

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

Summer 2015
Volume 3 Number 4

On the cover: *Cigarette Break*,
pencil and acrylic on paper
by Victor Juhasz

“*In 120 degree heat and brutal sun, at Kandahar Airfield (KAF), ‘dustoff’ teams and ground personnel would hide in the concrete bunkers to get some shade, puff away, talk, and deal with the incredible boredom before the chaos. The shade was appreciated even if the temperature wasn’t that much different than outside.*”

Victor Juhasz, a graduate of Parsons School of Design, is a veteran of over forty years of courtroom art, editorial cartooning, and book illustrating. His art has appeared across a virtual who’s who of publications from *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times* to *GQ* and *Esquire*.

Victor is the co-chair of the Society of Illustrators’ governmental affairs committee and a civilian participant in both the United States Air Force and Marine Corps combat art programs. Juhasz is also a member of The Joe Bonham Project, a consortium of American artists who’ve volunteered to spend time with and sketch America’s most profoundly wounded service members in military shock trauma surgical wards and rehabilitation centers.

In addition, Victor’s youngest son, Benjamin, is a Staff Sergeant in the Marine Reserve.

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Editor's Note
(*A Tale of Two Readings*)

This summer I had the pleasure of attending two readings. At the first, held at the Politics & Prose bookstore in north-west Washington, DC, Jesse Goolsby read from his novel *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*, a story of three veterans of the war in Afghanistan. I'd read the novel and knew the passage Jesse was reading, so I enjoyed observing the reactions of the audience. There were little "Mmmms" of appreciation and suppressed gasps in just the right places. One woman opened and looked at her hands when the character Wintric noticed the cut on his hand and wiped the blood on his pants. Another, behind me, audibly followed the character Dax's direction: "Deep breath, Ellis. Breathe." Sincere sighs of appreciation hissed out when Jesse read the final line.

The second reading took place in the atrium of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in downtown Washington, DC. The readers had all attended Veterans Writing Project workshops at the VA Medical Center in 2014 and 2015. A few read poems. Most read personal narratives. Some of the readings were not about the writer's military experience. Nevertheless, the audience reactions were similar: sighs of appreciation, a foot tapping in rhythm with a driving line of poetry, a few "Mmmms" and even a couple of muttered "Amens." Heads nodded in agreement or shook side to side in amazed incredulity. Fists clenched and unclenched. The applause for each reader resounded through the multi-story atrium and drew the attention of passing staff and visitors. Some wandered over to listen.

At both readings, the authors got the audiences' empathy circuits firing after just a few lines. Their writing evoked shared experiences and memories, whether the listeners were fellow veterans or curious civilians. Their stories called forth deep emotions. The readers built an instant community from complete strangers, and united veterans and civilians with vastly different life experiences. Ultimately, this shared emotion and connection is why we write, and why we read and attend readings.

The selections in this issue had an evocative effect on us, and we believe that many of the emotions portrayed in these pages will resonate with readers. Welcome (or welcome back) to the community created in *O-Dark-Thirty*.

Jerri Bell

Non-fiction.

One Summer Night

By Chris Stowe

"D

irty Sanchez, Dirty Sanchez, this is Highlander Main." The radio transmission crackles over my headphones like heat lightning in the summer sky. It is 2:00 a.m., and I have been up since 6:00 a.m. the day prior.

I have never known what the true meaning of the phrase "bone-tired" meant before this deployment, but I'm beginning to understand it.

This time the Command Operations Center is sending us to just outside Firm Base 4. An Observation Post has spotted a military-aged male attempting to place an IED out in the intersection of FB 4 and the main military supply route. The OP has relayed to the COC that he thought he had shot him, and requests my EOD team to search the back alley mazes around FB 4 as the suspected emplacer has run back into an alley with the IED. "Great," I mumble under my breath, as my teammates start reloading the truck. I look over the imagery and can't wait to be in the middle of downtown at ground level with no fewer than four buildings looming above me while I try to find one jackass and his IED. At least it's dark.

We arrive and set up security. A strange mixture of Viking

giants and gentle little boy-men, every last one of them I would ride to Hell and back with. They are my lifeline. And I am theirs. Who would have thought seven months ago that I would be relying on some Army doggies to keep me alive? I am thankful for every last one of them.

We get an update by the OP—no change in the situation. There are several U-shaped alleys that connect behind the buildings that face what passes for a road in this shithole, and our job tonight will be to search them for the bad guy, the IED, or hopefully both. I am sure the OP has missed this prick and this will be nothing but a dry hole but what the hell, it can't hurt to check, right?

I divvy up the security and send my teammate with one group of the security detail to search the near end of the alley while I move with the second group to the farther alley, and we plan to meet in the middle. I pause—it's so quiet it feels like the air has been sucked out of the night sky by some universal evil. I feel heavier all of a sudden because of it. My kit digs into my shoulders and my sweat-soaked socks grab at my legs. We start to move over to the far alley, searching as we go. Security is splitting their attention between the windows above their heads and the gravel below their feet. Both places are pregnant with the possibility of death. I turkey-peek the corner going into the alley, and instantly see him. A dark figure slumped against the wall of the alley, one hand on the blossomed rose near his stomach on his shirt, the other on the ground. His quick panting confirms he is alive. At his feet is my prize: the IED. It looks like a speed bump.

As I move up a bit to get a better vantage point, he moves. He goes for something in his pocket. That is enough for me and I hammer three rounds into his face without hesitation. Then I radio to the other group to let them know I am the one who fired, and I am now moving in to neutralize the IED. I go over to dead check the guy and search him. He had been trying to get a hand grenade out of

his pocket when I shot him, so now I am even more relieved that I did not hesitate. He had his ID in the other pocket and a few other papers, which I put in my dump pouch. I then turn to neutralize the IED. A mixture of steel, C-4, and detonation cord shaped to literally look like a speed bump with a pressure strip on top and a 9-volt battery on the side.

I kneel down to remove the power source, wire clippers set to separate it from the device, when the guy I shot gives out an involuntary exhalation of air, also known as a death rattle. H.P. Lovecraft could not have described the unearthly gargling sound that comes from the corpse's neck where one of my rounds has struck him. My teammate has bounded into the alley at this point, and describes my position as running sideways on the ground as I tried to simultaneously move as far away as I could while also unloading the magazine from my pistol into the body, convinced of its resurrection. Only chance or providence saves me from stepping on the IED.

After once again confirming that the dead body is, in fact, still dead, we finally blow up the IED. and head back to base. I start inventorying the emplacer's pocket trash. My hair feels like it is full of electricity and my mouth has the taste of a battery as I come down from my near zombie encounter.

I look at his ID card and my stomach drops. Fifteen years old. Fifteen. The guy—no, the boy—I have just killed is fifteen years old and he lies in an alley riddled with bullets while my own thirteen-year-old son is just starting his day 4,000 miles away. My world tilts out of view. I wonder how the boy's father is feeling. I see my own son lying there instead of the Iraqi: two holes in *his* head and one in *his* neck.

I see my son at home starting his day. He is waking up and wiping the sleep out of his eyes. I also see the father of the dead Iraqi boy wiping flies away from his son's eyes as he is found in the morning. My

son continues throughout his morning; eating, dressing, preparing. I see the corpse of the fifteen-year-old boy continue in HIS day, being moved to the house of his father, being cleaned, being dressed, being prepared for burial. While my son begins his travels to school, the Iraqi boy begins his travels to the afterlife.

I can't breathe. I can't move past the image in my mind of my dead son lying there in some unnamed, unimportant Iraqi alleyway. It was then that another piece of my soul died and another chunk of my sanity crumbled away.

A large detonation ahead of our convoy returning to FB 4 shakes me from my thoughts. As I hear the radio come alive with the request for EOD support, I get my game face on. *Knock this shit off, Chris*, I think to myself. There is no time for reflection in a war zone. Maybe after, but not during. Reflection can make you hesitate the next time you see a fifteen-year-old boy—and hesitation can get you killed.

I just wish I could stop seeing my son's face on every fifteen-year-old boy that I see.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Chris Stowe is an active duty Marine of twenty-two years. Several combat deployments as an EOD technician have created a need for an outlet, which comes in the form of short non-fiction and poetry. He also spends time oil painting.

Dishonest Departure

By Jordan Powell

The dull roar, a mixture of the car's tires on the road and its round metal body cutting through the humid air, filled the silence that had settled between us. Our remaining time together could be counted in double digits. I glanced over. His face was stoic, eyes out the passenger window, hands clasped together in his lap. At least he wasn't crying yet.

Four days of non-stop activity had become a blur of fading memory—just as Pittsburgh faded behind us. Running around the convention center, attending panels, devouring quick meals, meeting up with friends, and meeting up with those friends' friends had consumed all the hours not spent sleeping. Having left the bustle, I now had a chance to dwell on the inevitable that I had so carefully been avoiding. I'd been preoccupied about taking a wrong exit on the convoluted highway out of the city before. Now there was nothing but straight, boring freeway ahead.

I was really leaving: leaving everything I wanted in my life to go back, back to work a world away. I checked my watch and for once I'd be early getting to an airport. It seemed like all the times

before I'd almost been late or had to run to make my flight. So I kept to the speed limit and tried to concentrate on driving. A couple more minutes—even spent in silence—was a gift.

