

THE MILITIA HOUSE

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts



Department of English

West Lafayette, Indiana

May 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because this thesis feels like the culmination of two separate experiences, there are two groups of people to whom I must express my heartfelt thanks. First, my creative writing teachers have changed my life. I am in the debt of John Rubins, Ted Sanders, and Matthew Minicucci for believing in me enough to write letters of recommendation for MFA program applications, and to Julie Price Pinkerton for putting a good word in for me with the Purdue faculty, essentially writing a fourth letter. Beyond helping me get into graduate school, these instructors (none of whom were tenure-track faculty at the time of my undergraduate studies) instilled in me a belief in my own abilities as a writer and as an artist which I would not have personally developed without. My graduate fiction instructors each deserve individual thanks. Sharon Solwitz convinced me of the importance of character-based fiction, which has caused me to approach writing through an emotionally closer and more sincere lens. I must also thank her for this quote: “Stories are like food. They nourish, and we can’t live without them.” Brian Leung is responsible for the pivotal turning point I went through in recognizing the importance of what it is I *desire* to write about rather than choosing projects based on the chance of publication or prestige. His fiction workshop, more than any other I’ve participated in, showed me how to respect the goals and aims of each individual writer, including my own. Finally, Roxane Gay not only taught me, but truly convinced me that all artistic endeavors are political, and that this is not something to avoid or to be fearful of, but to embrace. She deserves so much credit, as my thesis chair, for sticking with me through this process of finally completing a novel, and for supporting and encouraging the ideas and concepts I wanted to bring to the project. Second, I must express sincere thanks to some of my leaders from the Marine Corps. First Lieutenant Copes, Staff Sergeant Doerr, Sergeant Bognar, and Corporal Boddy are the four people who are directly responsible for bringing me home in August, 2010. The more time I spend thinking about them, the more I recognize how lucky we were to have them taking care of us, to say the least. Most important to me are the three main Drill Instructors from my Boot Camp experience at MCRD San Diego in 2008, Staff Sergeant Arzola, Sergeant Virto, and Sergeant Saldaña. I would not be where I am without them.

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ABSTRACT

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Institution: Purdue University
Degree Received: May 2019
Title: The Militia House
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John, it is October, 2001. The U.S. has just occupied Afghanistan, and you're happy about that, but you're only twelve years old, too young to act on any nationalistic impulses. In your eighth grade yearbook at age fourteen, you'll write in your third person biography that someday you hope to be an author and a U.S. Marine. When you're nineteen, you'll enlist in the Marines, and then join the occupation of Afghanistan at age twenty-one, from which you'll return home safely. Now you're twenty-three and you're going back to school, mature enough to understand the complicit nature of your involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom. By the time you reach grad school at age twenty-seven, you'll begin to feel a nagging guilt, and you'll bear the full impact of this guilt by the time you turn thirty and begin writing your thesis. You'll want to write a book reflecting your experience in a real-life war, describing what it was like to be there, and what it was like to be a part of something that people had forgotten about before you were even old enough to participate. Instead of reporting the facts, which you will do on many occasions throughout your book-length project entitled *The Militia House*, you'll write about the experience as a haunting. John, if this manuscript reaches your hands in 2001 via some means of time travel, I want you to know that you'll have accomplished your goals, but at a significant cost. Even though you will survive the war, you'll leave a part of yourself in Afghanistan forever. But perhaps even worse, a piece of Afghanistan will come back with you to live inside of your body and your mind, and it will haunt you for the rest of your life.

“There comes a moment when you witness events so epic you don’t know how to place them in the cosmos or in relation to the normal workings of a day. Worse, when these events recur, at an even greater magnitude, in a cascade of what you have never seen before and do not know how to classify. Troubling because each time you acclimate, you move on, and, if this continues, there is a mundane grandeur to the scale that renders certain events beyond rebuke or judgement, horror or wonder, or even the grasp of history.”

- Jeff VanderMeer

“I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away.”

- Kurt Vonnegut

“Let us begin with the bad little specimen...”

- Nicki Minaj

I

Helmand Province, Afghanistan

Operation Enduring Freedom 10.1

Summer 2010

1

06/05

Nothing went wrong for once. The osprey touched down after we'd been stuffed in there about two hours, cargo ramp dropped to the ground, and we grabbed our gear and ran out into the dark. Me and the lieutenant and a few of our junior enlisted, and some other artillery marines we've never met who think they're grunts, all of us charging out into the bird's downwash, swallowed up in the swirling dust cloud. Felt like an equalizer because all of us were lost the same even though our ranks may have been different. Could hardly see who anyone was, all of us dressed the same obviously, main pack, carrying a seabag in one arm and an M16 in the other.

Didn't know anything about this place before landing other than its name: Kajaki. The lieutenant told us we'd be running the LZ while the Americans take the FOB over from the Brits and turn it into an artillery base. Brits are leaving this area, heading south to Sangin. The mission is to keep track of the inbound and outbound passengers and cargo, facilitate the helicopter loading process. That's all we know. Logistics shit no one wants to read about probably. Pogue shit. Except my junior marines don't know the lieutenant put me in charge of this because of my blog.

Almost twisted my ankle running across the LZ when we landed. Couldn't see anything through my goggles. Eventually found the LT waiting off to the side for the bird to take off again. Found her because she's one of the shortest people in the group, along with Vargas.

Almost as short as him actually. She's alright but she doesn't trust me right now. Didn't tell her about bringing this notebook with. Told her I would write again when we get back to the US, which is true. Still going to write now, just won't have any computer access to put it online. Might convert it into a book later. Someday at least. Something so my parents and my sister know what I did here, at least if something interesting happens. Otherwise I guess I'll have to make some weird shit up like Tim O'Brien.

Helicopters took off and faded away over the desert and we waited with the advon artillery marines. Didn't really talk to any of them. Never ran into any of them at Delaram before we found ourselves on the same flight together. The lieutenant mostly talked to them if anyone needed to. She's a professional, real gung-ho about everything. Probably runs ten miles a day. Probably the only one who actually wants to be here even though she's only staying for about a week until we get set up all the way, then she's going back to Delaram.

Eventually found the Brits waiting to pick us up, piled all our gear into some of those little open bed trucks they drive, about a hundred times more comfortable and spacious than a humvee. Took us from the LZ down this jagged road extending alongside the Helmand River, which we could just barely make out flowing past us in the dark. Drove through these gated checkpoints where these local guys came out of their houses and opened the gates and then closed them behind us. Finally made it to the FOB's main gate, and a bunch of geared up Brits carrying SA80s opened up and let us into our home for the next month.

Helped us carry everything into a mess hall. Couldn't see much of anything in the dark yet, but it turns out we were going into a real building for the first time in a while. Mostly been used to tents and plywood offices nailed together by Seabees. Looked awkward, a bunch of us standing around with our flaks, helmets, and rifles in a room that seemed as if we were supposed

to relax and eat dinner. Had a TV set up in the corner and a bookshelf. Not what I expected when the lieutenant told me I was leaving Delaram and going further into the desert. Was too tired to be surprised by the unexpected though. All of us would've fallen asleep on the floor right there, but they wanted to give us a little briefing.

The Royal Marine company commander told us about the history of the place and I could barely pay attention. Just remember he said it used to be a rec center for the Soviets when they were here in the 80s. Told us there was even an empty swimming pool next to the chow hall. Explained where some of the OPs were. Some posted on the mountain which borders one side of the FOB. And on the other side of the FOB is the river. Told us it was the safest place we could be stationed in the AO. No way for the Taliban to get us for now.

They took the lieutenant off to wherever the officers sleep and they took Vargas, Blount, Tillman, and me across the FOB to a row of stone houses. The advon marines claimed the first house and the four of us took the one at the opposite end of the road. No power, running water, or doors. All open air basically, but it's a real roof and we don't have to listen to a tent flapping around in the wind all night. Except we couldn't go to sleep right away.

Staged all our gear on the floor and rolled out our sleeping bags, but Blount found a scorpion in the corner with his flashlight. Searched the rest of the rooms and found a few more. Spent a while searching for them all and smashing them with our boots, then tried to get some rest. Tillman propped himself up against the wall all night. Thought I heard Vargas talking in his sleep, maybe he was just snoring. Hard to sleep in a new place sometimes, especially on a concrete floor. Thought I'd be out like a light, but I had trouble sleeping too. Could hear a pack of jackals shrieking outside the wire throughout the night.

2

Mom,

The new base I'm at is a lot different than before. I'm far from civilization, but I'm not in the middle of the desert now. There's a river and a few trees, and we're surrounded by mountains now instead of an endless sea of brown moon dust. But I guess it's still pretty bleak, and as usual you want to be in the shade as much as possible. We get to live in a real house now. It's old and doesn't have power or water, but it's a real roof. The walls are all covered in graffiti and drawings. All these pictures from the Soviet invasion in the 80s I think. Tanks and men in their uniforms, and all kinds of writing in Pashto. Even a drawing about the size of my hand of a child holding a toy airplane, or is he a giant child holding a full-sized Soviet airplane? There are a bunch of animals here too, so that's also new. There are a lot of bugs. Flies everywhere, constantly. I can't lay down to take a nap during the day without at least one landing on my face. Scorpions and giant wasp-looking-things as well. There's a bird's nest in our house, tucked above one of the door frames. There's an orange cat that lives on the FOB and she came to the house with a bunch of her kittens. They're all skittish but if you scratch a tree branch across the dirt you can get them to pounce on it. There are some dogs too. There's a big one the Brits call Bear, and a fluffy one called AK who has a new scar on him every morning from chasing down jackals and fighting them at night. There's a little dog called Toto who came to our house and played tug of war with Blount's daypack. I don't know if I told you about Blount, the one from Texas, which doesn't mean anything because everyone's from Texas. He's probably six foot two, but only a hundred pounds soaking wet. I don't know how people get so skinny. He's been well fed the whole deployment. Talks in a real thick accent. I wonder if the Royal Marines can understand him even. I actually have a hard time understanding some of them, especially the

Scottish ones. I haven't met many of them yet, just the major and the sergeant major. They're all covered in tattoos and about three times as big as any of us. I wouldn't mess with them.

Love,

Trent

3

Dad,

I moved to a new base at a place called Kajaki. It's a lot different from Camp Leatherneck and Delaram II. I don't think there's a single tent on the FOB. The place is made up of these old buildings left behind by the Soviets. Right now it's run by the British Royal Marines. They're more laid back than us but they get the job done. They walk around in uniform issued camouflage shorts and flip flops. My platoon commander put me in charge of a fireteam for this mission. It's the first thing I've been in charge of in five months of this deployment. I've got two landing support marines under me, Vargas and Blount. They do the LS stuff with me obviously, rig up the sling or net loads and hook up the external lifts if we need to do an HST. You haven't met anyone I work with. Vargas is pretty quiet. He's a short, sturdy dude who doesn't talk that much, which is nice because Blount whines about everything. The last one is Tillman, the HE operator. The Brits will train him to drive their forklift until they start flying in American equipment. The rest of the artillery battery still needs to fly in and prepare the FOB, then they're flying in three howitzers. Right now the Royal Marines go out on foot patrols and the snipers up on the mountain monitor the area constantly, but when they set up the howitzers we're going to light this place up. All of that is probably classified.

Love,

Trent

4

06/06

Back at Delaram the lieutenant called me into her office at the COC, a plain building made of plywood. Someone high up in the company command had found the blog I was posting. Wasn't stupid enough to breach operational security or anything, like they accused me of. Was just keeping a journal in my free time pretty much, not giving out specific mission details, keeping a vague record of my state of mind so people back home could see. Had a good amount of readers who'd post comments and ask if I knew their husband or their wife who was stationed at the same base I was at. It's a small world, but I never knew the people they were asking about. No one in my platoon ever found it either and I hadn't told them.

"Have a seat," the lieutenant said, I remember. She's Second Lieutenant Guerrero, but we just call her the lieutenant or the ma'am, or just ma'am to her face. Wanted to kind of chew me out about the blog because it was something she had to deal with. Had to make a note of it in my service record book, enter in some paperwork that she made me sign.

