" and proclaimed that "the moment was almost upon them." The Interahamwe soaked up these words like a drug, enraging them, sending them into a near violent frenzy. At times they would take to the streets and like a brightly colored parade they would protest the moderate government's stance on peace and unification. They would bring their wives and their children and they would sing and shout. They would hold signs of protest high above their heads and wave them about. Some would even carry machetes. It was very troubling for me to see a student of mine, a bright-eyed and gifted young lad, carrying a sign

that screamed, KILL THE COCKROACHES, in dark blood colored letters.

In contrast, the Tutsi's did their best to blend in with the faces of their neighbors. Often the subject of ridicule or violence, most would go about their business as quickly as possible or, when the Interahamwe took to the streets, they would avoid things all together. For the average Tutsi, life was tending to grow more difficult. Each passing day they feared their neighbors more and more, and as the Interahamwe grew more belligerent it seemed that hostilities were not too far away.

The day the President's plane was shot out of the sky, I had to stop a fight. The children were taking a short recess out in the school yard after lunch and most of the boys were occupying themselves on the football pitch. As a fan of the game I always posted myself on a bench to watch the proceedings, but did my best to avoid any sort of involvement for fear that they would feel I had favorites. Instead, I would act as if I were reading a book and feign disinterest though all my concentration was focused on the game.

On this particular day, the day the President was murdered, the match seemed more competitive than ever. The

teams were split like they usually were with the whites and a few of the Tutsi boys on one side and the Africans, mostly Hutu, on the other. At first I objected to this set up and told the boys that it was insensitive to segregate each other in that manner, but it was calmly explained to me by Emile, the apparent leader of the Hutu team, that they all "preferred it this way" and had nothing to do with what I perceived as segregation or racism. Satisfied with his answer and surprised at his clarity, I decided not to interfere and let them compose the teams as they wished.

During the early days of the school year it seemed that the teams were definitely uneven. Our recess was merely a half hour, but during that span the white team would usually overwhelm them. But as the school year continued, the African team began to close the gap and was finally able to produce the occasional victory. On this day the game was extremely close. Neither team had been able to score and sensing that the game was coming to a close, both teams began to push themselves as hard as they could in order to achieve a victorious end. Finally, just as I was standing to call the children inside, one of the Tutsi boys on the white team broke free with the ball and was going one on one with the goalkeeper. Excited about the opportunity to see a quality goal, I hesitated from

reconvening the students and watched as the scene played out.

The boy, George, was the shortest in the class. He played with heart, but lacked obvious ability, so he rarely touched the ball. Such a chance as this was very rare. As he dribbled into the box, it seemed obvious that he was going to get the better of the keeper. So certain was I that he was going to score, I failed to notice the opposing player that was nipping at his heels. And just as the boy went to shoot he was hit from behind by a violent sliding tackle that sent him tumbling face first into ground. Instantly, the boys from both sides were at each other.

"Calm down, lads," I yelled as I ran from the bench to intervene, but only the white boys took a step back. As I neared, I noticed that the only boys who were fighting, though, were George and his assailant, an energetic and occasionally unruly Hutu named Mwuwara. The other boys, both Tutsi and Hutu alike, were trying to separate them. When I finally reached the players, the fight was over and both combatants were standing a few feet from each other, their teammates holding them back.

"He's a cheat," shouted George.

I raised my hand toward the young Tutsi, whose face was stained from sliding on the grass and his nose and lips

were bleeding. “I saw the whole thing, George.” Then I tuned to Mwuwara. “What were you thinking, lad? Why would you do such a thing?”

Mwuwara bowed his head and was silent for a moment, then looked up at George and said, “I did not want that cockroach to score.”

With that, the Tutsi boys began shouting and rushed toward their offender. Quickly, I moved between them and raised my hands. “Enough,” I shouted. “You boys stand down.” Then I was in Mwuwara’s face. “How dare you say that to your classmate? This is not like you at all. Why would you say such a thing?” I knelt down in front of him and grabbed his shoulders. He stood there silent; his fists clenched. “Speak,” I shouted.

“My father says that the time is coming that all of the cockroaches will die. He says they are evil and should not be allowed to have success.”

Again, the Tutsi boys shouted, but a wave of my hand silenced them.

“This Tutsi, this boy,” I pointed at George. “He is your classmate. He is a human being.”

“Yes,” spoke a voice behind Mwuwara. It was Emile. “The teacher. He is right. George is our friend, Mwuwara. You had no right to do what you did.”

I nodded at Emile, who held his head high and smiled, then turned back to Mwuwara. “Do you believe those things that your father said?”

The boy looked at the ground. “I do not know, Sir,” he mumbled.

Slowly I stood up and looked down on him in disgust. “It is a pathetic thing, when people are swayed by such hateful words. Your father is wrong and I hope you will grow to understand that.” With that said, I turned and walked away. The others, I could feel them following me, but when I looked back I saw that Mwuwara was standing in the same spot. “Are you coming, lad?” I asked. But he did not reply. He just stood there for a moment his hands clenched into fists.

By now, the others had stopped and were lined up next to me, waiting to see what I would do. Then the young Hutu broke his silence. “It is you who is wrong, white man. The day is coming and all of you will pay; the cockroaches and the white man. My father said so and he does not tell a lie.” Then he turned and ran.

At first I felt compelled to follow, but after only a few steps, I realized that any chase would be futile. I had forty-five other students to mind after; I couldn’t

just leave them. So I turned on my heels and ushered the students back to class.

As we returned to the building I happened upon the white players who had walked away from the confrontation on the pitch. “Why did you boys walk away?” I asked. “Your teammate was fouled, yet you didn’t stand up for him.”

Sensing my anger, the boys all looked away. That is, all except Edmund, the son of the British ambassador. He looked me right in the eye. “We let the savages to their own devices,” he said with a sneer. “They are not our concern.” Then the boys turned and walked into class leaving me to ponder the situation at the classroom door. Little did I know at that time, but a few hours later Mwuwara and Edmunds hateful words would haunt us all.

The death of Rwanda’s president at the hands of unknown assailants caused an explosive chain reaction. Upon returning from signing a peace accord that would allow dual control of the government by both the Hutu and Tutsi clans, the president’s plane was shot from the sky. As the aircraft fell in a spiraling trail of smoke so to did the unfortunate country spiral into chaos.

Our class became aware of this event about an hour after the incident on the football pitch. I was sitting at

my desk still trying to comprehend what had transpired between my students, while the students sat at theirs trying to comprehend Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant." It was Pierre who broke the news. He knocked softly upon the door and motioned to me through the window to meet with him in the hallway.

"A terrible tragedy has befallen us," he said. "I shall be closing the school for the rest of the day."

I shook my head. "Close the school? What - "

"I will tell you soon, my friend," said Pierre. "Please, dismiss your class, and then reconvene with the rest of the teachers in the lounge." Then he was off down the hall to interrupt another class and notify another teacher.

For a moment I stood outside my classroom door and looked in on my students. If I knew that this would be the last time that I would see most of them, I probably would have said a few words. Instead I opened the door and sent them home for the rest of the day.

Later, after the crowded halls were devoid of the shouting and merriment of young voices that had been set free from their desk filled cells, Pierre informed the other teachers of St. Andre's of the events that had

transpired near the airport and the delicate situation it had produced.

"The identity of the culprits," Pierre said, "is as of yet, unknown. However, accusations are being cast at many different groups like the Tutsi rebels and even the Americans. We are now placed in a very awkward position and I do not know how this will finish."

For the majority of the teachers, this knowledge was insufficient and we demanded to know more. Unfortunately, Pierre did not have the answers.

"A question has been asked as to whether we, or any other Westerner, are in any danger. This, I do not know. I have, however, been informed by the UN that the school should remain closed until they deem it safe to reopen. I suggest," he said despite our verbal protests, "that you all return to your homes."

For many of us, that was not far. The school was located and affiliated with the Catholic Church of Saint Andre, which was located next door, and adjacent to the church was a building complex that housed single teachers and members of the clergy. That night, finding it difficult to sleep, many of us sat on our balconies listening to the screams and gunfire that echoed around the

city and wondered when or if those sounds were ever going to die out.

In the late afternoon of the following day, UN troops, approximately twenty-five Belgian Paras, arrived outside our building. By then the school, the church, and the surrounding grounds swarmed with hundreds of Tutsis and moderate Hutus seeking refuge from the slaughter.

The first of them began arriving in the early morning hours when the sun had just started to peak over the horizon. I had drifted off in my lawn chair on the balcony and the sound of voices and crying from outside the church woke me from my restless slumber. At first, there were only a few - mostly students of the school and their families - but as the day wore on, they came in throngs. They begged to take shelter in the school and the church, afraid of the death that followed them, praying for the whites to provide them a safe haven. They resonated a fear that was contagious, and I suddenly felt the urge to escape and find a refuge of my own.

Most of us, the teachers that is, didn't know what to do or how to respond; nothing could have prepared us for such an affair. And without the guidance of Pierre, who we never saw again, it was clear that our group had no real

direction. But then the priest and nuns took control of the situation by allowing the people in to pray and enlisting our help in organizing the people and settling them in our classrooms. “Find those,” said Father Henri, “that are in your classes, and bring them there. Their families will follow.” So we did.

It wasn’t difficult for me to accomplish the task. George and his family were one of the first to arrive and I had had them come into my house to wait. When Father Henri gave us the instructions, I just passed them on to George, who in turn searched for his classmates in the crowd. In no time, my classroom was completely occupied.

We all knew what was happening; we had heard the calls for blood on the radio late into the night. It was admittedly surprising to me, though, that the Interahamwe was not indiscriminate in their killings since the refugees comprised of many Hutus and not just Tutsi. This would be later confirmed not only by the assassination of the Hutu prime minister at the hands of the military, but also by the savage murder of my student Emile and his family.

Throughout the day, it was impossible to avoid hearing the horror stories passed along by the refugees. However, the shear gruesome nature of the atrocities was avoided in conversation. That is until I caught up with Mr. Owen, who

finally arrived shortly after the noon hour. His tearful account of his journey across the city to the school shed light on what had now seemed like political unrest and sent a wave of panic throughout the entire faculty.

Mr. Owen and his wife and daughter lived a few miles away in the upscale section of Kigali where many white business men owned houses. "We heard the gunfire early in the evening," said Mr. Owen, "and it caused quite a stir throughout the neighborhood. Unsure of what to do, I phoned the British consulate and calmly asked them if they knew what was transpiring within the city. Their response was brief and they merely mentioned that the Rwandan military was taking care of a problem and that we should stay in our house. So that is what we did. But then…." He pulled his daughter close to him and took hold of his wife's hand. "But then around three in the morning, the gunfire and the screams were moving closer. Outside, I saw many of our neighbors packing up their things, so I told Joan to begin doing the same. Finally, when it seemed like we could stay no longer, we loaded up the car with what little we could carry and drove away."

By now the daughter was in tears, so Mr. Owen motioned to his wife to take her away. I pointed her to my

apartment and told them to make themselves comfortable, then I asked Mr. Owen to continue.

"As we drove out of our housing estate, I really wasn't sure where to go. My first thought, of course, was here, but I wondered if anyone would still be around. Then I decided it would be best to go to the consulate's office or the UN building. This, however, turned out to be quite a chore.

"Every street has a roadblock and the Rwandan military is out in force. Every time we approached one, we were forced to stop. Then the soldiers would redirect us in the opposite direction. In short order, we were driving around in circles. Finally, after conceding that there was no possibility of getting through to the consulate and fearing the Interahamwe that are roaming the streets, we came here."

Then he paused for a moment and looked away. The halls were filled with refugees, many sitting in groups, huddled together, sharing what food they had. I watched as he looked around at all the people, his eyes welling up with tears as he seemed to focus on their faces. Then he covered his face with both hands and slumped over.

“Come, Mr. Owen,” I said. “You have been through an ordeal. You must get off your feet. Perhaps a glass of wine or - .”

“Don’t you get it, you fool?” he said. His face was blotched red, his eyes bloodshot, and he grabbed me by my arms and shook me. “They are killing everyone. Do you understand? But not just killing them; torturing them too. We saw them, James. We saw them shooting people. Hacking them with machetes. It is a slaughter. We, my wife and daughter and I, watched as men from the Interahamwe, those murderous dogs, pulled a family from their house. They forced the man on his knees and made him watch as they raped and tortured his wife and daughters. Then they shot him in the head and hacked the bodies to pieces.”

Then he softened his grip and took a step back. I did not know what to say, so I stared at him and watch his red skin turned white. “They’re coming,” he whispered. “They’re coming this way, James, and there is nothing that can stop them. They’re coming and all of these people,” he motioned at the refugees, “are going to die.” And with that he turned and walked after his family.

For a moment I just stood there, the sound of his voice reverberated in my head. We were going to need some

help, some sort of protection, but in the chaos of the city, I knew it would be impossible to find.

When the Belgian soldiers appeared it seemed as if all of our prayers had been answered. A collective sigh of relief seemed to rise up from the school and the church, but it didn't take long for the thankful mood to sour. "We are not here to protect these Africans," said the Belgian officer. "Our purpose is only to round up all Westerners and have them ready to be transported to the airport."

This did not sit well with any of us and we made him quite clear of that. Father Henri, who had become our spokesperson in the absence of Pierre, said it best. "We will not leave if that means the lives of these people will be in jeopardy." Many of us nodded in agreement, but it was clear that the captain was going to have none of it. After a short, but rather thunderous argument, Father Henri finally conceded, but not without the captain agreeing to a few of his demands.

Since the convoy that was going to take us to the airport was not going to arrive for some time, the soldiers allowed us to stay among the refugees. "That way," said the old priest, "we may avoid causing a fuss among our

friends." So as we sat in our classrooms, the Belgians with their camouflage uniforms with blue UN patches, red berets, and guns, posted themselves around the perimeter of the buildings and courtyards. This seemed to calm nerves and ease the tension among us all, and the night moved by uneventful despite the screams and gunfire that continued to echo across the city.

It had only been daylight for an hour when the trucks finally arrived the following morning. Their appearance lowered the anxiety of most of my peers, but as I looked over at Father Henri, who in turn looked at me, I knew that for some of us boarding the trucks may be the most difficult thing we had ever done in our lives.