Fourteen days wasn't enough time: lazy days spent napping together on the couch; venomless back and forth banter; home cooked meals sitting together at a table, TV turned off; my first time seeing and catching fireflies; struggling to find something interesting to do in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania—all in the first week. I smiled to myself in reverie, blissfully unaware as the too-few miles rolled beneath us.

We met in September. He was the roommate of a friend I was visiting on my first return to the States since I'd left for Japan, eighteen months before, and my subsequent deployment to Afghanistan. In the ten months since we'd grown close, keeping in touch online. Despite the four wonderful days we'd just spent with each other at a geeky convention, I remained cynical about our future. How could I hold us together when I had trouble keeping myself together?

Thoughts of my family on the opposite side of the country, whom I'd decided not to visit in favor of my friends, reared their heads. My friends and my relationships with them something I keep from everybody back home. Just friends, Mom. No, they're not in the military, just met them through a friend I made in Afghanistan, Mom. I knew that telling her that the man in the passenger seat was more than just a friend couldn't possibly go well. Perhaps, someday, I'd broach the subject and be pleasantly surprised by her reaction, but I doubted that.

Eventually, I drove past a large sign: Welcome to Pittsburgh International Airport. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to it all. Again. I didn't have a choice.

I've had plenty of time to practice hiding my emotions as a Marine. More farewells and more tears shed on my behalf because

of my numerous departures than I like to acknowledge. There have been losses I wish had never happened. Emotion suppression is a skill born of necessity—the social expectation of a man to suppress the emotion that should be embraced openly, if only for his own sanity.

People were unloading their luggage and doing to loved ones what I must reluctantly do. I pulled the car into an open space alongside the curb. Another sign: Departures Terminal. I didn't need to look at his face to know he was doing his best. I could hear it in his quivering breath.

Muggy, oppressive air bore down on me when I opened the door and gathered my things and checked my pockets to make sure I had everything. Though it wasn't the best, the air conditioning in the car was preferable to the unaltered outdoors. The East Coast is a place I've never liked: too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. Too many cars and too many people crammed together. It made me miss Washington, my true home, even more. But that was my choice, my choice to visit my friends instead of my family. He was already at the trunk by the time I dragged myself out of the car. My mouth wasn't dry, yet I struggled to swallow. My sunglasses concealed my moist eyes as I helped put my bags on the curb. I double-checked the car one last time. Back at the curb I came face-to-face with my harsh reality. This was it.

Reality looked back at me with barely restrained tears. "Am I forgetting anything?" I asked as I checked my pockets: cell phone, wallet, Chapstick, and online check-in stub. He looked over at his car then walked over to it, opening the passenger door and looking around the seats.

"I don't see anything," he said when he came back, stopping next to my luggage, looking everywhere but at me. I'm not totally positive why he was so sad about my leaving. His feelings and emotions concerning me have always been a bit of an enigma. We're

not together in any traditional sense, more friends than anything. I know long distance relationships don't work for me. If only we were both better at being honest with one another.

I wrapped my arms around him with finality. He pressed his face into my shoulder and I wanted to cry. Just like all those other times, I was unable. I blinked away emotion and rubbed his back. People walked by, as unaware of my demons as he was. He leaned back and looked up at me expectantly with bleary eyes. I obliged and kissed his cracked lips. It only lasted for a moment; I wanted to hold it, but part of me is uncomfortable with the judging gazes of random strangers. Who gave a damn what they thought? It was all in my head anyway.

Goodbye has never been a strength of mine. This moment was like all the others before it. Goodbye feels awkward to me. When I say "goodbye" it lasts, seemingly eternal. A year will go by, a blink in hindsight, but a yawning chasm in the beginning. I fretted over my glasses hanging in the collar of my shirt when he squeezed me with all the strength his skinny arms could muster and I rested my chin on his disheveled hair. A quick adjustment and I returned the embrace stronger—three straight months of body building behind my affection. Even in times like this I worried about inconsequential shit. I have two more pairs of glasses and the government gives me two new pairs each year; why should I have cared if one pair got slightly squished?

Conscious of the overzealous airport security, I pulled back from him. My hand lingered on his arm. Neither of us wanted this. One last fleeting kiss; a hug for the road.

"Well, I better get going," I said, shrugging one shoulder and giving my luggage a forlorn look. I distracted myself by double-checking that my passport was where it should be in my bag.

"Yeah, me too. It's a long drive back home."

"How long is it?"

“Four hours.”

“Oh, that sucks.” I wanted to hug him again and never let go. I wanted to get in the car and go with him, but I had to go back. Most people wouldn't think going back to Helsinki was a bad thing at all, but it wasn't where I wanted to be. I still had more than two years left overseas and two more posts. “I'll call you once I get to the gate, okay?”

“Okay,” he said softly and sniffled.

“Drive safe, okay?”

“I will.”

I didn't want to watch him leave and waved as I turned to the airport. A pillar of air-conditioned heaven hit me as I entered the terminal. I quickly got my bearings and found the direction of my check-in counter. A sudden change of heart pulled me back to the entrance and I watched him pull away through the tinted glass doors. He slightly hunched over the steering wheel. Part of me hoped he'd look my way, but he didn't. It reminded me of the times I'd driven away, turning to see my mother with tears in her eyes, watching her youngest leave yet again.

The line to check-in was mercifully short when I reached it. A family of four was behind me in line. I listened in on their inconsequential arguing—insincere platitudes to keep the children quiet. Soon I was second in line and the façade started to crack. My vision blurred, the muscles in my throat strained against my will and my lips pulled into a deep frown. I wanted to break down, fall to my knees and let all the pent up tears flow. Tears that I'd restrained when the caskets, draped in the Colors, cocooning my brothers-in-arms, were carried into the belly of the waiting C-130. Tears I denied, again, when I stood holding my salute in the chill dusk as another fellow Marine was borne away from the deserts of Afghanistan toward home. Tears I refused to let fall, which turned my vision

to watercolors, in the packed base theater in Okinawa during the funeral ceremony for our two fallen Marines. One Marine's grieving family staggered up the aisle, inches from me, escorting their tortured grandmother to the exit. Tears I'd wanted to let out in the comfort of his embrace the week before, but what reason did I have to cry? From the outside I didn't feel I deserved to have these tears at all. I was alive, wasn't I?

Then, a text message, telling me he was crying. I wiped my eyes on the collar of my shirt, blinked away all emotion and adjusted my mask. I texted him back that I loved and already deeply missed him; I told him I'd see him soon. It was the truth, but it felt like a lie. No tears crawled down my stubborn, flushed cheeks.

The years I'd spent away from friends, family, and loves were wearing me down. You signed the dotted line, I told myself. I wasn't bitter but it didn't comfort me. I wished I could cry until my soul was empty. Empty of everything.

"Good afternoon, sir. Where are you flying today?" the woman behind the counter asked as I stepped forward, pulling my obstinate luggage.

"Helsinki, Finland, ma'am."

Three hundred and sixty-five days, I told myself. That day of return felt as distant as the sun.

Jordan Powell is an active duty Marine on his second enlistment, currently posted in Baghdad, Iraq as a Marine Security Guard. He has previously been posted in Okinawa, Japan; Helsinki, Finland; Seoul, South Korea; and he deployed to Helmand Province in Afghanistan in 2011 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

The Mud-Brick Crucible

By Mark Andrew Richards

I woke up because it was suddenly quiet. It took me a few moments to figure out what was wrong. For the first time in days, there was the complete absence of sound, and it was unnerving. No staccato popcorn-sound of Brit L7 machine guns. No thud of mortars. No helicopters on casualty evacuation missions. And not a single note from the mighty A-10, like a giant Viking war horn, echoing across the valley.

I sat up, shivering in the pre-dawn darkness, completely disoriented and with no idea where I was. It was freezing, and I awoke to the smell of a musty GP-Medium tent with no heat, while wrapped in a far-too-thin sleeping bag. Then it started to come back to me. Patrol Base Rahim. South of Lashkar Gah, a stone's-throw from the Helmand River in southern Afghanistan. I was with the Brits this time. Or, to be more precise, 12 Platoon, 4 Company, Irish Guards. I had been back in Afghanistan for exactly sixty-four days, and this was the twelfth location I had been sent to. I did the math and thought, “Hell, that’s an average of over five days per forward operating base. What am I complaining about?”

Ah yes, it was all coming back to me. No running water, one hot meal a day, and shitting in a bag. Hell, it could be worse. I could be back at Kandahar. Sure, you could go to the boardwalk there and get a Frappuccino and a slice of pizza, but nothing tastes very good when all you can smell is the giant shit-pond.

I had been at Rahim for six days, kind of a record for me. I was a contractor working for the Navy Special Operations Command Special Surveillance Programs. I know, I know: overpaid, scum-sucking leeches. I've heard it all before. Hey, I did my time as a 13B cannon crewmember, then as a gunner escorting convoys back in OIF III. So, if you're a soldier and don't think it's fair how much contractors get paid, then you are more than welcome to go get some technical skills and do what I did. I digress.

The Brits were pragmatists. I was there to help them and they acted like they appreciated it. When I landed six days ago, they rolled out the red carpet and even gave me a full intelligence briefing. Then a master sergeant showed me to the armory and made sure I knew how to use their standard-issue L85A2 rifle. He looked at me seriously and said, "If shite gets cocked up, you're expected to earn your keep."