Officially got a slap on the wrist for disparaging some of our command and calling them idiots, and also calling General McChrystal an idiot, which is a no-go since he's the commander of the entire NATO ISAF force. Basically I just vented about work and I didn't violate opsec like they wanted to get me for. Guess they had to do something though. Was better her chewing me out than a staff NCO. This is a bunch of bullshit, but she's still a good officer I guess. Don't know much about her personally, just that she's obviously got a degree and whatnot. Just two more years and I'd be done too. She's always been fair to the platoon. Anyway, she made me deactivate the blog website, wanted to watch me do it in front of her, so I did it on her computer and set the blog to private. Sent an email to my parents later that day to let them know everything

was okay, that they wouldn't be able to read the blog anymore. Then the lieutenant told me I was moving to a new base to carry out a new mission.

"It's called Kajaki," she said. "It's in the middle of nowhere like everything else here. There's a dam nearby that provides power to half the AO, and we're taking over the nearby FOB from the Brits."

"Good to go, ma'am," I said.

"I don't know much about it," she said. "But there aren't going to be many distractions there, if any." What she meant was I'd probably have no internet access to keep writing blog posts, so she was either sending me for my own good or because it made her life easier. Pretty much both. Was pretty frustrated at the time, to be honest. Knew right then that I'd figure out a way to keep writing in spite of all these fucking officers. Kajaki would be my third duty station during the deployment and I was sick of moving even just after one previous time. Already moved from Leatherneck to Delaram. At least the food at Delaram was better, and we got real beds. Just a pain in the ass packing everything up. Not to mention it's Afghanistan. We took IDF at Delaram and no one ever got hurt, but who knows how dangerous Kajaki would be.

5

06/07

Not much to see around our house when you break it down. That's usually the first thought in my head when I wake up and brush my teeth. The row we live on all shares the same backyard, just a bare dirt lot basically, bordered by a brick wall. The wall runs along the back of the FOB up to the back gate sitting at the bottom of the mountain, and then there's a dirt road that leads away from the back gate where they'll sometimes send out a foot patrol to a place called the green zone. I guess because it's green with vegetation. That's where all the terrorists are I guess. Got a couple trees in the yard, but they're looking bare, a couple dry, desolate bushes poking out the sides of the mountain. Plants need the sun, but the sun here kills them. It's another planet.

Checked out the rest of the FOB with the lieutenant. Walked around looking to find extra cots if the Brits had any. Also not much to see around the rest of the base, except a wooden cross set up with small brass name plaques listing the people who've been killed in action here. Gave me the chills since we'd sent out angel flights from Leatherneck when the grunts made a push into Marjah. Stood in angel ceremonies before, but the cross made me feel closer to all of that. All of this. Other than that, there's the chow hall, the water tank, the COC, some more houses here and there, and a barracks where most of the enlisted Brits live.

Found a few cots with the lieutenant and took them back to the house for everyone. Tillman was most grateful but didn't really say thanks. More just like, *Thank God*. He definitely wasn't my choice of HE operator, but he was the one available for the mission. Keeps a bunch of movies on his laptop but won't let anyone watch with him. Keeps to himself for the most part which I'm fine with, dreams about his wife probably. We all went to eat after bringing the cots. Could definitely get used to the Brit food. Actually got a cook putting everything together fresh,

or as fresh as we'll probably get here. Probably going to be limited to MREs when the rest of the Americans show up.

6

06/08

Sent the others back to our house after chow, then went to the COC with the lieutenant. Trying to figure out how we're going to stay updated on the daily flight tracker, where we can get SIPR network access and whatnot. Met one of the marines who flew in with us on the advanced party, Staff Sergeant Ryker. He's one of the artillery section heads, a stout, stubby guy with a bristly buzzcut and wiry hair peeking out from the neck of his skivvy shirt. Shrill voice with a country accent. Interactions with him go about as expected. Took him less than 48 hours to realize he had more marines below his rank to fuck around with. Immediately told the lieutenant he was putting me, Blount, Vargas, and Tillman on guard duty at the back gate.

"With all due respect, Staff Sergeant," the lieutenant told him, "my marines have an LZ to run." Crazy hearing *her* be the one to say *With all due respect* when she outranks him, but I guess he's been in longer and he's older than she is. She's a second lieutenant, might as well be just another boot to him. Although she did take a free hand and put it on her hip while awaiting his response, a way only a superior can address a subordinate.

"Yes, ma'am," said SSgt. Ryker. "I understand that, but we need to pick up some of the slack around here so the Brits can pack up their gear and get ready to head out, and I've only got thirty of my own marines here to cover twenty-four hour shifts an hour at a time." The lieutenant got what he was saying but still glanced at me like I had the final say, which felt ridiculous.

"We're good to go, ma'am," I said. "We can handle it." Then I told SSgt. Ryker he could put me on duty first with Blount. Felt like Vargas and Tillman would make a better pair than Tillman and I, or Blount and Vargas. SSgt Ryker was carrying a logbook, jotting a duty roster

down in it. Didn't look up to tell me that he'd put whoever on duty he wanted whenever he wanted for whatever reason, but he'd consider my suggestion.

"When's the last time you had a haircut," he asked, again without looking up. Before I could answer, he interrupted. "Scratch that. The real question is when are you going to get your *next* haircut, and it's not even a question because I already know the answer to that: fucking ASAP, check?" Just some typical nonsensical BS that a staff NCO would say.

"Yes, Staff Sergeant," I said, the lieutenant waiting there the whole time. We hadn't even done anything productive at the COC yet, we'd just been jerked around by this asshole. My hair wasn't even that bad. Hadn't been two weeks since the last haircut.

"These Brits are pretty damn lackadaisical," said Staff Sergeant Ryker, scribbling in the logbook and shaking his head. "But we're gonna hem that trash up pretty damn quick, got it?"

"Kill," I said.

7

Dear Bruce,

Told the junior marines we'd have to stand back gate duty in the middle of the night and Blount whined about it but the other two didn't say much, just *Good to go, Corporal*. Did you have to deal with that shit in the grunts or did people do their jobs without bitching about it? None of them know about this thing with the blog yet. Hopefully never. You'd probably think that was stupid. The lieutenant hasn't brought it up since I signed the counseling sheet. Guess she's going to forgive and forget. She even started moving on when she told me about this mission. Tried to convince me to believe in it by telling me it would be an honor to be in my position. She was really melodramatic about it.

"You'll be making history," she said. "You're going to be the first red patcher NCO to lead Marines at Kajaki." *Oh boy*, I was thinking at the time. *What an honor to be a red patcher*. Landing Support Specialist has such a prestigious ring to it, doesn't it? Logistics. But I'm glad I wasn't a grunt. That seems like a pretty terrible job, except at least there's some structure to it. Seems like they have a system in place. We're just a bunch of pogue chickens running around with our heads cut off.

The lieutenant even told me they'd maybe put in for a NAM for me if the mission and everything went well at the LZ. That seems like a bunch of BS since they just did paperwork on me for disparaging people in the command on the internet, but okay. They should've given you a NAM. What difference does it make if it's a posthumous? Maybe I can still recommend you for it. Then we can frame it along with the other ones, the Purple Heart, the Good Cookie, the GWOT service medal, etc. That's all officers care about at least, fucking medals.

She made me choose the LS marines for this mission from the available marines in our platoon. Didn't have many options since most of the others were already sent out to small FOBS scattered around the AO. Told me I was stuck with Tillman. I don't know him well, but he's kind of a tool. Seems like he'd rather take a nap in the forklift cab than actually drive the forklift. Already seems like he's not interested in listening to me because I'm not one of the NCOs from his platoon. None of the other sections really trust us because they never see us working, think we don't have a real job. They're never at the LZ.

I ended up choosing Blount and Vargas because they aren't married. Had no idea what to expect in Kajaki, and if I ended up being responsible for getting Blount and Vargas killed, I didn't want to be responsible for a broken home. A wife and a kid with no husband or father. Tillman's married, but I didn't choose him. Basically the three people I'm going to be around 24/7 for the next few weeks. Fuck. This is my life.

Blount's a goofy kid. You'd like him. I found a paper checklist he'd made and dropped, a *To Do* list for getting back to the states. Must have fallen out of his pocket. Went something like: *Go to a Cowboys game. Go to a Longhorns game. Fuck my girlfriend. Play Red Dead Redemption. Drink a fifth of Jack. Drink a case of Keystone. Smoke a blunt. Smoke another blunt.* I handed it back to him at lunch one day and he turned red.

Vargas is okay, just a quiet dude so I don't know him all that well. Probably won't have problems with him, which is usually my thought when I see someone reading a *Harry Potter* book. Told me he's been reading that thing all year. Those books are fucking huge, like I mean large objects. Can't believe someone's carrying even a single one of them around in his backpack during a war. There's probably nothing to do here but read though. Saw a copy of *The Da Vinci Code* on the chow hall bookshelf, so maybe I'll pick that up. Otherwise, Vargas is a

really strong runner. He's usually leading the pack for the three mile run at the company PFT every year. Not sure where he's going to run around here though. Not a ton of space.

I got athlete's foot really bad, man. Did you have to deal with that shit in Iraq? These Brits are walking around in flip flops and all I have to wear are these fucking boots every day. Feels like I'm scraping off a measurable amount of dead skin every day. It's this yellow crap. Goes from being sore to being itchy. Fucking sucks. Athlete's foot and being responsible for someone else's life.

Trent

8

06/09

Holy shit. First night on duty, at about 0130. This dog came up to the guard post and half of its face was all stuck full of these giant porcupine quills as big as pencils. Almost twice as long, I swear. Blount found the dog in his red flashlight beam when we heard it stumbling up behind us and he gasped when he saw the needles poking out of the white face, pulled his hand back since he was about to pet the damn thing. Stepped back to keep any of the blood from dripping onto my boots, even though there wasn't as much blood as you'd expect. It was dark, but it looked like some of the needles pierced straight through the dog's jowls and others pointed straight out, some barely missing its eye. Was like a cloud of flies buzzing near the dog, crawling on its face around the spots where the needles went in. We didn't do anything. What were we supposed to do?

Dog didn't squeak or whine or anything. Kept silent and looked at us, back and forth from me to Blount and then back to me again. Was a dog I hadn't seen before, not one of the dogs walking around the FOB. Some kind of mutt, mostly white but with some splotches of brown maybe. Was hard to tell in the red light. Blount kept it pointed right at the dog's face and I had to remind myself to keep focusing on our watch duties at the guard post. For a while it stood there and stared at us. Neither of us said anything or made a sound, didn't want to upset the dog or make things worse somehow. Tried to keep the flies out of my face. Usually not a problem at night. Eventually it walked back out into the dark and didn't come back for the rest of our shift at the back gate. Flies weren't as bad after that.

"What the fuck? Should we report that in, Corporal?" Blount asked. I was freaked out, I didn't know there was anything on this earth as horrifying as a porcupine of that apparent size.

Was shocked that the dog wasn't just flat out dead, but that was the dumbest question I ever heard. I picked up the PRC-117 hand receiver to fuck with him and I called in to the COC.

"Send it for COC," they said, which is what they say when you call in. Whoever it was on the other end sounded tired, the sergeant of the guard which didn't sound like Staff Sergeant Ryker. He was probably sound asleep in his warm bed.

"Nothing to report," I said. Blount looked at me like I had a dick on my forehead. Then the sergeant of the guard said roger in that staticky radio voice and then I clipped the hand receiver back onto the green radio and that was it. It's not like the dog didn't creep me out or anything, those needles were fucking crazy, but what the fuck was I supposed to call in to the COC? *Hey we found a dog back here.* If anything they'd just tell us to shoot it and I'm not going to fucking shoot it.

"Just a dog," I said to Blount. "This is a war. Stay focused." Even though something in me felt that wasn't really true. It was more than a dog, like a warning for us to keep inside the wire because there was nothing outside the wire that was not hostile to us, even the natural world itself.

