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Editor's Note

“We are made to persist. That's how we find out who we are.”

—Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army*

Happy Veterans Day and welcome to the second volume of *O-Dark-Thirty* and our first all-fiction issue.

The quote above from Tobias Wolff, one of America's most celebrated short story writers and a Vietnam War veteran, is particularly apt on this day. It captures the essence of service in the armed forces for the individual veteran, but also for the nation as a whole. But it also describes what drives many fiction writers—a constant persistence in the pursuit of conflict—the surest method to revealing the truth behind character, story and ultimately, the human condition.

As you'll soon see, the men and women veterans who have shared their fiction with us understand this pursuit. Their persistence reveals poignant and often harsh realities for their characters, but also truth about who we are.

We're confident that these veteran writers—and countless more like them—represent well the tradition of persistence and self-discovery that Wolff described. Their work, in fact, stands as a most fitting compliment to a day in which we honor all those who have served and the many who have written about that service.

James Mathews
Fiction Editor, *O-Dark-Thirty*

Fiction.

The Sleepwalker

By Eddie Jeffrey

Fort Knox. He remembers climbing around on the tanks, his father snapping Polaroids and handing them to his mother and her fanning them back and forth to get them to develop faster. He remembers mud and frogs and turtles. He remembers him and his friends gathered around the gigantic, translucent green and yellow spider that had spun its web under the kitchen window of the trailer next to theirs, and the time he split his knee open flipping over the handlebars of his bike on his first attempt riding no hands down the gravel hill that led from the highway into the trailer park. He remembers how his mother used to have him and his brother help her hang Avon catalogs on all the neighbors' doors, and how they had to start blocking their front door with the Lazy Boy nights after they found his brother taking a whizz off the front porch at three in the morning sound asleep on his feet. He remembers his father in his Class B khakis at the bus station and how he sort of looked like Elvis when he had been in the Army and had gone off to Germany and how his father hugged him and his brother and how his father had

to practically tear himself away from his mother who was sobbing into his father's shoulder so hard...how he and his brother sat in the back seat of their station wagon watching his mother slumped over the steering wheel moaning until long after the bus had pulled out of the station, how they had been afraid to speak or even move, but praying for something, anything to break the spell of her misery. They were too frightened themselves to cry. He remembers being hungry, how they made it to Burger King, finally, his mother staring bleary eyed out the window over their heads as they munched on their kid's meal fries and burgers and sipped on their Cokes in that weird post-traumatic silence where it feels like your ears are stuffed with cotton. He still has the Star Wars glass tucked away somewhere at the back of his cupboard to prove it.

Eddie Jeffrey's work has appeared in or is forthcoming with Copaiba Press, Thrice Fiction, Chaffey Review, Rising, JazzTimes, and The Alexandria Times. He lives near Baltimore and is a reader for Baltimore Review.

Liberty

By Jim Beane

0830 11 December 1964

The steward Marco froze at the end of the corridor when he recognized Dutch. He leaned to one side and shifted his feet, the ship pitched. Heavy seas. Both hands clung to the linen covered tray meant for the officer's mess. Boatswain's Mate First Class Dutch Olson leaned on the ship's store counter in the middle of the ship's corridor. His ass stuck out and blocked Marco's passage.

"Gimme a pack of Lucky's," Olson said to the store clerk Hugo, Dutch's pal. Dutch tossed a nickel and a quarter on the counter, then swirled ominously to glare at Marco. He and Marco were not pals.

Seaman Second Class Samuel Carter leaned against the steel bulkhead next to Olsen and waited his turn at the store. He had no feelings one way or the other toward Marco or any of the Filipinos on board. He flattened himself to the bulkhead to make way, but Dutch didn't budge. Marco closed the distance between himself and Olson by half.

"By your leave," he said, his voice boyish and thin. Carter thought he looked like a sad old man.

“You hear something?” Dutch said. He gazed overhead like the thin voice had come from above.

Marco stepped forward. Beads of sweat slicked his forehead.

“By your leave,” he said. He stood rigid, at attention, squeezed against the starboard side of the corridor.

Dutch plucked the Luckys from Hugo’s hand and leaned back against the bulkhead opposite the store’s hatch. He stretched his legs into the passage, and crossed one ankle over the other to make it near impossible for Marco to pass.

Hugo rested his elbows on the drop-down counter and cradled his chin in his hands watching Marco. He winked at Carter. Carter felt a boil rise in his throat.

Dutch folded his arms across his chest, his biceps swelling like cured hams. He stood a foot taller than Marco and outweighed him twice. The steward cleared his throat.

“For officer mess,” he said. His voice wavered. He extended the tray as proof.

“I know what it’s for gook, you think I’m stupid?” Dutch stood erect and pressed the backs of his legs against the bulkhead to make way in an exaggerated fashion. The narrowest gap remained for Marco to squeeze past. Dutch swept his hand inviting Marco to pass.

Marco stepped forward and the ship lurched. Dutch stuck his foot out. Marco tripped over it, stumbled, and fell forward. The steward saved most of the meal, but silverware flew and rolls tumbled to the deck.

“S’matter,” Dutch said. “I thought you island boys was used to rough seas.”

Hugo let loose a horse laugh and he and Dutch slapped open palms. Marco scrambled after the rolls.

Carter came forward and crouched to help.

“Brace up Carter.” Dutch shouted. “You ain’t no galley wench

like these fucking pineapples.” He kicked the rolls further from the steward’s outstretched hands. The ship pitched forward and Dutch pretended to lose balance, and used the opportunity to drive his knee into Marco’s side. Marco slammed into the steel bulkhead and tried to hide beneath the store counter, but Hugo yanked the counter closed from inside and snapped the hatch locks shut.

Marco racked upright and raised his fists to protect his face. Ship corridors are tight, no circling, no getting away. Dutch’s broad shoulders filled the passage. He licked his lips, his eyes blazed. Carter grabbed Dutch’s shoulder from behind and when the big man whirled, Marco hauled ass through the open hatch where he’d come. The rolls and tray stayed behind on the deck.

“Fuckin’ chickenshit pineapples,” Dutch said. “Go on Carter, pick that shit up.”

“No way,” Carter said. He jumped in the shark tank. Dutch’s lips pursed together.

“You disobeyin’ an order, Seaman? For what? That fag pineapple?” Carter understood respect for rank, Dutch deserved it, he’d served his time.

Hugo popped the hatch and started yakking at the Dutchman.

Carter ducked through the hatch at the opposite end of the corridor.

0845 Same day

Carter burst into his quarters fuming.

“What’s up?” Bowman said.

“Fucking lifers,” Carter said, and squeezed past Bowman.

Carter shared quarters with Bowman, an Iowa farmboy who’d never smelled salt water before he enlisted, and four others on board the Coast Guard Cutter Hamilton. Six bunks, stacked three over three, six lockers the size of long shoe boxes wedged on one

bulkhead, and a table with two chairs filled the compartment. Levin, a Jersey wiseguy sat with Bowman, playing cards, boys pretending to be men. Levin's girly calendar taped to the bulkhead next to the duty roster served as decor. Bowman and Levin tossed their cards to the center of the table and sat back in their chairs with their arms crossed. They wore white V-neck tee shirts and boxer shorts, they'd all just come off watch. A tattooed anchor covered Levin's forearm.

"Dutch and Hugo went after Marco again," Carter said.

"Big deal," Levin said. "Old Dutch don't like Filipinos in his Guard."

"That don't give him the right to fuck with them," Carter said.

"Dutch ain't concerned with rights," Levin said. "He hates gooks and's got a special red ass for Marco, that's for sure."

"What's Marco done?" Carter said.

"Nothing, he's a Filipino, that's enough." Levin picked the cards up and began shuffling them.

"Fucking Dutch," Bowman whispered.

"He's killer, ain't he?" Levin said.

Carter jumped in his rack and Levin dealt Bowman another hand.

1330 Same day

Dutch flicked the overhead on and off. He swatted Bowman in the arm and flicked the lights again. As section leader, he woke his seamen for work details between watches. He poked Levin's shoulder with his fingertip.

"On deck," Dutch said. His voice boomed. Levin stirred in his bunk.

"How's Marco?" someone said, muffled beneath cover.

Dutch scanned the quarters. "Who said that?"

Dutch's Guard stood watch, ate chow, caught a few winks, chipped paint, ate chow, chipped more paint, ate more chow, played

a little cards and stood another watch. Dutch's Guard did not make wise-ass comments. His Guard did not speak in funny accents or wait tables for officers.

"Who gives a fuck?" he said. "Fucking pineapples should be swabbing heads, not wearing crow's. Now get the fuck up 'fore I start jamming a size twelve shit kicker up your asses."

Dutch flicked the overhead switch repeatedly.

"Below," Carter called out and swung his legs over the edge of his bunk.

Levin pushed Carter's feet from his face, stood from his own bunk, and tried to elbow past Bowman.

"Watch it, shithead," Bowman said.

They dressed in a hurry and headed for the upper deck. Carter passed Marco in the passage outside the radio room. Marco hurried past without a word or glance.

1300 12 Dec 1964

Carter hated chipping rust scales, the mission of all work details in good weather. The sea had settled to flat calm and a full afternoon sun scorched the cold right out of the day. Dutch supervised Carter's work crew, but mostly he slumped in the sun against the warm steel bulkhead, huffed his smoke and closed his eyes.

Carter noticed Chief Petty Officer Puse', the head steward, emerge from one of the galley hatches, light a smoke and study Dutch napping against the bulkhead.

1400 14 Dec 1964

When the Hamilton pulled into Boston for a much needed five day turnaround, all hands crowded around the duty roster to see who plucked the short straw and pulled duty instead of liberty.

Marco nudged past Carter and wormed his way next to Dutch.

“Get the fuck away from me,” Dutch said.

The Filipino didn't move and Dutch gave him a shove. Carter and the others gave them some room.

“Get back in the fuckin' galley where you belong,” Dutch said.

“I belong here,” Marco said. “Same like you.” He focused on the liberty chart.

“You deaf, gook? I said get the fuck gone.”

Two more stewards appeared from nowhere and stood at Marco's side.

“Watch what you say, Dutchman,” Marco said.

“What'd you say you fuckin' slope?” Dutch's face flushed red, the vein on his forehead looked ready to explode.

“Be careful,” Marco said.

“You threatening me? You fucking turd. I'll squash you like a fucking roach.”

Marco took a cautious step backward, the other two stewards remained at his shoulders. Dutch glowered and took one step toward them.

Chief Puse' materialized and blocked Dutch. Carter marveled at the Filipino's timing.

“You got problem, Petty Officer Olson?” the Chief said.

Dutch's fists clenched and unclenched at his side.

“No problem, Chief.”

Marco stood behind his chief, pointed at the Dutchman and drew his finger across his throat.

1800 Same day

Before evening chow, Chief Puse' dressed Dutch down outside the enlisted mess in front of Carter and the rest of Dutch's boys.

“You look shit,” the chief said. He pointed to Dutch's unpolished belt buckle. Hugo snickered.

“You got something to say, seaman,” the chief snapped. Hugo skulked into the dining hall. Puse` threatened to put Dutch on report, if he didn’t shape up. Dutch seethed, but managed to choke out an “Aye, aye sir,” once Puse` finished his rant.

“Shove off,” the chief said.

Dutch turned on his heels and sauntered into the chow line. He gave thumbs up to a table of grinning petty officers. Puse` hurried past them into the scullery.