I was there to oversee the deployment of a surveillance system, and they needed it badly. Unfortunately, my equipment didn't arrive until two days after I showed up. The team of operators was already on site, so in the meantime I helped them get their shit together, building their hooch and unpacking their personal gear. Then the rest of the system showed up, so things were very busy for a while. I worked for thirty-six hours straight, because the Brits wanted to start really pushing into the valley with their patrols. But they wanted full ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) first. So I had to meet their schedule and get the system fully operational prior to their SP time.

We were fully mission capable right on time, and the Brits pushed out their first really large patrol. That was two days ago, and

that's when all hell broke loose. There had been fighting before that, but nothing like this. The Taliban fighters had been preparing and moving into position. More insurgent fighters had moved in from other areas. That first patrol had heavy contact the instant they got outside the wire. From then on, the deadly drama continued day and night. There was continuous fighting, but with an ebb-and-flow to it. Sometimes there was just sporadic gunfire for a couple hours. Then suddenly, everything would erupt and there was firing from every direction. If we were lucky, one or two A-10s would swoop in. I called them the "depleted uranium fairies" and I loved them. They would come in so low that I could make eye contact with the pilot. First, a low pass to get eyes on the target. Bank left, pop flares; bank right, pop flares, then pull up. The next pass was all business. That giant Gatling gun would spit fire, and the pilot would pitch the elevators on the tail of the plane up and down to strafe the target. But the sound—the acoustics of the valley caused the "BRRRRRRRRRRRRRR" roar of the GAU-8 Gatling gun to echo and envelop me, shaking my insides and turning me slightly giddy.

PB Rahim was a mud-brick fort that occupied the high ground overlooking a section of the Helmand River Valley. The town of Rahim Kalay was just below and to the east of us. In the mornings, I could get a brew (cup of tea) and make the short walk to the wall next to the mortar team. I would watch for a while as their rounds impacted a few hundred meters away. Then I would head to one of the Sangers (guard towers) to see what the crew-served weapon was shooting at. After that, I would go to the Tactical Operations Center, check in with the Battle Captain, and then walk the few steps to my GCS. There, I would watch the action unfold in glorious high-definition video on a panorama of forty-two inch monitors. Isn't technology wonderful?

However, on this particular morning, I sat in the pre-dawn darkness and just tried to get my bearings. The lull in the fighting had awakened me, and I still felt off somehow. My watch said 0500,

so I decided to get my ass in gear. The surveillance system was working flawlessly, so it seemed just about time for me to “pop smoke and break contact,” or leave the area. One more day and a wake-up and I would head back to Kandahar. Or Bastion/Leatherneck. Or Ramrod. Or FOB Frontenac. Ok, I actually wasn’t sure about my next destination, but I knew I was restless.

I lived out of a single desert-tan backpack. When I reached inside to fetch my last pair of clean socks, my hand encountered something warm and furry. I instinctively recoiled in surprise, cursing and kicking at my ruck. I had disturbed a big fat kangaroo mouse, who had been making a meal out of the vestiges of some long-forgotten granola bar somewhere in the depths of my battered pack. The mouse left the scene in a panic, and I pulled on my socks. There’s really nothing better in this world than clean, dry socks.

After subjecting my head and torso to an ice-cold water-bottle shower, I went about my day and made final checks on the system. The team of operators was already getting into the swing of things, and they were a competent and motivated group. I poked my head into the TOC and a familiar voice called to me, “Hey mate, what’s shaking?” It was Mark, a British lieutenant. He shared my first name, he was my height (short), and he had a shock of close-cropped red hair. Everyone referred to him as “the soulless ginger,” but we had hit it off immediately. I asked if there were any problems with the surveillance system.

“No, mate. The live feed is great, and we have comms with your team.”

“They’re not my team! I just set this shit up!” I laughed.

“At any rate, the commander is pleased. We have a partial platoon of EOD guys flying in this afternoon to help us clear the IEDs around this place. Looks like I’ll be going out with them to help pull security.” Mark seemed excited at the prospect.

“Just keep your head on a swivel. Don’t be a hero.”

Mark looked shocked. “Just because I’m a soulless ginger, that doesn’t mean I’m crazy!”

Several British soldiers chimed in all at once, “Yes, it does!”

We had a good laugh. Everything was looking good, so I headed out to buy some fake Marlboros from an Afghan soldier. I found a group of them not far from the Entry Control Point. They were wearing British camouflage, and one of them inexplicably wore an inflatable hat in the shape of a large jack-o-lantern. When I walked up, he just kept saying “Halloween! Halloween!” over and over and laughing.

I’m not usually a smoker, but I had a lot of nervous energy built up. Cigarettes seemed to help, plus I just liked to BS with the guys smoking outside the British equivalent of an MWR (Morale, Welfare, and Recreation) tent. It wasn’t actually a tent. It was three walls made out of Hesco barriers, with some corrugated tin for a roof. There was a TV, some folding chairs, and a wobbly table holding a tea kettle and a coffee pot. The flooring was genuine gravel. The lap of luxury!

Inside, I found a group of enlisted soldiers watching British football. It was “Premier League,” which I gathered was top of the soccer food chain. I’m not a fan of the sport, but their enthusiasm was infectious so I decided to pick a team to root for. I liked the name “Arsenal,” but I fortuitously chose Manchester United instead. They won, so I had something to cheer about. After the game, I went looking for the team of PGSS system operators, my American compatriots. My intent was to have my final dinner with them. However, they had already headed to the chow tent while I was engrossed in the football match.

The DFAC tent was crowded, especially since the arrival of the dozen or so EOD soldiers. I saw my team of operators near the back, but their table was completely full. I took one of two empty seats at a table nearby, and a British captain soon took the remaining seat directly across from me.

The young captain and I started talking. He had that bewildered, tired look of jet lag compounded with the realization that he really was in Afghanistan. Turns out he had just graduated from EOD school. This was his first deployment anywhere. Three days earlier, he had been on British soil. We talked for a couple hours, until we were the only people left in the chow tent. I could tell he just needed to wrap his head around the situation in which he now found himself.

I'm not going to use his real name. I'll call him Mike Hawthorne. Mike was just twenty-five, and he had a wife and a baby boy back home. He did not want to make a career of the Army. He had gone to school for civil engineering, and that's the work he intended to pursue when he returned home. He was a good, solid officer. Tall and thin, with tousled brown hair. He looked closer to nineteen than twenty-five, but at my age they all looked like children. He loved to go biking with his wife, and his favorite hobby was photography. I was really glad that I could be an impartial ear for him. I found myself in that role quite often because bravado and unspoken rules meant that soldiers would rarely show their feelings to their fellow warriors. But I was not one of them. I was an outsider, a friendly, middle-aged Yank who had been there and got the t-shirt. So I lent an ear and let him bare his soul to me.

Finally, we said our goodbyes. He was going on his first patrol the next morning, so it was time to hit the rack. I headed back to my lovely, freezing tent. I passed the MWR tent, and it felt dark and empty. When I bundled up and prepared to get some shut-eye, I found myself already missing PB Rahim. I guess because it was such a small patrol base where everyone knew everyone, and they all relied on each other. I felt welcomed and accepted from the moment I ducked out of the back of the British Sea King helicopter just six days earlier. I pulled my beanie down over my ears and drifted off to the comforting music of machine gun and small arms fire.

I allowed myself to sleep in a bit the next day. I was scheduled

to leave at 1300, so I packed up my bedroll and made ready to march. Once I had packed up my meager belongings, I wandered over to the chow tent in time to get some coffee, cold blood sausage, and a stale pastry. I finished my Spartan breakfast just in time to see the platoon forming up to head outside the wire. I spotted Mark, so I ran over and shook his hand. He gave a nervous nod. "Cheers mate! See you in a bit!" I also noticed my new friend, Mike, on the other side of the formation so I stood and waited until I caught his attention. He waved, but his face was grim. Then they were heading out the gates, boots kicking up a cloud of beige talcum-powder dust.

As the gates closed behind 12 Platoon, I went straight to the GCS and slipped in through the steel door. Jeff, one of the American operators, sat at the controls of the surveillance system, and he already had the troop formation up on the monitors along with the digital maps and other telemetry. I watched them move out, single file. Jeff expertly zoomed in and out, and switched between visible and thermal cameras to make sure everything was functioning properly. No sound came from the video, just the throbbing din of cooling fans from the computer rack. Jeff panned out with a wide-angle view so he could see the entire formation and their surroundings and scanned around a bit in the direction they were heading. So far it was all clear.

PB Rahim had been abandoned for a couple months before the Brits arrived. Unfortunately, that gave the Taliban time to plant dozens of improvised explosive devices around the old fort. Hell, there may have been hundreds. There were a few conventional anti-personnel mines, but the majority were low-metal-content, pressure-plate activated IEDs. Since they lacked the resources to clear all of them, the Brits and the Danish army had just cleared some paths, which they had marked with those little white surveyor flags. The entire column was ranged out in a single-file line to the right of the flags.

Except for one soldier walking on the wrong side of the flags.

Someone tall and thin.

I slapped Jeff on the shoulder and pointed at the screen. “Hey, Jeff, zoom in on that guy!”

It was unmistakably Captain Mike Hawthorne. What the fuck was he doing?

“Jeff, get the Battle Captain on the line. NOW!”

“He’s talking right now, giving orders . . . ” said Jeff.

“Stay on that fucker! Shit!” I bolted out of the GCS, heading for the TOC at an all-out sprint. Someone in the TOC had to see Mike! Someone had to tell him to get the fuck back in line!