"Good to go, Corporal," Blount said. Then we turned back to face the road leading out the back gate and the rest of the night was just a pretty boring time on post, just waiting under a camo net draped over a wooden guard post, standing there being quiet or whispering about cartoons or something like that. How firewatch always ends up. Feels dumb because there are other posts above us on the mountain providing overwatch, probably with sniper rifles and NVGs and shit like that. What do we even need to be here for? To open the gate in case someone needs to be let in? No one needs to come in at this hour. Only thing out there is an empty building nearby, just outside the gate, a boring old concrete structure I'd seen from the smoke pit

where I'd bummed a cigarette from the Brits. We're supposed to meet up with some of them to check out the LZ pretty soon.

"F that," Blount said when a bunch of jackals started up again like a sick chorus.

"Yep," I said.

Started griping about other animals out here, tigers and anacondas and other shit that doesn't even live in Afghanistan. Maybe he was making a joke, but he's not that self aware. Sounded scared, to be honest. Started rambling about *who knows what's next at this place*. In one way he's right. Don't know what to expect. Been here less than a week and a dog creeps up on us with a gruesome injury like that. Can't get it out of my mind. But I guess we'll get used to it here. Plus we won't need to stand post when the rest of the arty marines get here.

I told Blount he was an idiot and then we stood around and shot the shit until another pair of advon marines came to relieve us from the back gate. None of us introduced ourselves to each other when we changed over. Blount and I snuck back into our house trying not to wake up Tillman or Vargas. Swear I could hear Vargas whispering again. Haven't actually lived in the same space with him since we've been in country. Maybe it's a normal thing. Maybe there's a new level of normal for us to get used to.

9

06/10

Didn't see that dog anywhere around the FOB the next day. Didn't have much time to look in the morning anyway since we had an appointment with the lieutenant to head up to the LZ and scope the place out. See what we have to work with. Met up with the Brits who have been running the show since before we got here. Only two of them that have been doing everything by themselves. A sergeant who looks quite a bit older than the U.S. sergeants, bald with stubble around the sides and back of his head, just tells us to call him Arnold. Seems to be laid back enough. Has one subordinate, a red-haired private who introduced himself as *Ginge*. He and Tillman rode behind us in the forklift, the tines raised up and outstretched like a battering ram. The rest of us rode with Arnold.

Brit guards let us out the front gate, and on the way out we drove past a Royal Marine patrol staging their gear in a formation, doing a weapons check to prepare for one of their foot patrols through the green zone. Noticed that most of them hadn't had a haircut in weeks. Didn't seem to bother anyone. Would let SSgt. Ryker know that there's not much of a correlation between hair length and combat effectiveness but I don't think he'd care. Drove up the road about a mile to the LZ, passing through the checkpoints and seeing everything during the day for the first time. Blue-uniformed Afghan National Police let us through the gates, AK-47s slung over their shoulders. Waved at us with big smiles. Scenery looked so much different than my past two duty stations. Driving alongside the river was new, and the green plants hugging the water's edge made the place actually feel alive, unlike the FOB which is dead. Arnold gave the lieutenant his own version of the Kajaki backstory while the rest of us listened from the truck bed.

Told us he was on the first convoy to ever come here, took about ten days and required clearing hundreds of IEDs from the road. Talked some more about how the place has been safe for quite a while, gave us some background on that memorial cross I'd seen in the FOB. Apparently three of the names posted on it were Brits accidentally killed by American F15s. Described to us some more details about the Kajaki Dam as we drove across it, a giant lake to one side, and on the other side a series of enormous rocky terraces leading down to the dam's powerhouse like a giant staircase. Arnold said the Americans built the dam in the 50s. Never managed to complete the project or something like that, but it still provides most of the power in the region and remains a strategic point in the area. Kept seeing these old yellow excavators sitting around on the drive up from the FOB. They're from the original project, said Arnold. When we reached the LZ, there was one sitting right there, almost no rust built up on it for sixty years. Didn't even see it there the night we landed. Arnold parked the truck nearby and Vargas walked up to a giant bucket attachment lying on its side next to the abandoned machine. Was short enough to walk completely inside of it, or rather the bucket was big enough to fit him.

The LZ is a flat plateau, and with a house overlooking from a hill. More ANP guarding the area. They sat around in a circle, drinking tea, and waved when they saw me facing them. Held up my gloved hand and nodded, hiding behind my sunglasses. Across the river, past the road we'd driven up, the mountain next to the FOB reached higher and higher. A jagged path zigzagged all the way up to the OPs watching over the base. Before we even started talking about the LZ, Arnold and Ginge took off their helmets, their flak vests, and leaned their SA80s against the truck. Glanced over at the lieutenant to see how she'd react and she was already looking at me, shaking her head like *nope*. Vargas and Blount understood. They kept their shit on. We were outside the wire. Maybe it was since I'd spent most of the deployment working in an ops office,

but we were outside the wire, damnit. Of course our helmets stay on. Tillman took off his kevlar at first but put it back on when he saw the lieutenant and I were leaving them on. The Brits didn't react much but Arnold did give a quick eyebrow raise at Ginge.

Two of them showed us around on the LZ, a gravel plateau with only one way in and out: to drive across the dam. Showed us where they've been staging gear, some small crates netted up on the side, where the helicopters have been landing on a flat spot that looks sandblasted. We got the full tour. It was an LZ. An LZ is just a flat piece of ground, so there wasn't much to see. Got a flight coming up soon, so it was good to get our bearings but still felt pretty pointless. Just wanted to go back to the FOB and grab that copy of *The Da Vinci Code* or convince Tillman to let us watch *Don't Be a Menace* on his laptop if he had enough battery left. We spent maybe an hour just talking about things we already knew while Ginge showed Tillman how to work the Brit forklift before finally driving back down to the FOB. Shot the shit with Ginge for a bit at the HESCO smoke pit, really just an outcropping of rocks where you can see down to the river and across to the road leading out from the back gate. Ginge asked us if we'd met the dogs yet, then listed them off.

"We saw one on post," Blount said. "Wasn't one of those, though." Ginge told us it must have been wild, then. The other dogs had all been here since before he arrived. Said he'd been here about five months already, which I couldn't imagine. Been here a week now and I can't stand the idea of even one more month. Nothing to do here but get bored and sunburnt. Only way to take a shower is to fill a bag up with water and hang it from a hook while it drains out on you. No way to do laundry. Will have to conserve my socks on a weekly basis. Maybe the lieutenant can send us supplies after she leaves. Not looking forward to that. Won't have anyone to watch my back after she leaves.

“You hear the whole story about this place?” Ginge asked, grinning a bit to himself. “Don’t mean to slag off Sergeant Worth, but you know, he and the major leave things out of their little stories whenever we get new people.” Blount wanted to know what he meant. Listened to him while I smoked my cigarette. Ginge got a devious look on his face and then told us the FOB was haunted.

“Bullshit,” Tillman said, barely reacting. He, Blount, Ginge, and I were all smoking. Vargas waited quietly by the side. The lieutenant and Arnold were off making other plans and arrangements for the next flight coming in. Ginge pointed to something on the other side of the concertina wire from us, the building sitting near the back gate that I’d seen when the dog came by the back gate, the one outside the wire that seemed abandoned, another open-air building with all the glass smashed from the windows and every door taken from the hinges and repurposed as firewood.

“See that? That’s the militia house,” Ginge said. “Used to be a barracks for the Soviets when they stayed here. When they pulled out of here they all huddled up in there to make a stand. The muj cornered them and killed them all. Skinned them, strung them up, real ghastly like.” Tillman scoffed at the story. When I looked at the house it just looked like a plain old building, an old barracks. A rectangular concrete structure with no real distinguishing features other than signs of deterioration. Chips dug out of its side where a bullet had impacted, pieces of rebar exposed.

“Whatever you say,” Tillman said.

“I’m not taking the piss, mate,” Ginge said. “Wait till you stand post at the gate back there. See for yourself.”

“We already did,” Tillman said. “Nothing happened.” Ginge shrugged, but Blount exchanged a glance with me. Asked if Ginge had ever been in the house. Ginge said no, but he’d heard the stories from the ANP, the ones who guard the gates on the road to the LZ. Back in the 80s, they were mujahideen fighting the Russians. Nowadays they seem so cheerful, like jolly old men with their thick gray beard. Old grandpas. Couldn’t picture them attacking anyone, letting alone cornering them in a building and skinning them alive.

“Heard the place is all full of rubbish and dog shit now,” Ginge said. “No need for more of that in my life.”

“We should check it out, Corporal,” Blount said. “Why not? Give us something to do.”

“We have already something to do,” I said, not really meaning it. “It would give you something to take pictures of, that’s all you want.” Eventually Arnold came back and took Ginge away with him. Ginge looked back at us one more time and winked, now that he’d planted a seed in our heads with this story.

The lieutenant briefed us on what we were doing tomorrow and at what time and then she released us to chow. Kind of avoided me again after that. Haven’t had much one-on-one time with her as we get ready to send her back to Delaram. Blount and Vargas headed off to eat and to watch some of the World Cup with the Brits. They particularly liked hanging out with the loud Welsh guy. Tillman went back to our house.

I stayed at the smoke pit and smoked another cigarette. Watched the militia house alone. Seemed like a quiet, boring old abandoned building. Plain in its construction and its function. Was something else about it though, if you wanted there to be. Windows revealed only darkness inside. Like black squares placed along the wall, or like eyeballs watching you, the ones that are all black, and you can’t tell where exactly they’re looking.

10

Caroline,

Truth is there's hardly anything here to write about if I'm not complaining about some crap.

You usually wait for something to happen, and whenever something actually does happen for the first time in a long while it's usually bad. Like at Delaram when we took indirect fire, guys trying to hit us with rockets or mortars from some hiding spot outside the wire. Wouldn't want to scare you with those stories. Don't worry. Nothing ever happened, but that was an example of something bad that happens to break up the boredom. Even the indirect fire got boring. You probably can't even imagine that. It's hard to explain. It's crazy what we can become bored by. Eventually it was easy to sleep at night. You probably think school is boring, which makes sense because that's what you do all day. I get it. I remember that.

Right now I'm just wondering what I should write about. What would you want to read? If you could read a book about Bruce or me, what would you want it to be about? You're probably not the best person to ask because all the interesting stuff is probably scary or dangerous, what everyone else probably would want to read. I have tons of itineraries and schedules, but I doubt you'd want to read that because it sounds boring.

It's also hard to carry this notebook around too if I want to write something down. Someone's bound to ask *What are you doing* because it would be weird for me to constantly be taking notes, right? Plus, if the lieutenant sees me taking notes she's going to assume I'm trying to figure out another way to publish the words on the internet. I got in trouble for doing that, by the way. It's a long story. Actually, even more so than that, you're just not allowed to think, so that would be the first reason it'd be weird to keep notes all the time. People wouldn't question what you were thinking about. They'd wonder why you were thinking in the first place. All

anyone says about the book *Jarhead* is that it's just complaints scribbled down by some shitbag lance corporal. Staff NCOs don't like it when junior marines think, even when NCOs think in my case.

I guess even worrying about what I should write is taking my mind off of other things which could be good, but I don't know what those might even be when I think about it because there's almost nothing here for my mind to be taken off of. Just emptiness. Dust. Dirt. Nothing here to think about. You'd think someone would write because it makes them feel good or because they really have something important to say, but it hasn't made me feel good. Was just an easy way to vent to someone outside my daily life via the internet, and then it got me in trouble. You read my blog, right? You never commented on it, but that's okay. No one I know in person did. If anything that blog was probably just an easy way to keep thinking about all the shit that was getting me worked up in the first place.

If I wrote about the dog from the other night, I wonder if that would interest you or if you would be repulsed by the story. I don't know what to make of it yet. I don't know if that means I should write more about things like that more often or less often, or not at all. The artillery marines are making us stand duty for another week or so. Maybe something else interesting will happen at night. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. Nothing ever really happens on duty except some asshole coming by and making sure you're doing your job right. In boot camp it's the drill instructors messing with you on firewatch. You're at the squad bay hatch standing behind the three foot lockers stacked up like your makeshift desk or something and the DI comes in and fucks with you because you stuttered when you reported in, or whatever else. I think I've told you that story before actually. It keeps going after boot camp. Usually it's a staff sergeant or the officer of the day who comes by and they find something dirty for you to clean.