Though the trucks signaled the end to our ordeal, the news that the drivers carried signaled a beginning of a new one for the refugees that we would be leaving behind. After conversing with the drivers for a few moments, the Belgian Captain pulled Father Henri, Mr. Owen, and myself over to the side and delivered the horrifying news.

"Apparently," said the captain, "the convoy was followed. Members of the Interahamwe and the Rwandan military must have spotted them because a large force is heading this way."

The old priest was flustered. “Well, Sir, you must do something. We cannot leave all of these people to a torturous fate.”

The captain shook his head. “This is impossible. It is not my orders. And besides we have no room.”

“For God sake, Man, we can’t just abandon them,” said Mr. Owen.

The captain shot a glare at him, but hesitated before speaking. “I am quite sorry, Sir, but orders are orders. You will do well to attend to your colleagues and have them board the trucks immediately. I do not intend to be here when the Interahamwe arrive. It is against our mandate to confront them.”

“But -,” said Father Henri.

“Enough,” shouted the Belgian officer. “There is no time, old man. Do as you are told.”

Slowly Mr. Owen and the old priest turned and walked away, but I stood there, my fists clenched and my blood boiling. I wanted to jump at him, to rip the UN badge from his sleeve, to pound him with my fists. I wanted to kill this man, but I couldn’t move; I was frozen to the ground.

“Sir,” he said. “I suggest you join your friends.”

But I did not move. Finally, as he shook his head and turned to walk away, I mustered the energy to speak. “This

is wrong," I said. "You are wrong to do this. Don't you have any compassion? Don't you have a soul? Aren't you even going to warn them?"

For a moment he paused, his back turned to me, but then he spun on his heels and walked up to me real close. His hot breath beat heavily on my face. I could smell his sweat, his breakfast, his hatred, his disgust, his fear. "These savages," he said, "are not my fucking concern. And I do not care what happens to these fucking monkeys. My orders are clear and I am going to follow them. So either you abandon your monkey friends, or you can stay here and die with them." Then, he was gone.

It didn't take long for us to load the trucks. With the Belgian soldiers, weapons at the ready, ushering us along, it was hard to tell what their role really was. Meanwhile, the refugees, our African friends, had crowded around the vehicles, their pleas falling on the soldiers' deaf ears. For the teachers of St. Andre's Primary and Middle School, it seemed easy for them to load up. They simply followed the instructions the soldiers gave them and took their seats in an orderly fashion. The nuns, led by Father Henri, were a much more difficult chore for our supposed saviors. Many of the nuns held fast to the children, screaming and wailing, refusing to let go. And

Father Henri, he surrounded himself with his loyal flock and prayed loudly, his arms held out high at his side. Finally, after the captain had had enough, he ordered his men to put them on the truck “by any means necessary.” I watched the tragic scene develop as many of the nuns were ripped from the crowd and literally thrown into the vehicles. Father Henri, angered by the ill treatment of his charges, almost came to blows with the soldiers, but was finally subdued as the soldiers pointed their weapons at the crowd.

As the truck engines rumbled, I found that I was the last of us to climb aboard, but as I grabbed hold of the rails to pull myself up I hesitated. There, down the street not more than one hundred meters, were men from the Interahamwe coming toward us. They held their weapons – rifles, machine guns, machetes – high above their heads. Their shouts echoed off the walls of buildings and shook my very core. Behind them, traveling slowly down the road in jeeps and pick-ups were Rwandan soldiers.

I was not the only one to notice as the entire complex erupted in a panic. The refugees began to scatter, most running into the buildings for shelter, but some tried to climb aboard the trucks. The Belgian Captain screamed orders to his men, motioning for them to push the crowd

back and to load up as quickly as possible, but it seemed an impossible feat. The soldiers grabbed and punched at the refugees, pulling them off the trucks and throwing them to the ground. Some used there rifles and many felt the butt-stock as it smashed into their faces and limbs. But the refugees kept coming. It was obvious that they were more afraid of the Interahamwe then they were of the whites.

That, however, was soon to change as the Belgian Captain ordered his men to fire. The soldiers hesitated, but I did not. I ran as fast as I could, my hands held up shouting for them to stop. When the Captain saw that his men would not fire, he pulled his pistol from his holster and pointed at the unruly mob. I tried to stop him, I reached out to grab his arm, but it was too late. The bullet worked its deadly magic quickly. It pierced the head of a nearby man splashing blood upon those who stood behind him. Then all became silent.

All eyes seemed to be on the captain. The soldiers, weapons raised toward the crowd, seemed to shake with fear and anticipation. The refugees looked dumbfounded.

"What have you done?" I whispered.

The captain did not move. He continued to aim his pistol at the crowd and for a moment it looked as if he

intended to fire again, but then he slowly began to lower it.

"What have you done?" I repeated, this time a little louder.

He turned and looked at me for a moment and then replied, "Something that I should have done a long time ago."

Something inside me seemed to shatter with those words. It was as if everything I wanted to believe in was suddenly meaningless. I believe he saw it in my eyes. He knew what I intended to do. Why else would he have raised his pistol to my face? "I believe, Sir, that it is time for us to depart," he said. "Please board the nearest vehicle so we may leave."

I know it was shameful, but I complied with his demand. Within moments our convoy slowly pulled away. From the back of the truck I could see the refugees as they stood silent, watching us leave. No longer did they panic, as it seemed they almost accepted their fate, but on their faces I could see the looks of betrayal and I couldn't help but feel like Judas and yearn for death.

As we drove by the oncoming hoard, they shouted and hurled obscenities at us. Many aimed their weapons, threatening to fire. Then, after we had passed, they began

to run toward their prey. I could hear the screaming and the gunfire even after the scene fell out of view.

The Terp

His real name was Abbas Bassim, but we called him Neo, on account of his slicked-back black hair and dark Ray-Ban sunglasses that he wore both day and night. He was our company's interpreter, attached to us by some liaison at headquarters who insisted that we have someone to assist us on our patrols around the city. Of course we needed him – there was no denying how many times we fucked things up with the locals because of a lack in communication – but at first most of us resented having this Hadji accompany us around the streets we had come to know real well.

For the first few weeks Neo was very quiet and everyone basically ignored him. Even our platoon leader, Lieutenant Clarke, was reluctant to speak with him unless it was necessary. When we were at the base, the guys would ridicule him for the way he dressed or make fun of the way he talked. Some of the guys would offer him beer, knowing he would not accept, then call him a pussy because he didn't drink. Specialist Thomas took particular pleasure in trying to get Neo to talk about sex. "You fuck your wife last night?" he would ask as soon as Neo entered the room. The question, of course, made Neo's face turn shades of red, but he learned not to answer. The first time

Thomas asked, Neo told him that it was none of his business what he did with his wife and that Thomas should not ask those things. But when Thomas laughed and offered to fuck his wife for him, the two almost came to blows. Thomas was quick to receive a reprimand from his squad leader all the way up the chain of command, but that never stopped him. In fact, Thomas' abuse became more vulgar and more frequent, but to his credit, Neo absorbed it all without a word.

Besides Thomas, though, most of the platoon just kept their distance and Neo would spend most of his time sitting in a chair in the corner of the Platoon CP waiting to be of some use. The Platoon Sergeant, the LT, and the squad leaders would come in and out, pouring over maps, planning patrols, filling out paperwork, or just shooting the shit, and there would be Neo sitting in silence. At first I got a kick out of it, watching him just sit there with his hands folded and lying on his lap, but after some time I began to wonder if Neo would just leave. I'm sure he knew that nobody wanted him around, but he stayed and waited. Everyday, he would appear at precisely zero-seven-hundred hours and take his seat in the corner. When we went on patrols he would suit up and follow, staying as close to me or the LT as possible. On late night patrols, when we

would get back at three or four in the morning, he would stay in the CP, sleeping in his chair, then, like clockwork, be wide-awake at zero seven and start the day all over again.

I think I spent more time with Neo than anyone else. Since I was the platoon's RTO I was basically confined to the CP to man the radio, so we would spend many quiet hours together in that room. I have never been the type to just open up a conversation and I suspect that Neo might've been the same way, but I was also very curious about him, so I found it difficult during that first week not to say more than a few words to him. In a way, I guessed if I talked to him, I was afraid the guys would start messing with me, but another part of it was that in some sense he seemed just like the enemy. How do you differentiate between the two? He looked like the enemy, he talked like them, prayed like them, he even smelled like them. For all I knew he could've been some undercover Al-Qaeda agent who would kill us all in our sleep. When you're in a war zone it is difficult to keep your imagination from running amok, and it's even worse when it's hard to pinpoint the bad guys. Regardless of my reasoning, though, I vowed that I would keep quiet until he said something first.

It surprised me when he finally began to talk. It was in the early afternoon on a particularly hot day. I was leaning back in my chair with my feet propped up on the table reading a *Sports Illustrated* that my sister sent me from home and smoking a cigarette when he asked if he could have one of my Marlboro's. For a moment I didn't say anything, I just looked over the top of the pages and stared at him.

"May I have one?" he asked.

"Holy shit," I said. "So you do talk."

He smiled and shook his head. "Yes, my friend, I do. Can I have one of your American cigarettes? It is hard to get them here and I have wanted one for many years now."

I put my feet down and reached across the table, grabbed the pack and tossed it to him. "Help yourself."

He pulled a cigarette out and placed it between his chapped lips. Then he took his lighter from his pocket, lit the smoke, and took a long drag. As he exhaled he smiled broadly. Then taking one last look at the pack, he tossed it back to me. "American," he said. "They are fantastic.

I nodded. "Here. Keep them. I got plenty more." I stood up, walked over to him and placed them in his hand.

“Besides,” I said, “I should probably quit smoking anyways.” Then I returned to my seat.

“Thank you,” he said bowing his head slightly.

For a moment the silence returned and I wondered if that was it, but just as I went to pick up my magazine, he spoke again.

“I was wondering Specialist...Martin, is it? Where are you from?”

“You probably never heard of it. It’s just a small town in Michigan.”

“Really?” he said. “Some of my family live in Detroit. They moved there shortly after what you would call the Gulf War. I have not been to visit them yet, but I would very much like to go there. I have been to New York City. It is an amazing place. Have you ever been there?”

“Um...no.”

“Well, you should if you get the chance.”

I shook my head. “Wow, Man, I totally didn’t expect you to be talking like this. You’ve really been out of this country?”

“Of course I have. I’m not some simple dirt farmer like I’m sure you suspect all of us Iraqis to be. How do you think I became so good with your language?”

"C'mon now, I didn't –"

"You don't have to. It is easy to know what the Americans think of us. But that is okay. I have come to accept the ignorance of the West."

"That really isn't fair, Man, you don't even know me."

Neo smiled for a moment. "All right then, it is up to you to prove me wrong. My name is Ibrahim Ahmad Abbas Bassim, but you may call me Abbas." He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"Eric Martin," I said.

The day before I deployed to Iraq, my dad and I went fishing. He was a veteran of Vietnam – served two tours – and before I was to head off to my own war, Dad decided that he should give me some advice. I must admit that the moment was rather awkward. I wasn't much of a fisherman and would go only on those rare occasions that I couldn't find anything else to do. Also, Dad never talked about the war; in fact, he never talked much period. I asked him once, when I was a kid, to tell me a war story, but he just murmured something to the effect that I didn't really want to know about the war and went back to drinking his Budweiser and watching the game. Even when I shipped off

to Basic Training he remained tight-lipped and merely shook my hand and nodded his approval when I returned.

The advice my dad gave wasn't really advice at all, but rather an anecdote and a few cautioning words. As we stood at the mouth of the Au Sable, where the river flowed into Lake Huron, I stared at my line hoping that he couldn't see the fear in my eyes. I guess I expected him to open up – to tell the whole story. I wanted to know about his war, but that never came. We must have fished for an hour before he even said a word. When he spoke, though, I listened and let it all sink in.

"There was this kid," he said, "must've been around fifteen years old. A good kid, you know, the kind we knew we could trust. Dat." For a moment my dad just looked off far away and smiled, then looked back to his line and continued. "Dat was his name. He hung around our firebase and would get us stuff – cokes, chow, booze, chicks – anything we wanted. He had a knack, this kid, a way about things. He also used to collect our clothes and take them off to get washed. We could give him a funky pair of greens and he'd have them back, next day, clean and pressed. Needless to say, Dat was one squared away little gook."

Then he stopped. That was it – the end of his story. He reeled in his line, then leaned the rod against his shoulder and stared at me. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what he meant. So I just nodded. But he kept staring. Finally, he turned away and recast his line.

It was almost dark when we loaded up his truck and as I closed the tailgate my dad grabbed my arm. "You're gonna to see some horrible shit over there," he said, "and deal with some difficult things. Watch yourself, Eric. Keep your shit wire-tight, or else you ain't gonna come home." Then he squeezed my arm, gave me a quick nod, and climbed in the truck.

It was easy to befriend Abbas; he was a very likeable person. He just had a way with people and could make them relax. It wasn't long after we began to talk that he endeared himself to the rest of the platoon, and that's when the alias "Neo" was given to him.

Neo saw the humor in almost everything and would go out of his way to keep us entertained. On patrols he would point out the attractive women or places to commandeer booze. As we prepared for raids he would do awful impressions of American actors to break the tension. Even when we were just sitting around, bored out of our minds,

he would bring the latest pirated movie from the U.S. and there would be cheers and high-fives and Neo would get the chair of honor.

But there was more to Neo than what the guys saw. His seriousness and dedication to the mission won over the officers, especially the LT. He was meticulous when it came to retrieving intelligence and did his best to make sure that the CO and all the platoon leaders were well-informed. When translating he articulated exactly what was being said and refused to spare any detail. And his compassion was well-noted, especially when children were involved. But I liked Neo because of his love for conversation, which was something that most of my buddies lacked. While most of the guys limited themselves to sex and sports, Neo and I would discuss history and art and religion. It's funny, but in a company of about one hundred twenty men you'd think that someone would care about something important, but they don't. I spent four years in college before joining the service – it was a way to pay back my student loans – and I embraced learning and constantly tried to do so whenever possible. While the guys read *Playboy*, I brushed up on my geography. When they studied *Penthouse*, I studied Islam. Then when Neo came

around I finally had someone to discuss things with and even attempted to learn some Arabic.