“Fucking Puse`,`” Dutch said. He set his tray down next to Hugo. “Him and that fuckin’ Marco. I’ll get even for what just happened. I’ll bury every one of those assholes.”

“Yeah,” Hugo said, “deep six every one of them.”

Carter forced himself to laugh along with the others. Sections worked together, ate together and bunked together, Carter felt included with the rest, like it or not.

“I heard Puse` bitching to the Officer on Deck about our section,” Levin said. “He claimed the petty officer in charge was sleeping on work detail.”

“Fuckin’ rat slopes are fishbait,” Dutch said.

“The O.D. told Puse` to get his panties unbunched. I swear,” Levin said. “The O.D. patted Puse` on the shoulder and said he’d take care of the situation. But when Puse` went away, the O.D. rolled his eyes like the chief was nothing short of pathetic.”

“Nobody gives a fuck what happens to a pineapple,” Hugo said.

Carter leaned his head towards Bowman, and spoke so only Bowman could hear him.

“This situation is getting way too fucked up,” he said.

0730 15 Dec 1964

At breakfast, Dutch faked a sneeze as Puse` passed his table. He disguised the word pussy, imitating the drawn out last syllable

of the chief's name, behind the sneeze. The chief stopped just beyond Dutch's table, turned slowly and faced Dutch. Carter looked up from the table with Bowman, Levin, Hugo and a few others.

Puse` glanced over to the chief's table by the main galley hatch, but none of the white chiefs so much as looked up.

Dutch brushed past the chief and dumped his tray. Hugo, Levin and a couple of others fell in behind Dutch and filed out of the mess. Carter lingered behind hoping to distance himself, he found distance easier than navigating rough waters. Sometimes you couldn't detach, and in this case, judging by Puse`'s expression he rowed the same boat as those who'd just left.

Puse` disappeared into the scullery behind the steaming kettles.

The ship's loudspeakers blared with the skipper's voice. "Liberty commences at sixteen hundred hours. Sign out on the quarterdeck and check the duty roster for changes."

Carter hustled from the galley. He'd been in this pressure cooker for a month and needed to get the hell off before it exploded.

1555 Same Day

Carter checked his look in the piece of mirror he'd taped inside his locker. He adjusted his kerchief and smoothed his open palms against the wool of his dress blues. He cocked his Dixie cup low over one eyebrow and peeked at the mirror. Sam Carter had served one and one half years of a four-year hitch and still dressed in a uniform that never felt quite right.

"Man, I can't wait to get laid," Levin said.

"In your dreams," Bowman said. He high-fived Carter and grinned at Levin.

"First things first," Carter said. "Let's get drunk."

"Yeah," Levin said. "Happy hour at Tony's and then Maggie's. I smell Tony's twenty-five cent drafts already. Boom, boom, drink 'til we drop."

“Good plan, Levin,” Bowman said. “Maggie’s whores won’t fuck you sober, so get hammered and try.”

“Fuck you man, my luscious twins await me. Right Carter. Carter?”

Carter had fled up the ladder to the quarterdeck. The Officer on Deck gave him a quick inspection, and Carter leaned over the OD’s desk to sign out.

Dutch grabbed his sleeve.

“Got plans?” he said.

Carter signed out, ignoring Dutch.

“I’m talking to you, Carter,” Dutch said.

Hugo stood next to Dutch and a couple other Dutch faithful milled around behind them.

“But I’m not listening,” Carter said. He dropped the pen on the sign out sheet, saluted the flag and stepped off the ship onto the gangplank. Bowman followed in his wake, but Levin lagged behind.

Dutch pinned him at the rail. “In a hurry?” he said.

“Sort of,” Levin said. He checked out his friends making tracks to Tony’s and tried to slip away, but Dutch blocked his way and started talking. Levin half listened.

“See you at Maggie’s,” Dutch said when he finished bending Levin’s ear.

Levin trotted down the gangplank. “Hey, Bowman,” he yelled. “Wait up.” They did, and the three of them ran from the ship whooping and hollering.

Dockworkers, swabbies, and anybody slumming for a cheap drunk jammed Tony’s joint. Carter weaseled between a couple cowboys at the bar and held up three fingers for Tony. Three shots of clouded whiskey followed three drafts. The cowboys finished their drinks and got up to head home to mama. Bowman and Levin took their places. Tony kept their drinks fresh.

“To the Guard,” Levin said. They dropped shot glasses into their drafts. The whiskey drifted in the beer like smoke.

“To honorable discharge,” Bowman said. They drained the mugs until the shot glasses clinked against their teeth.

“To getting drunk,” Carter said, which seemed the most important.

“Hear, hear,” a dockworker at the end of the bar said.

After the fifth shot, they quit the whiskey. Tony brought out a couple bowls of nuts and chips and set them in front of the boys.

“Soaks up the booze,” he said. Carter felt too lubricated to be helped by a few salted nuts.

Bowman unscrewed the top from a jar of pickled sausages and gobbled three in a row. He fanned his mouth with both hands.

“Fuckers are on fire,” he said. He drained his beer and waggled his fingers at Tony. He pushed the jar toward Levin.

“I ain’t eating pig dick.” Levin said and shoved the jar back at Bowman.

Carter reached across Levin and dipped his fingers in the jar. He plucked one of the sausages free, raised it above his head, bent his neck back and dropped it into his mouth.

“Ah, pig dick,” he said.

Bowman jabbed Levin in the ribs.

“Assholes,” Levin slurred.

They raised their mugs in salute, drained them and slammed them on the bar.

The front door flew open and Marco burst inside. The silence lasted a few seconds before everyone resumed drinking. Marco drifted behind Levin and flashed his little boy smile. Two of his friends trailed behind and lurked at the doorway.

“Where your friend Dutch?” Marco said.

Levin stared at Marco like he’d never seen him before, and turned back to the bar.

Marco nodded to Carter.

“Where your friend Dutch?”

“Dutch ain’t my friend.”

Marco’s face clouded. He looked to Bowman.

“He your friend?” Marco said.

Bowman laughed, drunk. He shoved Carter and raised his eyebrows, and stole a glance at Marco.

“Jesus Christ, Marco,” Carter said. “Dutch ain’t nobody’s friend.”

“Where is he?” Marco said.

“We don’t know.” Levin shouted in the little man’s face. “Leave us the fuck alone.”

“Unless you’re buying,” Bowman said. He slurred his words.

“Right, Tony, a round of pineapples for the pineapples,” Levin said.

“Don’t call them that,” Carter said. “You sound like Dutch.”

“Oh, so sorry,” Levin said.

“Go on Marco, we don’t want trouble,” Carter said. “I don’t know where Dutch is, and I don’t want to know.”

Marco stared at Levin for a few seconds. The Filipinos wore loud Hawaiian shirts and loose fitting pants.

“Nice shirt,” Levin said and he touched the collar of Marco’s shirt, “What’s that made of? Pineapple leaves?”

“Shut up,” Carter said. “Go on Marco. Go back to the ship. Forget about Dutch.”

“Forget Dutch?” Marco said. “No forget, not tonight.” He looked at his two friends and laughed.

“Is okay, we find him.” Marco signaled the other two and they left without another word.

Carter held up three fingers.

“Friends of yours?” Tony said. He wiped down the bar in front of Carter.

“Not tonight,” Carter said.

Bowman folded his arms on the bar and laid his head on them.

“Bring us another one,” Levin slurred. They left Tony’s near midnight totally shitfaced. Carter flipped the collar of his peacoat up against the cold. A needling drizzle had turned to sleet.

0043 16 December 1964

“Look at you wet dogs,” Dutch yelled. “’Bout time you sons of bitches showed up to my house.”

Carter shucked his peacoat and shook the wet from the heavy wool.

Dutch bearhugged Levin.

“Where the fuck you been? Man, it’s good to get my boys all together,” Dutch said. “Serve together, drink together, stick together.” Dutch’s words slid together into one long slur. He released Levin and punched him in the shoulder playfully.

A fake Christmas tree, strung with broken lights, leaned lopsided in the corner of the front room, the parlor Maggie called it, and listed against one wall. Near naked young girls lounged on every horizontal surface in the room. Glass bead curtains separated the bar in the back of the house from the parlor. Worn velvet drapes hung behind the curvy backed beat-down couches that crowded the room. Dim lights burned overhead. Two enginemen from the Hamilton sat on one of the couches and tried to grope the girls as they meandered past them. The girls giggled and dodged away and the enginemen whistled and almost fell from the couch trying to grab ass.

The magnificent Maggie strode into the room. Sex oozed off her like cheap perfume. Hugo followed close behind her jitter-bugging like a moth to a flame. He tried to put his arms around her waist. She swatted his hands away as you might flies from honey.

“Come on in,” she said to Carter. “Where you been hiding all night?” She touched the girl perched on the arm of the couch she passed. The girl stood up and followed her toward Carter.

“Carter,” Dutch said. He came beside Maggie and slipped his arm around her waist. She did not resist. “Meet Rose, your perfect woman.” Rose wore see-through panties. Carter could not look away. Bowman and Levin plowed through the bead curtain and headed directly to the bar. Two dark-skinned girls, the twins Levin longed for, jumped them and threw their arms around the seamen’s necks.

Rose ushered Carter to the couch where Hugo sat snoring.

“Move the fuck offa there,” Dutch said. “My boy Carter needs a place to sit with Rose, the girl of his dreams.”

Reluctantly and half conscious, Hugo scooted to the end of the sofa to sulk. Carter flopped on the couch and dust lifted in the air and shimmered in the glare from a floor lamp. Rose draped herself in his lap.

“Home, sweet home,” Dutch said. Maggie kissed him and he molded himself to her body.

Levin brought Carter a drink from the bar. He glanced back at Bowman and their girls. His dark twin pushed her tits up at him with both hands.

“Next round’s on you,” Levin said. “Bowman says our train stops here.”

Carter glanced beyond the glass bead curtain. Bowman’s face burrowed between his twin’s tits. Her hand massaged his crotch. Long way from Iowa, Carter thought.

“Roger that,” Carter said. He rested his head against Rose’s chest.

Levin disappeared behind the glass beads.

Rose climbed off Carter and yanked at his hand to help him up from the couch.

“C’mon, big boy, let’s go upstairs and have some real fun,” she said. But Carter, limp from all the booze, pulled her down on top of him.

A commotion at the front door caught everyone’s attention and Marco and the two Filipinos from Tony’s sauntered inside. Four others stalked in and fanned out behind them.

Dutch shoved Maggie out of his arms. His lips pulled back and exposed his teeth. He coiled his body like a cornered dog.

“Get the fuck outta here,” he snarled. He lunged toward Marco.

The Filipinos stood stone still, expressionless, like wax dummies.

“Fuck you, Dutch,” Marco hissed.

Two Filipinos split from the others and fell in like shadows behind Dutch and as Dutch raised his fist, they attacked from behind. Dutch lost balance and as he fell, Marco’s hand slashed across the Dutchman’s throat. A flash of steel glinted in the cheesy light. A spurt of blood spit onto Marco’s pants and Dutch pitched face first to the floor. A wet gargle, like no voice at all, dribbled from the Dutchman’s mouth.

Maggie screamed.

Hugo elevated from the couch and one of Marco’s boys took him down with a kick to the groin. The enginemen tried to stand, but fell into each other drunk and collapsed onto the couch. Levin untangled himself from his twin, and he and Bowman rushed in from the bar.