The whole purpose of guard duty is to keep the area secured and stay watchful and alert, ready at all times in case of an enemy attack. But I've never seen an enemy on duty, just marines being shitty to other marines. Sorry, now I'm just venting again. You don't want to hear that. I wish I could send you something, not just a letter, like something from the bazaar at Camp Leatherneck. They had all these watches. They're all fake of course. You can haggle with them. Talk them down from a hundred dollars to something like twenty or even ten probably. I thought about sending one back to you for fun but I didn't know if you'd think it was stupid. Now we don't have a bazaar so it's too late.

Love,

Trent

11

Dear Dad,

Next time I see you you're probably going to ask me to tell you some stories. You might not but you probably will. Or you'll at least want me to. Either way I don't have any good ones right now. Nothing's happened yet. Just a CH-53 flight coming into the LZ and offloading some tri-walls. Has nothing to do with three walls. Just a weird way of saying they offloaded big boxes made of cardboard with a plastic base and lid. I don't know why they're called tri-walls. Crazy. It's 2010. We're still using cardboard boxes to mail supplies across a warzone. Sometimes it's just gatorade inside. A tri-wall filled with gatorade that someone's sending to someone else in their unit. Saw that at Delaram. Can't imagine people mailing gatorade to each other in World War II, but I guess a lot of things have changed since then. Not sure why World War II is my frame of reference for how things should be here. It's completely different. Maybe since it's the one we learn about a hundred times in school growing up. Oh well. Seems like everything's going to go smoothly here at least. Tillman, the forklift driver, offloaded the tri-wall himself. First time doing it in the Brit forklift. Didn't crash. What more could I ask for?

Trent

12

Dear Mom,

When I see you in person I'll describe the birds better. The little chicks started chirping. Now they do it all the time. They're kind of annoying but also they're a good alarm clock when they start screeching in the morning. Seems like they're never not hungry. I don't think there are any worms here, but there's no shortage of flies and other bugs all over the place. I'll spare you all the bug details though. Probably wouldn't want to know about the first time I saw a camel spider in Delaram. Something you can never unsee but anyway. Found some geckos in the backyard, little gray ones. Blount and Tillman put one in a bucket with a scorpion and tried to get them to fight, but they wouldn't. Nothing happened. Neither one was hungry for the other. Blount's usual entertainment is to stand outside the house and use an empty water bottle to knock down the wasps flying circles around the house. Then he digs these little holes and puts the wasps in them before pouring on some lighter fluid and burning them. I mean, they're just bugs, but it still feels pretty horrible. Still, he could be filling his time doing worse. Glad the lieutenant hasn't found him conducting his animal experiments yet. I'm probably the one who'd get yelled at. Anyway, you don't want to hear about that. Maybe you want to hear some more about the dogs here. You'd think maybe they'd be mangy rabid monsters or something, like these war-ravaged creatures who spend all day dodging bullets and bombs. But they're good dogs, just dirtier than usual. They roll onto their backs when you get close. I guess a dog is a dog anywhere. I don't know what that means. Met another dog on guard duty with one of my marines. It was injured. It was like when you find one that stuck its nose into a beehive or something, but worse I think. I'll spare you that too, even though you were a nurse and you can handle stories like that. Haven't seen that one around since. Anyway, things here feel normal to me at this point.

Love,
Trent

13

Dear Bruce,

Confession: When I found out about you from mom and dad I was basically angry even though I knew at the time I was supposed to be sad. But I was fucking pissed, and you were one of the people I was pissed at. Probably had been pissed at you as early as when you left to enlist. I was still dumb enough to think joining the Marines was badass, so I looked up to your decision to do that, but always felt like you left us behind. I couldn't help but think the same thing when you went to Iraq, even though it wasn't like it was your choice to go there. Wasn't something I realized at that time though. That's what grunt units do. It was your job. But anyway, when I first found out about you and flew back home from school, I went into your room. Barely anything had been touched since the last time you'd been back for leave and mom or dad wouldn't go in there to mess with anything. I remember one time, shortly after you finished boot camp, when I was still in high school, you showed me where you kept your EGA pin, the black one the DI gives you at the end of boot camp. So when I got home from school I found it in your dresser and I took it out back and flung it as hard as I could into the woods because it was all I felt like I could do short of driving to the recruiting office and burning it down. Then I was mad at myself for losing something that was special to you, even though I didn't realize how special the EGA pin was until I got my own at the end of boot camp. The lie I told myself was that I was pissed at myself, which is why I dropped out of school, walked into the recruiting office, and signed up (instead of burning it down). It was a lie. I enlisted because I used you as an excuse to face some kind of crossroads that didn't exist. I was about to fail out of school and I was fucking depressed because I got rejected by Colleen, that's it, but I told everyone else some bullshit story about honoring you and *servng my country*. How fucking stupid. I wish I could tell you I was sorry for

both losing the EGA and also enlisting. What did I think would happen if I made it to Iraq on a deployment? I'd find whoever built your IED, and then what? Kill them, I guess. It's hard to remember my exact thoughts. I don't know about the officers and I don't really care. But I think everyone joins the enlisted side because they're pissed about something. Happy people don't do it, do they? Happy people go off and make money or have kids. Makes me wonder what you were pissed about when I think it over. It's pretty easy to throw around the same story to everyone, isn't it? They ask why you're enlisting. *Because I want to serve my country.* It's pretty easy to salute the flag but in your head you're thinking about paying off a car or getting free college or you're thinking of literally anything except the flag you're saluting. Of course they didn't even send me to Iraq. They sent me to Afghanistan, which is ironic isn't it? Or it might not be. The first time I think about Afghanistan since 2001 it's because the combat instructors at MCT are telling me it's where I'll end up sooner than later when I always thought it would be Iraq. Fuck. Last time I thought about Afghanistan I was too young to realize there was a difference between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. And now I'm here, and coming here didn't solve anything, because I'm still pissed at myself and you didn't magically come back to life like you were supposed to, and whoever buried that pressure plate is somewhere else now, and they're either alive, or they're dead, but I will never know. But I wish you were here so I at least had someone new to talk to.

Trent

14

Dear Caroline,

It's a lame thing to say, but I hope school's going good. I'm always picturing you in school when I think about what you might be doing at any given time when I don't feel like thinking about whatever I'm doing. I think about that a lot actually. It makes me feel old when I think about school and I'm not that old. But I mean what I say about school when I say I hope you're doing well. I thought none of that stuff mattered, or I wouldn't have left. Well, I wouldn't have screwed it up in the first place. Now all I want is to go back to school. I guess I should've learned my lesson sooner, that you always want what you can't have. It's all I want to do now, just be tired in class, struggling to stay awake through a lecture because I was up late studying the previous night, but right before I dropped out it was the last thing I wanted to do. I just want to come home and be a normal person again. Sometimes I imagine what you're doing. You're ten and a half hours behind me. Not sure how it's possible to add the half hour, but hey, no one ever said anything that happens here makes any sense. When I wake up in the morning I picture you up late studying. I guess that would technically be during the previous night, which for you is still happening. Now I'm confusing myself with this. Anyway, I didn't study very much. You probably remember, or you don't. I mean I did fine I guess, but I took my purpose for granted, you know? You have a purpose when you're a student: get smarter, think about getting a job, etc. There's at least a goal. Here, not so much. Just get promoted so you have more of a right to be a dick to everyone beneath you than you had before. Other than that, all I do for work is the crap no one else wants to do. We keep track of passengers and cargo weights, but we don't really improve or get better at anything, unless you include cleaning and picking up garbage. I'm probably pretty good at that now. I can clean a mean toilet. I guess I could set a casual goal for

myself when I think about it, which is to finish writing a book, but there's no guarantees of any of that at this point. At least when you study, and do well on the exams and the finals and midterms and all that, you pass a class and get a grade and it goes on your transcript. With a book, I don't know. Maybe I'm just doing it to entertain myself. That might as well be the whole point. But I remember when I was a kid I always wanted to know what grandpa did in WWII, since we were really young when he passed on. That's probably why I'm so fixated on WWII. I want to write stuff down so my grandkids don't have to make any guesses about what I did here, like I did about him. Make sure you set a goal, you know? That's what I would tell you. Even if it's just to graduate. I barely even had that on my horizon, and look where I ended up. Technically employed, but, you know. But you're too smart for me to be saying any of this to you. Just ignore me if I ever try to tell you any of this.

Trent

15

06/12

Scene of our first HST at the LZ in Kajaki: British olive drab CH-47 hovers into the area and lands on the LZ next to the old yellow excavator, kicks up all the dust with its front and rear rotors, then Vargas runs up to the ramp when the air clears up a bit, exchanges info with a crewmember wearing a brown flight suit by shouting into his ear over the roar of the engines, then being shouted at in return. They're yelling about what the helicopter might have to offload and what we might have to onload, what cargo we might be sending out externally, swaying back and forth from the bird's cargo hook. Vargas runs back across the LZ to where the lieutenant and I watch alongside Arnold, Blount, and Ginge. He tells us there's no cargo to offload. We can barely hear him. A squad of Royal Marines waits nearby to board the helicopter and travel to their new area of operation. Tillman waits in the forklift, leaning back in the cab to take a nap since there's nothing for him to do but take up space. Vargas approaches the Royal Marines and leads them single file out to the helicopter, which they board one at a time before the ramp raises up and seals behind them. Then the CH-47 takes off and hovers across to the opposite side of the plateau, where Arnold and Ginge have rigged up one of the Brit defender vehicles in a cargo net.

The lieutenant and I follow Arnold and Ginge underneath the helicopter, where our goggles and neck gators can't save us from being viciously sandblasted in the face, our skin stung by tiny pebbles flying in the downwash. A thick hose with a yellow hook on the end dangles from the bird, waving around in the wind. We look straight up into the hellhole where a crewman wearing goggles watches us from above, guiding the pilot via radio even though Blount and Vargas are giving hand signals for the pilot to follow based on where the rest of us are standing underneath the bird. The pilots never listen to us.

Arnold reaches up with a hook attached to a chain that drags against the gravel, designed to ground the insulated static wand from the bird's static charge. He taps it against the bird's cargo hook as it lowers toward us, grounding out the charge built up by the spinning rotors. Little bolts of electricity flicker between the two hooks. He grabs the cargo hook with his other hand to stabilize it. Ginge steadies himself against the truck in the downwash. He reaches over with both hands clutching a metal loop attached to the cargo net, and hooks it to the helicopter's hook. After double checking to make sure it's secure, he gives us all a thumbs up and we run out from under the helicopter while he waits, the downwash nearly throwing us across the gravel under its power even though we've done this a thousand times. As the bird lifts up slowly, Ginge checks to make sure the net doesn't catch on anything, the truck's side mirrors for instance. When it's clear, he too runs toward us out from underneath the bird, and then the net stretches out until it's taut and the truck raises off the ground and slowly twists around in the downwash and eventually disappears from view behind a mountain.

We debrief, during which the lieutenant and I acknowledge that the lift went as planned and nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Again, nothing interesting to write about, but that's fine. The Brits do external lifts just as we've been trained, although they use fewer people and are generally more relaxed about it. Par for the course. They don't wear their flak jackets for instance, while we're always ordered to, even though a flak jacket wouldn't save a victim from being crushed by a helicopter. Not much would I don't think. I told the lieutenant I'm confident the four of us can handle this whole thing for the next month, that she'll be able to rest easy after she goes back to Delaram soon. I hope I'm right. I think she believed me. Really, all I could think about is the dog from the guard post. It distracted me all day.

No one I've asked has seen a dog that fits its description, nor have they seen a porcupine as big as what I imagine based on the giant quills. I can't stop picturing the side of the dog's face, punctured in all those places, waiting silently. Maybe it wasn't even hoping we would help it in some way. Maybe it just didn't want to be alone, or in the company of whatever was out there waiting for it to return. I realize I just want to know if the dog has died. If it's lying somewhere covered with flies. Maybe all of those answers await in the militia house.