The force of the blast almost knocked me down. I felt an instant wave of nausea, not from the explosion but because I knew exactly what had happened. A dirty mushroom cloud was already rising above the wall. I turned around and scrambled the few feet back to the GCS and stood in the doorway with my heartbeat thudding in my throat. The big, brilliant 42-inch monitor showed a cloud of brown. As it cleared, I caught glimpses of red. Just hints of it at first, then more and more. The dust billowed and roiled, but gradually a human figure resolved into view. Most of a human figure. A medic reached Mike and frantically went to work. But both his legs were gone at mid-thigh level. The massive amount of blood and missing legs showed the most visible damage, but there was more. His left arm was gone from just below the elbow. He was gone. There were other casualties as well, but Mike caught the brunt of the blast. Within moments, two officers and a master sergeant shouldered past me into the GCS. There was frantic activity for a few minutes while they directed the cameras and shouted orders into their radios. Then it was relatively calm.

I stumbled out of the GCS, with my face and lips feeling numb and tingly. Why would fate choose to introduce me to this wonderful man, in the prime of his life, with a family waiting for him back home?

Why would fate let me see that Mike's life had been a seemingly unbroken string of good decisions up until that morning? And then, fate let me watch him make his last mistake on this earth, and fate went on to taunt me and show me how helpless I was to do anything about it. In the harsh light of day, I grimly realized that this chilly November morning had just been etched into my mind indelibly with the caustic acid of war.

The rest of the platoon marched back into PB Rahim and came to a halt in front of the TOC. They were dazed, filthy, bloody. Not one of them was the same person who marched out through the gates less than an hour earlier. All but a handful of them were dismissed and they all silently went their separate ways. I milled about the GCS, feeling helpless. And, suddenly, I felt like the outsider that I really was. Then movement caught my eye among the tangle of wires between the TOC and the GCS. It was Mark. He was standing in the shadows, trying to light a cigarette with hands that were shaking too badly to hold the lighter.

I lit his smoke, then lit one for myself. "You know, these things will kill you." I tried to make a bad joke. Mark laughed, surprising both of us. Then he choked back tears.

"I bloody almost died. I watched my friend die, a bloke I went to university with. That could have fucking been me!" Mark broke down. Rather than just stand there awkwardly, I decided to wrap Mark in a hug. His sobs were fierce, but brief. Then he pulled himself together and looked at me sheepishly.

"Don't you dare tell anyone about that. It's just . . . not allowed."

"Of course not. Besides, who am I going to tell?" I said.

We walked back around the GCS and Mark started to head back into the TOC. He paused and turned around. "Cheers."

"You're welcome." I responded.

As Mark disappeared inside the TOC, a Brit corporal came

running up to me.

“Grab your kit and get to the LZ. Your ride’s here.”

And, just like that, I was leaving PB Rahim. Yet the battle raged on.

Mark Andrew Richards is currently serving as a communications team chief in the Army National Guard and preparing for a deployment to Kosovo. In his civilian life, he is a research electronics engineer at a university cancer research facility. He is happily married to his wife of 17 years, and they have two adult children.

Fiction.

Chewy

By Matthew Cricchio

We had been patrolling for three clicks and I wanted to get to the crest so we could pause and hydrate and get a good view of everything below. My plate carrier wasn't riding correctly; it was doing something weird to my shoulder right where the bone met my trap, burning and pulling as I trotted up the rocky hill. My Kevlar helmet was hot from the sun, grinding my acne bloody. I motioned for my Marines to continue at my pace toward the crest of the long slope so I could take my fucking Kevlar off and wrap a bandana around my head. It was so hot that the black carabiner holding my rifle to its sling felt scalding through my gloves.

I was near the top when they called a halt over the radio. Someone had heard something from the other side. They wanted me to check it out before all of us came rushing over. I called back to ask what it was and they told me a bunch of MAMs—military-aged males—yelling at each other. Now lying prone, I turned my head, whispered for Meno to come toward my position. Meno was a boot but he was smart. He ran at a crouch up the hill, closing the distance quick, flopping down at my side. A wave of dust blew up and I closed my eyes to keep it out.

“Thanks, asshole.” I raked my tongue along the line of new dirt that clung to the spit on the edge of my upper lip.

“I’m sorry, Sar’nt Bing.”

We low-crawled toward the top of the hill through big, smooth rocks and tufts of dry grass, pushing our rifles ahead. Nearly cresting, I rolled to my back, stopping Meno with a quick hand signal. Reflexively, he began scanning with his rifle to our right. He was a boot but he was going to be a good rifleman soon. Our squad was arrayed below in a wedge with each taking a knee to cover their sector. Even without cover their worn brown uniforms melted into the terrain. In that moment, in the barren countryside near Musa Qala, I was proud that my Marines knew how to do their jobs.

The sun was behind us. Knowing my optic wouldn’t glint, I crawled the last meter to stick my rifle over the top, using the magnification of my gun sight to scan. The downslope ran steeply into a wide field of sand and dull piled rocks, wrapping the field like a horseshoe, creating an amphitheater. I scooted further into wind, which was blowing hard and rushing up toward me. Six men faced each other across a short distance. In the narrow world of my scope I saw each individually, glassing over their wind-snapped, baggy pants and furling black turbans before I realized there was too much to see and I raised my face from the tube. Two red motorcycles were thrown haphazardly onto the dirt. Azure pieces of glass hung from the handlebars and three AK-47s leaned across saddles covered in squares of blue rug. The guns looked like they had been left carelessly, one sitting with its muzzle pushed into the sandy soil. I went back to my gun sight and put it on the rifles to verify what I’d seen. The wind rose again across the field and fiercely up the slope. With it I heard the men’s guttural laughter and the wet snarl of dogs.

Two dogs, tied to thick ropes, leaped and snapped at each other in the open ground between the men. Each dog was held back

by a man leaning with his entire body pitched at an extreme angle to the ground. Both of the anchoring hajjis slipped in their black sandals, skidding across the sand and fighting to regain their footing to hold back the huge dogs. The dogs had reared onto their hind legs, taller than the men at their withers, their heads all fangs and rolling white eyes. Both were a dull yellow with cropped ears and tails. Four young puppies of the same coat ambled clumsily over the ground between the men and the motorcycles. Suddenly, there was a hard shout and the ropes were cut. The dogs attacked each other, blacked out with rage.

I slid down below the crest and over the radio told the lieutenant what I had seen.

“Weapons?”

“Yes, Sir. Three AK-47s. Six MAMs. Two big dogs and a lot of really young puppies.”

“Get everyone on line across the crest. Assault through.”

“Sir?”

“You positively identified weapons, right? Go get ‘em.”

My Marines broke their wedge formation and spread out in a line below the top of the hill, hooking around the hill along the south side of the field, holding back from the north to avoid shooting into each other.

We stood and advanced together, not running, but allowing gravity to take us down the hill at a speed that we could still shoot accurately at. My Marines must’ve looked like demons springing from the dirt because when the men saw us they forgot their dogs and ran. They became immediate threats, their running taking away our choices as they sped for their motorcycles and toward the thoughtlessly abandoned guns. The air broke with one shot then the entire line joined. The bark of our guns echoed deafeningly as we descended into the bowl of the field. Someone laced a guy in the head. He

crumpled dead, bouncing hard off of the fork of one of the motorcycles. The other five didn't stop to help, kicking the puppies and jumping over the motorcycles to run across the field. All of us were good shots. Bullets chased then found them easily. They hadn't gotten more than five or six meters away from the bikes before we killed them. They fell contorted over each other in a single pile.

The two fighting dogs lowered their heads, hackles raised in a menacing ridge across their bodies, the hanging flesh of their snouts pulled back showing rows of bloody teeth. I drove my Marines on. When we crossed a low dip at the bottom of the hill, the fighting dogs broke from the circle of puppies. They closed the distance in a moment.

"Holy shit," Meno yelled. A fighting dog charged directly at him. Meno raised his rifle just as it leaped for his face. The dog twisted and went down, dead instantly. We began firing at the second rushing dog, hitting it in the leg first, following as it began to dart side-to-side, driven to kill, before shooting three more times. Finally it flopped, sliding through the dirt on its own horrible momentum. I snapped my head down the line to check our spacing before yelling for them to continue closing around the puppies. Puppies began to run from us, sniveling and squeaking from us. I heard, from far to the right, the whine of a bullet and a puppy was thrown, twirling and bleeding away. I heard the crack of the report and another bouncing bullet came across. Another puppy was hit near my feet. I raised my hands over my head, chopping the air.

"Cease fucking fire! Cease fire right now!" I keyed the mic on my radio and squelched before screaming over the net. There were a few more shots but the word went down the line and my Marines stopped. Meno was closest, and the unluckiest because of it. I grabbed him by the collar, pulling him off of his feet. "Get Corporal Hamnet, right now." He went sprinting down the line and came back with

Hamnet. Hamnet was breathless, his lips pulled back, teeth stained from a constant plug of black tobacco between his cheek and gums. His helmet had become lopsided on his head from the sprint.

“Square your shit away!” I told him. “And go square those douche nozzles away that shot these puppies. Do it now!”

“Sar’nt Bing!” The lieutenant crossed the small dip at the bottom of the hill. “Whatya got?” He put one hand on my shoulder, reaching out with the other to his radioman for the handset so he could talk to the Ops Center. “What’d they have?”

“Three AKs and six KIAs.” I motioned to the tangle of bodies across the field.