Bowman blanched at the blood pumping from Dutch’s throat and pooling beneath his head. Levin vomited on the couch next to Carter. Carter could not summon himself to move.

Marco pressed his foot against Dutch’s side and pushed. Then spit on him.

“Motherfucker,” Levin said. He started for Marco, but three of Marco’s boys threw him back through the beads.

Marco took a long look at the faces of the seamen, but saved the longest for Carter.

He knelt and wiped his knife on Dutch's shirt, folded it closed, and dropped it on the floor in front of Hugo.

Hugo cursed him and raised to his knees. He held his groin in both hands and groaned.

"Return to ship's store," Marco said. "Don't need anymore."

Marco twisted that little boy's smile onto his face, then casually followed his boys out the front door of Maggie's into the frozen night.

Hugo crawled across the floor and placed his hand to Dutch's throat. Dutch gasped and blood streamed through Hugo's fingers. The big man's legs spasmed, and Bowman held tight to stop them hopping. Hugo cursed and screamed for help. Levin knelt next to Hugo and draped his kerchief across Dutch's throat.

"I think he's breathing," he said.

The enginemen grabbed at Dutch's arms and legs. Levin wove his hands under Dutch's arms. Bowman did the same. Carter grabbed Dutch's hands. Hugo held his head. But, when they heaved together, Dutch fell from their grasp and they all collapsed in a sticky heap to the floor.

Dutch raised his hand above his chest, but only for a second, and the hand fell limp to the side of his body. His head lolled to one side. Levin's kerchief slipped away. A deep red gash opened wide. The men reached under Dutch and linked their hands together to fashion a dead man's carry.

"Move out," Hugo ordered.

They raised together, balanced the limp body and double-timed from Maggie's to the docks.

The Officer on Deck and a squad of shore patrolmen heard the screams a hundred yards away and hustled down the gangplank to help when they made it to the ship.

“Get the doc,” the O.D. yelled. Blood colored everything.

The shore patrols pried Dutch from Carter and the rest, and disappeared with him up the gangplank, Hugo hot on their heels.

0345 Same day

Bowman dropped to his knees. Levin sunk to the asphalt and sat cross legged. Carter daubed a kerchief at his bloody hands. The enginemen wandered off, lost.

A shore patrolman questioned them. He wrote their names in his log, and asked questions they couldn't answer.

“There will be an inquiry,” the patrol said. “Be damn sure of that and probably a captain's mast. So you best talk now if you know anything.”

No one spoke, and the shore patrolman shook his head and walked away. Bowman closed his eyes, his head drooped from his neck. The shore patrolman stopped at the head of the gangplank.

“Clean yourself up,” he said, “the captain will be wanting to see you.” He nodded slightly and walked up the gangplank onto the deck of the ship.

After the patrols had left and the docks were clear of all but bloodied seamen, Chief Puse` stepped from the shadows. Four of his stewards appeared behind him half hidden in the fog. Their flowered shirts showed little signs of the fight. They looked fresh from returning from liberty and hovered over Bowman and Levin. A streetlight made their faces shine in the freezing rain.

Puse` placed his hand on Levin's shoulders. “How liberty?” he said.

Levin jerked from beneath the chief's hand, and stood to face him. Two from the shadows stepped forward. Levin was surrounded, and clearly oblivious.

“Where's Marco?” Levin said. He spit the words in the Chief's face.

“Marco? Marco who?” The chief looked at the other grimfaced Filipinos. “You men know this Marco? No. I’m sorry, Seaman Levin, we know no Marco.” There was no more than a finger’s width between their faces. “There is no Marco.”

The chief pushed past Levin toward the gangway, and the others followed close behind. The last one to the gangplank tossed a blood streaked cover to Carter. Carter recognized the man as the one who drove his foot into Hugo’s balls.

Puse` stopped at the foot of the gangway. His men strolled past and headed up the gangplank. Puse` stared at Carter and slicked his hand through his hair, but didn’t speak. He didn’t need to, Carter understood rank and respect and he understood Dutch’s Guard would be better served without the Dutchman. It would survive and so would the world.

Jim Beane's stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines including The Baltimore Review, Scribble, The Long Story, The Potomac Review and the anthology DC Noir. He has twice been awarded fellowship to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and is currently leading creative writing workshops at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD. He is working on his first novel and second collection of short stories.

Jim received his honorable discharge from the United States Coast Guard in 1972.

Your Country

By Lynn Stansbury

Funny where you run into bits of other people's wars. Like on a foggy Sunday evening on US 99 somewhere north of Merced but still south of Sacramento and the connectors to I-5. The exit is a two-pump Sunoco station and a Taco Bell on the far side of the highway, but whatever soured you on the ghostly strip malls and Applebees and Jack-in-the-Boxes further south means you've run out of choices. At the bottom of the short straight ramp is a rusted 'yield' sign; Main Street bears off to the right beside the town cemetery. As you turn, your lights slide across the face of a marble angel.

Five dark blocks later, a vest-pocket café is still open on a side-street. It has old-time diagonal parking in front, the wall-papered john is spotless, and the white-board menu includes BLTs and 'home-made pie'. You can smell something burnt—coffee or bacon—but decide that nobody can mess up a BLT, and you owe these people something for a loo that didn't reek of old drains and chemical flowers. At this end of the L-shaped counter, two paunchy guys in Harley-Davidson t-shirts, their tractor bill caps reversed—one

Kubota, one John Deere—stare up at a Giants game on TV. The rest of the room is empty except for a young couple in one of the far booths under the plate-glass windows. You can see the back of her blonde head and his quick dark glance as he tracks your appearance on the scene then looks back to her.

The one server gestures from behind the counter. “Place is yours,” she says. She is bleach-blonde, reed-thin, leathery-looking, portrait of a Dust Bowl Okie granddaughter married into an old ranch family and now the aging wife or widow of an agribusiness foreman, picking up some extra cash and some time to herself.

“Thanks. Just coffee for now.” You head for the tiny booth against the far back wall under a white-faced clock like out of the 1930’s. Weekdays, that booth will be some local’s primo spot for watching the passing scene, but now it’s empty and the nearest seating to the hotplate island with the coffee pots and the pie carousel and the tray of scarred white ceramic mugs. Settling into the booth with your coffee, you fish your book and phone out of your backpack and set them on the table. The booth under the window where the young couple sits is so close that you can hear their quiet conversation.

Like creatures at the edge of a forest, they are silent for a moment—maybe as aware of you as you are of them. They stare at each other across the steel-edged red Formica table, and your first thought is that they could not have come into this place together fifty years ago, a girl that white, that classy, and a kid so dark, so clearly Mexican. You watch, fascinated, maybe a little afraid for them—surfing radio stations as you drive, you’ve heard “wetback” more than once tonight—maybe even a little jealous.

She is slim and, in her white tank top and tight cropped jeans, could be made of gold: gold hair, gold skin, two gold earrings on this side—a cuff on the helix and a tiny hoop in the

lobe—and a fine gold chain at her throat, with a single pearl hanging just above the swell of her breasts. One slender ankle perched on a high-heeled gold filigree sandal slants out from beneath the table. Her face is a smooth oval, her mouth wide and full, and her blue-gray eyes tilt up at the corners. The guy is maybe a little older but not much. His skin is copper brown, and his crisp-cut hair is short and black, but the more you look, the more you wonder about him. That profile is not Mexican. Mayan, maybe, like a jaguar prince from Tikal, and something else less obvious. It suggests a complicated family history: Africans in Mexico, Jews in Guatemala, Japanese in Peru. The kind of thing her family is unlikely to approve of, maybe something you don't want to know about, knowledge that might force you to think and make choices.

Which is not at all what you came in here for. You loosen your shoulders and sip your coffee. Your nose was wrong; the coffee is weak and bland, but it is fresh.

The air-conditioning in here is fierce. Rolling down your sleeves and glancing up, you can see even from here that the young woman's bare arms are pricked with goose-bumps. She pulls a pair of lacquered sticks like crossed swords from the smooth knot on the back of her head, and her hair uncoils into a spun-gold cape down her back. Shoulders squared, the young man watches the sinuous unraveling. She says, "So now I've been to Goodluck." Her voice is high-pitched, teasing.

His eyes lift to her face. "Was it worth it?"

"I didn't see much." She cocks her head, still teasing. The delicate edges of her nostrils flare slightly. They would still smell of each other, musky and arousing; she's in control and loving it.

At first, his face responds, sharing in the fairy tale of flesh and heat and happy endings in a good-enough motel room—you can see the memory in the corners of his smile. "That's what happens

when you keep the drapes closed all weekend.” Then his face goes still, and he looks down. “Though there’s not much to see even with the drapes open.”

“I wanted to see where you live.” Her voice pings *wanted* and *live*.

He looks up again, but the beginnings of that same happy smile snag, half-born, as if he has only just processed the two stressed words. “Can’t imagine why.” His voice is now carefully neutral, as if conceding give-away points in a business negotiation. “It’s ugly and boring. No work. Miss the ocean. Miss having my own place and, you know, how things were. For us.”

Her voice and face leap for the stroke. “Why stay? Your mom doesn’t need you to look after her anymore like you’ve been doing. You could get your old job back. You’re a vet. Bosses are hot to trot over hiring vets now.” Of course, you think. That explains the high-and-tight buzz cut and parade-ground posture. “And landlords are begging for tenants who pay their rent on-time. You could get a super cool place, one with a real bedroom instead of a couch. Things could be even nicer for us.” She smiles. Her teeth are perfect. You are distracted for a moment by the American obsession with perfect teeth.

He fishes in a hip pocket, pulls out a watch with a thick strap. “Knew I was sitting on something lumpy.” He buckles it onto his wrist. “I have a bedroom.”

“I wouldn’t know that, would I?” She sits very still, as if something is going wrong but she doesn’t know quite what.

“The dogs are happy,” he says. “Modelo and my mom’s dog get along really well.” He is tossing out fluff now, trying to distract her.

“The dogs are happy. That’s so nice to know.”

“My mom’s dog is the brains of that crew, though.”

She makes a little moue. “Not hard. Modelo’s an idiot.” She freezes, as if conscious again of something slipping sideways.

He grins, perhaps sensing her discomfort, or just remembering something funny about her and the dog. “Just because she was jealous of you.” Then his face does that thing of freezing again, and he looks down again at his hands. “She’s my girl, though. Saved my life back in the day. When I first got home.” You get the feeling he’s said this before to this girl, that it’s a warning about something she should have remembered about him and his dog, about his past. At any rate, she’s smart enough not to flare at him calling the dog “his girl.” He glances at the clock on the wall above you and resets his watch. With his attention deflected, her body recalibrates. She pulls her feet together neatly under the table as if steadying herself for another round.

She says, “I don’t remember food. Did we eat?”

His face has relaxed, open and boyish again, happy to go back to those first memories. “Chinese. Place behind the motel. They delivered.”

“I do remember a lot of wine.”

“We *campesinos* know what’s important. Are you going to be okay driving back?”

She responds to the concern in his voice like a kitten arching against an ankle. “Oh, sure. And I got out of breakfast shift for tomorrow—I have a critique in my afternoon class. Oh, shit. My mom’s coming tomorrow. I mean, I love my mother. But everything’s always about her. My dad’s so much easier. He blows in, checks in with the local D.A.’s office and his local mistress, buys off his conscience by buying me stuff, and blows out again. And he tries to be supportive about my work. I mean, for somebody who has no clue what I’m trying to do. At least I can sleep in tomorrow morning. I never get anything done the day of a critique. I’m just too tense.”