16

Colleen,

You wouldn't believe any of what happened today, even if I told you in person. What would you say if I told you my alarm clock this morning wasn't an alarm at all but the sound of mortars shooting off? What if I told you that this ended up being the least of my worries? At this point I'm used to the mortars on base. Every now and then the Brits shoot off their mortars. It's okay. They're aimed at the bad guys, that's all. We're not supposed to think of them as people. No harm no foul. Each of the big booms shook our cots and woke us up, but we weren't scared. Would've covered my ears and tried to go back to sleep under my poncho liner, but we needed to wake up early for a flight anyway. Had to fly out a group of Royal Marines to their new base down south. Something a bit peculiar happened though, when I first went out back to brush my teeth. Found a couple porcupine needles piled out behind the house, against the back wall. A couple of them lined up in a row. Wind could've blown them there but maybe not. Someone could've put them there. Blount's the only other person who saw the quills in the dog's face, but maybe the other advon marines are fucking around. That's what I was thinking about this morning at least, before we went outside the wire. I thought about you a lot today when we were out there. Would you care about that? Would you even want to know?

Before we were out there it was just me, the lieutenant, Vargas, and Tillman. We left Blount at the FOB with a radio and we went up to the LZ with everyone, the Brit passengers leaving the base. The lieutenant wanted to supervise me handling the whole flight without any of her help, or any help from the two landing support Brits. So I was supposed to show off that I knew what I was doing. That was the whole point, except I never really got the chance to prove anything.

The CH-53s always fly in pairs. They're these big gray beluga whale type things, the biggest helicopters we use, and they're always broken. When the flight came into the LZ, we were all standing off to the side waiting. But we noticed there was only one helicopter instead of two like there's supposed to be. The bird landed and the lieutenant ran across to talk to the crew chief, then waved us over, Vargas, Tillman, and I. Suddenly we were all on the helicopter, taking off, and all I could hear the lieutenant fucking say was something about *the Taliban circling around* which could've meant anything. So what were we supposed to do about that, I thought. I'd never carried my rifle for any reason other than that we're required to all the time, not because I'd ever needed it to actually shoot someone. I'd never fired it in-country except to zero the sights when we got here five months ago. So I was terrified. All I knew was we were going to the Taliban. Thought we were going to fire our rifles at them out the back of the helicopter or something, from the opening where the ramp closes with just enough space for a mounted .50 caliber machine gun to have a decent view of anything behind the helicopter. That was a ridiculous thought but I never thought we would actually land.

We got farther from the LZ until my view through the window became a brown blur washing by like a dust ocean. Started wondering what we were really supposed to do, the nine of us including the CH-53 crew on a bird that can seat fifty-five. Then the lieutenant gave us our first order.

"Go to condition one," she shouted above the roar of the rotors, her eyes obscured behind the scratched lenses of her goggles. The lieutenant has her shit together. You'd like her. I started freaking out though, thinking *oh Jesus*. Hadn't loaded rounds since we zeroed our sights. Racked my charging handle back a couple times and a little cloud of dust came out each time. Hadn't cleaned my M16 in weeks. Started thinking this might be it, you know? This might be it.

Managed to get a magazine loaded and a round chambered and ready to fire even though my hands were shaking. Started to imagine what the chances were that an RPG would fly right into the opening at the rear of the helicopter.

Might have been in the minority there because Vargas reached across with his gloved hand and fist-bumped Tillman, who returned the gesture but he didn't look as excited, as in he wasn't displaying an open-mouth smile like Vargas which surprised me, Vargas's smile that is. Never pictured Vargas as the bloodthirsty type? Maybe that's not it. Just ended up unnerving me even more. Had spent months training for combat in boot camp and MCT and then doing all the workups but I was nervous as shit. Never thought I'd end up engaging the enemy directly. Our damn job is to send ammo to the people who shoot the guns. Then the lieutenant gave another order.

"Tillman, with me," she shouted. Tillman nodded, clenched his jaw. "Corporal Heywood," she continued. "With Vargas!" That's when I started thinking *Holy fuck, we're going to land. This is really happening.* Spent five months in this country and have never seen any Taliban, just the locals, the ANP gate guards or the chow hall workers back at Delaram. Realized the first time I saw one could mean I'd be seconds away from getting shot by a person who wanted to kill me, or seconds away from shooting another person. Wondered about Bruce. You remember meeting him that one Thanksgiving, right? Freshman year? He wouldn't have been scared. He was a grunt, did this kind of thing every day. But I started shivering. I was thinking about my parents and Caroline. What if I missed my chance to say goodbye? What if I left her without either of her brothers? Knew I could get shot but also remembered about the Soviet mines still littering the Afghanistan countryside. Worried that it would be worse for me to kill

someone out there. Then come home and leave Caroline with nothing but some husk of a person as her remaining brother, who knows. Then I felt the weight of everything else.

Riding tricycles on the sidewalk in the rain. Making a Tyrannosaurus Rex out of clay in first grade and then painting it pink and black, then the nose breaking off later. Trips to the dunes, making sand castles on the beach, visiting a farm in Missouri, fishing in a catfish pond. Bouncing a basketball against a wooden gymnasium floor. Pencil drawings of dinosaurs on notebook paper. Lego pieces falling down a heat register. Failing junior high math tests. Detention for swearing. A hot shower. A long hot shower. Losing almost every track race in high school because I had shin splints or because I was just slow. Kissing you for the first time at the barn dance, going a little farther than kissing you the first time after the barn dance was over. Wondering what you are doing now, probably studying for the LSAT or skipping class or sleeping in late on a Saturday with someone else who goes farther than kissing you. What a waste. Was nearly hyperventilating but I had to rewind and disconnect and fall back on what they taught me about killing people. *Clear tip, blurry target. Clear tip, blurry target.*

When I flipped the selector switch on the M16 from *safe* to *fire* I knew everything was real. It was as if things unfolded both in a way that surprised me but also a way that felt expected. After all, I'd flipped the selector switch from *safe*, to *fire*, to *burst* about a billion times, but on the range. Then the helicopter hit the ground and the cargo ramp dropped.

"Let's go," the lieutenant shouted, signaled for me and Blount to break in one direction and she and Tillman would go in the other. Four of us got up and scrambled down the ramp into the brown dust cloud. Held the rifle tight against my shoulder, watching for bad guys. Couldn't see anything. Knew if I died right then I wouldn't even know what from. Couldn't see shit, just hoping not to roll my ankle on the rocks. Still had no idea what was going on, where we were

going, and then as we cleared the dust we came face to face with the other CH-53 that didn't make it to the LZ. Appeared to be in perfect condition, landed safely. Fucking figures, I thought, still pretty terrified though, all keyed up. We'd seen so many of the 53s break down during training in North Carolina, why not here too?

"What the fuck?" Tillman said. Turned to face him and told him to shut the fuck up. Then the other CH-53 took off and left us alone with the other bird and its crew who waited inside out of the direct sunlight.

"We're setting up a four-corner perimeter," the lieutenant ordered. "Keep your eyes open and call anything out if you see it. You and Vargas set up at forty-five degree angles about fifty yards from the bird and we'll take the other side after I talk to the crew. Let's go, Tillman." Took our positions around the bird, lying silent and alone. Looked down my scope, not sure if I was seeing people or if floaters were swimming lazily across my eyes. In the distance was the Kajaki Lake, the lake created from damming up Helmand River. A rippling mirage off the surface of the water blotted out the horizon beyond and made the lake appear as if it were an ocean going on forever.

Tried to adjust to a position where I could lie down without a rock pushing up against my groin protector. It was morning, and the sun was crawling up higher in the sky, and I was worried a camel spider was going to find me, and was worried the Taliban would find me, and was worried I might have to take a piss or a shit and just how was I supposed to go about doing that? Behind me, the pilots sat in the cockpit of a stranded hunk of dirty gray steel with *U.S. Marines* stamped on the side. The crewmen waited at their .50 caliber machineguns. We waited in the dirt. The sweat beaded up under my flak jacket, under my helmet, between my fingers. It

moistened up the crusty fabric of the socks I'd been wearing that week. It dripped down my forehead and onto the scope lens.

Overhead, the thumping rotor of a Cobra attack helicopter built up until it echoed across the open field around us. Circled the nearby area with a Huey as its backup. The first CH-53 eventually returned to us after making a round trip back to the LZ, bringing with it a group of Royal Marine Commandos to help out the four of us logistics marines providing security. We would've been fucked if anyone attacked before that, before the Cobra flew in. The Brits carried rifles and machineguns longer than I am tall and they filled in the open gaps between the four of us, turning our four points of defense into a complete circle, although no one was close enough for me to have any contact with anyone, not that conversation would have been permitted anyway. The bird stayed on the ground and the two helicopter crews got together to tinker with the hunk of junk. After a while, the first one left again.

The lieutenant came by to check on me a few minutes later. "How you doing, Corporal?" she asked. She'd been over to the helicopter to talk with the pilots I figured.

"Fine, ma'am."

She handed me a warm water bottle. "The crew had some extra water for us."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"They have to go back to Leatherneck to get the part they need," she said. That meant we'd wait around for at least another two hours for them to fly down and back. And we did so, waiting there in the sun all morning waiting for someone to attack the broken down helicopter with AK-47s or RPGs. Eventually the CH-53 came back and picked us up, took us back to the LZ, and flew out the Brits as scheduled after making the needed repairs.

Blount tried to get us to tell him what happened when we got back. He'd been waiting all morning with barely any info, just listening in on the radio to see what was going on with us since we'd taken much longer than expected to get back to the FOB. Vargas and Tillman told him a little bit but didn't say much and I ignored him until he finally shut up. Collapsed on my cot until lunch. So did Vargas and Tillman. Didn't care if any flies landed on my face. Was exhausted from the adrenaline rush that hit when we first took off and landed. Exhausted just from having been in the sun for so long. They should make an accurate version of *Call of Duty* where you just lie there and drip sweat under your flak jacket and your gun's always dirty. The game has to really get in your head too. First you have to imagine everything you never had the chance to do, or everything you took for granted. People you'll never see again, or people who will forget about you. Think about all of those things you will never achieve and everyone you'll never get to say goodbye to and regret enlisting. Blame yourself for your subordinates' potential death, even though the lieutenant is responsible for all of us until she leaves in a couple days. Then you try to stay awake after the crash you get from the adrenaline rush. Try to stay awake, go back to your base, take your flak off and your skin's already breaking out on your shoulders and back from the sweat. Would have a hard time selling that version of the game. I wonder what you're doing right now. I feel less scared thinking about that.

II

17

Dear SSgt. Ryker,

Thanks for the clippers, asshole. Our haircuts will look nice and fresh for you from now on. And thank you for giving me a good reason to take a shower, considering I'm covered in hair now. I'm guessing you have me right where you want me now that the lieutenant's gone. Don't have her to stick up for me anymore, so now I have to play nice with you and most of the other marines in your artillery battery who just showed up. Made sense to me right away why you were so adamant about the haircuts. So far everyone in your damn battery has a fucking high and tight, so it must be some fucking artillery thing. Look at them all. The Royal Marines looked like a bunch of badasses. The rest of your marines looked like a bunch of kids when we first saw them at the LZ, big smiles on their face as if they were on their way downstairs to open presents on Christmas morning. Is that what this all is to you? A gift? Makes me wonder how Arnold and Ginge react to us, if they see the same differences I do. But again, speaking of gifts, thank you for these clippers. How cute that you keep them in an old Crocs shoebox. I bet they were your crocs. Did you know the clippers barely work for longer than a minute before they become scalding hot? I bet you didn't know that because it still looks like you could use a haircut too, if I may be so bold to suggest. But no, I don't think you would hear any of that.