"*In shah Allah*. It means 'God willing,'" said Neo.

"*Inshaallah*. Yeah, I heard that one before. Some Hadji kept repeating it after we busted down his front door and trashed his house looking for weapons and shit. His wife was hollering and what not. I think his brother swore revenge on us or something like – "

"You know something, my friend," said Neo. His face was pale, eyes dark and he clenched his fist so that the knuckles turned white. "On most occasions you can be quite delightful." Slowly he raised his hand a pointed a shaky finger at my chest. "But every once and a while you can be such a bastard."

For a moment I didn't know what to say, but I guess I had it coming. "You're right, Neo. I'm sorry. It's just that I feel like you're a part of us, you know, a part of the platoon."

"I feel the same way too, my friend. But these people, the people of this country, they are my people. And if we are to help them, we must do right by them. And God willing, we will."

"*In shah Allah*," I said.

"*In shah Allah*." Neo smiled and sat back in his chair. "Now. *Maa shah Allah*. It means 'this is God's gift.'"

"Hold on a sec. Are you teaching me Arabic or your religion?"

"Language and Islam go hand in hand, my friend."

"I knew you were going to say that."

I was saved when I was five years old. It was in the auditorium of Sunnyside Baptist Church and the building was musty and cold, but it was a familiar place – God's house. I was sitting in an old wooden pew with my mom seated next to me and Pastor Roberts kneeling in front of us. We all held hands and prayed.

I knew what I was getting myself into and the thought of spending eternity with a nice man named Jesus in a city in the clouds was this fantasy that I wanted to see fulfilled. The best thing, I thought, was that all of the people I loved and cared about most would always be with me, but I was concerned for my dad. So while my mother and the pastor were bowing and praying, I stared at the wooden cross that hung behind the pulpit and asked God to save him too.

Dad never did get saved. I don't think he ever went to church either - at least never a time that I can remember - but I immersed myself in it. It was cleansing. I went every Sunday, both day and night, and Wednesday nights, too. Mom would get us all dressed – my older brother and sister and me – then load us up, while Dad would sit in front of the TV and watch the game or the news. When I was little I would ask Dad if he was coming, and he would look down at me and smile and rustle my hair, but he would never answer. But Mom always had an excuse for him – he's tired, she'd say, or he's busy.

Eventually, I stopped asking, but the thought always kept clawing in the back of my mind. Church was such a nice place, it gave us hope, something to live for. I just knew that if I could just get him to come one time, he'd would be hooked and he could be saved. Finally, the summer before my senior year, I mustered up the courage to ask him one more time. It was during a revival week where we would go to church each night and have a potluck picnic. We would eat, then sing, then Pastor Roberts would give his sermon and we would feel the Spirit moving inside of us. Dad was in the driveway, head under the hood of his truck, and I walked up to him and asked him to come. For a moment Dad just kept on working, but I knew he'd heard me so I

waited for an answer. Slowly he pushed himself away from the engine, stood upright and turned toward me. And when he smiled that same smile that he did when I was a kid, I knew what his answer was going to be, but I pressed him. "Why not?" I said. "What's so bad about going to church that you can't just come this one time?"

He just shook his head, that smile still on his face, and he wiped off his screwdriver. I was so angry, but I knew that saying so would be pointless, so I turned to walk away. I didn't get more than three steps before he started talking, so I stopped in my tracks, but didn't turn around.

"I went to church like you, boy, while I was growing up in Texas. Your grandma and grandpa would take me and your aunts and uncles every Sunday, just like your momma brings you. But something about it just wasn't right, you know? All that happiness, all the niceties, it just seemed kinda fake. It wasn't until I grew up and became a man that I realized this, and maybe it's time you realize this too."

I turned and looked at my dad. That smile was no longer there, but rather a far away look, both sad and serious at the same time. "What's that, Dad?" I said.

"The world ain't like that, boy. The world is hurtin' and pain plain and simple. And when you're done, you're

done. There ain't no coming back and there sure as hell ain't no eternal life. Trust me, I know." Then he nodded and went back to work.

I went to church that night, but after that I never went again.

Operating in the "cradle of civilization" was always a dangerous thing, but whenever I was out with Neo I couldn't help but feel like a tourist in a war zone. I knew a lot about ancient civilization – I was a history major in college – but seeing it first hand with someone who lives there and knows the history as well, was very satisfying. It didn't matter whether we went by vehicle or by foot, Neo always had something to show me and it seemed like every patrol I learned something knew.

Neo took almost every opportunity he could to educate me. It seemed like it was his personal quest to get some American to see and understand Iraq and her people. So he talked about everything. Sometimes we would sit on top of our building as the sun disappeared beyond the horizon. It would be nice and cool and the callers atop the minarets would sing their song of prayer. I enjoyed watching Neo pray, the slow but deliberate movements of body and hands, the way the words sounded as they poured past his lips.

Five times a day, that's what was commanded of them. It was one of the pillars of Muslim faith and Neo was adamant about following it.

One day Neo asked me how I prayed. "You spend so much time watching me," he said, "so now, I believe, I would like to watch you."

I sort of shrugged my shoulders and leaned against the wall. It was a cool evening up on the roof and despite the decaying smells of the city, the soft breeze was wonderful. I soaked it up as best I could, my helmet and flak vest lying on the ground, my blouse hung neatly on one of the lawn chairs that we had brought up when we moved into this building. I stood there, my back against the ledge and I closed my eyes and felt the breeze. I didn't worry about snipers or explosions or alarms or officers. I blotted out the image of the city, its sand colored buildings, the waste that lined the streets. Instead I thought about home, the green forests, the first snow fall that I was sure to be missing, Lake Huron.

"Martin?"

I didn't answer.

"Martin, are you listening to me?"

I opened my eyes and smiled.

"Well, are you going to show me how you pray?"

"I just did," I said.

"Really? That is it?"

"Yeah. It's simple for us. There is no show. We just close our eyes and talk to God. Then we're done."

Neo cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "That is simple, though I wouldn't consider our praying to be a show."

"I don't mean it as an insult, if that is what your getting at." I walked over to my lawn chair and sat down. I stretched my legs out as far as they could go, and put my hands behind my head. "Look, Neo, for most Americans, religion is a simple thing. Sure, some of us take it seriously, but we don't go as far as you guys do. It's a personal thing."

"It is a personal thing for us, too, my friend. But for us, Islam is everything. We consider it before everything we do. *La Elaha Ella Allah*, which means there is no God but Allah, this is what we believe. But to go a step farther you must understand that we put nothing before Allah. *Allahu Akbar*. *Allahu Akbar*."

"I've heard that one before," I said. "It means 'Allah is great', doesn't it?"

"Allah is greatest," he corrected.

“Whatever. The point is I heard that when these guys ambushed us. In fact, isn’t that what all of them say before they try to kill Americans.”

Neo shook his head. “Yes, but you are associating it out of context. These men, they truly believe what they are saying. They believe that they are doing right. That they are doing God’s will.”

“Well, it sounds like a damn battle cry to me. Why is it that you Muslims have to associate your religious beliefs with violence?”

Neo glared at me, his tan face darkened. When he spoke it was fast and saliva ran on his lips and flew from his mouth. “How dare you compare me to them,” he said. “How dare you equate Islam and its followers to violence. The people that you are speaking of contort our religion, they demean and corrupt its meaning with their actions. They are not true Muslims, they are murderers.”

“Now hold on,” I said rising to my feet, “You just said that they truly believe what they say and what they are doing.”

“Of course they do, but that does not mean that they are right.”

“But they are fighting a Jihad. This is their holy war. Isn’t that a part of your religion, to fight the nonbelievers?”

“Do not preach conversion to me, Martin. The West, they are the crusaders. They are the ones that want us to change, to push our religion aside, to embrace their view on the world. You studied history. You should know. The Christians invaded us first over a thousand years ago in order to destroy Islam and convert its followers. This has not changed.”

“That’s bullshit, Neo, and you know it. It may have been true a thousand years ago, but religion don’t mean shit to us now. That ain’t why were here. That isn’t why I’m here. Anyway, why are you sticking up for those guys? They would kill you just as easily as they would me.”

Neo sighed and turned away. Resting his hands on the ledge he stared out at the city. “I am not defending them, my friend. They are my enemy, too.”

I walked over to the wall and leaned up next to him.

“You are right, Martin, they would kill me. In fact, their intention is to kill everyone who doesn’t believe like they do. Americans are convenient targets because they are an enemy to all of Iraq. They kill Americans in order to enlist people to their side. And when they are

done, and the Americans leave, that is when the real killing begins. That is the war that scares us all."

"Why? Why are they doing this?"

"It is an ancient war, my friend," said Neo. "Sunni versus Shiite. The Sunni wish to maintain their control of this country. It was theirs when Saddam was in power. The Shiite wish to change all of that."

"So which one are you?"

"Shiite."

"And who are the people attacking Americans?"

"Both."

"I don't get it," I said. "We got rid of Saddam. We changed the power structure in this country and are trying to make it equal. So why are the Shiites fighting us? It ain't fair, man."

"Fair?" said Neo. "Fair has nothing to do with this. Listen, my friend, and listen well. To the Iraqi, both Sunni and Shia, America is the occupier. Therefore, they wage jihad against those they see as oppressors. When they are successful, they garner more support. The more support they get, the more willing fighters they have, the better their chances at winning the war that is to come. No, my friend, this has nothing to do with fair. This is about

trying to right a wrong. And it is the hope of all Shiites that we are victorious. *In Shah Allah*."

"So we are just targets to help promote their personal war?"

"Precisely."

"So then who do we trust?"

"No one."

"Isn't there anyone on our side, or are we just wasting time?"

"I am on your side, Martin. I am a friend."

Finding time to relax with the guys was a difficult thing to do since I was constantly monitoring the radio. Most days I would find myself going on one or more patrols, and when I wasn't risking life or limb while carrying that unwieldy squawk box I was usually glued to a chair in front of it monitoring the net for other patrols or waiting to convey orders from battalion. On a typical day I was given about a half hour to get breakfast, and another half for lunch. At night I received an hour and a half so I could get a meal or shower or run over to the MWR tent. However, these moments always revolved around patrols and were never guaranteed. It wasn't really a bad gig - I did a lot of reading and would write letters home - but it was always

awfully boring. If it weren't for Neo I would have probably lost my mind.

There were those occasions, though, about once a week, when I could get someone to cover the radio for an extended period of time. It was nice to get away for a while and not feel rushed, and those momentary glimpses of freedom were the few things that any soldier could treasure in a war zone. Usually, though, I was merely trading one boring moment for another. The platoon had a common room, with ragged couches and lawn chairs surrounding tables or in front of an old Sony television. There was always a movie playing, but we had seen them all a million times. Occasionally, we would play sports. Our Supply Sergeant, Sergeant Simmons, brought a few footballs, a soccer ball, and a pump, and on particularly slow days we would stand out in the dust and heat and play a game or two. But mostly the guys just laid around and slept, sleep being a rare commodity when there was always work to be done.

Most were sleeping when I came in that afternoon. Private Owens, from second squad, came and relieved me at the radio, so I crept over to the common room to relax and try to forget about what Neo had said. I wasn't angry, just annoyed and confused. I knew that Neo was my friend and I felt like I could totally trust him, but I needed to

get away, to take a break and try to blot out any mistrust that may have crept into my mind. I was hoping that some mindless entertainment would remedy that, but it didn't.

The room was dark when I entered; the windows were covered with blankets and cardboard to keep the sun out and the cool air from the air conditioner in. The only light emanated from the television and from Sergeant Phillips laptop. A few guys were sleeping on the couches, their boots still on, equipment on the floor next to them. One of the guys was sitting back on a lawn chair in the corner, his book resting on his face. Specialist Jackson sat in front of the television, his hands manipulating a videogame controller. Sergeant Phillips, a soft-spoken 40 year old who led second squad, sat in front of his laptop typing away. I pulled up a chair next to Jackson and picked up a controller. "Mind if I jump in?"

"Sure, white boy." Jackson kept his eyes on the screen. " But you know I'm gonna wax your ass."

"Whatever. Just start the damn game over."

Jackson smiled and squeezed my shoulder with his big black hand. Then he hit pause, exited the game, and restarted it at the main menu. Madden football was the platoon's game of choice, everyone had a favorite team. I picked the Cowboys; Jackson the Raiders, and we were off.

We played for a few minutes before Sergeant Phillips even seemed to notice I was there. “So Owens replaced you there, Martin.”

“Roger Sarn't.”

“Good. You looked like you needed a break. Besides, Owens was starting to get on everybody’s nerves.”

“Yeah,” said Jackson, “that mouthy motherfucker was ‘bout to get knocked the fuck out.”

I smiled and shook my head, then looked back at Sergeant Phillips. “Well, thanks a lot Sarn’t. I really needed to get out of the CP for a while. Neo was -”

“You been hanging out an awful lot with Neo, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So,” said Phillips, “what do you think?”

I turned back toward the TV and continued to play. I was losing, but I really didn’t care. “Think of what, Sarn’t?”

“Of Neo, Man, who do you think?” said Jackson.

I paused the game and stared at both of them. Jackson was smiling, which was usual, but Phillips wore a look of curiosity that betrayed his doubt. “He’s a cool guy. He chips in around here, right. Hooks us up with shit whenever we need it. That’s cool, right?”

"Yeah, that's cool," said Phillips. "But some of the guys...well, some of the guys have been noticing some stuff."

Before I could answer, the door popped open forcing us to squint because of the light. One by one, third squad walked through the door, their rifles clanging on the equipment. "That's right, fuckers," yelled Specialist Thomas. "Third squad is back and its time for you assholes to clear the fuck out."

Soon after the room erupted in shouts as the men who were sleeping told third squad to shut the fuck up and close the damn door. And third squad, having just come back from patrol, was in no mood to be fucked with. Finally, Sergeant Phillips stood up and threatened to kick Thomas's ass, then the commotion ceased and third squad filed through the common room back to their bunks while Jackson and I continued our game. A few moments later, Thomas and a few of his squad mates, returned and pulled up chairs next to us.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Martin? Your fucking Hadji girlfriend give you some time off from the ass banging."