His face has become cautious again, but you would have

missed the tiny flattening of his expression, the wry hook to the corner of his mouth, if you hadn't been expecting them. "That's one good thing about the Marines. You learn to sleep anywhere, any time."

"You still miss it, don't you?"

"Not me. I don't like being shot at." He holds out his hands as if judging weights. Like the rest of him, his hands are square and solid-looking. You do a quick inventory of parts; he doesn't seem to be missing anything obvious, though you can't see the other leg and foot. "But at least they made me a citizen. Now, I can vote for what wars I want."

"There must be more to it than that. Your buddies and stuff?"

He stares at her for long enough that they both begin to look uncomfortable. You focus on your book. Then he says, "I've seen the Garden of Eden."

You look up. She grins at him. "Oh, yeah?"

"We were caught in a sandstorm. Incredible. Couldn't see shit; couldn't move 'cause you'd drive off the road and bury your wheels in the sand or hit an IED. So we pulled up to wait it out. Then suddenly it cleared—like the eye of a hurricane, maybe—blue sky, no wind. All around us was green grassy hills and wildflowers and trees in the distance. Like nothing we'd ever seen. Then the storm hit again, so we stayed put until it blew over. When it cleared, maybe ten minutes later, all there was was just desert, just like before. There were five of us. We all saw the same thing."

"Wow," she says. "Weird." You wait for something more, some hint of curiosity, of recognition of what he has tried to tell her, of the gift of confidence. She lifts her coffee mug to her nose, sniffs, sets the mug down. She looks up at the clock, pinches her earlobe. "We could go by your house now. It's not too late. You can introduce me to your mom."

"You need something to eat."

“Long as it doesn’t make me sleepy. Food always makes me sleepy.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

She smiles at him again. The server comes out from behind the counter, refills your coffee, then moves over to the couple’s booth carrying an order pad. The girl drops the plastic menu card back between the ketchup bottle and the napkin dispenser. Her nose wrinkles slightly. “Do you have any salads?”

The waitress shrugs. “Potato and macaroni. Slaw’s pretty good. Make ‘em all here.”

“A double order of coleslaw, I guess. What kind of dressing do you use?”

Deadpan, the waitress looks at the girl. “Coleslaw dressing.” To the boy, she says, “Cheeseburger well done with fries, right? How’s your mom doing?”

“Onion rings this time, please. And a slice of the Boston Cream Pie. She’s better. Thanks.”

“They miss her at the nursing home, I know. My dad’s there. Some days, he thinks he’s Dirty Harry, laying down the law to God and everybody. She’s wonderful with him. I mean she knows stuff about the US constitution I don’t know, and I was born right here in Goodluck. She a lawyer or something in your country?”

“Teacher. Ran a school. My father was the lawyer.”

“Well, we all love her. I know she’s super proud of you. Glad to have you back safe.” Her pale eyes flicker toward the girl without actually looking at her. “Your mom going to be able to get back to work?”

“She’d better. Not working makes her crazy.”

“Ain’t that the truth. My husband busted his hip falling off a hay bailer. Like with your mom, they replaced it. My husband always says it’s the most expensive thing we got in the house. Well, tell her our prayers are with her.”

“I will. Thanks.”

The waitress leaves, and the girl says, “Nothing like having everybody up in your shit.”

“Anybody with family at the nursing home knows my mother. Besides, this is like her favorite restaurant. In 1988, when Bush—Vice-President Bush—was campaigning for President, he and Barbara ate here. When we go out, I’ll show you the plaques on their seats.”

“Your mother thinks that’s cool?”

“Oh yeah. I told you. We’re big Bush fans.”

“You were a baby in 1988.”

“No way. I was an all-star striker for the county third grade soccer league that year. By 2004, Dubya’d made me a sergeant and given me a Purple Heart and a Silver Star. Why wouldn’t I vote for the man? I mean, since I could.”

You risk a sharp look at the girl’s face to see if she has heard the irony. She hasn’t. Their food arrives. She eats two of his onion rings then begins picking the raisins out of her coleslaw and setting them on the table beside her plate.

“I really thought I was going to meet your mom this time. When she came down on the bus to see you at Thanksgiving, I know that was, like, family time. Anyway, my friends and I were going to Maui. And you and I were just kind of getting together then. It’s different now.”

You are suddenly on alert. You may have had this all wrong.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? Yeah, what?”

He slides his mug around on the table in a slow circle; you can hear the delicate grinding of the heavy ceramic on the hard surface.

“Matt.” She draws the single syllable out into a caustic diphthong. “You’re being such a douche-bag about this. If you didn’t want me to come, why didn’t you say so?”

“What would I say? I don’t want to be with you? I’m too busy?”

“I don’t know. But why else would I drive all the way up here if not to meet your mom?”

“To spend the weekend with me?”

Her voice pokes at him. “You are such a shit. In two months, you’ve gotten to LA four whole times. Then I come all the way up here just before exams, and you think I wasn’t expecting to at least meet your mother? That’s totally fucked up.”

He looks at his watch again. “I have to head out myself pretty soon. One of my uncles is due to land at SFO at midnight.”

“You never said anything about this before.”

“I didn’t know it would be an issue. I didn’t know you were coming until Thursday.”

“That’s crap. I told you I was trying to get things organized for this weekend.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t understand. But I do have to leave soon.”

The simplicity of these statements—apology, confession, implied command—leave no toehold for contention. Finally, she says, “Is he—?” One hand moves impatiently, as if grasping at words floating by. “Like, coming from your country?”

“My grandmother died there in January. She was the family anchor. Now my uncles have gone all like mother hens about my mother. She’s become kind of the matriarch.”

“Keep the old traditions going and all that.” Her voice is teasing again, but she reaches up to touch the pearl hanging above her breasts on its gold chain. His eyes follow the gesture, but his expression doesn’t change.

“Maybe. Our family traditions anyway.”

She pauses as if she might ask a question but instead begins trailing the leftover shards of cabbage on her plate into little whorls with the tip of her spoon. “This uncle who’s coming, is he the one in the photo when you graduated from boot camp? The one with the Ray-Bans and all the medals and ribbons on his uniform?”

“The one you said looks like a whole banana republic rolled into one? Yeah, him. His wife has family here. That’s how we ended up here when they got my mother and me out.”

“Don’t tell me that stuff. You know my father does immigration law.” Both of their voices have a new edge, not sharp or hurtful, more like the awareness of being seated on a stone bench.

“We’re legal now. Thanks to President Reagan and the US Marines. My other uncle’s coming in June to help me do the roof. He’s a doctor, so you can’t tell him anything, but he doesn’t know shit about construction.” He makes a comic face, but she doesn’t respond.

“What’s that got to do with us? You need to take control of your life, Matt.” She reaches out with a gold-ringed forefinger, pushes her raisins into a tidy line, then begins torpedoing the little fruits across the table. “I’m sorry. It’s just, I mean, are you ashamed of your mother? Are you afraid I’m not going to like her? Afraid I’ll look down on her because she got here illegally and works as an aide in a nursing home?”

One corner of his mouth turns up. “No. No. That’s not it.”

“It’s *me* then? You think she won’t like *me*? What’s the chance of that? After the trailer trash you jarheads were hanging with around Pendleton. Did you try taking any of *them* home to meet your mama?”

Her voice is cheerfully incredulous, waiting for the laugh line. Anger, you think, anger as a measure of doubt, would have worked. Not this. You hardly breathe, wondering what he’ll say next. He collects the scattered raisins into his napkin, wipes up the little white slime trails left by their trajectories across the table, sets the crumpled paper on his plate. His voice is very gentle.

“I don’t want things to change between us. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Not want me to get hurt? How do you think I feel now?” She yanks a handful of fresh napkins from the dispenser, scrubs her fingers. Then she punches around in her handbag, pulls out her

phone, and swipes the screen. She starts a text but the phone warbles. She looks at the incoming number and, twitching aside the fall of golden hair, slips the unit up to her ear.

“Hey, Mum. No, I’ve just been really busy. I have a critique in tomorrow night’s class. No. But you can take me somewhere really cool after that. I’ll need it. No, I’m up in Goodluck, actually. You know where Fresno is? No, north. You remember Matt? Yeah, Gemma’s wedding. Yeah, the dress blues and the gold braid and the sword guard. Yeah, the one with the flamenco guitar. No. Really. Hey, we’ll do high tea at Nordstrom’s, and I tell you all about it. See you tomorrow. Love you.” She drops the phone into her bag. “Sorry. What do you mean, you don’t want things to change between us? Things are changing. There is more to life than fucking your brains out, you know.”

“There is?” He raises his hands. “I’m sorry. Please. I’m sorry, I was joking.” He stares at her face as if memorizing it. “Okay,” he says slowly. “If this is what you want. We’ll go by the house. But then I do have to get on the road.” He finishes his last bite of pie, then picks up the check and slides toward the end of his bench. She doesn’t move.

“Do you want me to leave a tip?”

“I’ll get it at the register.” She still hasn’t moved. He stands up. “There’ll be a friend of my mom’s there. Comes over after her shift because she doesn’t have any family here. They watch the *telenovelas* together, and then she helps my mother with her bath. Stuff I can’t help her with. It’ll be easier with this lady there.”

“Easier than what? God, you’re making such a big deal about this. It’s not like you’re announcing our engagement.”

“No, but. Look—” You are seeing the person on the dock watching the widening water between the ship and the shore while everyone else is still cheering and waving.

“Look what?”

“Why don’t we just get on the road? I can’t come down this Friday, but maybe next weekend.”

“Matt, what the fuck’s going on? I mean, are you like living with somebody? That who this ‘friend of your mother’s’ is?”

“What?” His voice is very quiet. “No. She really is just a sweet little old lady who cleans motel rooms, hardly speaks English. Married a crazy Nam vet who brought her up here and dumped her.” He stands back, opening out one arm to wave her ahead. Getting up, she totters a bit on her golden sandals. He catches her elbow to steady her; she looks up, but he isn’t looking at her. His face is a thousand miles away.

As they walk toward the door, you suddenly want to jump up, catch the door, bend your face to the guy’s ear as he passes, and say, hey, man, if you really care about her, give her a fighting chance. Teach how to talk to your mother: a little courtesy, a little deference, stuff no one ever bothered to teach her. All anyone has ever done is decorate her like an empty room, tell her all that mattered was her own image in the mirror. No one has ever loved her enough to teach her anything. You are so much luckier than she is.

You don’t do any of that, of course, just stare down at your mug instead. You glance up. The waitress is staring after them as well, and her half-smile could mean anything. She sees you looking and gestures toward the coffee pot. You hold up one hand, fingers splayed—no thanks—and then, thumb and forefinger together, scribble a request for the check in the air.

Lynn Stansbury is a physician, fiction writer, and 30-year Army wife. Both of her parents served on active duty in World War II. “Your Country” is part of a short story cycle based on her experience in the Peace Corps in Guatemala during the Vietnam era and that of a local family to whom she became and remains very close.

A Flawless Coward

By Kyle Noe

'Guardian ad Litem' is a position to which a judiciary body appoints a person to govern the affairs of an individual, usually an adult, who is deemed unable to govern himself. The guardian has fiduciary duties to act in the interest of her ward, and only the courts can withdraw the duties or revoke her authority.