“Thought I'd forget about y'all with those mop tops, eh?” you said in the COC as all the artillery marines carried in boxes of their gear, secure computers and SIPR phones and whatnot. “Hell naw, you boys get first dibs. Welcome to the battery barber shop, self-serve. Check? Take your asses outside and get that trash chopped off, got it?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant,” I said like a good corporal, really thinking *oh great this is what we get to deal with for the next three weeks*. Great. Well, I took my junior marines outside to plug the clippers into the outlet by the tree.

“Guess I got the duty, Corporal?” he asked. Not like anyone else was volunteering, considering it really doesn’t matter if we have fresh haircuts or not and they all know and understand the futility of it. Tillman stood there swatting flies out of his face, pretending like there was no question of who’d be the designated hair stylist. There was no way in hell I’d trust Blount with it.

“Hell yeah you’re doing it,” I said, because you’re lucky, Staff Sergeant, that Vargas can give a damn good haircut. He’s been keeping a running tab on what everyone in the platoon owes him for barracks cuts when we get back to the States. I told him to add us to his book. If you were a smart entrepreneur, Staff Sergeant, you’d learn how to cut hair and then every time you chewed someone out for not having a haircut you could force them to pay you \$5 to fix it for them right then and there. Just a thought. But you might want to buy a better set of clippers to work with.

Wiped the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve and leaned my M16 against the tree with everyone else’s. And as I mentioned earlier, it took about a minute for the clippers you gave us to heat up to molten levels.

“Goddamn, that shit’s fucking hot,” said Blount, jerking his head away since I made him go first while Tillman and I waited our turn. Vargas was good enough to cut his own hair without a mirror, so I wasn’t worried. Had to turn the switch off of the one pair of clippers and then exchange to the other. So for about thirty seconds he used a pair of clippers before turning them off. Very time efficient. Vargas told him to stop complaining anyway.

“It’s like one-twenty out, fool,” he said to Blount. “Of course they’re gonna get hot.” But it didn’t matter. They were so damn hot, which I eventually experienced, that Blount’s level of concern for the whole ordeal rose to existential levels, so, thank you for that Staff Sergeant. Wish you could’ve been there to enjoy our conversation. I’m sure you would’ve provided us with some dynamic insight.

“Motherfuck,” he groaned. He kept whining while Vargas finished up. “We shouldn’t even fucking be here, goddamnit.”

“Yep,” Tillman agreed, briefly opening one eye to acknowledge Blount while he sat against the wall with his arms crossed, trying to fall asleep. “This is some bullshit.”

“No, man,” said Blount. “I mean this whole fucking thing. Fucking Afghanistan, bro.” Tillman laughed and told him *okay, sure*, his standard response when it’s obvious he thinks someone is saying something stupid. I wasn’t sure whether I was going to agree or disagree with whatever Blount was about to say, Staff Sergeant, so I just kept listening, to keep getting to know my marines. You remember the leadership principles, right? Vargas saved me from saying anything and asked Blount what he meant.

“Come on, we should’ve bombed these fuckers ten years ago,” Blount said. “We aren’t back to back world war champs because we tried to make friends with everyone, dude. We fuckin’ blew all their asses up right away. And that’s Europe. They got like, nice shit, you know? And this shit’s just a fuckin’ desert. Nothin’ even here. Who gives a fuck about it except these dumbass farmers?”

“This ain’t a world war, son,” Tillman said. “It’s NATO versus the Taliban. Get on Wikipedia.” Was probably more than I’d heard him say in one breath since I’d met him at Delaram.

“Same difference,” Blount said, jerking his head away from Vargas’s clippers again.

“Sure, okay,” Tillman said.

“We’re too powerful to not be winning this shit, dude. Fucking Osama’s still running around in the caves out there and we’re sitting around sending rice and beans to motherfuckers.” He was talking about a cargo lot full of supplies we’d sent from Delaram to the Afghan National Army. You should’ve seen it, Staff Sergeant. It was a real shit show. Beans, rice, and powdered milk all over the damn lot since the ANA soldiers who helped us were a bunch of morons and spilled that shit everywhere.

Still, Blount bringing up Osama reminded me that the Global War on Terror began before I was old enough to drive a car and has continued on long enough for me to reach enlistment age, with no clear end to it in sight. Maybe he’s right and we should’ve just bombed the hell out of everyone. What difference would it make to anyone back home? I didn’t really want to think about it, just wanted Blount to look like more of an idiot because it amused me and I was bored.

“Ok, Professor Blount,” I told him. “Let’s say they fire General McChrystal. What’s your course of action then, smart one?” I’d already gotten in trouble for *slagging off* McChrystal in my blog, as Ginge would say, but thankfully it was an easy secret to keep from the junior marines.

“Who, Corporal?” Blount asked.

“Son,” Tillman said. “McChrystal is the ISAF commander. That means he’s our boss. Get on Wikipedia.” That made me chuckle, but there was plenty of truth to what Tillman kept repeating, don’t you think, Staff Sergeant? We never really got any kind of training on the context of anything happening. Could you tell me anything about the Pashto culture? Probably not, even if this isn’t your first time in Afghanistan. I bet you’re proud of that too. Beyond that,

what could you tell me about OEF 10.1 without looking it up on Wikipedia? *OEF* probably makes you think of the tax free paycheck you're getting while deployed rather than the historical significance of anything happening here.

"Anyway, Corporal," Blount said, "to answer your question: I don't know. All's I know is we got enough bombs to end this shit five minutes ago yesterday, but we're too goddamn busy trying to be nice to everyone, trying to be *PC*, you know?"

"We're trying to save these people," Vargas said, waving his hand against the hot teeth of the clippers in vain. "Not trying to blow their house up, fool."

"Yeah, well a firefighter doesn't go into a building that's on fire and make friends with the people they're trying to rescue. They grab their asses and save 'em before more bad shit happens."

"Well no one wants to be your friend anyway," Vargas said, shaving off a strip of hair on the back of Blount's head. Tillman laughed, and I did too. Would have paid real money to hear your response to that, Staff Sergeant. Tillman had an answer for him, but I didn't actually hear. Was too distracted by something I saw across the FOB.

You don't know about the dog me and Blount found when we were on post a couple weeks back, the one that got attacked by something. Saw it standing along the hill behind the officers' house that leads up to the mountain where the OPs watch over us. Could've sworn, looked like it was facing right at us. Too far for me to tell if the porcupine quills were still shoved into its face, and then when I asked Blount if he saw it up there it walked away back in the direction of our house, toward the back gate. Told him I thought I saw the dog from the back gate but wasn't sure, and Tillman asked what I was talking about. Told him the story.

"That's fucked up," he said.

“It was like some haunted shit, bro,” Blount said. “Like the story Ginge told us.”

“It was just an animal,” Tillman said, probably the same answer you’d give, Staff Sergeant. And yeah it was just an animal, but I noticed this morning that there were more of those porcupine quills behind our house, and it looked like they’d been placed closer than before. Anyway, thanks for making sure we’re all living up to the proper grooming standards. We’re in your debt.

Respectfully,

Corporal Heywood

18

Dear Caroline,

Figure out what you want to do now, if you can. I spent two years in college studying English and hating it, and only just because in high school I could BS all those papers and get at least a B or an A- without even reading the full books we were assigned. I've still never read *Great Expectations* in my life. Think about what you want to do for the rest of your life though. Instead of just taking a break from school I ended up practically failing out of something I didn't even like in the first place. Should've gone to school for journalism. Not sure why I never admitted that to myself. Always liked writing in general and was good at it, but hated Shakespeare and all that other symbolism crap any time we had to think about it. Always liked writing about real things actually happening. If I would've just written for the high school newspaper and gone to college for it, I might not be where I am right now. Wouldn't have felt like I needed to use Bruce as an excuse to reset my life since I couldn't just drop out of school and not compensate somehow. Haven't told you about that. Still thinking about whether or not I want to. Don't end up like me though. My life is not that great, to say the least. I've taken only one shower since we've gotten here. I've got enough socks to wear a clean pair for a week for the next month and a half or so. If I could get a hold of you I'd ask you to send clean socks. Every day I scrape dead yellow skin from between my toes. It smells like shit. Sometimes it's itchy, sometimes it's sore. The corpsman (our version of a medic) told me he couldn't do anything for me while we're here. All corpsmen ever do is prescribe us motrin anyway.

Love,

Trent

19

Dear Bruce,

If you were here you'd probably think I was being pretty stupid. You'd tell me to focus on the mission, which hasn't taken much focus to be honest. Every day I walk to the COC and check the tracker on a SIPR laptop to see if we have any flights and what's coming in. Then we go up to the LZ to meet up with the birds, and if they're meant to fly out a chunk of the British gear that's been assembled, we show the loadmaster around the staging area and let them know what each net load weighs so they can decide which, if any, of the bundles they want to hook up and carry out of here. It's the daily monotony like this that made the shit last week so bad, getting flown out to the middle of the desert, thinking I was going to get shot and killed and the last thing I see would be this dump. See? You'd think I was being stupid. That was the kind of shit you did every day, going on patrols and clearing buildings. And you'd think this other crap with this haunted house was bullshit too, but I don't know. This place is creepy at night. One of my junior marines, Vargas, keeps whispering as soon as he falls asleep. Definitely speaking words, but I haven't understood any of them and he eventually stops when I start to listen. No one else has noticed. Tillman put his gear in another room and sleeps alone. Blount is such a heavy sleeper he's usually snoring thirty seconds after he lies down. Thought I found a few more of those porcupine quills in the backyard. Gathered them up and threw them over the wall. A couple more were right there the next day, along the wall. Hardly see any of the artillery marines out back, so I doubt it's them. Haven't made any enemies with them, just met this other dude, Corporal Wolcott. Don't think they would want to fuck with us at all by messing around. Anyway I thought it could mean those porcupines just wander through the FOB at night. After all there's probably all kinds of animals moving around while we're asleep. But we got put on

back gate duty again, and I was standing out there at night just like before except it was me and some artillery guy I never saw before, just ignoring each other in silence, except for the typical howling from some jackals which you pretty much hear every night out here. Then I swear, that building, the militia house that Blount's been talking about lately, asking if we can go outside the wire and go inside it. The way it sits along the back gate road, one of the shorter length sides of it faces the FOB. From the smoke pit you can tell it's a two story building, and while I was back on post the other night I could've sworn I saw a window on the side facing us, up on the second story. But later I zoned out and when I looked back at it again there was no window. Kept looking away from it and then back again to see if it would change, but there was never a window again. Sure. Was dark out there. But I swear there was a window. Came back after getting relieved and Vargas wasn't in our house. He was out back taking a piss I guess. Was going to make fun of him for drinking too much water before going to sleep, but I passed out before he came back.

Trent

20

06/17

Now that the lieutenant is out of here and back down at Delaram, Blount and Vargas have been trying harder and harder to cajole me to escape the FOB boredom and check out the militia house. Tillman's been aloof about it if they bring up anything when he's around, pretending like he's not interested but I know he is. He's got a little digital camera his wife mailed to him, so I know he wants to bring some pictures home with him. Haven't admitted to either of them that I'm probably just as interested as they are. The story about the Russians is probably a bunch of BS, but I guess it's something worth taking up one of our empty afternoons. Nothing else is. Still, we'd be going outside the wire, even if it's not that far out. Leaving base is pretty reckless, even if it's in full view of the FOB. But Blount made a good point to me, even when I told him no again.

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "What if the ma'am found out?" He stood in front of me at parade rest, keeping his hands behind his back as a typical sign of respect.

"She won't find out, Corporal," Blount implored. Seemed so eager to get out of here and do anything other than what we've been doing, even if it's for nothing but an hour of cheap amusement. "Vargas and I are on post tomorrow morning," he said. Then he explained that all we'd have to do was get Arnold and Ginge to change out with them for a little while and watch the back gate while we were gone. We'd do it all before SSgt. Ryker found out, and it would be the perfect time since the rest of the battery including their command element were still due to arrive and all their new oversights and rules had yet to take effect. It was our last chance before we wouldn't be able to sneak out again, he said. Didn't admit to him that I agreed. He made some good points. Timing made sense to me. Still a terrible idea though.