“You did good,” he said as he raised the receiver to his ear. Two puppies emerged from the shadow under the wheel of a motorcycle and carefully picked toward us. The lieutenant looked down at one as it sniffed the toe of his boot. “Might as well finish these ones too,” he said, kicking the sniffer hard across the ground. He raised the radio to his face again, repeating the situation, asking for good copy, and without acknowledgement he pointed to the top of the hill. “Can’t get comms here, so we’re going back up there. Clean this up.”

We pushed out to the crests of the amphitheater of hills and set a new perimeter. The lieutenant had disappeared again with our gunnery sergeant after making comms from the high point. I took Meno to the twist of bodies to search them. Flipping and untangling the men, we took turns pulling security for each other, plunging our hands into vest pockets and kicking rubber sandals off of their scaly feet. Their blood was still hot. I swallowed hard the sickness I felt when I connected with their empty, dead eyes.

“Look at this,” Meno said. I’d turned my back, taking a knee. I cocked my head to hear him.

“What?”

“Look,” Meno said, motioning with his rifle, the metal and nylon of his straps clinking impatiently. The sniffer, a downy brown

puppy no bigger than my two palms together, came around my bent knee and squatted on the ground, staring past the men at the empty windblown field. I grabbed his scruff and pulled him to my face. The sniffer peeled back his lips and brandished his needle teeth. I shook him hard to stop his jerking head biting wildly at my hand. Without thinking I dropped him into my coyote dump pouch. I cinched the bag so that his head and front paws rode over the edge. The sniffer became still and watched, unblinking, ahead.

“Didn’t the LT tell you to finish him?”

I ignored Meno and scanned down range through my optic. “Get Hamnet. BIP the motorcycles and collapse on the other side of the hills.” Meno fixed on the sniffer in the bag. “Get the fuck going.” In our trucks going back to our patrol base, the sniffer didn’t move or make a sound. And when I put my hand back toward my hip he grabbed my gloved fingers with his two paws and chewed on the leather as we bounced through the turned fields.

After we accounted for the sensitive gear, cleaned our trucks and weapons, debriefed the mission in a semi-circle, we finally broke for chow and sleep. I’d hidden the sniffer in my hooch in a pen of cardboard boxes, chairs, and sheets. When I returned, he sat placidly in the middle of the shoddy construction nibbling wet the corner of a pale blue sheet I’d thrown over to create the image of a wall.

“Hey, bud,” I said. He lifted his eyes up from chewing and watched me peel off my shirt before going back to the sheet. He swatted at the sheet, and losing balance tipped over, his naked belly up. He hung on to the gnawed end by his mouth, watching me from his back. “You like that sheet, huh?” I kicked my boots off across the room before running my hand from his neck to his curled tail. He continued chomping obsessively. “Chewy. How about that for a name?” Chewy let go of the sheet and rolled to his feet, turning headlong toward me, crawling to my fingers, licking gently with his new tongue. “I like it, Mr. Chewy.” I took Chewy up, cupping his

squirming, keeping my hands steady until he calmed. I held him like this for some time, Chewy only breaking to lick my curled fingers, before he pissed hot into my palm.

That night I took bread and milk from our chow hooch and fed it to Chewy. It was nice to have him because I'd run out of things to do. Video games were boring. I'd watched every movie we had on the camp. I was waiting for some books in the mail to entertain me between patrols. The puppy was a miracle, almost as good as having liquor, or beer or wine, especially right then when I hadn't had anything but water. Lying in the dark to sleep that night I listened to his tiny jaws working over the frayed and torn corners of my sheets.

At our patrol base we had everything dropped by air, so when the planes or helos came overhead we were already waiting to patrol out from the gates to recover the food, water, ammunition or whatever they had for us. This required a CONOP and full battle rattle but when the winds were good and the pilots didn't fuck it up, it only took an hour to recover our supplies from the outer stony fields.

We got mail from home about once a month in these air drops. Usually, I made a game out of mail call to fuck with my Marines. I'd stand on the swept pad we poured to play basketball, holding a heavily taped care package to my ear.

"What we got, Hamnet? It's weird your mom would send you a vibrator. Let's see if I can shake it hard enough to turn it on."

My Marines laughed and Hamnet spat a long dark slash of tobacco across the ground before releasing his own shy smile. Winking, I threw it to him.

Meno always stood with the tightly formed crowd. He remained there, even as my Marines peeled away with each package I tossed out, the last figure over an empty box. I made sure I'd gotten everything and, like after every mail call, we would break down the pallet together.

“Did something of yours get lost in the mail?” I tossed him tin snips to cut the metal bands that kept the pallet together during the violent parachute free fall.

“No, Sar’nt.”

“Really? You’re always in the front.” He didn’t look up from his working hands except to examine his arm after he used it to draw sweat away from his forehead.

“I like to see everyone else get packages.”

I balled the last piece of shrink wrap and handed it to him. “So you’re not waiting for a package.”

“Nah.”

“Then who’s sending you packages from home?”

“Nobody, Sar’nt. No one cares that I’m out here.” He smirked.

“Come on.”

“My parents were fucked up. I quit school and worked digging wells for a couple of months. Then I got my GED and joined the Corps.” He grabbed his smooth chin and rubbed it while drawing back his lips and exposing large white teeth. His chin tilted toward the sky like he was thinking. “And here I am.”

“Come check this out.” I took my care package under my arm and nodded toward my hooch. We walked fast, and without stopping I leaned on my creaking wood door, shutting it fast as soon as Meno was inside.

Chewy, sitting like a miniature sphinx, panted happily at us as we peered inside the round of chairs and sheets. He had pissed two dark spots on the bare floor and it stank sourly.

“Is this that dog?”

“That’s Chewy,” I said, laying the care package onto my bed and pulling my multi-tool from my belt to cut the box open. Inside there were big chocolate cookies wrapped in parchment paper and packed into Tupperware. The lid opened with a crisp exhale. I threw

a cookie at Meno. “My family sent these.” He bit into it without looking away from Chewy.

“That’s that dog, right? The one LT told you to get rid of.” I bent over into Chewy’s pen and placed a cookie flat on the floor. He turned his head in confusion before pouncing. Almost smaller than the treat, he fell to his back and his legs worked through the air like he was running across invisible earth. We laughed.

“Yeah, it’s that dog he told me to get rid of.” Meno pushed the last bite into his mouth, chewing close-lipped. He swallowed the lump stiffly, his neck filling up and emptying.

“Then we’re gonna have to make sure LT doesn’t find out about this.”

Meno became a trusted conspirator. We were rotated off missions for the next two days and after mail call I stayed in my hooch. Meno scooped Chewy from his pen and took him around to my Marines while they watched DVDs or played video games. That night Meno walked him along the inside of the barriers that formed the perimeter to our patrol base. He returned him after I’d gone to bed.

“Meno,” I called as he opened the door to leave, “you can come get him whenever you want but make sure that when you put him back the door’s shut tight. I don’t want him to wander out and the LT to find him.”

“No problem, Sar’nt,” he said reaching for one last touch of Chewy’s gentle fur. When he left I pressed my head against the sleeping puppy. The race of his miniature heart pushed through his thin, transparent chest and each exhale rushed from his tiny black nose. Through the night he burrowed further into me. We mingled so that his sour breath became like mine.

In the morning, I woke up to Meno tripping on the upturned edge of a small Afghan rug I’d put down on the floor.

“Sorry, Sar’nt,” he said with his head down and arms clasped behind his back. “You said I could come get Chewy.”

I blinked through the film over my eyes. Chewy moved down toward my feet, under blankets. We watched his shapeless figure tunnel through.

“Yeah, yeah. Take him. Be careful.” Chewy pushed his head through, his eyes bright in the dim room, his tongue reaching up and swiping his nose. Meno smiled took hold of Chewy. He held him for a moment before leaning in and laying a soundless kiss on the puppy’s head.

“How long do you think this can go on for?” The puppy fought against being held but Meno clenched until Chewy quit.

“I don’t know,” I said, sitting up and swinging my legs off of the bed.

“We can’t hide him forever.”

“I know.” I stood and reached across to a low, homemade table for a t-shirt. “I just need to figure something out.”

“Okay,” Meno said. “Yes, Sar’nt,” he added, dropping Chewy to the floor and opening the door and checking both directions. Sure it was clear of the lieutenant, he toed Chewy out with the curled end of his dirty sneaker.

We had a mission the next day and after chow I went to the TOC for the Warning Order. The gunnery sergeant and the lieutenant dragged it out, arguing openly about the frequency of comms windows. I dropped my pen into my green, waterproof notebook and slapped it shut. They continued, bringing the radioman into the discussion. Outside I could hear the metallic ping of a basketball behind the squeak of my Marines’ shoes. They were playing a hard game. I wished I wasn’t a sergeant. I could go out and play basketball and only worry about my own field of fire and sector on missions. But then there was no way I could’ve taken Chewy without getting busted by some other sergeant. Sometimes you’re fucked either way.

He'd slept near me the entire night. I kept waking to check where he was and each time I shifted he'd stand and turn toward his tail in an endless circle. At first I reached out to grab and hold him but he attacked with a flash of his teeth and goofy puppy growl. Then I tried laying my hand tenderly on him until he plopped down against me. He drifted back to sleep after the stream of a few relaxed exhales. With Chewy it took more than a strong arm.

"Is everyone good with the mission?"

"Yes, Sir."

I jumped from my metal folding chair and raced to the basketball game. We played four or five games, through lunch, through the burning of the day.