James only dated mental health professionals because of their compassion. Kara, however, did not possess the healer personality. Nor was she technically a mental health professional. When he'd asked how she ended up as a disabled veteran's Guardian ad Litem, she evaded giving a real answer. He never really bothered to wonder whether she would share her personal motivations. He thought her too rigid and dogmatic to do so.

"My mother believed in tough love," she'd said. "It all started when I had to get over my first pet, by drawing pictures of her. The more times you recount a sad or traumatic event, the less power it has over you. And eventually your emotions archive the pain. The drawings are painful, though. And it takes a long time to work, but it's the only real way to get poison out of your system. Plus," she said, "People don't always know what's best for them."

James knew she was full of it, and that only part of the story was true. This was the only time she'd ever not made eye contact with him while speaking. So he knew. She probably got off on causing pain, and what better profession to fulfill that desire.

Anyway, that was the reason he didn't pursue her. That, and he'd lost all four of his limbs, or maybe he was suffering a full-blown PTSD episode when shipped home and that turned her off.

When she'd answered his question, they'd been arguing about her unwillingness to sign the document that would accept a medical discharge and leave him without prosthetics. She wanted him to keep the limbs, but the problem . . . the VA had determined that if he accepted the prosthetics he would be combat-capable and have to continue fulfilling his enlistment obligation, i.e. redeploy. It's not that he was a coward. It was the principle of the thing. He'd served. He'd fought. He got blown to bits and lived, and it was service-connected, so they had to give him the limbs if he wanted them. Or a medical discharge. He did not know, however, that the choice was one or the other.

Propped up by a pillow, with the prosthetics leaning against the side of the bed, he stared at Kara, trying to block out the shouting and clanging the protestors were making, beating their signposts on the sidewalk and railing for justice. Yes, they were on his side. But who actually wants to be the novelty in a crusade?

"I've made up my mind," he said.

"Give me your reasons," she said. "Or I'm not signing that paper."

"I ought to be able to make my own decisions."

"We've crossed that bridge. The courts ruled you not of sound mind. So no, you aren't able to make your decisions."

An itch on his upper left shoulder was killing him. And one on his nose too. Without the prosthetics, though, he couldn't even adjust to a better spot on the pillow. Putting them on now that he

knew what strings were attached went against everything inside him. He wasn't a coward. He would prove that by not wearing them. "Patrolling the Mediterranean on ship," he said, "we ported in Italy one weekend. I went into this posh club, hoping a trophy wife was looking for some fun. The one I wanted, though, she had two security guards on her. I looked around for someone else that fit my speed, big eyes, olive skin, high cheekbones, and a hard target for sure. No one fit the bill 'cept her. I went over and asked the smaller of the two guards if he'd mind if I talked to her. He looked to her for approval. She nodded. I went over.

"I asked why all the security. She said they weren't for her, but for her drink. As you can guess, that surprised me. I prodded further. Her drink had an eleven-karat diamond and twenty-four-karat gold flakes as part of the recipe. The drink also included Louis XIII Cognac, Cristal Rose Champagne, Angostura Bitters, brown sugar, and a dash of lime. The lime part made me laugh. It was at most a twenty dollar drink without the diamond and gold flakes. She said if I was going to make fun of her I wasn't welcome to stay. And do you know how much this drink cost and why it required two security guards? Fifty-seven thousand, six hundred, and ninety-two dollars. Plus tip.

"I asked why she felt the need or desire to spend so lavishly on only a drink. She answered, 'I grew up poor,' she said. 'What's the point of being rich if you don't live it?' I can relate to that."

James interrupted his own story. The truth of his current situation wouldn't let him drift for long.

"When I'm not looking at them, I forget they're not there anymore. I can feel them. I want to move them. But they're gone.

"Anyway, when the drink came in a martini glass, the two guards tensed up, and their eyes darted back and forth between the crowd and me. She got all flirty at that point. Touched my neck.

I watched eagerly as she went in for her first sip. To be honest, at this point, I wanted to know what that drink was like more than I wanted to know her. But I knew I wasn't getting anywhere near that smooth liquid without going through her.

"We small-talked for damn near twenty minutes. About nothing really. It only got interesting when she hinted at how her sugar daddy—she didn't call him that—rescued her. They'd met at a strip club, and two years later he came back for her and proposed—once he'd made his fortune. I'm sure his means were all on the up and up. It got to the point that I was being intrusive, and she pulled the glass close to her chest. 'That's enough,' she said. Thought I'd blown it, but she didn't wave me off or gesture for the guards. She took another a sip—a long one. She left only a drop in the glass.

"I told her that I would never know why she specifically needed it, but that I did know some people deserve such a drink. She smirked and asked if I thought I deserved it. I didn't answer right off. Had to think about it, and that surprised me. Finally . . . I said no.

"She slid the glass over to me. The remaining drop had just enough gold flakes left in it, and she gave me a choice. 'You can have the last sip or a nightcap at my hotel,' she said. I guess she wanted to feel the power so many had felt over her. She'd obviously climbed the ladder. Or maybe I imagined that. She was surprised to find out that I wasn't like her.

"Drinking that last drop made me feel like somehow I had moved up to the next level of life. Or maybe it was the placebo effect. It was like I was living for real now. You know what that drink was called? Flawless. And it was."

James blinked at Kara, waiting for a reaction.

Kara looked around the room, as if she were bored and he'd just told a bad joke. "Why'd you tell me that story?"

With his eyes he gestured to the window, where a murmur of protestors could still be heard. “All them—I don’t care what they think or what you think either. What matters to me . . . I’m not sure I know what matters to me, but I know I ought to be able to say no.”

“Your decision is wrongheaded,” she said. “You don’t know what’s best for you.”

She lowered her head. James thought she might leave then. And he’d be all alone, and with no chance of refusing the prosthetics and going home, even if he had to do so as a cripple. She didn’t leave, though. She stood still.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she said.

“What’re the terms?”

“I’ll refuse the prosthetics and accept the medical discharge on your behalf if you sign an unofficial contract to do something for me.”

He guffawed at that. She was talking nonsense now. No silly note was going to hold weight in court or public.

“Whatever,” he said. “If you’ll submit my official reply to the VA by the end of the week I’ll do whatever. Don’t forget—you’re supposed to be acting in my best interest.”

“According to what I feel is in your best interest . . . Not what you feel is right. Good luck making a case that you’re of sound mind, especially after refusing the prosthetics.”

He thought he might talk her into letting him out of his bind. But he began to realize his lack of leverage.

“I could appeal to the courts to rule that I’m of sound mind now.”

“It will take months. The response is due in one week . . . by noon. That means I’ll be making this decision for you.”

He let out a breath and stared. He knew she wouldn’t get past her scruples and date him, but he was beginning to wonder if anyone would in his present condition with or without the prosthetics.

“You’ll deny the prosthetics on my behalf and accept the medical discharge?”

“I will.”

“You promise?”

“Of course. And then you can make your political statement . . . ”

“It’s not a political stat . . . ”

“If I let you decline the prosthetics, I’m the one they’ll blame. But I’ll let you have what you want, and I’ll suffer the consequences regardless of whether I believe in the cause. The deal is not negotiable either.” She marched toward the door. Then stopped without turning back. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

“This silly deal of yours isn’t going to change my mind.”

She ignored him and left.

Kara never gave James leeway in his decisions. He even asked for a replacement guardian after the first week. But when he started getting better and feeling less numb emotionally, he changed his mind and dropped the appeal.

A few hours later, Kara barged in without knocking, slapped a piece of paper onto James’s desk, and held out a pen. He remained on the bed, helpless to protest and unable to even get to the contract and read it.

“Well,” she said.

“Not funny,” he said.

“Just want you to get used to the kind of life you’ll be living if you stick with your current choice.”

“I’m not putting them back on.”

“You’ve got a week before you have to decide, so I guess I’ll just leave it there.”

“No,” he said, as she began walking towards the door. “You don’t get it. This isn’t a protest. I’m not protesting. It’s . . . it’s . . .

Once they're back on again, it's only going to be that much harder to take them off. Don't you get that?"

She stopped, turned around, and crossed her arms.

"If you don't sign the deal I've written up, then I don't sign your request for discharge and refusal of medical service, which means you've accepted their terms. And you'll be going back to combat anyway. I personally don't want to see you go back into combat. You've done enough. But it is a tricky situation we're in."

He wished to use one of the prosthetics for only a moment, so he could flip her off and then throw the other arm at her. The best he could do, though, was lean back against the headboard and shout an unintelligible word. The protestors went silent, but only for a moment before going back to their murmuring.

"Your tough love routine has gone too far," he said.

"Don't be mistaken," she said. "There's no love left in it. I'm just trying to keep my job."

He harrumphed. She pursed her lips. The standoff continued.

"Put them on," she said. "Read it, sign it, and do as it says. Or I walk."

She waited a good two minutes before she uncrossed her arms, walked over, and attached his left arm—with delicacy and compassion—making a snapping sound as she turned into place like twisting a medicine bottle cap. She reached for the right arm, but he grabbed a hold of her wrist and held it softly. She stepped back. He took his right arm on his own and attached it, struggling to make it lock in like the left. He took the legs one at a time and attached them with more ease.

His legs were wobbly at first, as he stood. He braced himself against the wall. After a second, he walked over to the desk and picked up the paper.

"My terms are as follows," he read out loud, "For one week

at reveille, you'll attach your prosthetics, go outside, stand at attention, and salute the flag as they raise it every morning. Then go back inside and remove the prosthetics for the rest of the day."

He flipped the paper, and it landed sideways on the desk. "This is silly," he said. "It's nothing more than a ploy to get me attached—literally—to the prosthetics. You're not going to change my mind."

"I don't plan on it."

"Your reverse psychology will not work." He snatched the paper and began to crumple it.

"You're right. My reverse psychology will not work on you."

"Right. No. I mean, never mind." He shook his head and stopped crumpling the paper—the make-believe contract. He hesitated as he saw Kara's face harden, disappointed, letdown. James set the paper on the nightstand. "You'll sign my denial of service . . . if I do this nonsense for a week?"

"I swear."

"They never should have taken my freedom of choice away. You know that, right?"

"At least we can agree on that. But I'm not putting my name on a contract I don't agree with unless you do the same."

"This is f'd up."

He leaned down and signed his name beneath the pigheaded paragraph. He'd find a way to circumvent the arrangement.

"And you can't cheat," she said. "Because I'll be here every morning making sure."

The first morning was the hardest. The protestors' shouts woke him. Most were murmurs, but James could hear one voice that was louder than the others. "We're behind you, Devil Dog!" A man's voice. "Coward!" A woman's voice.

Having left his left arm attached during sleep, not knowing when a nurse would stop by, James reached over, grabbed his right arm, and attached it at the awkward angle he still wasn't used to. He fastened his legs, feeling like a dog trying to catch its own tail, and hobbled to the window. Outside the gates, the rabble had grown to a hundred strong. And every one of them probably thought they were making a difference. He couldn't tell which one had been the loud shouter. Some newsmen held giant cameras on their shoulders.

He stepped back and stretched, yawning, to his full arm span. His dress blues uniform hung on the door, still in pristine condition and full of medals, purple hearts mostly, and ribbons. The image reassured his decision. He didn't have to accept the prosthetics to prove that he wasn't a coward. He'd already volunteered for combat. He'd already lost four appendages for his country. The signing of a ridiculous contract could make no difference in that regard. He stared at the uniform, though, and realized he would no longer be able to wear it quite the same without those damned appendages.