“What if the OP guards see us from the mountain and call it in?” I asked. “What if Ginge and Arnold don’t want to dick around at the back gate? They’re short on their deployment, going home soon. Why would they pull guard duty for us?” Every reason I told him wasn’t really me behind the reason. Was just trying to do my job, be a good NCO because after the blog, it wouldn’t look good if I wasn’t trying.

“So you want me to go and ask the Brits if they’ll cover for us so we can go wander around an abandoned building,” I said. “Yeah, right. Go away.” I even pointed my finger so he would know *away* meant not here. Then Blount told us they’d already asked Arnold and Ginge, and they had already agreed to help us out. Said they weren’t interested in going to the house, apparently, but they’d experience it vicariously through us. Saw Tillman leaning against the doorway into the main room where the rest of us sleep, listening in on the conversation.

“You in on this too?” I asked. He shrugged. Of course he was. Just sat for a moment and stared at each of them individually. Realized if I agreed to go, if I let them decide, I could lose their respect in the future. Would they listen to me again if something more serious came up? But damnit, I wanted to know too. Wanted to have a story to make everyone else in the platoon envious whenever we finished here and went back to Leatherneck to fly to the States.

“Fine,” I said. “We go in for fifteen mikes so you can take your pictures tomorrow,” *and I can take my notes*, I thought, “and then we’re back here. No exceptions.”

“Kill,” said Blount.

21

Reminded them this morning again, fifteen mikes and we're back out of the house and surprisingly, we got lucky and nothing went wrong. Vargas and Blount walked over to the back gate to relieve the advon marines and do their first radio check with the sergeant of the guard. Then Arnold and Ginge showed up to make sure the back gate was secure while we were gone. Tillman and I geared up and met everyone over at the guard post, geared up with our rifles. I brought my daypack with an MRE and my notebook, but left the radio back at our house and hoped SSgt. Ryker wouldn't have a reason to call for us and find that we weren't there. Reminded me that I wanted to see if Arnold or Ginge could do a radio check with an American accent, see if they could fake out whoever was at the COC.

“Show me your best Yank,” I said. Ginge gave me the shit-eating grin of someone who's spent too much time watching *Zombieland* and learning American English from deployed marines. He thought it over for a minute and gave me his best American.

“If ya can't stand the heat,” he said with a big smile in a shrill cartoon voice, “get outta the kitchen,” and then, “by the skin of my teeth!” Then he repeated everything in the baritone voice of John Wayne. Vargas cracked up at that, but Tillman was stone-faced.

“We're fucked if they radio in,” Tillman said. “They'll find us out for sure.” He was probably right.

“Everything's fine, lads,” Arnold said. “No use stalling. We'll be right here when you get back. Go have a look and let us know how it is.” Seemed too easy to me, the whole thing, but soon enough we were on our way over to the house, passing through the opening between the giant bars of the back gate without unlocking it, carrying our rifles. On our way out Ginge told us

not to wake the ghosts. He hummed the theme to *The Twilight Zone*. Was more apt than you'd think.

When we were outside the wire, everything felt different again, just as when we went to provide security for the broken CH-53. You start to feel jittery, tense, aware of every little thing. The shadow cast by a small pebble, a tiny piece of trash blowing across the ground, a larger piece of trash set in the dirt that could be a hubcap or a Soviet landmine. The longer you study the hill leading down to the river from the wall, the more of the hubcaps you see. The protection of the walls and wires is behind you and all that's ahead is a world that would either be indifferent to your death or actively working toward its outcome.

"Go condition three," I said. We loaded our magazines without chambering a round and I gave the Brits a mock salute. Started along the dirt road that would've taken us all the way to the green zone if we were on a patrol, but our stop was the militia house about a minute's walk away.

"Holy shit, are those mines?" Blount asked.

"Not sure what else they'd be," I said. "Come on, let's make this quick." Heard the little clicks of Tillman's camera as he took pictures of the mines behind me. Tillman's camera, the idea of him watching something, reminded me of the OPs on the mountain above us, so I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked up to the mountain peak where the Royal Marine snipers provided overwatch for the FOB. Dawned on me that there was some oversight on our part, to forget about the other guards peppered around the mountains who watched the areas outside the wire, but if our job, the gate guards' duty, was to watch the back road, then the OP snipers would be focusing on other areas and ignoring the back road. They'd never notice us leaving the base to report it in to anyone.

Made it to the militia house, to a doorway facing the road. From outside it looked like nothing was inside but darkness and silence, maybe a dull little moan from the wind sweeping over the space of the open windows. Unclipped my moonbeam from where I attach it to my flak vest, turned around and shrugged at them.

“Let’s do it,” I said. Flicked on the light and stepped inside, swallowed by the doorway to find a horrible place that was absolutely filthy and disgusting. Pockets of sunlight bled through the open doorways of the long hallway which first greeted us, revealing dirt-covered concrete floors filled with a varied assortment of garbage and pilings of animal shit. Didn’t see a single human footprint in the dirt, just the tracks of what were probably jackals, too small to be the porcupine needle dog from the back gate. Seemed like people hadn’t attended to the building or been inside of it in years. They’d forgotten about the militia house and everything within. Torn cardboard and shreds of plastic from British MRE boxes littered the hallway corners as if assembled by animals creating a nest with objects carried back here. Blount groaned and squeezed his nostrils shut between his thumb and forefinger.

“Goddamn, it smells like dog shit in here,” he said after a gentle breeze blew the stench at us.

“This is what you asked for,” I said. The light of my moonbeam revealed all kinds of scuffs and smudges along the walls and ceiling, black marks and scratches and more Pashto graffiti similar to what we found when we moved into our house on base. Turned around and found a staircase leading up to the second floor, and another down to a basement, which surprised me since none of the other buildings at the FOB have basements, but maybe it was once used as a shelter from bombs and mortar fire.

“Hello,” Blount called down the hall obviously expecting an echo, but the sound was swallowed up and he was left unanswered by anything. Vargas provided him with a mock echo and laughed, but Blount didn’t seem amused. Almost looked as if he still expected to hear a real echo, or as if he’d heard an echo which the rest of us hadn’t. Vargas gave him a light punch in the shoulder and that snapped him out of it.

“Alright, let’s take a walk,” I said. “Which way? Let’s make this quick.” Then Blount asked where they skinned the Soviets and I asked him how the hell I was supposed to know that.

“They didn’t skin the Soviets,” Tillman said. “That’s the bullshittest story I’ve ever heard.” The others had gotten out their moonbeams and Tillman pointed his up the stairs, the light settling on a line of small baseball-sized holes punched into the wall exposing some of the rebar beneath the concrete. The holes lead up the stairwell wall to the second level like the dotted line on a treasure map. I’m sure we were all thinking it, but none of us said anything: They were bullet holes, from an automatic weapon by the look of it. Probably an AK-47.

“Holy shit,” Tillman finally whispered. Yeah, I thought. Some shit went down here, that’s for sure. Then I realized I’d been curious enough about the militia house, but had seen the whole thing as a diversion from our monotonous routine, something to pass the time, give us something to think about. Never really believed that anything important had happened inside though, or at least hadn’t been sure of it until this moment. Then the flash of Tillman’s camera blinked against the darkness and for an instant we saw the full assembly of bullet holes pockmarked indiscriminately around the stairs, more on the ceiling, as if one party had chased the other up the stairs. Blount suggested following the bullet holes upstairs.

“Alright,” I said, but I walked over and stood in between the stairs and the other three. “We take a quick look, we walk through, snap a couple picture, and then we get back.” Checked

my watch to see we'd already been out about seven or eight minutes, halfway through our allotted time.

Tillman's camera blinked a few more times from behind me as we headed up to the second deck, reaching it to find it about identical to the first deck and smelling just as hideous. I let everyone spread out and go their own way to investigate and explore. Each time I passed one of the old barracks rooms I saw my shadow stretching over the sunlit floors out of the corner of my eye and it was as if another person was walking alongside me. Decided on one of the rooms and poked my head in to take a look, but found nothing unique compared to what we'd already seen. The room was empty of furniture or bedding of any kind, and the floor was covered in trash and other rejected matter. But I noticed something familiar just as I was backing out to rejoin the others.

Stepped all the way into the room and knelt down near a pile of clutter that I thought at first were twigs or sticks, but after looking more closely saw that they were the same type of porcupine quills from the poor dog's face, and also from our backyard. Picked one up for the first time, from the tangled clump, some of them with their sharp spikes pointed out at me with nearly intentional hostility. The needle I picked up extended from the base of my palm to just past the length of my middle finger with alternating white and black bands striped around it as a sign of caution. Thought it would make a good photograph, the porcupine quill in my hand for a startling size comparison, then I realized I wasn't sure where Tillman had gone with his camera.

Found the rest of them down the hall gathered together in one of the rooms, saw where they were by the sight of Tillman's camera flash bleeding into the hallway. Don't know what it was, but something about them in there, the room, I don't know. Felt like it would've been easier to stay here for a while than to walk back. More comfortable, more simple that way. Sat down,

got my notebook out and started writing this all down. Just checked my watch. We've been in here too long already.

22

Bruce,

I don't know what just happened today. Thought about waiting till tomorrow to write anything, almost left the page blank, but I can't focus on anything except the militia house right now.

Needed to get at least a few words down. I remember some of it, but I need some space to think and figure it out. Didn't even have five minutes to think after we got back from that place before going to get my ass chewed by SSgt. Ryker. Just finished that up a few minutes ago. Apparently he called for me on the radio after we left the house earlier but obviously we didn't answer. Of course, since I thought no one would call in, someone did. The ever faithful Murphy's Law. Took effect at the house too. We set a short time limit to be gone, and we went past it by at least an hour. What could have gone wrong did go wrong.

Thank God Arnold came and got us, because I don't know how much longer we would've been there if he didn't. All that's clear to me right now is that we were in the house looking around, and then suddenly we were back out on the road in the sun following him to the back gate as if nothing had happened between the time he left and the first sound of his voice from outside. I remember him calling up to us. Ginge was waiting for us near the guard post, but not as one of the gate guards. There were two advon marines posted up there. At first I thought we were really in trouble, but they weren't there to get us. They'd come to relieve the preceding guards because it was their turn to stand post, and the preceding guards had been Ginge and Arnold. We'd been gone quite a bit longer than fifteen minutes, but my watch didn't show that. It wasn't any use telling that to SSgt. Ryker. You know how it is.

The advon marines on post were jealous that we'd gone out and seen something outside the FOB, this guy named Corporal Wolcott and one of his junior marines. Wolcott flew in with

us from the start. Don't know him well enough yet. So far he evokes a premonition of what Blount might be like when he picks up corporal. Seems laid back enough, not the type to snitch us out to SSgt. Ryker. He came off as being more worried for us than anything. Relayed the message to me that SSgt. Ryker wanted to see me ASAP. He'd called into the radio at the guard post to see where the hell I was when no one at our house answered. They said he wanted me to meet him at the COC. On my walk across the FOB, I tried to process some amount of what had occurred, but it was just a big scramble of gray fog in my head. Wasn't ready to believe that anything strange had happened with the way time passed when we were gone, but when I got to the COC and saw that the place was empty, and everyone was out to lunch, I realized we really had been gone longer than what my watch was showing. Seriously, how the hell does that happen?

The front room was empty except the desks lining the perimeter of the room with the old computers displaying the same screensavers we had on our Windows 97 Gateway when we were growing up. If it was any other day I would've been happy to see the computers unattended. Usually means I don't have to wait for the Brits to finish whatever they're doing before I get the chance to log on and check the flight tracker. But I had something else to deal with. SSgt. Ryker knew it was me at the first sound of footsteps.

"In here, Devil Dog," he called from another room, sounded like the adjacent briefing room. Found him in there leaning back on one of the wooden benches where the section heads listen and take notes from during their briefings before every foot patrol outside the wire. Would've thought he was asleep if I hadn't just heard his voice. The back of his head rested against one of the wrinkled maps plastered on the wall, and his arms were crossed. You know

you're in trouble when their arms are crossed, right? His eyes were closed, but I knew he knew I was there. He pointed at the floor right next to where he sat and said, "Stand right there."