I didn't even look at him. I just shook my head and kept playing.

“Give me that controller, you poge. You don’t belong in here.”

“How ‘bout you shut the fuck up,” said Jackson, “and let the man play his game.”

“Okay, okay, take it easy. I was just fucking with him. Ain’t that right, Martin?”

“Whatever,” I said.

“Hey Thomas,” said Phillips. “How about you back off of Martin? You know he goes on more patrols than all of us.”

“Sure, Sarn’t, you’re right. Martin busts his ass around here.” Thomas stood up and walked up next to the television and squatted down so that his face was level with the screen. “But that friend of his, Neo, I don’t fucking trust him.”

I paused the game again and leaned forward, glaring. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Neo being a goddamn spy.”

I leaned back in my chair and shook my head. “You’re crazy, Thomas. Now how about you move out of the way so I can finish this game and get out of here?” I looked over at Jackson, nodded, then pressed the button to continue the game.

Thomas stood up and walked behind us. “I knew you were going to be like this. All blind and stuff. The signs are all there, Man. You’re with him all the time. We figured you’d be smart enough to see them, you being a college boy and all.”

“Fine,” I said putting down the controller. “How about you enlighten me?”

“You really don’t see it?” asked Sergeant Phillips. By now the guys who were lying on the couches were up and paying attention. Everyone was staring at me.

“We’ve been watching, Man,” said Thomas. “He does some strange things on patrols and stuff.”

“Like what?”

“For starters,” said Thomas, “He’s always talking on his cell phone. Who the hell is he communicating with?”

“Yeah,” interrupted Jackson. “And I’ve seen him writing shit down and stuff. You know watching us, watching what we do and where we go. It’s like he’s recording it all.”

“The guy has even been caught walking off and talking to people when he should be doing his job,” said Sergeant Phillips.

“Look you guys,” I said. “There’s a logical explanation for all of those things. How the hell do you

think we get solid intel sometimes? Neo's got connections with both the police and the Iraqi army. If he weren't on that cell phone or talking to people we'd be wandering around lost like a bunch of assholes out there. And the note taking. Who the fuck knows? Maybe he's writing a fucking book or something. I haven't asked. Besides, he's a smart, observant guy, I'm sure he's got his reasons. Anyway, if the LT or the CO hasn't said anything, than who gives a shit?"

"Okay," said Thomas. "That's fine, but you heard about that fight that Neo and the captain had, right."

"Yeah, Rothstein told me and so did Neo. Big Deal."

"You aren't paying attention, Kid, that shit is a big deal."

"Why? I mean, it's simple. They round up some suspects and they're Sunni. Neo gets bent out of shape when the captain says to let them go. Neo admitted he was wrong. The captain and him are square."

"That may be so, but I was talking to this dude from Bravo company at chow the next day and he said that about an hour after our boys and Neo cleared out, a group of guys dressed in black came in and started killing everyone. They were part of the Medhi Army. You know, the Shiite militia."

“So?”

Thomas threw his hands up in disbelief. “He’s a fucking spy, man. He called the hit.”

“Fuck you, Thomas. That ain’t proof.” I had heard enough and turned to walk away, but Sergeant Phillips stops me.

“Martin, we know he’s your friend, but something isn’t right about him. We’re just saying that you need to watch him.”

I turned around and ran my fingers through may hair in frustration. “Let me get this straight, now you guys want me to spy on him.”

“Think about it, Man,” said Thomas. “You’ve got to look at this clearly. I got another story for you, since you don’t see what we see. That dude from Bravo Company, yeah, he fucking warned me about our boy, Neo.”

“Oh Really?”

“Yes, fucking really. The other day they went on a patrol in a neighborhood close to where that hit was and the hadjis there were all bent out of shape. I mean they were more hostile than usual. He says it was like they were going to have a goddamn riot on their hands. So their CO, he and his terp ask these guys, who look like they’re in charge, to explain what all the fuss was about. Well,

turns out that they're pissed at us, saying that we're collaborating with the Shiite militia and ordering death squads and stuff. The CO, he doesn't get it. He tells them that that ain't true, you know, says we don't take sides, we try to keep the peace. But they won't listen. One of them says he knows it's true because he's seen our Shiite spies while we're out on the town. So the CO, he's annoyed now and demands proof. You know what they tell him?"

"No, Thomas, please tell me what the crazy raghead said."

"Well this crazy rag describes your buddy, Neo, to a fucking T, Man. Says that Neo is ordering hits and shit. He even picked out a couple of other terps in the battalion."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was with Neo; he was a guy to be trusted. However, something about it all rang true, though I really didn't want to believe it. "Why hasn't the CO said anything? Why not fire him?"

"Who knows," said Sergeant Phillips. He walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, Martin, we all like you and respect you. We're not trying to gang up on you or anything, but this isn't just something that we can overlook. Our company has gotten lucky so far. Six months

and no casualties. We still got a year left and all of us want to make it out of here in one piece."

"Just think about it," said Jackson.

Slowly I shook my head, then grabbed my gear and walked out.

The following morning I found myself watching Neo intently when we went out on our zero seven hundred patrol. Normally, I made sure that I was as close to the LT as possible, in case he needed me to get a hold of battalion on the net, or call for support, or send a SITREP. Neo would also trail close to the LT so that he was on hand if needed. Occasionally, he slipped away, working with squad leaders or conversing with locals. I never paid too much attention when he did so; I was too much focused on my own job.

That morning, though, I couldn't concentrate. I lagged behind. When Neo was close, I didn't say much. He tried to talk to me like he usually did, but it was obvious that I wasn't in the talking mood. I was waiting for him to do something. It's not like I believed what they guys said, but there was a part of me that couldn't help but suspect. So I was silent. I watched. When he crept away, I did my best to see what he was up to, where he was going.

On more than one occasion, the LT yelled at me to hurry the fuck up and pay attention. I was torn. I had a job to do; the patrol depended on me. But at the same time, I couldn't help trying to keep a watchful eye on my friend as we navigated through the maze of sand parched buildings.

Officially I can say that I didn't see him do anything out of the ordinary. I mean, it was the same things that he always did while on patrol. Unofficially, though, I was suspect of everything he did. The guys were not lying; they were observant. Everything they mentioned to me was true; he did all of those things. Of course, I was so used to seeing him do those things, and I trusted him already, so those actions shouldn't have meant anything. But this time, they did.

There is something about war, this war in particular, that makes a soldier paranoid. The enemy was all around us. They placed bombs on the road, in cars, in trash heaps. They strapped them to their bodies and attacked our checkpoints and even mess halls. They hid in buildings, sniping us whenever they had the opportunity. They fired mortars and rockets at our barracks while we slept. Trust was a commodity that we could rarely afford. The enemy was all around us - men, women, the elderly, children. They cleaned our clothes and served our chow, then planted bombs

in their neighborhoods to kill us when we passed by. I suppose I could justify my lapse in trusting Neo as part of this paranoia, but it killed a part of me, that last bit of hope I had, when I did so.

That evening, I stood on the roof of the CP and watched the city settle in for the night. The sun and the sand turned the horizon shades of orange and pink and I couldn't help but think of how beautiful this country could be. Neo was tasked out on a patrol with third platoon – their terp had been killed two days ago while on his way to work – and so I went about observing the call to prayer on my own. I remembered the movements, the words and I tried my best to imitate as closely as possible, but in my head I said a Christian prayer and thought of my friend.

It was shortly after nineteen hundred hours when chaos broke out on the net. Third platoon had been hit, the CO had been with them and he was down. The relative calm of the CP instantly exploded as officers and NCOs burst in and out giving and receiving orders and preparing to deploy in support. Second platoon was on QRF, so it was their mission to lend support to the pinned down patrol.

I felt helpless. We all did. It was hard to gauge, through radio reports, what had happened, but it was later

explained that they had been ambushed while returning from a nearby Shiite neighborhood. Apparently, an IED was remotely triggered as the patrol passed by. Someone said the captain was killed instantly. Then they were hit by small arms fire and RPGs. It was a well-planned and well-executed attack.

At the time, I wondered about Neo and whether he had been hit, but then a few hours later he appeared at the CP. His shirt was soaked with sweat and he paused and panted at the door before wiping his forehead with his sleeve then stumbling in.

I jumped to my feet and helped him to his wooden chair. “Are you all right?” I asked.

But he couldn’t answer. His breathing was heavy, his eyes wide with fright.

“Are they back, yet? I heard over the net that the fighting had stopped and that they were in the process of loading everyone up, but that was just a few minutes ago.”

Again, Neo was silent except for his breathing, then he leaned forward, placed his face into his hands, and muttered something in Arabic that I couldn’t make out.

“Dude, are you okay? How the hell did you get back?” I stood up and walked over and looked out the door –

nothing. Then I walked back over to Neo. “What’s going on, Man? Where is everyone?”

Slowly, Neo looked up at me and I thought he was going to speak. His dirty face was streaked with sweat and tears and he looked as though he was going to lose it. But before he could speak, the LT and our platoon sergeant, Sergeant Winters, walked in. Neo sprang to his feet, looked at me and the other two men, then pushed his way through and ran out the door.

“What the fuck is his problem, Martin?” said Winters.

“Beats the hell out of me, Sarn’t. I’m still wondering how he got back before everyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

The LT looked at Winters, then turned to me, his eyes wide – epiphany. “The CO took him along with third. Somehow that fucker made it back before them.”

For a moment we were silent. Dread seemed to settle in my stomach. I knew I had to find him and get some answers before anyone else did. “Do you want me to go after him, Sir?”

The LT shook his head. “Third will be back soon and we’ll have to help them recover. Stay here and monitor the radio. We’ll be outside if you need us.”

Slowly I sank back into my chair, the prospect of waiting was more than I could handle. But I sat there and brooded, my mind fucking with me, creating twisted scenarios with Neo as our enemy. A half-hour later, the trucks pulled up and I could hear them outside as they unloaded. Over the radio, third platoon relayed the count to battalion – six dead, including the CO, and twelve criticals that had to be MEDEVACed to the combat hospital by the airport. They listed the names; I tried not to listen.

A few minutes later, the LT called for me to come outside. There, underneath dim generator lights, stood Lieutenant Clarke, the other platoon leaders, the First Sergeant, and a few other noncoms. They wanted to speak with Neo.

"You know him best," said the LT. "Where can we find him?"

"I, uh –"

"Look, Martin," said Lieutenant Reed, third platoons PL. "The guy skipped out on us back there, right before the shooting started. We've got to ask this guy some questions."

I didn't know what to say. I knew that finding him wouldn't be too hard – we had the same hangouts. But I

didn't know what I would do if I were to find him. I wanted to stand there and proclaim his innocence - he was my friend after all - but the evidence was mounting against him. So much so, that all I really wanted to know was the truth. Finally, after a few tense moments, I submitted. "I think I know where he might be. Just give me a few minutes. If he's there, I'll bring him back with me."

The men looked at each other for a moment; their minds sharing a silent thought, then the First Sergeant nodded and told me to hurry the fuck up.

I don't know how long it took for me to find him. When I think about it now, time seems somewhat irrelevant. The fact is, I took my time. I went through the motions. I didn't lie to the LT; I knew where he was at, but I didn't know how I could face him. I didn't want any of this to be true. Eventually, though, I knew I had to go to him; it was unavoidable. Besides, I really began to worry about what might happen if some of the others guys found him first.

There was this place, out by the wire, where Neo and I would relax on occasion. Out there, the fence line followed a ridge that overlooks the Euphrates. It had an amazing view highlighted by the mosques and minarets that

decorated the Baghdad skyline. At dawn, when the sun rose over the eastern sky, the light would reflect of the domes creating a prism like effect, like a rainbow or a vision of god-like beauty. For Neo, it was a spiritual place; a place where he could seek refuge.

When I finally found Neo he was talking on his cell phone. His left arm was stretched out above his head, his hand gripping the metal rungs. His head leaned forward, chin on chest, and his back was hunched like a man who had been defeated. I could hear him talking. It was frantic, but soft. For a moment I stood and watched him, wondering if he was going to try and make the climb. The razor wires that lined the top of the fence were an obvious obstacle, so was the twenty foot drop. Also, guard towers stood to the left and right of us, stretched out at about fifty meter intervals. It wasn't worth the risk, but Neo looked desperate. Finally, I spoke.

"Neo?"

He did not answer but his head jolted upwards and his back straightened.

"Abbas?"

Slowly he closed his cell phone and turned toward me. His eyes were dark, hidden behind the shadows of both the night and his fear.

“Abbas, you have to tell me what is going on. You need to tell me what happened.”

Neo began to look around. His body tensed and it seemed as if he was going to run. I tried to stay calm - I wanted to trust him, but he needed to trust me.

“Look, Man, you’re going to have to talk to me. They think you’re responsible. They want me to bring you back.”

“Do you think I am responsible, my friend?” he asked.

“I don’t want to. But if you run, then how can I believe otherwise?”

For a moment, Neo was silent. He looked down at the ground, as if to study an object, then without looking up he said, “I will try to tell everything.”

A few months after I returned home from Iraq, my dad and I decided to go out and have a few beers. It was his idea, not mine, but I let him talk me into it anyway. I guess, since I was a war vet now, he felt like we had something in common. It was almost like he wanted to talk or something. To be perfectly honest, though, I really had nothing to say. And despite the fact that we had both experienced war, he was pretty much the last person I wanted to talk to.

Dad didn't take me to a bar. It wasn't his style. Instead, we sat on the pier on Lake Huron, near the place we went fishing before I shipped out, and started to go through a case of Budweiser in silence. It wasn't until our third or fourth that my dad finally spoke. It was strange what he asked. Do I want to talk? For years I tried to get this man to open up, but he chose to shut everyone out. Now here I was and he expected me to do something he never did.

So I told him. "That's bullshit, Dad. Why should I say a goddamn thing to you?"