Fastening the golden buttons took longer than normal. His hands were shaky. His fingers fumbled. Once he snapped the top neck clasp, sealed tight like a space monkey, he placed the white cover on his head and positioned it in a straight line above his eyebrows. He'd never saluted with the prosthetics before so he practiced twice to make sure. Whoever designed these things was a genius. With the white gloves wrapped tight around his make-believe hands, he looked normal, and the salute was flawless.

James tugged on his blues at the waist and began marching down the hallway. The dress shoes clacked against the over-waxed linoleum. He reached the front doors and hesitated before opening them. He pushed them both at the same time. The murmuring crowd went silent in only a few seconds as James's eyes squinted and adjusted to the bright light.

This was the first time they'd seen their symbol of protest in person. The ones closest to the black bars that surround the base pressed their faces between the bars, squeezing their cheeks and making them look like children without their realizing it. They had no idea. He wasn't what they wanted him to be. Not what either side wanted. Nor could they ever feel it. What it's like to spend years training and fighting alongside your friends who become family, only to abandon them.

Their eagerness and delusion made him think about turning around and breaking his side of the deal, but one of the faces grabbed his attention. Kara stood near the front gate, separate from the crowd, stern look on her face, observing, and making sure he didn't break the agreement.

He marched down the steps and onto the grass. Each step reminded him that the skin of his feet would never again feel blades of grass. He marched to the flag. He waited for the young Marines to grab hold of the rope. They paused for a second and looked at him as if he might give them orders, but he didn't speak, so they carried on and hoisted the flag. James lifted his right hand and saluted.

Half the crowd cheered. Half jeered. James held the salute until the flag reached the top. Then his arm snapped down to his side, and he did an about-face and was going to start marching back inside, but he stopped instead. And looked for Kara at the front gate. She'd left.

The cheers and jeers shifted back and forth, with neither ever becoming the loudest, as neither side really knew what the salute or look towards them meant. James resumed his march back inside.

The next six mornings began and ended in the exact same manner. Each time, the reporters shouted louder. "What's your stance?" they asked. James never answered. That hadn't been part of the make-

believe contract. He saluted the flag as it was raised, and he went back inside. The crowd grew in size until the onlookers overflowed onto the street. The police had to block traffic outside the base. James didn't care. All he wanted was to go home and never kill again. Now that he knew what it felt like to be on the other end of a blast, he couldn't do the job anymore. And he couldn't face one more day of trying to fall asleep as mortars went off overhead. Being limbless the rest of his life was worth that. It wasn't that he was a coward, though. The disability payments would be compensation enough. Not enough to get the prosthetics on his own. Maybe some cheap ones that would be wobbly and unreliable. Not the good ones that fool strangers. Everyone would see his past whether he wanted it known or not.

He did want the prosthetics. That was true enough. But not at the cost of having to go back.

The seventh day was the worst. He dressed the same as each other day, but this time, he heard murmurs through the cracked-open window.

"It's time for his salute," someone yelled.

He felt a sense of pride at that. He had a role. The ridiculous arrangement had become a routine that they all looked forward to. He wasn't just a symbol. He felt a sense of control over his situation for the first time. That feeling almost broke through and got him thinking. What if there were other ways to prove he wasn't afraid? What if he could have a different kind of purpose? But as he donned his cover, he remembered that he was, in reality, not at all in control.

He marched, the same as each previous day. He waited. The crowd stood silent this last time. The flag began to rise. He saluted. He snapped his hand down. The crowd cheered and

clapped. Both sides cheered and clapped. He hesitated before doing an about-face this time. And he looked them over for a few seconds—not sure what to make of them. They appeared as if they were looking to him to speak, for answers. Like he could tell them their purpose. Veterans and non-veterans alike. All searching. And they hadn't even lost anything. Or maybe they had, and it wasn't visible like his losses. He closed his eyes and let the image of their faces tattoo themselves onto his mind's eye. He knew he'd never see this again.

He returned to the hospital room and removed the prosthetics for the last time. It was over.

A knock came as soon as he was back on the bed. Using his teeth, James began reaching to pull the sheet up and cover his stubs, smooth to the touch and without scars. The skin around the stitched up wounds had a pinkish hue like the rest of his skin. It was almost a pretty sight, except for the catch where the limbs attach. He could still feel them. The missing limbs. As if they were there. Even with the prosthetics on. Once he got the sheet up to his waist, he leaned back and sucked in air. Exercise had never been this taxing.

“It's open,” he said.

Kara stood in the middle of the room for a moment without speaking or moving. James smacked his lips. Why should he have to speak first? He'd met her demands and fulfilled the ridiculous requirement. Now she needed to fulfill her side of the deal. She could still screw him over, though. Neither budged for a full minute until Kara walked over, picked up a hand towel from the nightstand, and wiped James's forehead. Once the sweat was gone, she pulled a document from her back pocket and placed it on the bed on top of James's thighs. He looked down. Her signature was already beneath his name. All he had to do now was check the box next to his choice.

The first read, “I hereby accept the terms of medical discharge, to include one hundred percent monetary compensation for the loss of four limbs and therefore abnegate my claim to prosthetic replacements, which would eliminate the need for discharge and make me fully combat-ready.”

The second read, “I hereby accept four prosthetic limbs, thus abnegating my claim to a medical discharge and monetary compensation for the loss of limbs, as my body will be fully combat-functional.”

James motioned to check the first box, but stopped short as he realized he’d removed his prosthetics. Humiliated, he could feel his cheeks flushing red. He imagined what he must look like through Kara’s eyes—helpless and unable to complete such a simple task. This was the first moment he cared what someone else thought of his decision. He leaned back, letting his skull bang against the headboard, and met her eyes.

“Do you want me to check the box for you?” she asked.

He detected no malice in her voice. Only compassion and sympathy. She really had hoped for this to heal him somehow. She’d misplaced her hope, though. He knew that from the beginning. The only difference was that he now understood there was no trick involved.

James closed his eyes and pictured the silent crowds watching him salute each morning. With that image in his mind, his prosthetic parts hidden from view by his uniform—he felt partly whole.

He opened his eyes. Kara reached for the paper.

“No,” James said.

He looked to the prosthetics, and Kara acknowledged his meaning with understanding in her eyes. He wanted to feel that he’d made this decision even if that wasn’t really true. She took up his right arm and pressed it against his shoulder with care. She turned the limb, latching it in place and removed her hands slowly.

She placed a pen in his hand. James reached out and let his hand hover. After a brief moment, he let the pen touch paper. He checked the box next to the second choice. He would be going back.

Kara picked up the paper, saw his choice, and blinked rapidly, not sure what to make of it. She had the expression of a pet that is confused about why her companion isn't moving. James, however, paid little attention to her air of surprise and began reaching out for the remainder of his limbs.

Kara remained frozen. Staring at the letter, not understanding what had changed his mind. Not believing what she saw.

"Might as well get as much use out of them as I can while I've got 'em," he said. Once he was done, he stood and began walking to his uniform. Time to be a Marine again. Let someone else take a stance.

Kara came out of her trance and stood between him and his uniform.

"Wait," she said, and reached into her back pocket. She pulled out another document and placed it in his right hand. She opened her mouth but couldn't get any words out. He frowned and looked at the second letter. This one already had a signature and a box checked. James pulled the letter to his eyes and began reading . . .

Dear Staff Sergeant James Borgelt,

This letter serves the purpose of granting you an honorable discharge with disability payments for life. The disability payments will be commensurate with the designation the Veteran's Administration has assigned to your case regarding posttraumatic stress disorder. Thus, you will be receiving full benefits and treatment.

This letter doubly serves to thank and commemorate your selfless service and devotion to a grateful nation in the Armed Forces of the United States.

Sincerely,

US Secretary of Defense Elizabeth Roland

The letter was dated from two weeks prior. James folded the letter, and his eyes began glistening. After a moment, he couldn't hold it back any longer, and he started sobbing, and a sound came out of his mouth that was like a wail. He might have been embarrassed but he couldn't really help it. And he pounded the air with his fists.

"You knew they were going to do this?" he asked through muffled sobs.

"Yes," she said, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I knew you wanted to make the right decision."

"You tricked me."

"You made the right choice, regardless of how you got there. You'll feel strong now. And maybe this irrational fear that you're a coward, which is completely unjustified, won't get in the way of your recovery."

He'd proven he wasn't a coward. At least to himself. And he began to think about the searching faces of the people who'd watched him every morning, looking for a purpose. He could do something for them maybe. But what if he failed? Back here, in the real world, though, a man has to live with his failures.

"Drawing pictures of your cat really helped, huh?" he asked.

"It did."

"You still have the drawings?"

She nodded.

"Think I could see them?"

“Of course.”

“Will you teach me to draw?”

The door burst open and interrupted her chance to answer. A nurse entered carrying two glass snifters full of swirling brownish liquid and gold flecks and hoisting two splits limes on the brim of each. The nurse handed the snifters to Kara and left.

James attached the rest of his prosthetics and watched as Kara set the drinks on the desk. Her cheeks were flush, like she'd done something she felt proud of. Like maybe she'd tried this before and it didn't turn out okay.

“Sorry,” Kara said, “The flakes aren't real, and I couldn't find the right champagne or bitters. Plus, I'm a volunteer, so the cheap cognac will have to do.”

She took the limes, squeezed them into the drinks, and handed him one of the sniffers. They clinked their glasses and said cheers.

Drawing wasn't going to heal him in the places that couldn't be seen. He already knew that and only proposed it as small talk. But James felt a sort of curiosity and eagerness and didn't really care what the topic was as long as he felt something about something. So he took the glass Kara had given him, and he pressed it against his cheek, letting his skin feel its cold but pleasant bite.

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The Final Cut

By Nikolina Kulidžan

The first time he comes to my place he looks more scared than I have ever seen him. And that's saying a lot. For a long time we just stand in the hallway and hug. It's the first time we can really do that. It feels right. And so does everything that follows.

My place is still full of boxes and to get to the bedroom we have to step over piles of stuff. My shipment arrived before I could get my mind around the thought of unpacking. That I could once again sit in my recliner, use a potato peeler, or curl my hair on weekends all sounds attractive, but only in theory. The one thing in the whole house that provides any actual comfort is my enormous, fluffy bed and that's where I take Rip as soon as he releases me from our shaky, desperate embrace.

"You've got your work cut out for you," he says and kicks a box out of his way.

At the foot of the bed, we have a brief stare down. Can it really be as simple as this? When he takes his ball cap off and drops it on the floor, it's clear that it is. He pulls his sweatshirt off and

unbuckles his belt. I watch him undo a button and unzip his jeans. He steps on the heel of his sneaker and it slips off. First the left then the right. His jeans drop to the floor and he kicks them out of the way. He stands naked in front of me. His body looks exactly how I always imagined it: a flawless testament to fifteen years of pushups, pull-ups, sit-ups and running. It's a body that has fulfilled nature's intent.

He is patient as I stare him down. Eventually, I undress too. It's an understated affair. When I am naked, I climb into bed.

"I need to piss," he says.

"You go right ahead," I say. "I'll be here."

When he comes back, he climbs next to me and we wrap around each other without fanfare. It's an embrace of pure need. We hold each other with tenderness, as if it were raining outside. I nibble on his earlobes like a toddler on a pacifier. He caresses my hair and I rub his chest, awed by the tapestry of soft black hair so comforting to touch. He kisses my eyelids and my temple and traces the outlines of my jaw with his lips. When I let go of all resistance, he strengthens his grasp and bites my neck hard. I shiver and moan and that's how it starts.