All afternoon, my Marines left the game, usually in pairs, the speed and violence of our play in the heat crushing some. But mostly, like Meno, they left to check their weapons and gear for the mission the next morning. Tired and salt-crusted, I walked happily away too, toward my hooch.

"Sar'nt Bing," the lieutenant called from behind as I walked into my room. The door was completely open. Panic broke in a prickly wave. Chewy's pen had been taken apart. "Turn around," he said, closer.

"Sir," I replied, spinning. He held Chewy high by his scruff and the puppy struggled, kicking his legs while throwing his head around to bite the lieutenant's thin, pale fingers. The lieutenant wore gloves all the time, even in the patrol base, to protect his hands from the sun. My Marines swore that on missions they had seen lotion twisting down his wrists from inside those gloves.

"What's this?" From chest height he let go and I jumped but was too slow, Chewy glancing off of my hand and smacking hard into the gravel. The puppy cried out and ran through the open door into my room. I threw the basketball into my room and slammed the door shut. The lieutenant motioned for me by hooking his soft

pointer finger. I took a step forward. He put his arm around me. His face was framed by his long pointing chin; a tuft of sandy hair rose like a rooster's comb from his medium regulation haircut. Stiff brushed whiskers of his deployment mustache were a pedestal for his predator's nose. I didn't like many officers. I fucking hated this guy. He walked me around the corner of my hooch toward his own. We stopped in front of his door. Our Afghan workers had built a small cage of two-by-fours, chicken wire and screen mesh. Inside, two fat and stupid brown partridges leaned against each other. "You're one of my best Marines."

"Sir."

"So I know you understand General Order One."

"Sir."

"You could probably repeat it for me. Word for word, I'd guess."

"Sir."

"What happened? I told you to finish that dog with the rest of them."

"Sir?"

"Bing, it's not me that says we can't have dogs. It's General Order Number One and that's issued by the Theater Commander. That's about a million rungs above my head and about a billion over yours." He squeezed my shoulder with his spidery hand, breathing heavily while we watched the partridges in the cage. "See? I'm an animal lover. Look at my birds." He dropped his arm. "Get rid of that dog. Give it to one of the Afghan workers to take to their village. I don't care how you do it, just get it done. Understand?"

"Sir."

"You're one of my best Marines. Don't throw that away." He walked on, into his hooch.

My anger moved like swirling fire. I charged toward my hooch. Meno, hiding just around the corner, raised his hands together in front of his chest.

“Sar’nt, I’m sorry.” I pushed him through my unlocked door. Chewy sat calmly in the pile of wrecked chairs and sheets.

“What the fuck!” I drove my fingers into his chest, pulling his brown t-shirt until it almost ripped. “What happened?”

“I don’t know! We started playing basketball and I got excited so I ran back here. So—I don’t know! I threw Chewy in and ran back.” His eyes became wet with angry tears. “The door doesn’t close on its own.”

“Well no shit, Meno! It’s Afghan built!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Fuck your sorry.” I spit onto my own floor. “It’s the tiny things that fuck everything up. All it takes is something simple like not pulling a fucking door shut and—boom!” I clapped loud in his face. “Then everything is gone and you got nothing left. You get that?”

“Yes, Sar’nt.”

“You can’t get away with nothing.” Chewy, scared of the yelling, hid in the corner. He was quaking. I picked him up. His natural heat and softness killed how raw I felt. Meno fell into a chair and sat with his elbows on his knees.

“What are we gonna do?”

“I don’t know, I’ll think of something.”

“We’re going to put him out there?” Meno pointed at the door but really he was pointing past it, toward the danger of this country. Outside the sun had gone behind the far mountains and everything had turned black.

“No. Even if he survives, they’ll just chop his tail and ears and fight him.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I don’t know. When we get back from the mission tomorrow I’ll look for some adoption thing on the internet. There has to be a way.” I handed Chewy to Meno and looked at my plate carrier

hanging on its rack. I'd squared it away when we got back from the last mission and with a final check I knew I was ready. "I'm going to sleep. We step off at zero three hundred." Meno nodded and held Chewy to his face, pressing his nose into the fur. He breathed the puppy in.

"You think I can sleep here, Sar'nt Bing?" I checked the target illuminator on my rifle and my night-vision goggles before turning to him.

"Huh?"

"Can I sleep on your floor tonight? With Chewy?" I shook my head and lifted my Kevlar up to check the pads.

I shook my head again. "Yeah, I guess. Sure."

We rebuilt Chewy's pen so he'd have a safe place when we left in the morning. Meno spread his ground pad and sleeping bag across the plywood deck. He slipped Chewy into the bag and cuddled the puppy. I didn't hear them move once all night.

The mission began when it was dark and cold and continued until it was blinding and hot. We were tired after clearing two villages with the Afghan Army, but we pushed through the emptiness of our legs toward each pause to hydrate and eat. We had one serious engagement, the way it always happened, with the sun to their backs and us staring into it. No one got hurt. After we returned to base, accounted for sensitive gear, cleaned our trucks and weapons, and debriefed the mission, Meno ran with me to my hooch.

The door was opened, gaping black, and we entered quickly, one after the other. The sheets had been folded neatly. Someone had stacked them on my bed. One of the folding chairs that formed the circle of Chewy's pen had been pushed under my desk. The rest were collapsed against the wall. The smell of piss had been cleaned with bleach. Meno stood with his hands in the air. He was shaking his head. I dropped on the deck to look under my bed. Sick loss and

dread burst wave after wave so that I felt like I was filling without emptying. I swallowed to fight hot rising bile.

“He’s gone, Sar’nt,” Meno said. “He’s gone. They took him.”

I jumped up and looked in every dark corner and space for Chewy. “Whatya mean?”

“They got him.”

“No. Nah.” No, no, no they couldn’t. We were gone. Who could get him if we were gone?”

“Sar’nt Bing. Meno. Get out here.” The lieutenant, in shorts and t-shirt, stood in the doorway. “Now.”

“Sir.”

I turned my head one last time to look for Chewy, hoping he’d come bouncing out from under the bed and rolling to his back for a belly rub, and then raced Meno to the lieutenant. I stood at attention in front of him, and in my periphery I saw Meno go rigid too.

“Get the fuck out of here, Meno.”

“Sir,” he said sprinting away between the hooches. The lieutenant waited for his footsteps to fall away before continuing. I hoped Meno would come back quietly to listen.

“What did I tell you to do?”

“Sir?”

“Yesterday.”

“Sir, you said get rid of the dog, Sir.”

“That’s right. Whatya fucking thinking, Bing? Am I a joke to you?”

“Sir, no, Sir.”

“You’re going to get a counseling chit. I’d fuck you up more if I didn’t need you. The Gunny’s going to deal with it from here on.” He turned to walk away from me. Seething, I grabbed his arm. He turned, angry with untouchable rank, but in my grip we transformed to equals and I felt him break. “What are you doing, Sergeant?”

“What’d you do with him?” I would not say Chewy’s name.

The lieutenant didn't deserve to know it. He pulled away but I didn't let go. We were alone in the quickening dusk and he was scared of me.

"I told the Marines in the TOC to let it out the front gate. They just opened it up and the dog walked out." I let go of him and he retreated away. He was gone and Meno came from where he'd been hiding.

"You hear all that?"

"Yes, Sar'nt." He was stiff and staring at the ground.

"He's out there now."

"Yeah," he said. His nostrils flared as he drew a deep breath and he looked at me for a moment before striding away to his own hooch.

Didn't the lieutenant know there were people here who took care of Chewy? Didn't they know *that* when they opened the gate and let Chewy trot away on his unsteady puppy legs into the hard, brown scrub? Didn't they know we would be here waiting for him? That we would always wait for him? What would happen when Chewy had sniffed everything he wanted and tried to come back? Didn't they know that Chewy would be scared and lonely and wish he could come back home to us? That we would be here and we would wait for him to come home? Didn't they know that?

I cried hard with the lights off in my hooch.

In the deepest part of the night I lifted from my bed and silently slid my door open. Without shoes, I padded to the lieutenant's hooch. The two fat and stupid partridges purred weirdly as I crept toward them. In short snaps I cut a hole in the chicken wire and screen mesh. One of the birds waddled slowly to the opening. The other soon followed. I watched with thrilled anticipation. They stuck their heads, round and smooth as chess pawns, through the hole and searched. I took a step back to give them room. One, then the other, stepped out and with a loud flap they took off together. Wheeling

dark against the greater black, up and up, I watched them go out there, into that dangerous country, until I couldn't see them anymore.

Matthew Cricchio lives in Richmond, Virginia. He served in the Navy as an intelligence collector and interrogator, and deployed to Afghanistan in support of Special Operations. A student in the Master of Fine Arts Program (Fiction) at Virginia Commonwealth University, he wrote a novel about Afghanistan currently under representation with Creative Book Services.

Water Is Water

By Robert Herring

His friend told him to come to San Francisco. Told him she had a spare room and a garden and a view of the park. Told him everyone is born again in California.

He had lost his job, the store no longer economically viable. The company gave him a severance. Which he blew on an Amtrak ticket because he had never been on a train before. Well, not a proper train anyway. He once rode the train around the zoo with his mother and sisters when they came in from Iowa to visit. But it only went in circles, past the lion and elephant and penguin cages. It wasn't the same as this train.