But Dad nodded and almost smiled. "I said the same thing to your grandfather when I got back." He put his hand on my shoulder and stared hard into my eyes. "It's what everyone wants you to do, isn't it? Talk. What the hell for? What is there to say? It's not like they're going to understand, is it? They'll just nod, try to be sympathetic, but they ain't never going to get it. Never."

I swallowed the rest of my beer, shook loose of his shoulder, and stood up. "I just don't get it, Dad. I don't. I can't. I mean, what does it all mean? What am I supposed to take away from all of this? How do I go on?"

Slowly, shaking, my dad pushed his way up until he was standing in front of me. His eyes were sad in a way I had

never seen them before, like all of the horrors that he endured rose to the surface and played there in front of him over and over. "You just do, son," he said. "There ain't no tricks. You just find a way. And what does it all mean? Well who the hell knows? I'm sure, though, that it don't mean a goddamn thing." Dad reached down, grabbed a beer and tossed it to me. Then he grabbed another, popped the top, took a long drink, and then continued. "Look, Son, war, like life, ain't nothing but a series of pointless tragedies. The only difference is that in war, those tragedies seem so much bigger. All we can do is hope to avoid them. Problem is, though, we know that we can't. Sometimes things just happen, and the more we attempt to control or avoid them, the worse off they seem. I guess so much so, that when it is all said and done, those memories stick with you no matter how hard you try to get them out."

We never made it back to the CP that night. About half way back some of the guys intercepted us and the consensus was that they wanted to string him up. It was Specialist Thomas who led the way.

"I say we fucking kill him right now," said Thomas. Everyone seemed to roar in agreement. But I tried to intervene.

"You can't do that, Thomas, and you know it," I said. "The LT and the others want to speak with him, so I'm bringing him back. Now get the fuck out of my way." I tried to push my way past him and was pulling Neo by his arm, but nobody moved. "C'mon guys, clear out," I said.

Thomas looked to his left and his right, a confident smirk was pasted to his face. Then he pushed me. Hard. I fell back into Neo and would've fell to the ground if he didn't catch me. I struggled to regain my balance and with his help I was standing chest to chest with Thomas.

"Look, motherfucker," I said, "You better back the fuck off or I'm going to kick your ass."

"Fuck you, Martin. You going to stick up for this fucking raghead after he killed our commander? After he killed some of our guys?" Again, roars of agreement echoed through the crowd of angry soldiers.

I backed away, trying my best to stay between Neo and the men. "You don't have any proof of any of that. I mean, nobody has even let the man defend himself."

Thomas shook his head. "Fuck that. We all know he's a fucking spy. You know it, Martin. Tell me you don't know it."

I gritted my teeth and shook my head, then I looked back at Neo. His eyes were on me, they bore through as if

he were looking at my soul. For a moment I was silent, but then, my mind made up, I smiled slightly, nodded, then turned toward Thomas and the rest of the men. “Abbas is my friend. I trust him.”

There was a murmur among the crowd as they discussed this new revelation. But Thomas broke the silence. “Fine, Martin. You think he’s innocent, then we’ll give this fucker a chance to talk.” He looked past me toward Neo. “Here’s your chance, Man, talk.”

All eyes shifted toward Neo. Even I had to turn and see what he would say. But he never said a word. Instead, his lips began to quiver, his hands shook, his eyes watered.

“Please, Abbas,” I said. “Say something.”

What happened next is the image that plays in my mind over and over to this day. I don’t know why he did it. Fear maybe, or guilt. But Neo ran. He ran, but had nowhere to go.

It was Thomas that shot him. There was no doubt about that. As soon as Neo bolted, Thomas pushed me aside, raised his M-16 and shot him twice in the back. I didn’t do anything to stop him. I just stood there and watched as he collapsed, face first, onto the sand blasted road.

Regrets

It was unusually cool the day Specialist Ramirez was killed. For weeks the sun hung heavily in the sky sending daytime highs over the one hundred twenty degree mark, while we conducted combat operations against insurgents in and around Duquaq, just south of Kirkuk. Needless to say, things had become unbearable. Our DCU's were soaked with the sweat of heat and fear and clung to our skin. Our equipment weighed down upon us as if the sun's rays added extra pounds to our combat load. The black painted plastic and metal of our weapons absorbed the heat and would burn when touched. The heat was visible; it rose from the ground waving and blurry. It carried the sand and smoke. It transported the smells – decomposing waste, the decay of a city in squalor, death. It would play trick on us, fuck with our minds. It painted mirages of the enemy around corners and behind walls. It made us tired and slow to react. But then it was gone, mysteriously disappearing as the operation came to a close. We all felt rejuvenated, refreshed, motivated, and alive – that is until Rami died.

Our combat patrols began in early June, but the men of the 1st Battalion 508th Airborne had been fighting since we

made our jump into Northern Iraq at the start of the invasion. It seemed so much easier then. The weeks of training had prepared us for the fight. We were all excited about the prospect of parachuting in and getting that golden star or mustard stain on our jump wings to symbolize our combat jump. It was the largest airborne operation since Vietnam and we were all jacked up for it.

The jump was a breeze; it was obvious that the Iraqis didn't even see it coming. I guess they were so focused on the main force invading from the south that they didn't even think about us coming in from the north. Staff Sergeant Edwards, my squad leader, said they knew but just blended in with the population rather than fight. I thought he was full of shit.

The first few weeks in Iraq were chaotic, but the resistance was surprisingly light. I guess I was pretty grateful - not that I was scared, but rather it was my first time in combat and wanted a relatively easy time of it. Let's just say it was nothing like the movies. We cleared the airfields and secured them for the follow on forces, then we moved to the nearby towns and the oil fields. It was pretty simple really. We would move into an area, clear the homes and buildings, talk to some

people, then move on. Sure there was some shooting here and there, but it was relative calm.

A little too calm. We had been hearing about the fighting to the south; how the Marines and the armor were having some hardcore battles as they pushed toward the rivers and to Baghdad. We wanted to get in the fight. I wanted it. It was strange; the war was actually, well, boring. But then, finally, a chance, an opportunity to really get into a fight. East of Kirkuk, by the Iranian border, there was a terrorist camp that purportedly held chemical munitions ran by a group called Ansar Al-Islam. Apparently these were some brutal guys and well-trained fighters. It was just what we were waiting for.

The plan was simple: helicopter insertion, overwhelm the defenders, and secure the camp. The execution was flawless – a perfect example of US airborne capability. Of course, it would've been much more difficult had there been any bad guys in the area. I guess we must've just missed them. They left most of their stuff there and apparently left in a hurry. Someone obviously tipped them off. The good news: they left their chemical munitions and lab intact. Unfortunately, their stockpile and the lab itself was the equivalent of a basement meth lab any junkie might have in his suburban home. Powders, chemicals, beakers and

what not – it looked like some teenagers had gotten into their mothers chemical cabinet and played with the contents. Kudos to prewar intel.

It would be an understatement to say that I was disappointed. I was pissed. We all were. We had been on the ground for almost a month and it felt like we didn't achieve squat. The LT said we needed to look at the big picture. The invasion was going according to plan. Baghdad had fallen and it wouldn't be long until we would be going home. He was right, but it didn't feel like it. To me the whole thing felt half-assed. This may be the way the big wigs at the Pentagon wanted it to happen, but it didn't feel like the way it was supposed to happen.

My wife says that I sound like some sort of a war-monger when I talk that way, but she just doesn't understand. I was a soldier – had been one for almost six years – and had yet to see one day of combat. Sure, I spent almost a year in Bosnia and Kosovo, but nothing really happened there; it was a complete waste of time. And finally, when I had made it to an actual war, it was beginning to feel like Bosnia all over again.

In May, they pulled the battalion back to Kirkuk to reorganize and reassess our role. We all watched on television as the President declared us victorious. I

couldn't help but laugh. Rumors spread throughout the camp as to what our next move would be. Most hoped that we were going home, but some thought Baghdad or Tikrit. By this point I really didn't care. I just wanted some answers. But then a few weeks later they gave us something to do.

Duquaq was a dump of a town. A sprawling center of shacks and squalor surrounded a dilapidated center that at times resembled rubble more than buildings. Filth lined the streets and the people lived and worked among it. Surrounding it were groups of small villages that were governed by the Duquaq city council. I had no clue why the hell this was such an important location, but that very first day it became very obvious that our stay was not going to be a pleasant one.

We ran into problems immediately. First our convoy was hit about two clicks outside of town. It wasn't too bad – some small arms fire, a couple of RPGs – but it slowed us down and woke us up. It was late afternoon by the time we pulled into what would soon be our main operating base which gave us very little daylight to find and procure shelter. Unfortunately, shelter was a luxury that most of us did without during the majority of our stay. Then the mortaring began. The first one dropped the

moment the sun disappeared over the horizon and it didn't stop until morning. Granted, it was sporadic and horribly inaccurate, but it kept our heads down and deprived us of sleep throughout the night. The next morning, when I was breaking open my MRE for breakfast, Sergeant Edwards walked up to me and kicked my boot. "Looks like you finally got your war, Andrews."

"Fuck off," I said.

The mortars never stopped. Every night they hit us. Sleep was a commodity that was very difficult to attain. The sad thing is that we always knew when it was coming. Like clockwork, the evening prayers would end, the sun would disappear, then the world would explode. I can still hear them - the pop of air off in the distance that signaled a round had been fired, the soft whistling of the round as it raced toward it's target, that moment of silence before the explosion, then the loud bang that echoed like a steal beam dropped onto concrete. The light flashed and blinded for a moment, and the acrid smell of gunpowder and burnt rock permeated the air. It may not have been accurate, but it still did a number on us.

Being in the airborne - or at least in my unit - usually had its perks. Top notch equipment, excellent

training, exciting missions, and most importantly a limited time in theater. This unit was a quick reaction force, which meant we were to go somewhere quickly, fight, then we were replaced by forces that could sustain themselves for an extended period of time. It was our mission to get in and get out and we liked it - a lot.

But this was different; it was a mission we were totally unprepared for. The higher ups saw fit to utilize us in a manner that we were neither accustomed nor equipped to do, but we really had no choice. As the battalion commander so eloquently put it, "Duquaq is a hotbed for insurgent activity and it is our battalion's duty to root out and destroy them." This meant that we were stuck here until someone felt we had accomplished our mission. Basically, we were never going home.

The commander set us up into four urban forward operating bases or FOBs. The battalion headquarters set up in the warehouse district just inside of Duquaq - the place we spent our first night. From there they would provide logistical support to the other three FOBs by creating a link with our main base in Kirkuk. The other three FOBs would be set up so as to split the town and neighboring villages into a triangle, each FOB making a point. From there each company would patrol their sector, gathering

intel and destroying any insurgents that we could find. What we didn't know was that there were a lot of insurgents in the area; so many that it was nearly impossible to distinguish who was friend or who was foe. Apparently, Sergeant Edwards was right – the enemy just melted away when we jumped in. Many of the soldiers we expected to fight from day one had set up shop in town, and members of Ansar Al-Islam, whom we thought had fled into Iran, were helping them. To put it simply: it was a fucking mess.

My FOB – Alpha Company's FOB – was located in the village of Al Hawija, just south of Duquaq. A few days before we moved into the area some of the guys from the battalion went with a couple of Iraqi guides to recon the area and make arrangements as to where we would set up. Our AO wasn't so bad from the sound of it – an abandoned school just north of the town center on the edge of the village. We figured there would be a couple of buildings, some bathrooms and stuff – a decent place to lay our heads. We were fucking way off. I have no clue who would've thought to send kids to this school because the two buildings that were there weren't really buildings at all. Granted, both structures were made of brick and concrete, but one building was partially reduced to rubble and barely provided room for our company CP. The other building was

in good shape, but wasn't big enough to house the entire company, so many would have to sleep outside or in the tents that we set up. Outside was most preferable anyway. It was so hot, even at night, and the building just absorbed the heat. Also, with nightly mortar attacks it was just a matter of time before a round would strike the building and everyone inside would be done for. Besides, it was actually kind of pretty at night, lying under the stars. Sometimes a cool breeze would blow and there would be a moment where I felt like I wasn't really in that place at all.

The worst thing about our FOB was the smell. Hell, Iraq smells terrible to begin with, but this place might've been the worst. It hit us the moment we got off the trucks and began to unload, but we didn't know what it was or where it came from. At first we thought it was the toilets inside the buildings. There was one in each – both being just a hole in the ground. The stink was terrible, but it really only affected the buildings. The other smell was worse, like dirty diapers and spoiled milk covering a dead and decaying animal – the kind of smell that burns your nose when you breathe. Everyone complained and wanted to find the source, so we put together a small patrol and walked around the perimeter.

It was garbage. Lots of it. The school was located next to the town landfill. We couldn't believe it. How could battalion do this to us? When the CO found out, he radioed battalion and requested a new position. No can do. That's what they said. The locals provided the best place that they could give us, so we were ordered to man that position. It was easy for them to say; they didn't have to deal with the smell – or the infestation of lice and other insects and animals that were attracted to it. I found out later from a headquarters buddy of mine during a resupply that when the Iraqis showed them around during the recon they purposefully avoided telling them about the dump. And when they were asked about the smell, they just held up their hands and shrugged saying they did not understand what they were being asked. Personally I think its fucking bullshit – the boys from battalion were just covering their ass – but we really couldn't change things. So that's how we lived for just over three months; surrounded by itching, stinking, filth.

The position wasn't all bad. It was actually the perfect location for us to send out patrols for our sector. The FOB itself was easy to fortify. There was a small, three-foot brick wall that surrounded most of the perimeter. We reinforced it with triple strand concertina

wire at first, then used sandbags and whatever we could salvage to build up the wall. We used brick from the broken down building and destroyed some of the abandon dwellings next to the school to give us a clear line of sight. The material from those structures – brick, concrete, aluminum – we used on the walls and buildings as well. Near the landfill were old beat up cars which we dragged back to base with our HUMMV's. We tore those things to pieces and used the metal frames and doors to fortify positions. In the end it was a pretty solid little fortress. It wasn't pretty to look at, but it worked.