He grabs my hair, pulls it back, and bites me even harder. Pleasure tinged with pain travels down my spine. I grab a handful of his hair and tug at it gently. "Harder," he whispers and I do as I am told. I sink my fingernails into his back. "Don't leave marks," he whispers and I dig deeper until I feel blood. He twists in pain, yelps, and clutches my jaw. He crams my head into the pillow, then slaps me. The pain takes time to blossom in my cheek and when it does, I punch him. It makes him furious. He pins my arms above my head, my resistance just an exercise in futility against his bullish strength. I thrust and jostle and kick though it does no good. But the longer the resistance the longer the pain. And pain is a rare relief.

It's an excuse to keep on fighting. It's a pretext to keep on hurting. It's repentance and absolution, all in one. It's where despair and exhilaration meet. It's home.

Pink Floyd's "The Final Cut" comes from the speakers. I put it on before Rip came. For months, his roommate had blasted the album so loud I could hear it in the neighboring barracks. When the gun goes off in the song, we both freeze, and when the music resumes everything is slightly altered. We are both a little meaner, a bit more pissed off, more interested in what we need than in what we can give.

Eventually, we collapse. We are spent and speechless. We both wanted this, needed it more than anything since we came back, but I don't think either of us quite believed we'd know how to pull it off. I figured it would feel awkward or fake, clumsy or unnatural, that we'd burst out laughing in the middle of it. But it was effortless. When we look at each other, it's a look that says: "What the hell was that?"

Neither of us has an answer.

We lay quiet for a long time, my head on his chest, his arms wrapped around me. He plays with my hair.

"Remember what I asked you that time we thought we had lost our convoy?" he says after a while.

"Ah-huh," I nod without looking at him.

"Would you still do it?"

"I'd do anything you ask."

"When?" he asks.

"Whenever."

For a moment, the promise is all he needs.

When he decides he has to go, I suppress the urge to beg. I know he will come back. He needs what I have to give. Sure enough, two days later, he is at my door at five in the morning.

He always comes at odd hours and though I wonder how he explains his excursions, I never ask. When we are together we pretend that this is all there is. So no matter what time of night or day he arrives, I welcome him like a faithful wife. I kiss his lips, take his coat, ask him if he would like anything to eat or drink. Then I take him to the bedroom and do for him whatever he asks. The time always slips away too fast. It doesn't matter if it's thirty minutes or six hours. He comes, I blink, and it's time for him to go. Reminding myself that he will come back is all I can do to keep myself from crying.

There are days when he can't get it up. All bets are off then. He can be borderline nasty or he can be the sweetest ever. The one bruise he ever gave me was when he couldn't fuck. But that's also the only time we reminisce. We lay on our sides spooning and we dig into the dirt of what we left behind.

"Remember?" one of us will say. Remember that time our helicopter landed in a meadow twelve thousand feet up and we unloaded like fucking tourists? We had no idea where we were or why we were there. All we knew was that it was spectacular. And that such beauty shouldn't have been wasted on that godforsaken place.

"Remember the old dude whose response to everything was: 'You're welcome?'"

"This road we built you, it's working out well, isn't it?" our captain would ask.

The dude just nodded his turbaned head, his mouth widening into a toothless, self-satisfied grin as if he personally laid down every last inch of the asphalt which now connected his village to the rest of his fucked up country and mumbled: "You're welcome."

"Back then, you agreed to support us in setting up an outpost up on that hill," the captain kept on.

“You’re welcome,” the elder said preempting any translation.

“It’s a nice day.”

“You’re welcome.”

“We’ll get going now.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Fuck you and your fucking country, you motherfucking perv.”

And the elder still grinned, nodded, and said: “You’re welcome.”

We talked about the time we were swarmed by a throng of ladybugs, the event that many took to be some sort of cryptic message from god. Something about the ladybugs’ elegant simplicity commanded awe, so that even those of us who dismissed the suggestions of divine communiqué remained reflective for a long while, concluding ultimately that at the very least, the ladybugs were a good omen.

And then there was the time when our platoon crossed into insurgent territory but instead of al-Qaeda we found a bunch of wrinkled old men, their beards and nails painted red with henna. I was way in the back, as females are told to be when coming into contact with local men, and I could observe the scene as it unfolded. Our guys approached the elders, hands extended for handshakes but soon found themselves being pulled into long, uncomfortable embraces. I watched as my normally fearless brothers started backing off in horror, shrieking and shuddering like a flock of geese.

“That motherfucker just licked my ear,” someone cried out.

“And that dude wanted to paint my nails.”

“They were making kissing noises at me.”

Rip too came running back wiping his neck. “I need a shower! I need a fucking shower,” he was yelling. “I could feel that fucking asshole drooling on my neck.”

“Stop, stop,” he now begs me. “There is a reason I forgot all that stuff!”

I laugh at his terror and he laughs with me and we roll over

each other on the bed and what my touch hasn't accomplished, the laughter sometimes does.

There is only one thing we never talk about. Whenever we get anywhere near it, Rip gives me a little push.

"Try again," he says.

I slip under the covers, down to where heat radiates from his legs and groin, I close my eyes and before I take him into my mouth, I inhale the musky odor of sperm and sweat. Sometimes my efforts pay off, other times they don't. I try not to take it personally either way. Whenever he stays soft, Rip is apologetic.

"It wasn't like this before," he says and I pull him tighter into my embrace, trying to soothe him and tell him that he doesn't need to explain anything. I tell him that he is the toughest, handsomest man I have ever met.

"You are a big fucking liar, sugar tits," he responds. "But thank you for saying that."

But I don't feel like a liar. I was attracted to Rip the moment I laid my eyes on him. He was a platoon sergeant of the platoon I was attached to and this was his fourth tour in six years. Everything about him screamed tough. Never a superfluous word, never an unnecessary motion. Yet something about the way he looked at us revealed he cared in a way that wasn't as Spartan as he made himself to be. When he was in a really good mood, he called us clowns. People whispered about the lives he saved. I believed it all.

The first time he ever spoke to me directly was at the airport.

"So, you are the female engagement person," he said and I had no idea if that was a statement or a question. Either way, there was no time to respond. He had already moved along.

How we got from there to here, I can't explain. There had never been a flirtatious instance between us. The best I can offer is that we developed an understanding. He'd watch out for me and I'd watch out for him.

But it wasn't until the first time he let me touch him that I felt I could do anything for him. We were behind the barracks, sitting on the ground, silent and chain smoking when he asked me to put out a cigarette on his arm. Given the circumstance, it didn't seem like an outrageous request.

It had been raining cats and dogs for several days before and the mud had muffled the explosion so that it didn't even startle me on the other side of the building. But Rip was just meters away from Tommy when his body bounced into the air pole-vaulter style and landed in the mud with a splash. Rip was the one who dragged Tommy away, yelled for a medic, and held his hand while the blood gushed out of the missing limbs.

When I realized what had happened, I tried to approach, more for Rip than for Tommy I think, but they held me back. No matter how many missions I had under my belt, those fucks still wanted to protect me. In a place where they controlled nothing, this made them feel like they were doing something important. So I stood back and watched Tommy bleed to death. When you do something like that, it doesn't much matter if it's from two feet away or twenty. Either way, you quickly realize that this could have been you. And that you are grateful it wasn't. And that you feel like shit for feeling grateful. Who are you to live when this poor fuck with three kids in St. Louis and a morbid obsession with Toby Keith isn't going to make it? Everything you feel—sadness, shame, grief, fear—turns soon into anger. Because anger is something you can act upon. You can punch holes, get into fights, swear up a storm. You can be angry at the assholes you are fighting, at the fucked up culture that teaches hate and ignorance, at your clueless paper-pushing commanding officer, and at the entire ungrateful nation whose safety you are risking your life to protect. You can't do any of that with grief.

The day a helicopter took Tommy away, Rip fractured two bones in his right hand punching the side of a humvee. He was ordered to see a chaplain. It was after that meeting that he asked me to put a cigarette out on his forearm. I didn't give it much thought. Nothing seemed more natural than wanting to be in pain. So I took one long last drag on my cigarette and pressed the burning ember into his skin. My nose was perpetually plugged so I couldn't tell what burning flesh smelled like but I heard a sizzle. I tossed the butt, covered the wound with my hand and squeezed. I didn't look at Rip. I just lit us each another cigarette. When he finished smoking, he curled up and laid his head in my lap. I could hardly believe this was happening so for a while I barely moved. Eventually, I let my fingers creep into his hair and my palm press against his burning cheek. He just lay there.

As much as has changed since that day, nothing important really has. We are clean, we smell nice, and we are in a cushy bed but we are still as desperate for comfort as we were back that day. Rip clings to me so hard he might as well be hanging off a cliff. I hold him as though the relief I offer him is my only justification for being alive.

I lay a soft kiss on his forehead and he opens his eyes and blinks.

"I'm hungry," he says.

He is always hungry when he wakes up from dozing off. I want this moment to last, I want him to cling to me awake as he does when he is asleep, but he is already on his feet and heading to the kitchen and soon his voice is ringing amidst the clinging pots and pans. I get up and join him.

"I'm going to cook you something so good your panties are gonna drop," he flashes me a smile. "So to speak," he adds. It's a jab at our CO who overused the phrase in his untiring effort to be funny. "You can come again," he would say and then quickly add, "so to speak."

From a barstool, I watch Rip move around the kitchen as if he has done it his whole life. He opens the fridge and cupboards and always finds what he's looking for right away. He chops and slices, stirs and flips. He seasons everything generously and then tries each dish to make sure the flavor is just right. "Mmmmmm," he moans and brings a spoonful to my lips. "I can't wait to eat it," he says. "So to speak."

Watching this butt naked exhibit of domesticity makes me slip into fantasy. I forget the strict confines of our relationship and start hoping, that perhaps, somehow, at some point, maybe, after all, we could . . .

It's when he orders me to the table and puts a bowl of soup and two slices of perfectly toasted and buttered bread in front of me, that I can't help but open my mouth.

"Rip . . ." I say, my spoon suspended in air.

"It's amazing isn't it?" he looks at me.

"It is," I say. We eat in silence for a while until I find courage again. "Rip," I say. "I think we should talk."

"You are welcome," he says and lets out a forced laugh.

"I am serious," I say.

"And you think I am not?"

The way he says it makes it clear that this is the end of this conversation. It makes me angry to be dismissed like that but I don't say anything. I would give him the silent treatment but that would require that he actually attempt communication. Which he doesn't. When he's done eating, he takes his dishes to the sink, rinses them, puts them in the dishwasher and then disappears in the bedroom to get dressed. He tries to kiss me on his way out but I back away and he doesn't insist.

"I'll see you later," he says.

I don't say a thing. "I'll see you later," I repeat to myself the

rest of the day. “I’ll see you later. I’ll see you later.” That’s what I get after everything we’ve been through?!

A week goes by. It’s the longest I haven’t seen him since his R&R eight months earlier. Not an hour goes by that I don’t think of calling or emailing him. But I don’t do it. “You must let him go,” I keep reminding myself. “It’s for the best.” The thought alone makes me want to kick and punch everything in sight. It makes me want to scream. It makes me want to fuck him again and hurt him for real this time.