This train—silver and sleek and running on diesel—is very modern indeed. But it stops often. At every small town between Chicago and Oakland, picking up and disgorging passengers. It also stops in the middle of the night, in the middle of the day, shunted off to sidings so the Union Pacific hauling two-miles of coal and oil can roar past. The doors sealed shut so nobody will wander off to be left on the plains waiting.

His bag holds clean underwear and socks. And six bottles of

whiskey. He is happy to have the whiskey; he couldn't have carried this much whiskey onto a plane. The TSA would've thought him a terrorist and renditioned him to some Third World hellhole never be seen again. Not that Henry cares to ever be seen again.

But he has to be somewhere, has to be doing something. So he drinks whiskey from the bottle and watches the sun bake Nevada. His bare feet on the window make smudges the conductor will wipe away in the morning.

He knows it's very hot outside because it's hot inside. He takes a long drink of whiskey. Coughs. Falls asleep.

Sweating, he wakes. The train moves slowly along the aging track. California seems an impossible nightmare. Why is he on this train? Why isn't he back home looking for a job?

The train picks up speed, swaying gently back and forth. A soft knock on his door and he falls towards it.

"Dinner is served." The conductor, an aging man with white hair, walks away. Knocks on the next door.

Henry throws some water on his face, checks his whiskey inventory. He puts on his pants and dirty shirt and stumbles his way toward the dining car.

There's a line. There's always a fucking line. He waits.

Henry has never seen the ocean before. Only a great lake. His friend out there in California told him a lake was no ocean. Told him the ocean would change his life.

“Yeah?” he said, over the phone. “How?”

“I can’t explain it,” she said. “It’s the salt, it’s the waves. It’s the way it seems to spread out until there’s nothing left.”

“Lake Michigan is as big as an ocean,” he said. “Water is water.”

She sighed. “Water is not water.”

Robert Herring is a truck driver living in Kansas. He has a BA from the University of Iowa, an MFA from California College of the Arts, and a Good Conduct Medal (2nd award) from the US Army.

Poetry.

Spirit of a Solstice

Aaron Graham

At the violet hour, you found azure icicles hugging
The bathroom vanity—diving, splintering bodies
Resonating with D minor's deep blue when they struck.

You picked up their shards,
Constellated them into shapes of dying stars,
And pinned them together like an antique wedding dress.

At the violet hour, they sang unrivaled eulogies
of beauty and felicity, the tonic and the subdominant
of black and grey.

This is cactus land
At the yellow chirping of the fail-safe alarms
You awoke to a dappled snow.

Cinder-speckled drifts incompletely refract
The dim light of a put-upon heaven
You began this vigil two anemic weeks ago.

Weeks when moments of indigo still seemed
To drift between ash clouds
You awaited the shadow like a guest.

Abiit iam et reverti debet

(He has been gone for long and must, once, return)

Aaron Graham

Our love is the oak entertainment center
Built at zero-drunk-thirty
That had some upside down shelves.
The cheap, tan particleboard and black paint clash
And still face the world.
The citrus candles: cause you hated that I smoke.
Your issues of *Cosmopolitan* stacked on our tan and black shelves.
I loved it all. Even the TV
we stole from Jake's trailer when he left town. The picture
frame broke. Contentment and peace
spilling from the cracked glass like a severed artery,
Falling in coagulate droplets, pooling on sand and asphalt,
Carried by tire and track, splashing and coloring the continent.
Wishes and might-have-beens are dead limbs.
Best amputated before sepsis sets in.

Aaron Graham is currently a doctoral student at Emory University emphasizing in intersections of neurologic medicine and literature. He specializes in twentieth century poetics, continental philosophy, and cognitive neuroscience. He is a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where he served with Marine Corps Intelligence as an Arabic linguist.

Nine Weeks

Jeb A. Herrin

we came out malformed
preterm
bald and stubbled
birthed in the bicorn
uterus of the american army

we came out

baptized in sand pits
shin splints
and swollen ankles

our first word was fuck

we teathed our bayonets
on rubber effigies

our shit smelt
of coffee beans
tabasco
and nicotine withdrawal

we had no mothers
but brothers
in surplus

and we still have not learned
to sleep the night

Jeb A. Herrin is a graduate of the University of Tennessee where he studied English with a concentration in Poetry. He was a medic with the 3rd Infantry Division during Operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn. He currently serves as Community Relations for Sundress Academy for the Arts. When he's not writing, Jeb enjoys touring military history museums and Civil War battlefields.

The Car Wash

Kim King

My Father owned a Chrysler sixty-eight—
a traveling office stuffed with extra parts
to shiny vacuum cleaners, boxed and tied
with rope he knotted into handles. Once

a week, I got to sit beside him, pressed
against the papers, belts and hoses. Stiff,
my feet on top of piles that slid at turns,
I learned his words like, "Cripe!" or "Judas Priest."

On Saturdays, I went with him to wash
the car. "A salesman's fortune," he would say,
"is what his car reveals—success." He steered
the wheels on tracks and waited for the rain.

Inside the car, the soap would cover us.
The glass became a foamy blue cocoon
of bubbles dripping silky barm. My Dad
would laugh or tell a story, Navy lore

of battleships, destroyers and the "Japs."
Secure and safe within the suds he'd talk
about the war. He gripped the wheel, then flipped
the wipers, rinsing words into the drain.

Kim King's poetry has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies. She has an MA in Writing from the Johns Hopkins University and lives in Pennsylvania. Kim King's father served in the Navy in World War II. She writes in his honor.

Salt Ponds

Michael Lancaster

Exuberant life gives way to that which
You must wait upon. Multi-layered life that
Celebrates itself minute by minute
In depths of mud and every level of
Water and air, green upon tones and
Shades of profligate growth, goes nearly mute
In the advancing cold and lower light.
The birds of summer move further south to
Economies, ecologies more kind
Seasonally to that fragile softness
And lightness of their kind. Gone to ground is
The salt life in this maritime preserve.

To know hidden life, beauty, holiness,
I must silence the noisiness, still the
“Busy-ness,” of me to see and hear that
Sanctity within. Advent is nature
Mostly at rest, waiting later
Call to rise abundant. Silently I
See and hear those always here within.
Life’s always here in beauty of movement,
Of sound, and earnest sweetness; I must wait.
I wait too for the holiness within
Me: nascent, faint, salvation complete, just
Alive for me to own, to change, to be.

Mike Lancaster is a retired Army veteran, West Point Class of 1967, and a combat veteran helicopter gunship pilot with the 101st Airborne in Vietnam. Mike and his wife Ellen live on the Salt Ponds, just above Fort Monroe, in the Tidewater area of Virginia. Mike mostly writes poetry about Salt Ponds life and its spiritual quality, though two other volumes of poems and a good sketch of a novel are works in progress.

Interview.

A Conversation with Kayla Williams

Kayla Williams served in the U.S. Army for five years as an Arabic linguist, including a year in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). She is the author of two memoirs: *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army*, a book about her experiences as a soldier deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and *Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War*, a memoir of reintegration and her marriage to a former Army sergeant who suffered a traumatic brain injury. She has a B.A. in English literature from Bowling Green State University, and earned her M.A. in international affairs with a focus on the Middle East at American University. She is a project associate at the RAND Corporation, a member of the Army Education Advisory Committee, a fellow at the Truman National Security Project, and a former member of the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. *O-Dark-Thirty* Managing Editor Jerri Bell interviewed Kayla.

ODT: *You were a literature major—you got your bachelor's degree*

before you enlisted in the Army. What did you read, what did you like, why did you become a literature major?

Kayla Williams: They were willing to give me a degree for reading books, which is what I do for pleasure. My dad has a Ph.D. in English lit, and one of my earliest memories is going to one of the classes he was teaching. They were talking about the Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," and I knew that the image of the "inward eye" meant memory when not all the college kids did. It was one of those defining moments.

Once I was in the program, I realized that the vast majority of the literature I was being exposed to was by dead straight white guys, and so I crafted my own minor in studies in gender, ethnicity and class issues. I sought out classes where I could read works by African authors and women from around the world. It was more interesting, and it gave me the space when I was writing term papers to write things that hadn't already been said six hundred times. There isn't a whole lot of fresh work that you can do on Shakespeare. My thesis was on Edwidge Danticat and Gayl Jones. I thought that was exciting, interesting work.

ODT: On deployment your friend Lauren read romances, and you read Ayn Rand . . . what else did you read when you were deployed?

KW: For a while on the mountain [at the Sinjar Mountain forward operations post], I read a book a day. I read everything I could get my hands on: Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, Dan Brown novels, the whole *Lord of the Rings* series, the *Amber* series by Roger Zelazny—I like sci-fi and fantasy—I read a textbook on microeconomics, science magazines . . . if it was there, I read it. I didn't read a lot of "classic" literature while I was over there. I read what people chose to send us.

ODT: *Did you go into writing Love My Rifle More Than You thinking that your story was different because you're a woman?*

KW: That was what interested my publisher. I wrote it in partnership with a former college professor who encouraged me to tell my story. I thought that by telling my story I would get it out of me, and I could put it down and walk away from it—like writing crappy poetry in high school to deal with emotional problems. The writing process would be cathartic, and I'd be done. I didn't understand that when a book gets published, it takes on a life of its own and you have to continue to engage with it. My book tour was my version of prolonged exposure therapy—having journalists stick my book under my face on live local morning TV shows and say, "What's it like to watch someone bleed to death?" And I had to talk over and over about the detainee abuse that I'd witnessed, one of the things that I'm most ashamed of in my life, one of my biggest moral failings. It was rather challenging for me.