Our combat patrols started out easy enough. At first it seemed like everyone liked us – or at least didn't care if we were around. For the most part we were greeted with smiles and nods of approval. The people seemed happy to answer our questions and it felt like most genuinely wanted to help. That's not to say that everyone was enthusiastic about our presence; there were the occasional sneers and shouts from angry young men – those who found they could talk tough when they were in groups. But at first these moments were few and far between. In fact, other than the sporadic nightly mortar attacks our sector was, for lack of a better word, peaceful.

The first week in Al Hawija was probable the most enjoyable time I had in Iraq. I had just been promoted to squad leader, which meant I was pulled out of Sergeant Edwards squad and given command of eight men of my own. The good thing was that I didn't leave my platoon, but rather replaced Sergeant Bayer, who had left on emergency leave when his wife was killed in a car accident. We were all sad to see him go. He was a cool guy, laid back and easy to talk to, but it was nice to be given a squad of my own. I believed that I could get things done.

The best part of that first week, though, was that it actually felt like we were making a difference. We met with town leaders, who were eager to rebuild and aid us in rooting out the enemy. We established checkpoints at different spots in and around town with the blessings of the citizens and local merchants. And there were the children, hundreds of them, all wanting to walk and talk with the American soldiers who came to save them.

I must admit I had a soft spot for the kids. I had two boys of my own and playing with the Iraqis made me feel that much closer to home. That first week I must have played fifty games of soccer. Whenever we had some time to ourselves we would play a pickup game just outside the compound. They would even try to play with us as we

patrolled the streets, but the LT put an end to that rather quickly. Mostly the kids just wanted candy or to hold hands and talk. I figured most of them were orphans, or at least had no father, so in a sense we were like that father figure or guardian. But really they were just impressed with seeing something new. The curiosity ended though when the first bullets started to fly.

I don't think I truly appreciated my men until our first firefight. It was at that moment amidst the chaos of battle that I knew for certain that those eight guys would do whatever it took to accomplish the mission and bring us all back alive. I don't think there will ever be a group of men that I will trust and love more than my brothers in third squad. They came from all parts of the country, each with his own background and set of ideals, but each had a common goal to protect one another at all costs. I know it sounds cliché and many mistake soldiers for being robots who blindly follow orders, but that just isn't true. Thompson, Goodale, Richards, Wilkey, McGuffey, Kallstrom, Onyewu, and Ramirez, they're people with names and faces – all unique but with a common purpose. My squad embodied that and I will never forget them.

Ramirez was the one who stuck out the most. He was a clown, an optimist, and totally loyal. He just had a knack for making the most out of every situation, like the way he would talk about pussy when filling sandbags or hum the Star-Spangled Banner during mortar barrages. I even heard him singing during a firefight. Wilkey said he was nuts. "That crazy wet-back doesn't even know he might get killed." But we all loved him for it. It made things easier – like the war was only a trivial matter for us to deal with on occasion. Of course that wasn't true, and after a while it all began to even wear on him, but he never stopped totally. It just got to the point that I knew things were tough when Rami was silent.

Fighting an insurgency is a tricky endeavor because the response that is given to any event will affect things in ways that are not foreseen – which in our case usually turned out bad. According to the town council, who had accepted us with open arms, we were to blame for everything. First they said we never kept our promises – infrastructure was not being rebuilt, a police force was not being trained and equipped, there were no jobs. But then when we tried to do things, they said our involvement was infuriating the insurgents and causing bloodshed among

the people. Thompson quipped that they didn't know what they wanted, but I know they did – they wanted us dead or gone.

The biggest complaint that the councilmen had, though, was that they believed we overreacted to situations. None of us really knew what that meant, but the LT explained that they were upset with how we responded in full force to any sort of attack. "They think we should show restraint," said the LT, but even he felt that that was bullshit.

In a sense, though, those councilmen were right – we were quick to the trigger and lit shit up. Our first firefight was a complete mess. It was getting on in the afternoon and we were returning to base after a meeting with the owner of a petrol station on the west side of town. He had been complaining that armed men were stealing gasoline. The LT told him that we would continue to check on him and that we would probably set up a checkpoint a few meters down the street to help keep the peace. He seemed satisfied, but still wary of the situation. About half-way back we were hit by men in three pick-ups. They pulled up at an intersection in front of us and started firing. As I ducked into a nearby alleyway I whispered a small prayer thanking God that they couldn't shoot for shit, and then I leaned around the corner and started firing. It sounded

like an earthquake the way we all opened up at the same time. We put down at least three of them in that initial volley and disabled a vehicle. The remaining insurgents jumped into the other trucks and took off. When the firing stopped, the streets echoed with the sounds of our voices as we relayed our status and moved to secure the area, but no sooner had we began to move when we were hit again and again; each time, harder than the last. We responded with our maximum firepower and basically left the streets and buildings in shambles. They were probing us and it worked. I'll give those bastards some credit - they know how to adapt quickly and they were good at what they do.

That first firefight was a success - no casualties - but in the long run it was the first of many failures. Though the insurgents were unable to harm any of us, they did turn the council and the people against us. That night we were serenaded not only by mortar fire, but also by the murmur of an angry people.

It was amazing how fast the people turned against us, but it all makes sense when it is looked at objectively. There were too many jobless men brimming with frustration. Sunni clerics would openly preach hostility toward Americans in their mosques. And the regular people, who

were caught in the middle, found it hard to trust people they saw as occupiers. Put them all together and you have a lethal situation that is near impossible to remedy. Sergeant Edwards said that the mission was doomed from the start and although I wanted to believe otherwise it was obvious that he was right. However, I am being completely honest when I say we were partly to blame as well. We never had the resources nor the manpower to deal with the insurgency, but instead of admitting it to the people we fed them empty promises, destroyed their homes searching for the enemy, and shot up their streets. We tried, though, to make things better, but it seemed like the more we tried the worse things became. In the end, we did something that destroyed any chance that hope might have had.

Throughout the rest of June and into July the violence only escalated. It was a never ending chain, a pattern that just couldn't be broken. We knew the links - Imam preaches violence, the young men attack us or the civilian populace, we respond with raids and arrests and make more enemies, and so on. It really just comes down to a basic culture clash. We just didn't understand who these people were. I finally began to understand it when one of the terps tried to explain to the LT the idea of tribal law.

He said, “Whenever you kill someone you make blood enemies with their family, regardless of whether it was right or wrong. For that reason, this will never end.” The LT didn’t believe him. Instead he told the mayor to control the tribal sheiks. Unfortunately, it was more complicated than that.

Finally, about mid-July the whole ugly mess escalated into virtually open war. It was early on a Saturday morning and we had been informed that one of the most vocal Imams, a man by the name of Abdullah Mahdi, was behind a recent string of car bombings and attacks on local police and US troops. First platoon, along with a special ops team, was tasked with the takedown, while our platoon was QRF. The raid went down as planned and there were no shots fired. He was taken to the police station, which was also the main government building in Al Hawija, and was supposed to stay there until he could be transported to Duquaq. That night all hell broke loose. The Imam’s supporters protested outside the police station and demanded his release. The police and the platoon who captured him advised them to leave, but they wouldn’t back down. Finally, the mayor, who feared more for his life than his city, pleaded with our CO to free Madhi. By then, though, the chopper that was to extract the prisoner had arrived.

Later that night, the protestors marched on our compound. It was a peaceful yet vigorous demonstration, but when someone who was probably planted in the crowd by insurgents opened fire, we retaliated swiftly and violently. Fifteen people were killed and many more injured. It was dark, we were jittery, and over the next month and a half we would pay the price.

Taking causalities was something that the company wasn't accustomed to. In fact, since the start of the invasion we had only sustained fourteen wounded, and all but Private Bullock – who broke his leg on the jump – occurred after we had moved into the area of Duquaq. They were all superficial wounds too, like small bits of shrapnel from RPG and mortar fire or a graze from a stray AK round. Specialist Kinney, second platoon's RTO, had been the only soldier who needed to be MEDEVACed – a bullet went through his radio and logged into his shoulder – but he was back a week later with some stitches, a bruise, and a story to tell. We didn't get our first KIA's until a week before the incident with the Imam, but after that it seemed like we would run out of men before we finally went home.

It was a Thursday morning and the men at Checkpoint Green were being relieved after their forty-eight hour shift. On the way back to base, the lead HUMMV rolled past a garbage bag thrown carelessly on the side of the road. When the IED detonated it left the vehicle a burning shell that rolled for a few more yards before it stopped. All three paratroopers were killed – their body parts mingling with the vehicle pieces that showered the dirt and gravel around it. Those first KIA's hurt. We were totally unprepared, which sounds strange being in a war zone, and when they loaded the three bodies on the helicopter for the Baghdad airport we all stood around crying and hugging each other and swearing revenge. Sergeant Edwards said that our luck had run out, and I could only nod in agreement. But it was good for us, in a way, because it got us in the right mindset to deal with the onslaught of death that followed.

The days following the incident with the Imam were vicious. It was as if the whole town had risen up against us. The merchants and civilians who conversed with us on patrols now hid themselves away afraid to be near the Americans when the jihadists showed up. The boys we played soccer with and the little children who always wanted candy hid behind their mothers or threw rocks when they felt we

weren't looking. And the insurgents, they attacked relentlessly. We lost eleven men that first week, at least one a day. We were scared to leave the compound, afraid that we would be next. But we had a job to do and knew we had to fight if we were to survive. Finally, after weeks of playing politics and taking it in the chin, the battalion and the brigade felt it was time to fight back.

The operation began at the end of July and ran for three weeks. Our company was reinforced by the 2nd Battalion 508th Airborne - who had just transferred their position north of Kirkuk to a National Guard battalion and the Iraqi army - and we were supported by a squadron of Apache helicopters. Our goal was simple: conduct deliberate house to house searches and root out all insurgent forces in and around Al Hawija, but the mission was far from simple. Despite our best efforts in the months prior to the operation, we just couldn't stop the influx of insurgent fighters. We knew they were there, but our hands were tied because the people themselves were protecting them. How do you help people who refuse to help themselves? By the end of July the insurgents had dug themselves in so much that it took a full scale street by street, house by house, battle to root them all out.

It's dangerous business fighting in urban terrain – so many places for the enemy to hide; so many ways to get killed. We lost fifteen guys during those three weeks, times two wounded. Three of my squad were wounded – Richards, Thompson, and Onyewu – but only Onyewu had to be MEDEVACed. When it was all over, though, we were thankful for the relative calm.

By late August we had received news that we would be pulling out soon and handing over the position to another unit, so we decided to celebrate. The CO got on the horn and ordered us up some steaks and some beer and had them delivered by chopper at a makeshift LZ just outside our compound. That afternoon the officers grilled the steaks and served the men, but not everyone was there. We still had three checkpoints that needed to be manned and my squad was at one of them. My guys were pissed, but there was nothing I could do about it. But then Wilkey came up with an idea. "How about you and me go back and make sure they save some chow for us," he said.

At first I told him that we were supposed to stay put until our shift ended, but when they all kept complaining and talking about the food it made me give in. "Stop whining like a bunch of bitches," I said and I told Wilkey

to get in the HUMMV. It was a dumb decision and I knew it, but I didn't like seeing my guys get screwed over. Besides, I knew those fucking greedy pigs wouldn't leave shit for us.

It wasn't more than a three minute drive back to the base, so I figured we'd be gone about ten minutes and that we wouldn't be missed too much. When we got there we went over to the LT, who was guarding the cases of beer, and asked him to put some aside for us. "Already taken care of Andrews," said the LT smiling, "Now get the fuck back to the checkpoint." Satisfied, we hopped back in the HUMMV and sped back.

We couldn't have been more than two blocks away when we heard the explosion. Seconds later the radio blared with static and screaming. *Hurry up, Sarn't. We need your help. We just got hit. One man down.* I picked up the mic, not totally sure of what I heard, and ask them to repeat. Nothing. As we turned the corner I saw my guys standing around a body and a crowd gathering across the street. I told Wilkey to get on the radio and call for the QRF and a possible MEDEVAC, then I jumped out of the vehicle and ran over to the rest of my squad.

On the ground lay Rami, or at least what was left of him. An RPG round hit him square in the stomach and ripped

him in half. Sergeant Thompson was kneeling down next to him, and held his upper body in an embrace.

"What the fuck happened," I said, unable to comprehend what I was looking at.

Thompson cried out a sick wailing moan and pulled at Rami's hips as if he could put him all together. I looked over at Kallstrom and Goodale, but their faces were etched with confusion and pain. Shaking my head I took a knee next to Thompson and grabbed his bloody hands. By now tears were flowing freely down my face. "What fucking happened?" I screamed.

Over by our sandbagged position McGuffey and Richards were manning the M60 and the M249 machineguns. McGuffey shouted, "We were hit Sarn't, but we don't know where from."

I stood up and looked around. The street was filling with Iraqi civilians, all eager to see the dead American. I raised my rifle and yelled for them to stand back. Wilkey jogged up next to me, his weapon ready, and told me that the QRF were on the way. Then he saw Rami.

Wilkey and Rami were best friends. They had known each other since Basic Training and did their Infantry and Airborne schools together. When they were both given orders to go to the 173rd in Italy, they couldn't believe

their luck. Their wives were best friends. Their little ones played together. They were a team. I guess that's why I can't blame him for what he did.

It was totally spontaneous. An act of rage and hatred, of misery and loss. It was an act of love. With one look at his broken friend, Wilkey pushed past me, raised his rifle to his cheek and started to fire into the crowd. The frantic civilians erupted into screams and shouts and panic and fleeing. One by one, Wilkey put them down. I wanted to tell him to stop, but I couldn't; I just stood there and watched. Then McGuffey and Richards opened up with the machineguns and Kallstrom and Goodale and Thompson, too. Thompson was screaming at the top of his lungs and he aimed at nothing in particular.

The firing didn't stop until the crowd was out of sight. By that time, the QRF had arrived and started to take up positions along the street in an effort to make a defensive perimeter. The street was covered with the dead and wounded. Those who survived moaned and cried in pain as they tried to pull themselves to cover. The medics had their hands full. My men had all gathered around Rami's body. Wilkey stood over his head, but he wasn't crying and his face was stoic and pale. As the medics and my squad placed Rami in a body bag, the LT grabbed me by the arm and

pulled me over to his HUMMV. “Holy shit, Andrews. What the fuck just happened here?” As he said this I could only stare uncomprehending. He looked foreign to me, like something I had never seen before. He asked me again, but I didn’t say anything; I didn’t know what to say. So I slung my rifle on my shoulder and walked back to my men.