It’s a workday evening when he shows up at my door again. Not a usual visit time.

“I want you to do it,” he says as soon as I open.

“I told you I’ll do it,” I say.

“I want you to do it now.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Like today now?”

“Yes, Sam. Today now.”

I guess I thought that this was one of those things I could keep promising but would never be asked to deliver; that this was something Rip only imagined he wanted not something he really did; that nobody could really want this. But I guess Rip does.

He unzips his jacket and pulls out a bundle he was hiding inside. He sets it on the counter with a muffled bang. He digs into his pocket and pulls out a small box. He sets it down too. Cautiously, as if I might receive an electric shock or be bitten by a snake, I unwrap a t-shirt to reveal the packet’s contents. It’s a standard issue M9. I know this weapon well. I’ve trained with it for years. But out of context, it looks strange. It makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable. It’s like running into your boss as you stumble out of a bar at 2 a.m.

I stare at it for a while before I pick it up. The motherfucker

weighs as much as a small melon. But it fits my hand like a well-worn glove. I point the barrel at Rip.

“What the fuck do you want me to do with it?”

“Just the usual. Only with this.”

“You are fucked up. You know that?”

“No shit,” he says.

When I don’t do anything for a while, he nudges me. “Load her up. Make sure she’s good to go. It’s been a while.”

I release the magazine and load the rounds. The familiar clacks and snaps of the machinery stir something in me and suddenly I feel a hint of thrill.

“All right, then,” I say and point the gun toward the bedroom. “Let’s go.”

When he turns around, I cough and slide the safety on. I press the barrel between his shoulder blades. I remember how I felt during the week he has been away, and I press the cold metal a little deeper into his spine.

“Undress,” I say at the foot of my bed.

“Take the safety off,” he says as he pulls his sweatshirt over his head. Pretty soon he’s naked except for his watch. I point to it and he takes it off.

“Slap me,” I say.

“Safety,” he says. “Off.”

“No.” I shake my head and step away.

“Yes.”

“No.”

Before I can react, Rip tackles me and puts me in an arm-lock. He releases the safety and then my hand. Before I can collect myself, he slaps me. As I flinch from the strike, I get it on my nose. Pain shoots through my forehead and a surge of anger comes over me. I strike back, the butt of the gun against his jaw. A spark of

fury shoots through his eyes but he doesn't fight back. I push him so hard he falls on the bed. He crawls up toward the headboard but I chase him and sit on him. I pull a sheet from under us and I tie his wrists to the bedpost. He does nothing to resist. I trace the muzzle of the gun over his body—from his open palm up his wrist, across the inside of his forearm, weaving over his shoulders to the tender skin of the neck. I pause there, right under his chin and press against it, so that his neck is entirely exposed. I bite him and feel him get stiff against me. I slip out of my clothes and straddle him again. His hips start swaying gently under me and with the gun still pressing against his chin I move up and down to his rhythm. Sometimes, I let him come all the way in, other times I back off. When I let him back in again, it feels extraordinary. I monitor his breathing and adjust my speed but soon, I'm no longer in control and our bodies take over, twitching, thrusting and heaving and soon I can feel him pulsing inside me and the little yelps that escape his throat slowly push me toward the edge and just as my mind is about to blank entirely, he whispers into my ear:

“Cock the hummer.”

“Fuck no,” I yell, hating him for the distraction.

He bucks under me and pulls out.

“Come on! Don't be stupid,” I cry in frustration.

“Cock the hammer.”

His pelvis lifts, the tip of him brushing just barely against me before he backs off again, and I don't give a shit anymore if he lives or dies, I just want him inside, so I cock the hammer and push the barrel harder under his chin, and when I do, he sinks all the way into me and within seconds he is screaming at the top of his lungs and I feel my entire body cramp up and I want this moment to last forever, I want him to always make me feel this way, I want him to . . . The gun is pulsing in my hand and my forefinger trembles on the

trigger. Rip pushes his jaw against the barrel and the pressure transfers to my arm. I hear “Shoot me, Sam,” at the same moment that “Leave your wife” comes out of my mouth.

Our eyes snap open and for a while we just stare at each other. Several times, his lips part and then close. Mine too. After a while, I untie him and he gets up, gets dressed and leaves the bedroom. I am still in bed when the front door shuts behind him. That’s the last time he comes over.

The next time I see Rip, it’s at the installation award ceremony. The post theater is packed by the time I come in, all the service members in their stiff Class As, all the civilians, mostly wives and children, in their Sunday best. I search the sea of uniforms, black cardigans, and pearls for a long time before I spot him. He is holding one of his boys high in the air and giving him a toughen-up-now shake. He hands the boy over to a tall, slim woman who smiles at him, gives him a kiss on the lips, and smoothens his already flawless uniform. As the crowd settles in their chairs and Rip leaves his family to join other award recipients lined along the hall’s far wall, my mind goes on to spin the old fantasy:

I approach his wife and tap her on the shoulder. I notice the way her back is slouched and I am gripped by an urge to press against her spine to force her to straighten out. Instead, I pull her away from the crowd. As I speak, I see her face transform from graciousness to incredulity, from anger to pain. I see tears welling up and the kids running over in alarm. I see a crowd gathering around us and Rip pushing his way through. Before he even hears what happened, he calls me a liar. It’s a halfhearted attack. He takes his wife into his arms and rocks her as she sobs silently. I feel an urge to embrace them both and cry with them. But the crowd wouldn’t go for that. They’d much rather lynch me. I know I should be scared but I don’t care. I am not here to fight. Not for Rip, not for truth, not for anything else ever again. I just

want all of us to admit that we are in pain. That we are not as normal as we make ourselves to be. That we need help.

“Please rise for the playing of our national anthem,” the announcement jolts me from my fantasy.

People all around me rise from their seats. Because I know I have to, I rise too. Rip’s wife is way up front, poised and unruffled, her honey-colored hair gathered in a bun high up on her head. By the tension in her neck and the slope of her shoulder I can tell her right hand is covering her heart. I wonder what she hears in this song; what the music means to her? What I hear is the blast of the shot I never fired.

Nokolina Kulidžan grew up in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early nineties and came to the U.S. at the age of eighteen. She hoped to steer as far from war as possible but her first job out of college was teaching Serbo-Croatian at a military language school. Over the course of a decade-long career, she has come to know many veterans and is partnered with a retired U.S. Airman. Nokolina’s fiction, nonfiction and poetry have appeared in The Sun Magazine, Exquisite Corpse, Best New Writing 2010, and other publications. Her stories have twice been nominated for a Pushcart Award.

Hate Me

By Molly Martin

Perhaps it's not exactly suicide. More of a situation that spirals out of your control, but then you realize it's going exactly the way you want it to, so you stop fighting. It's kind of nice, that peace, that quiet after trying so hard for so long.

Mulling it over, I decide it's more of a suicide by proxy, like suicide-by-cop. I watched an accountant commit suicide-by-cop once. I was on my way down from Amberlee's. Another good talk about my so-called career. She had a gig, but she didn't want to book me after that stunt with Klaus. Was I sure I was clean?

"Oh, yeah," I lie. "I'm clean," I tell her as I finger the little packet of coke in my pocket.

I remember being tired as I left. My cheeks hurt from the fake and, hopefully, appeasing smile I'd stapled to my screaming mouth to keep it quiet.

There were a bunch of other people. We packed into the elevator, avoided eye contact and ignored bodily contact like pro subway patrons. I ended up in the back corner.

The elevator is glass and I can look out over Canal Street.

Downtown, a few blocks away from the Bathtub, the 9/11 Memorial grows. Outside, the brake lights flash red. I watch as we descend. More brake lights. Those drivers are pissed. I imagine the cacophony of horns and curses; a sea of waving middle fingers and clenched fists.

Red and blue lights flash and two patrol cars muscle their way into traffic. I'm the only one who notices. Everyone else placidly ignores each other, watches the numbers click by; a count down to freedom. No more enforced intimacy with strangers.

Below a man bolts out into the street. He's in a state of frenzy. He zigs left, zags right, looking for a way out. Doors opened on the cop cars. Little blue men emerge, ringing him in. He doesn't know where to go.

The cops gesture, try to calm the man, but he shakes his head. He's balding, in a suit, looks like an accountant. The cops start to close in. He reaches into his jacket. Out comes the dark shape, aimed at the nervous officer braced behind her patrol car. She holds out a hand in a "Stop!" motion, but doesn't fire. It's her partner who shoots first, bright flashes: One! Two! Three!

The accountant throws up his hands as the bullets rip through him—Hurray! His dark leather wallet flies up, spilling a confetti of money, credit cards and family photos. The next day, the papers will confirm what I saw. The dead accountant never had a gun, just a wallet, a death wish, and a trigger-happy cop.

It's awful and beautiful. I don't say anything. All I can think is, *I wish that was me.*

Sometimes, more and more these days, I feel it's all just too much and there's no way out. For example, when I stand in the financial aid office. I try to escape but they talk on and on, saying things about the VA and expired loan forbearance. Do I have my DD214? Do I have my 23-A? Copies of my taxes, FAFSA, a letter from my landlord, a note from my mom, a signed birthday card,

a copy of my first Picasso inspired macaroni and glitter masterpiece. My eyes roll up and I flee, paperwork unturned in.

Two weeks pass. I don't tell anyone. Not my counselor, not my advisor, certainly not Amberlee. On the phone with the folks, I agree to come home for the holidays, but only because I know I'll call Percy later and back out.

"Sorry, no can do, dearest sister of mine. No money, no ride," I tell her.

The girl is persistent. She calls back, "Mom and Dad have booked you a ticket. Write this down." She talks for a while about departure times and carry-on bags. She gives me a confirmation number.

How can I go home like this? Look at my mom and tell her I still can't sleep at night, so I fall asleep in class? Tell my dad I screwed up my free ride? I won't be a proud G.I. Bill grad like Grandpa. And Percy, oh god. She'll take one look at me and know.

"You promised if I didn't tell Mom and Dad, you'd go to rehab. You promised."

I wanted to. I would have, if I thought it would help. But I can't see getting through a day on my own. I don't think a Serenity prayer will be enough.

I've never slept so well as I did with my cheek pressed against AngelSweet's stock. I miss the sound of incoming. I can't tell how far away the rounds are in the silence of my loft, so I cut the coke and snort the lines and wish I was back Over There.

In a way, I think I never left that elevator. I'm still on my way down. As a crowning achievement on my list of 'Crap I've Put My Family Through', I cash the ticket they bought to fly me home for Christmas. I use the money to 'score' as they refer to it on TV.

I lie on the floor and wait for the rush. Outside, I can hear Percy. Weird. Shouldn't she be in back home?

She yells something about being worried about me, something about calling the cops. Again with the cops.

The door splinters. I wonder if I can get my deposit back. Probably not.

They roll me on my side, their blue-gloved hands cold on my bare skin. They push Percy back. She's crying. I want to cry, too. She shouldn't be here. She's going to tell Mom and Dad what I did with their ticket money.

I'm in an ambulance and Percy clutches my hand. Why doesn't she hate me?

I'm in the hospital and the doctor holds de-fib paddles over me. They're wasting their time.

I'm in the dark, alone.

Molly Martin served two combat tours, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. After getting out of the Army, she worked as a DoD consultant before fleeing D.C. for the West Coast, where she now lives her fellow-veteran husband and obligatory cats. These days she focuses on speculative fiction and short stories.

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