But my publisher hoped that *Love My Rifle* would be the "female *Jarhead*," so I didn't read Swofford's memoir until I was done with the manuscript. I didn't want to be influenced by it.

ODT: *You wrote Love My Rifle More Than You with a collaborator—a former professor. I sometimes thought I could read his voice in it more clearly than yours. My favorite parts were the ones where your voice comes through, with all the anger and the occasional profanity right there on the page.*

KW: I had an argument with the publishers before it came out. The prologue, in particular, did not ring true to me as my voice and I wanted to rework it. The publishers put their foot down and said, "Leave it, or it's not going to get published." Then one of the reviews

came out, in one of the bigger papers, and it said exactly what I'd been telling the publisher. I got an apology from my editor—and I felt vindicated.

ODT: Did they push you to spin it in any way?

KW: We had some differences in opinion. Those differences made me realize—in the Army, despite the sexual harassment, despite all the challenges, we were all on the same team when it came down to the core things. I may have actively disliked some of the people I served with, but I still trusted them to save my life in a combat zone. When I went into the process of publishing my book, I assumed that my publisher and my agent and my co-author and I were all on the same team. It was a huge shock to me to realize that they were on their own teams, and that we did things for our own reasons and didn't have entirely shared goals. That was jarring for me. Part of the problem was [writing the memoir] so soon after coming back from a combat zone, because my head was still firmly in that "We're on the same team" page, when that just wasn't true

ODT: Memoir is said to be the art of the examined life. It didn't seem like you'd been home long enough to have distance when you wrote your first book.

KW: Totally unprocessed. I just vomited everything out. In some ways I regret that, because I came across sometimes as a kind of twit. I was whiny, and angry, and that's not necessarily how I want to be remembered. On the other hand, it's a very honest account of where I was right then.

ODT: You were also going through a difficult time personally when you were writing Love My Rifle. I didn't realize that until I read your second memoir.

KW: Neither did my editor! The person I was in *Love My Rifle* is a very accurate accounting of who I was then, but that's not who I stayed. I waited a lot longer [to write and publish my second book]. I wanted to write it about five years into my marriage, but I knew I wasn't ready. I was too full of anger. I wanted to make sure that I [had more perspective, more space,] that I'd processed that experience.

ODT: *What do you think would be different about Love My Rifle More Than You if you wrote it now?*

KW: I'd have more patience and empathy for the other people I served with. Later I read Anthony Shadid's book *Night Draws Near*. He wrote about being in Baghdad with journalist Hamza Hendawi of the Associated Press waiting for the invasion to begin. Hendawi would yell at him for smoking—not for the smoke, but for the sound of his breathing while he smoked. Shadid was mature enough, had enough distance, to realize in that moment that Hendawi was afraid of dying. Reading that made me realize that I had been so unsympathetic to my squad leader. I had no empathy for how terrifying it must have been for her, how much the responsibility must have weighed on her shoulders. I developed that empathy a lot later. I don't wish I could change [what I said]; it stands as it is. But I can see things differently with more years, experience, and perspective.

And I would have had more control over the story—I'd be able to impose more of a narrative arc. It doesn't have [a strong narrative arc]. I would also be more open about some things that I wasn't ready to reveal when the book first came out. I was afraid of blowback, especially for other women in the military.

ODT: *You've mentioned that you didn't want your first book to come out while you were still on active duty. What were some of*

your concerns? How did you think telling your story might affect other women, or the perception of women in the military?

KW: I thought publishing while I was still in could be problematic. I still had to work with people [I'd written about], and I was still in military intelligence. I wouldn't be able to talk to the media. How would I promote the book on active duty? I felt like I had to wait until I was out.

Then when the publisher sent the galleys of my first book around to get blurbs, retired General Wesley Clark wouldn't write one. He said he thought the book would set the position of women in the military back, which was upsetting to hear.

I think about what I accepted in the military, and now I'm upset with what I put up with. I wrote about the worst of it, but I just absorbed so much of the rest. Like jokes that I let people tell in front of me. And ways that I treated other women. I was harder on other women than the men were. When I saw other women fucking up, I didn't see it as an opportunity to be a mentor. I looked down on them, or I was angry at them. Other than not reporting what I knew about detainee abuse, that's the thing I regret most. I try to make up for that by actively getting engaged as a mentor now, and by speaking out about the things I did wrong. I'd like to help make things better, and move them forward.

***ODT:** Military women aren't telling their stories as often or as publicly as men. It was something that we noticed in the Veterans Writing Project seminars early on, and it's the reason that we created a separate women veterans-only writing seminar. Our theory was that women veterans need a safe space to feel comfortable opening up and telling their stories. Why do you think that women veterans have been more reluctant to write and publish?*

KW: We're following gender norms that have been around for decades. That may have something to do with it. But we are writing. We're not getting published as often as men, though. Both civilian novelist Cara Hoffman and New Yorker critic George Packer said that women veterans aren't writing, and that made me so irate. I have to clear my writing through my employer now, and they made me rewrite my response to Hoffman's op-ed four times for them before it sounded "not angry" enough to publish!

My theory is that the general public thinks of war literature as coming-of-age stories from men, stories about how boys go to war and become men. No woman joins the military to become a man, though, so [women veterans' stories] are not about that. The majority of published work by men coming out of these wars is predominantly written by young, straight, white men. There's more ethnic diversity and even job diversity in writing by women veterans—they aren't telling the typical young infantryman's stories.

ODT: *I don't remember seeing the words "caregiver fatigue" anywhere in your narrative, but that's certainly a theme in Plenty of Time When We Get Home. I admire that you and Brian made it through that early period in his recovery.*

KW: Even though Brian read each of the chapters, there were certain things that we just didn't talk about until we did a couple of joint radio interviews. The interviewers asked him questions that I had never really had the courage to ask him. Like: "What's it like to have somebody write about you? Were you okay with her writing this about you?" He said, "Look, if you don't want somebody to write about you, don't marry a writer." I came at [Brian's injury] thinking about some of the famous men like Newt Gingrich who have left their wives when their wives were fighting cancer. I just felt like they were horrible

human beings for doing that. They walked away. I thought, “I can’t do that. I can’t be that person.” Brian’s more empathetic than I am. He said in one interview, “I just want to say that if there are any spouses out there going through this, and just can’t handle it, it’s okay. I understand. This is a lot to go through—I would understand if somebody just couldn’t handle it.”

ODT: We’ve talked about women being hard on each other. I noticed when you discuss the Honey Badger Book Club in Plenty of Time When We Get Home, you and the other women veterans in the group spend some time talking about the women who enlisted in the Army or the Guard thinking that they’d never have to deploy because they were women. As you’ve been working with women veterans’ interest groups, do you see women who deployed comparing combat experiences—“You were a fobbit, I was outside the wire —” that sort of thing? Is there a kind of one-upmanship among women veterans?

KW: No, I haven’t. A couple of the women in the book club never deployed at all. I don’t see them being excluded, nobody says, “Oh, I had it so much worse than you”—there’s none of that. One of the women in the book club who didn’t deploy has] gone on to a civilian job trying to catch war criminals. She goes to Africa and deals with things like genocide that the rest of us don’t want to sit around thinking about all the time. We’re able to see that other experiences may be different than combat, but they can be just as hard.

ODT: What would you tell other women veterans who are struggling to decide if they should start writing about their military experiences—who might be hesitating to speak up?

KW: Just do it! Get involved with organizations, don’t try to do it alone. I think that our stories need to be told. The act of capturing

your story and telling your story can be cathartic in and of itself. Getting it out there for other people is important for the historical record, and also for other women who feel isolated, alone, unheard — even crazy. When my first book came out and I went on book tour, women who'd been in the first Gulf War would come up to me sobbing, saying that they'd thought they were crazy for over a decade because nobody believed what they'd been through. They'd started to doubt their own memories, their perceptions of reality because they'd been so isolated. That was so meaningful to me. I'd even get letters from infantrymen who'd served in Operation Iraqi Freedom—they'd say things like, "I can't talk about the war. But I can give your book to my mom, and she can understand something about what I went through." It matters to tell our stories—not just for ourselves, but for the other people who aren't ready or able yet to tell their own stories.

ODT: What's next for you? More books?

KW: I tried my hand at fiction for the first time. I was invited to submit a piece for a collection—I don't know if they've found a publisher for it yet. That was terrifying for me. I'm almost forty, I know who I am. I have flaws. There are days when I know I'm being a bitch. So if you read my memoir, and you think, "I don't like that," I can see that as "you don't like me," and you don't have to like me. I don't need you to like me to feel good about myself. I'm comfortable in my own skin. But if I write fiction and you don't like it, you're saying that you don't like my craft. You're saying that I don't have skill. And that's much more upsetting to me.

I also have a novel in mind, but it's not getting out onto paper yet. I have two small kids, and a full-time job; I do public speaking, and I write op-eds. For my second book I had an advance that let me cut back to half-time so I could write the book. That doesn't happen

so much in the fiction world, so at this moment in my life I don't see how to make it work. You take turns making sacrifices in a marriage. Brian and I have been married for ten years, and he worked at the VA in a job he disliked so we would have financial stability while I went to grad school and worked on the second book. Now it's his turn. He's going back to college right now, so it's my turn to work full time. After he's done, maybe I'll go back to writing regularly again.

###

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