The investigation that followed was pretty straight forward. Each of us told our story and that was the end of it. Of course none of us admitted that the squad fired on innocent civilians, but there were never really any questions about that. I just figured they knew and they understood. We were all past the breaking point; we had all already cracked. As for my squad, well none of them voiced any regret – they craved revenge like they craved the steak and beer and they weren’t going to stop until they were full. But I just couldn’t get any of it out of my head.

I sat next to Sergeant Edwards on the flight back home and we got to talking for a bit. He asked if I was going to be okay and I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I just sat there, silent, and looked out the window and

watched as the desert brown turned to blue sea. After a while I turned to tell him yes, but he had fallen asleep.

It was late in the afternoon when we landed. Everyone cheered when the landing gears touched the ground. There were smiles and laughing and guys hugging each other. As we pulled up to the terminal we could see our families and friends had gathered and were waiting for us. I scanned the crowd looking for my wife, but couldn't find her and quickly gave up. Slowly I watched as the paratroopers crowded the aisles and grabbed their gear, but I didn't move as the plane emptied. Sergeant Edwards asked if I was coming, but I just looked out the window. Outside I watched as the men reunited with their loved ones and walked to a nearby hanger for a celebration until all that was left was my wife and kids. But I couldn't move. I was frozen to my seat. A stewardess walked over to me and asked if I was alright. "We've stopped, Sir. You can exit the aircraft."

But I didn't look at her; I just stared out the window at my wife and two boys as they huddled together and waited for me on the tarmac. And I wondered how I was ever going to face them.

A Long Way From Home

Jon sat in his black pick-up at the end of a long gravel driveway, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. It had been six months since he had last been to his in-laws' plantation, and he just wanted to hurry up, grab his daughter, Sara, and get the hell out of there. The moment Mary opened the front door questions would start like blows to his gut. He didn't want to hear her annoying southern drawl. He couldn't think of the answers she'd want to hear. But it was the only way he could see Sara, the only way he could pick up the pieces and just go home.

Slowly he pressed down on the accelerator and the truck eased forward, gravel crunching underneath his tires. The Spanish moss that hung from the trees slid silently over the cab of the truck. Jon scanned the yard hoping to get a glimpse of Sara, but the setting sun reminded him that she would be inside eating supper. It was not like he could just take her away without telling them, but he wanted to. Just picturing Sara running down the driveway after him made him smile broadly.

Jon pulled his truck up next to Jack's new Volvo. He climbed out of the cab, adjusted his shirt, and walked up

the short stairway onto the white columned porch. A porch swing sat off to the side, the white paint chipping away. He used to hold Sara in his arms and rock her to sleep in that swing when she was just a baby. He would hold her close and gaze up at the stars. April was alive then and she would sing Bible songs like “Jesus Loves Me” or “In the Garden,” her voice carrying in the warm Georgia air. Jon pressed the doorbell.

“Just a minute,” he heard Mary yell. Seconds later the door opened and there she stood.

Jon took off his ball cap and flashed a slight smile.

“Well, well, well,” said Mary as she flattened out the front of her country blue dress. “I’m surprised to see you here. Didn’t think you were going to be back for a few days.”

“I don’t know why you would think that, Mary. I called you just yesterday and told you I was back.”

Mary pretended not to listen and stepped back from the door. “Well, come in. Come in. Are you hungry?”

Jon shook his head. “No ma’am.” In the open foyer, pictures of family hung from the walls, surrounding a painting of Robert E. Lee. Light from the massive chandelier seemed to warm the room even on the coldest days. “Where’s Sara?”

“She’s eating with Jack. Why don’t you come on in here and sit down? I’ll get you a glass of iced tea and then we can all talk.”

Jon reluctantly agreed and followed her into the dining room. Another, smaller chandelier hung from the center of the long room, cabinets filled with china lined the walls, and two large bay windows gave a sense of openness. Jack and Sara sat in high-backed chairs eating at the grand, ornately carved oak table. Jon’s heart melted. It had been so long since he had heard Sara’s beautiful laugh. But when times were toughest it was that memory that gave him the strength to push forward.

“Sara, your daddy is back,” announced Mary as she floated through the dining room toward the kitchen. Both Jack and Sara looked over at Jon, who stood awkwardly by the dining room door.

“Daddy!” Sara hopped from her seat and ran to where he stood. Jon opened his arms wide and dropped to his knees. Once in his arms he held her tight not wanting to let go. She was all he had left, his only family, and the only reminder he had of his beautiful wife, April. Finally, he pulled his head back and stared at his daughter’s pretty little face. “I missed you, Monkey.”

“I missed you too, Daddy.”

They both smiled and gave each other Eskimo kisses, rubbing their noses together softly.

"You missed my birthday," she said lowering her head and sticking out her lower lip. Her hands pulled at the bottom of her red-checkered dress.

Jon feigned surprise. "I did? When was that?"

"Last month."

"Really? I thought it was this month." Jon looked up and placed his finger on his lip. Then he asked, "How old are you?"

She held her head up, straightened her shoulders, and crossed her arms. "Seven," she said.

"Wow. You're getting big, aren't you?"

"Yep."

Jack walked over and held out his hand. Jon stood up and shook it. Jack smiled. "How you been, Jon?" The sad look in his eyes let Jon know that he already knew the answer.

"I've been fine," said Jon. "It's good to be back."

"I'm glad you're back, too. Sara's missed you very much. She never stops asking when you're going to be back." Jack stroked her long blond hair and looked down at her. "And she always asks if she got a letter from you."

Mary walked in from the kitchen with a plate filled with hot food and a tall glass of sweet tea, which she placed next to where Sara was sitting. “Come over here and have something to eat,” she told Jon.

He nodded and walked over. Mary stood next to his chair, her hands folded in front of her. On his plate were two large pieces of roast beef, mashed potatoes with steaming hot gravy, and fried green beans. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose. It had been a while since he had had a nice home cooked meal. “Smells wonderful. Thank you, Ma’am.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” sang Mary and she walked around the table and sat down next to Jack.

Jon ate heartily, clanging his utensils, not really paying attention to his manners, until he felt his mother-in-law staring at him. Slowly he looked up. “Sorry, Ma’am.”

Mary sipped from her glass, her eyes wide open.

“So, Jon,” said Jack. “How long are you back for?”

Jon sat up, swallowed. “Umm,” he said as he wiped his mouth. “I really don’t know what is going on to tell you the truth. They gave us a few weeks leave and then we’re supposed to report back to duty.”

“Are you going back to Aganstan, Daddy?”

Jon looked over at Sara who was playing with her napkin.

"It's Afghanistan, Dear," corrected Mary.

Jon rolled his eyes and tried to ignore her. "No Sweetie, I'm not going back there."

"Good," said Sara with a nod. Jon leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

"So, what is it you plan to do then?" asked Mary. Jack glared at her and waved his hand. Mary ignored him and leaned forward. "You don't intend to take Sara back to Fort Bragg, do you?"

"Mary," whispered Jack.

Jon knew what was coming and felt his face burn.

Mary stood up. "You can't take her. You shouldn't. She needs to be with those who can take care of her."

"Mary."

"No, Jack. He cannot take care of her. Not when he is always off gallivanting around the world like some sort of cowboy. She needs to be with her family."

Jon leapt to his feet. His chair fell loudly onto the wooden floor. "I am her family. I'm her father."

"Yes, but you cannot possibly think that you could take care of a child." Mary pointed at Sara, who sat

scared and confused, her eyes misting up. Jack rushed over to Sara who was sobbing into her napkin.

"She's my child," he screamed.

"Both of you need to stop this bickering," said Jack, "especially when Sara is in the room." He picked her up and walked out of the dining room toward the den.

"See what you made her do," said Mary.

"What I did? You're the one who brought this up, not me."

Mary crossed her arms and looked, toward the kitchen.

"I know you don't think I can take care of her. You've always thought that I put my career before anything else. But I don't."

"You don't?" Mary glared at him. "That's such a lie. The Army is your life. You're never home. You're always busy. With April gone do you really think you are capable of taking care of a little girl?"

Jon hung his head. "April has been gone for years, Mary. I think I've succeeded so far."

"Yeah, but that's because we're here to help you out. Ever since your parents passed away, we have been there for you. We're your family Jon." Mary walked around the table and stood next to him. "I know you want to be with Sara,

and that's okay. But what're you going to do when you have to leave again. And you will have to go again, won't you."

Jon nodded.

"Sara's got a home here. She has a nice life and you really shouldn't take that away from her."

He felt her hand touch his shoulder, but quickly he pulled away. "Well, that's not your decision to make," he said, then walked toward the den to get Sara.

They spent the next few days at the plantation. Jon couldn't wait to leave, but Sara said she wanted to show him around before they went back to North Carolina. No one discussed their leaving, but no one really had to. Tension was thick like a fog. Barely a word passed between Jon and Mary, but Jon liked it that way. He knew that if she talked to him it would only be to convince him to let Sara stay.

During the days Jon and Sara spent little time around the house. They went for long walks around the plantation. She showed him the big oak tree she loved to climb. They threw rocks in the pond, seeing who could make the biggest ripple. He taught her how to skip them along the surface. They played tag in the long grass, laughing, shouting, rolling. In the afternoons they walked barefoot down the

road to a small little gas station that still sold Cokes in big glass bottles. Then they soaked their feet in the river while they drank and talked about school and Barbie dolls and Disney movies. At night they would dance to Harry Connick Jr. CD's, her feet on top of his as they spun and floated. Then they watched the stars, while crickets chattered all around them and he would point out constellations as they cuddled up on the porch swing. Sara said she loved Orion, mostly because one of the stars was actually a galaxy.

"Daddy?" said Sara.

Jon stared off at the stars. "Yes, Baby."

"What did you do when you were gone?"

Jon had hoped she would never ask him that question. He turned to Sara. She reminded him of April, her beauty glowing in the moonlight. "Well," said Jon. "I had to work."

"I know that," she said as she rolled her eyes. "What did you really do?"

"Well, I'm a soldier and I had to fight."

"Against who?"

"Against bad people who want to do bad things to Americans."

Sara glanced down at her lap for a minute. He knew the question was coming, but didn't know how to answer it. Finally, Sara looked up at him. "Did you kill anyone?"

Jon pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. He lied. "No." Then he turned toward the stars and closed his eyes.

Intelligence from reliable sources had told Jon's commanders that a small but powerful group of Al Qaeda troops were operating around the area of Al Tazik. Their base camp was located in this little village. So Jon assembled his team of twelve Special Forces operatives and fifty or so Afghan rebels, and rode out from the rebel stronghold to terminate all opposition. It took them almost eight hours of riding by horseback to make it through the narrow mountain passes, mostly uphill, single-file. Loose rocks and large boulders littered the trail making movement difficult and painfully slow. Often they had to get off their horses in order to negotiate the obstacles.

Slowly they approached the outskirts of town and Jon called for a halt. They settled down on a ridge overlooking the village. The vegetation was sparse with only patches of long grass and brittle bushes here and there.

Occasionally, there were a couple of trees that provided a comfortable place for them to rest. Jon had them set up a small perimeter, having some of the Afghans standing watch around the group. The rest sat near the trees either sleeping or eating their MRE's. Many of the tribesmen sat together, their voices chattering in Arabic. The members of his team sat apart, laughing and joking around. Jon quickly ate his own MRE, chicken and rice, then he and Rick, his second-in-command, rode down the ridge for a closer look at their objective.

The village contained about eight stone houses, none of them over a story high. They were an odd mixture of wood, brick, and cloth, ready to crumble at any moment. One of the buildings had antennae positioned on the roof, like sticks protruding from a mound of sand. Around the buildings were various tents torn and frayed from the harsh mountain wind. Goats, horses, and camels roamed freely, feeding on the few shrubs and grass that grew along the rocky valley floor. Smoke from numerous small fires crept up into the air, blanketing the village with a grayish mist

"What do you think, Boss?" said Rick as he played with the selector switch on his M4.

Jon leaned forward in his saddle. His back ached. "Don't look like much, does it?"

Rick looked over at Jon. “You think Intel might be wrong about this?”

“Naw,” said Jon, “they’re probably right, but it seems like such a small place for us to waste time on.”

“Yeah, but we’ve seen smaller.” Rick pulled out a bag of chew and put a big chunk of the leaves in his mouth. He held out the bag for Jon, but he waved it away.

The village wasn’t empty. Herders walked with animals. Women carried baskets. It seemed like everyone had a gun. But it was the sight of children that bothered Jon. He reined his horse and they both turned around and headed back to meet up with the rest of his men.

Jon decided that it was best if they waited until nightfall. It would give his men ample time to rest from their long journey; it would also allow them to take the area by surprise. The last thing he wanted was the mission compromised.

They set out shortly after ten by foot. He split his force into two sections. The largest section he put under Rick’s command. Their job was to secure the perimeter of the village and keep anyone from coming in or going out. Jon took the second, smaller, section which was to push into the center of the village to knock out the command and control of the opposition. After both objectives were

attained, the force would, if possible, detain any enemy personal and search the village for more intelligence. Helicopters would be flown in to pick up any prisoners and casualties, while Jon and his men followed a different route through the mountains to a vehicle extraction point. The mission was pretty standard.

As they moved toward the village Jon thought about Sara, her smile, her laugh, and wondered if he would ever see her again. The sound of gunfire brought him back to reality. Rick's section had apparently moved in rather quickly and already Jon could see flashes from the northeast. It didn't take long until Jon's section came under fire. Rounds from enemy weapons whizzed around them from all directions. Quickly they rushed up to the closest buildings and began the slow, yet deliberate process of negotiating their way through gunfire toward their objective.

It took them about ten minutes to reach the main building. His team entered through the main doorway, weapons blazing. The fight lasted only a few seconds. Then his team started their search. Jon walked just outside the doorway of the central building, his hand clutching the mic from his RTO's SATCOM radio. The air was heavy with smoke, tents burned, flares illuminated the sky,

tracers zipped back and forth like fireflies. Dead men littered the ground, blood pooling on the hard rocky surface.

"Eagle's Den, this is Red Dog Six. Primary mission objectives achieved. We will begin intel search and evac of detainees in approximately twenty mikes, over."

Static sounded from the mic, then a muffled voice. "Roger, Red Dog Six. Continue onto secondary objectives, over."

"Red Dog Six, out." Jon tossed the mic to his RTO, then walked back inside the building. His men were busy searching bodies, desks, dressers, beds; anything that might contain intelligence. Along the wall stood four Afghanis, dirty, bloodied, hands held tightly over their heads.

"All right guys. Jerry, Steve, you two grab the PW's and assemble them outside the building. The rest of you follow me. We're going to clear the other building to our left."

Everyone nodded. Jon turned and, with his small team following, ran out the front door. As they moved to the main entrance of the house he called Rick through his headset. "Give me a SIT REP, Bravo team." Jon heard Rick's voice, barely audible over the sound of gunfire.

“Yeah, we’re just clearing up the last few outlying buildings and we’ll be moving to your position shortly.”

“Any casualties?” asked Jon.

“Only theirs, Boss.”

“Good. Have a few of your men set up a PW collection point on the north side of the village. Make sure it’s big enough for extraction. We’re going to clear a couple of these buildings and then wait for you to link up with us.”

“You got it,” said Rick. “Oh, by the way, watch out for civilians. They’re everywhere. Tom almost shot some lady in the face.”

“Roger. Out.” Jon raised his weapon and signaled for his team to move up to the door. Entering a building was probably the most difficult and frightening experience any soldier could face. Odds were that at least one man would be shot when they moved through the door, usually the first guy. Jon always went first despite the odds. He believed that a good leader should lead by example, and his men respected him for it. Granted, it was against the standard, but Jon didn’t always follow the standard. Jon walked up to the door and signaled a man to kick it in.

The door flew open with a crash and Jon and the others filed in, guns blazing. Four men fell. Jon dropped two of them.

"Clear." The word echoed from each corner of the room. Quickly the men spread out and began moving to the other rooms, this time searching for targets before shooting. Jon moved into a short hallway and walked slowly, purposefully, toward an open door at the end. He held his weapon close to his face, the muzzle moving wherever his eyes moved.

At the end of a hall on the right, Jon saw another closed door. He signaled for the two men following him to cover it. Then he peeked around the doorway and into the room. Nothing. Jon relaxed and lowered his weapon. Suddenly the door to his right flew open and Jon saw a figure moving toward him. He raised his weapon and fired blindly, not comprehending who or what he was shooting at. The body slumped to the floor and Jon leaned back against the wall closing his eyes.

"Oh shit," yelled one of his men. Jon wiped his face and looked down at the body that lay at his feet. It was a small boy, probably only ten or eleven years old. His bloody hands clung to an AK-47 that lay across his lifeless chest.

Jon sat up straight in bed. The light from the moon filtered through the window illuminating the room with an

eerie glow. All was silent. He rubbed his face with both hands, then slowly climbed out of bed. “I need a fucking drink,” he said, stretching his arms up high above his head. He put on his robe and headed downstairs.

He walked slowly, trying not to wake anyone else, but when he made it into the foyer he noticed the den light was on. “Hello?” he said and he peeked into the room. It was full of bookshelves and antique furniture, a grand piano in the corner and old paintings on the walls. Nobody was in the room, so he walked in and headed straight to the liqueur cabinet that sat next to a leather EZ Boy. Jack’s private stash. The cabinet was opened and on top of it sat a bottle of Jack Daniels. Jon looked around the room again. “Jack?” No answer. Jon grabbed a small glass and filled it with the whiskey, then he headed toward the front door.

Outside the night was cool; the only sound came from the crickets. He leaned up against the closet column and took a sip of the whiskey. It was strong and he curled his lips as he swallowed it down.

“What are you doing up?” said Jack.

Jon turned around spilling some of his whiskey onto his hand. Jack was sitting on a chair pushed up next to the wall.

"Shit, Jack, you scared me."

Jack smiled, the light from the moon reflected off his teeth. "I'm sorry, Son."

"It's okay. I couldn't sleep."

Jack motioned to a chair next to his. Jon wiped his hand on his robe and sat down.

"I can't sleep either. Damn arthritis keeps me up all hours of the night. What about you?" He looked at Jon, his eyes squinting, his head slightly tilted.

"I keep having these dreams."

"About war?"

"Yeah. I guess."

Jack shook his head. "I have dreams about Nam, too." He leaned back in his chair and took a sip from his glass.

"The 173rd Airborne, right?"

"Yep. Our battalion was ambushed in Dak To and boy did we have to put up a fight. You couldn't stand up, the bullets were so thick. I just laid there, in the grass, and fired, fired at anything that moved." He took another sip. "We fought all through the night. You could hear guys screaming, but you couldn't see. I remember at one point it got real quiet, but we knew they were still out there. They were right on top of us when we finally saw them. I remember beating this little VC to death with my

helmet, and then crying." He stopped and looked off at the stars.

Jon watched him for a while and drank his whiskey. Finally he asked, "Are you okay?"

Jack smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine. Are you?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't think I can, at least not yet."

"That bad, huh?"

Jon nodded.

"I understand." Jack looked up at the stars again.

"I want to get over it," said Jon. "I want to forget. That's why I came back to get Sara. I thought maybe if we were together things could go back to normal."

"See," said Jack, "that's your problem. It ain't never going to be normal for you anymore. Not after war, Son. It changes you. Changes the way you look at things, the way you think about things. Taking Sara will help for a while, but sooner or later you are going to have to face the fact that you are never going to forget what happened and you can't change that."

Jon hung his head. "I can't leave her, Jack. But at the same time I want to do right by her. She's got it

great here, and she loves you guys. I don't want to take that away from her."

Jack nodded.

"But at the same time, I want to be with her, too. The problem is that every time I look at her I can't help but think of the terrible things I've done."

"Well," said Jack, "you got a tough decision to make." He stood up and put his hand on Jon's shoulder. "You're a good man, Jon, and a smart man. I know you'll make the right choice."

Jack took one last drink from his glass and headed toward the door, then he stopped and looked up at the stars. "Beautiful night, ain't it?" And he disappeared into the house.

The sun had just peeked the tree line and Jack, Mary and Sara watched while Jon put his duffle bag in the back of his truck. Then he walked over to Mary and took off his ball cap.

"Well," he said, "I guess that just about does it." He looked down at his feet. "Mary, I . . ."

"I know," Mary said. "I know. I'm sorry too." She reached forward and pulled him close. Jon raised his arms and they embraced.

“Now you take good care of yourself, ya here.”

Jon stepped back. “Yes Ma’am, I will.”

She smiled and stepped back. Then Jack walked forward and stuck out his hand. Jon shook it, and reached over giving Jack a quick hug.

“You hurry on back now, Son.” Jack smiled then stood behind Sara, who was rubbing her eyes.

Jon took a knee down in front of her and held open his arms. Sara ran forward, but stopped short of him. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

Jon shook his head. “It’s not that, Sweetie. I want you to come, but I think it’s best that you stay here. I’m going to have to leave soon anyway, and I can’t take you with me. This is your home now. This is where you belong.”

Sara walked into his arms and he held her tight. Looking up at Mary and Jack he said, “You take care of your grandma and grandpa. Be a good girl.” Then he kissed her forehead and let her go.

As the truck rolled down the gravel driveway there was a light breeze causing the Spanish moss to dance. Jon looked in his rearview mirror and watched Sara wave.

Duty

I was watching football the day you died. The TV was turned up loud and I was sitting back in my recliner sipping on a bottle of Bud. Your mother was in the kitchen. She had just finished baking cookies and was going to send them off to you in a care package with a letter and your little bear the following morning. Before she began to pack them away she offered me one, but I was too lazy to get up and get it. Besides, it was third and goal and Texas was about to score another touchdown. And you know how I get when the game is on.

The two sergeants who came to the door that day wore their green Class A uniforms. They were covered with ribbons and patches, just like the ones on my old uniform, the ones you used to point at and ask what I got them for. You said I looked handsome in my uniform; I remember how proud I was when I saw you in yours. You said it made you look fat, which was something I thought was odd for a soldier to say, but then again, you always were that beautiful girl and you wanted to look your best.

Your mother was the one who answered the door. I heard her voice waver when she called my name. She said

that it was some men from the Army and they needed to talk to us. I didn't hesitate to get up.

We invited the men in, but they were reluctant to stay. They tried to hand her a letter, offer their condolences. But you know how your mother is. She said, "Nonsense. Come on in, I'll get some coffee going. And Victor, turn off that darn television." At first the two men protested, but they must've decided to stay after seeing the desperate look on your mother's face.

I was proud of your mother that day. She has always been a strong women; I don't think I have ever seen her stronger. She boiled up a pot of coffee, poured it for the two soldiers, and even smiled while offering them sugar and cream. At first I wondered if she knew what was going on, but when I saw her take the cookies from your care package and put them on a plate and serve them to these men, well, I knew she knew you were gone.

It wasn't like you to join the service. It was the last thing that your mother and I expected. You were always so fragile when you were young, always cutting and bruising yourself on everything. And although you played sports and were just as good as some of the guys, you were always real feminine. Like the way you always wore dresses and did up your hair, and how everything in your room had

to be pink and bright. I rarely remember you wearing jeans and stuff, and you never got dirty unless it was necessary. But you were a fighter, never quitting no matter how difficult things were. Like the time when you were tackled hard while playing soccer, and we thought that you were injured, but you got up, dusted yourself off, and scored the winning goal. I knew in you there was something special – a drive that I felt could only come from a son, yet somehow developed in my daughter. And I knew you were capable of doing anything, yet I never could have predicted your choice. But you were so excited to be accepted to West Point, and when the letter came you waved it in the air and jumped and danced. I said that's not how a soldier should act. And you stopped and smiled, then gave me a hug.

But you always had an interest, didn't you, darling? Your curiosity over my job seemed to grow each passing day. You wanted to know what my job was and how hard it was to do it. You always had a million questions – What's it like to jump out of an airplane? How heavy is your weapon? Why do we fight wars? Have you ever killed a man? I guess I wasn't always honest with you when it came to those questions. I didn't feel it was appropriate to be truthful with some of them. Besides, your mother would have been

upset with me if I did. “Our young lady doesn’t need to hear your war stories,” she’d say. But now, now that you’re gone, I wish I didn’t hold back. I wish you could have known more about the dangers that you would face. I wish I told you what it feels like to kill. I wish I would have told you that it is not your job to be killed.

After your mother had served the coffee and the cookies and we had finished small talk about the weather, she sat down next to me and grabbed hold of my hand. “So,” she said to the men, “tell me how it happened. How did my Darlene die?”

Both of the sergeants looked at each other for a moment, then one of them said, “Ma’am, we aren’t really prepared to talk about the specifics of Lieutenant Lewis’s death.”

But she demanded to know. “My husband and I have been a part of the military for twenty-five years. I have the right to know what happened to my daughter.” And though there were tears on her face, her expression was as solid and stern as ever. The men, they looked at me and I nodded. I’ve never been much for words.

The day you left for Iraq your mother was angry. Not at you – I hope you didn’t feel that way – but rather at the Army for stealing her daughter. You know that your

mother and I don't agree with this war – she calls it a Vietnam-like quagmire – and I know that she was vocal, but she meant well. She had been through this many times before with me, but I guess she never believed she would have to deal with her only child in the same way. But she loves you, Darlene – we both do.

I was angry too, but I'd never let that show, because mixed with that anger was pride as well. And when I held you close and told you goodbye, I hope my words of encouragement were never far from your thoughts.

The two men who came to our house, they told us how you died. It was an ambush, they said. Your convoy was carrying supplies from one base to another and it was hit. They said that everyone was killed either as a direct result of the initial attack or afterward. But they said you must've put up one hell of a fight.

Then the sergeant who was telling us stopped and said that he really shouldn't continue. But your mother has a way of making people follow through with their stories. "I really want to know everything." Then the sergeant took a deep breath and continued.

When the army was finally able to reach your ambushed convoy they found most of the bodies stripped. You were found lying next to your destroyed HUMVEE. I wish I could

have been there to protect you or at least to hold you in my arms when you died. But I know in battle there is no such comfort. I hope you have found peace in death.

A few days ago I was watching CNN and the reporter said that more American female soldiers had died in Iraq as a result of direct combat than in any other war. Apparently women have more of a combat role than the government is willing to admit. Your mother said she heard that they were pulling women away from the more dangerous areas and sticking them where they can be safe. She wished they had done that for you, but I told her that such a place did not exist in that country. Besides, I said, you are a fighter and you wouldn't have wanted it that way.

The day you received your commission from West Point was one of the proudest moments in my life. I had always wanted my child to follow in my footsteps as a soldier and to know that my daughter was an officer made me extremely happy. But what pleased me the most was knowing that my daughter had worked hard to achieve what she wanted and that she would always work hard to ensure the job was done for our country. I knew you would duty like I did mine.

Yesterday we received your final letter. Your mother, she couldn't open it, so I took it from her trembling hands, tore open the envelope, and read your final words to

us. You said that things were fine, but things were very busy. You talked a lot about the weather and the people in your unit, and how you and a few of your friends had been collecting shoes to hand out to children in the area. But then you became serious before the letter closed. Your mother says that you did it because you knew in your subconscious that you were not going to be around much longer. I don't know if I believe that or not, but it is obvious that you were thinking hard about that subject. You said that things were starting to get rough lately and that many of your convoys had close calls. That it was only a matter of time before something happened and that your unit was fortunate to have not lost a soldier yet. But you knew that it could change quickly. "Daddy," you said, "the enemy is taking more chances. I fear that I might lose someone."

I will always remember the last lines of that letter; I placed it next to your picture in my office. You said, "Daddy, things may be tough here now, but I'm glad that we are here. When we are out among the people I can see the hope in their eyes." I know you did your duty to the last and I pray that as you took your dying breath that you believed it wasn't all in vain. But as I sit her suffering, missing my beautiful daughter, I can't help but

wonder if their chance for hope was worth your sacrifice.

I hope that it was.

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