"Aye aye, Staff Sergeant," I said, and held one hand behind my back with the other hand securing my shoulder-slung M16 when I found the spot which he had indicated in front of him. Ass-chewings are predictable once you get used to them. You always know when one's coming. Doesn't make it any more pleasant or desirable.

"Explain to me," he said, and finally opened his eyes. "Explain to me why I couldn't reach any single one of you LS marines when I radioed over to your house earlier." Felt like the militia house had betrayed me. Fuck that place. If they found out we went outside the wire it could go as high as a court martial. Had to think fast and tell him something. Wasn't sure if he knew we were outside the wire or if he'd talked to Arnold or Ginge, so I just gave him the obvious, true answer.

"We weren't in our house, Staff Sergeant," I said. He stared back at me in silence. He hadn't accused me of anything yet, but I knew he wanted me to incriminate myself. You know how it is when you waive your constitutional rights. So I said, "we were PTing," and when he continued to wait in silence, "up behind the officers' house, on the hill." Wasn't even sure if what I said was a possibility, but I had seen a hill where I'd described, and I had thought about making the junior marines come up there with me to run up and down it. Told him I didn't have an explanation other than that. Didn't want to be standing there in front of him wasting my time. Just wanted to be left alone so I could think in peace.

"That's not good enough, Devil Dog," he said. "PTing? I went into your house and all your gear was gone, flaks and kevlar. So where did you go, Corporal?"

“We PT’d in our gear, Staff Sergeant,” I said. Thought maybe that would even motivate him some, to know that there were NCOs in the FOB being assholes to their marines by making them run up and down a hill in a hundred twenty degree heat. That’s the kind of shit that arouses a staff NCO.

He said that wasn’t good enough, and it was like the bottom fell out of me. If I couldn’t distract him or divert his attention with that story, what the hell other kind of story could I make up to cover our asses? He told me it wasn’t good enough to wander away when I knew they put a radio in our house to get in touch with us at all times. What the fuck did he want?

“You think we’re back on the block, motherfucker, but we’re not,” he said, and then lowered one of his boots from the bench he was on and rested it on the floor. I wanted to say, *yeah, no shit*. That’s the kind of thing that wouldn’t have helped. He kept going and said, “You think you get to be on your OFP since your platoon commander left. Wander around all day so no one can find you if we need anything. You on your own fucking program?”

“No, Staff Sergeant,” I said, awaiting whatever it was that he truly needed from me. I knew we had a damn flight tomorrow, sending the rest of the Brits out of the FOB and receiving more of the artillery personnel. I’d seen it scheduled on the tracker for days. “I don’t have a good explanation for you, Staff Sergeant,” I added for effect.

“Look,” he said. “You belong to us now, check?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant,” I said, expecting him to continue on, but he snapped up from his spot on the bench and was suddenly standing almost on top of my boots, looking up into my face with his index finger pointed inches away from my eyes.

“*We fucking own you,*” he yelled. “*Your lieutenant’s gone, so you answer to us! You do your job and you do what we tell you. A flight comes in, you take inventory in your fucking log*”

books. A flight leaves, you load the shit on the bird. And when you're sitting pretty in your nice house all day without a damn care in the world, you'll be in goddamn radio contact at all times and not wandering around outside the fucking wire!" Fuck, I thought. SSgt. Ryker saw my reaction and he sat back down on the bench, folded his arms across his chest. He cleared his throat and then chuckled to himself.

"That's right," he said quietly, but he could only keep his voice at an even tone for so long. "I know you're a fucking liar. You weren't PTing. You weren't even in the *fucking FOB!* You gotta be fuckin' shitting me if you think I was too stupid to know who was on the roster for back gate duty. *I fucking made the roster!* And I go back there and find some fucking limeys standing where your junior marines should've been." He took a deep breath through his nose. "Bowe Bergdahl. You know what happened to him?"

"No, Staff Sergeant," I said, but I sort of did. When we'd first arrived in country there were all these stickers posted up inside the temporary transient tent we'd moved into. Picture of a soldier wearing Army BDUs, encircled by the words *Bowe Bergdahl - Have you seen me?* We figured it was some guy who got captured and killed.

"*No one does,*" he yelled. "Because he fucking disappeared from a secure forward operating base like the one we're currently in, surrounded by wires and walls and guards. Sooner or later we'll be on Google watching him get his head sawed off." There was nothing to say in response to that, but I acknowledged him anyway.

"Aye aye, Staff Sergeant," I said. He waved his hand and told me to shut the fuck up. Said he'd keep the whole thing a secret, wouldn't tell the lieutenant or do any paperwork on me if I kept my nose clean and didn't fuck up. Was surprised since he didn't seem like the merciful type, but he must have read that surprise in my face.

“This isn’t a gift, Devil Dog,” he said. “I’m fucking blackmailing you. You slip up once, I swear I’ll take the first chance I can to get on the phone with your platoon commander and get your ass shipped back out of here. Get her to send us a shiny new corporal or better yet, we’ll take over ourselves. Don’t even fucking need you anyway. We can do all the shit you assholes do, including sleep all day. You’re taking up space on our FOB, eating our food, and treating this place like it’s still the rec center it was when the Soviets were here. Complacency kills, Devil Dog, remember the sign at Leatherneck?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant,” I said. The back side of the *Welcome to Camp Leatherneck* sign was stamped with the black stenciled words, *Complacency Kills*, but that wasn’t really what drew my attention. He had some fucking gall to accuse us of ‘eating their food’ when up to this point we’d still been eating Brit food. As if we had a grocery store where we could go and buy our own individual supplies. And the actual marketplace across the river from the FOB was abandoned, a little place the Brits called *Tangi*. If we were working at Kandahar, we’d be that lucky, we’d even have a T.G.I. Friday’s at our disposal.

“Screw your damn head on,” said Staff Sergeant Ryer. I’ll tell you what, Bruce, I was torn between being angry as hell and embarrassed. Not to mention I was still confused as shit, trying to piece together the missing space, whatever happened before Arnold came and got us from the militia house. If you would’ve been there with me in the COC, I don’t know. You wouldn’t have liked it. You wouldn’t have liked me. You probably would’ve been a good sergeant and chewed my ass too. And the position I was in. If I fucked up one more time with the lieutenant, that would be it, and now with SSgt. Ryker as well.

“What the fuck were you doing out there?” he asked.

“We were just taking pictures, Staff Sergeant,” I said.

“Pictures of *what?*”

I shrugged. What could I have said? Pictures of dirt. Pictures of an abandoned building. Selfies? He would’ve believed what he wanted to believe no matter what I said. And for all I knew I could have straight up told him what happened, that we’d gotten lost in some kind of supernatural time vortex. Maybe he was weird or stupid enough to believe that and excuse what happened, but the time for risk taking had come and gone in a single day. Told him we went to take some pictures of the river, and he sighed and shook his head, confused.

“You can see the river from inside the FOB,” he said, and was about to continue but cut himself off. “You know what, I think I’m done with this. I can feel myself getting dumber and dumber. Screw your damn head on and have at least an ounce of common sense and personal judgment in your body. JJ DID TIE BUCKLE, you understand me?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant,” I said, recalling the standard acronym to help recruits remember all of the official leadership traits, amongst which was *judgement*. Then he pointed his finger to the door and told me to go away, so I left the COC and walked back to our house. Turned out all he wanted to do was bitch at me. Didn’t even have anything extra to discuss with me or any tasks to assign, no new orders.

Blount was lying on his cot with his eyes closed when I got back, but I wasn’t convinced he was asleep. Felt grateful for that because I wasn’t in the mood for him. Vargas’s *Harry Potter* book was lying open on his cot, but I didn’t see either him or Tillman when I set my rifle down. Found them out back of the house, hunched over looking at the viewer screen on Tillman’s camera, clearly shocked or surprised by something. Then I remembered something about the house, the stairs leading down to the basement. For some reason I couldn’t picture them on our way out, when we left to meet Arnold and walk back. Asked Tillman if he had a picture of it, but

Tillman didn't answer. Simply handed me the camera and then I realized why the two of them seemed so worried. I scrolled through pictures to find them all blank, just a black box in place of each file. Tillman told me they'd saved just fine while we were in the house, made me wish you'd had a camera when you were in Iraq. Don't have any pictures of you from that. Didn't ask them to fill in the gaps for me yet, everything that was still fuzzy. Need to get some sleep tonight, figure this out tomorrow.

Trent

23

06/19

Was easier for me to get a good night's rest than I thought it would be. Spent the morning getting the story straight from the junior marines. Surprised how much came back to me once they started talking me through it, past the point where I found them in the kill room on the second deck of the militia house. That's what they thought it was at least, the room where the mujahideen cornered the Soviets during their last stand and supposedly skinned them all alive. The room was full of flies, as if the bodies had been rotting in there until the day prior, and the floors and walls were splotted black, almost charred. Still full of garbage and animal shit, and Blount said there were even more of the porcupine quills scattered around the floor than in the room I'd just checked out. They pointed out the wall behind me when I walked in, but I don't remember that as well. Sort of. Said there were so many bullet holes all crammed together like the wax cells in a honeycomb, only small areas of the concrete wall left untouched. A bunch of people had been in there shooting off AKs.

Said I found them there and sat down against the wall, started jotting stuff down in the notebook like I didn't care that we needed to get back to the FOB. Each of them told me they seemed to forget about that too while they marveled at the bullet holes and the grim appearance of the space, playing the violent narrative of the Soviet last stand in their heads, the way they pictured it at least. Piecing it all together. Tillman took pictures of every inch of the room like a crime scene investigator, which we later saw didn't stay saved on his camera, or were overridden somehow. Vargas and Blount were trying to find some type of souvenir among the refuse, but all they could come up with was more trash. Blount saved one of the porcupine quills.

After I finished writing in my notebook they told me that I suggested we eat, and that seemed like a good idea to them, like a dinner party in an old haunted house. I remember sitting in a circle with them on the floor. The only one with any food was me, the MRE in my daypack that had probably been in there since before we left Delaram. Never needed it since we got fed at the chow hall every day, and it's not like you crave MRE food if you're hungry for a snack, except maybe the ones with Skittles or M&Ms. Plenty of calories in every small package to split up the contents among multiple people. Tillman claimed the M&Ms when I pulled it out of the pack and saw it was the beef stew option, one of the MREs that always has candy inside. But the flies went crazy when I took it out of my pack. Started buzzing around the room in swarms.

Had this crazy feeling of *deja vu*. I remember that. I remember the flies now. Not sure what exactly it was that my mind was convinced I'd seen before, but I just had this odd feeling. The MRE in my hands, the flies. Maybe even the room, the militia house itself. Like we had done this before. An intoxicating thing that made me feel drunk, enough so that I didn't pay much mind to the flies or even care if they landed on me and tiptoed around on my face. They seemed particularly interested in the sealed MRE, clumping together and walking all over it, covering my hands. So naturally I tossed it to Blount so he could open it up.

We rocked back from where we'd been sitting cross-legged when he tore the package open, covering our mouths and gagging. Blount grimaced and then vomited on the floor. There was something inside the MRE package, a rotten stench that reached up into my nose and tugged at the back of my eyes, causing them to slobber tears over my cheeks. Something warm and dead was in the MRE and I needed to get it away from me. Threw it across the room where it smacked against the wall and landed in the corner where the flies followed it and congregated, surging over it. More flies flooded into the room like a swarm of angry bees until we could do nothing

but cover our heads to keep them out of our eyes and ears, and as we struggled there was someone outside calling for us.

“Lads,” came the voice of Arnold. And we knew we had to go, that we’d been there too long. He called up to us again from below, somewhere down on the ground outside. I ushered everyone out of the room until I brought up the rear. Took longer to traverse the second deck corridor on the way out than on the way in, I was sure of it, something like that. We weren’t walking slower, we were going faster, nearly jogging out to escape the flies, and I could swear I saw the graffiti moving around on the wall as if it were alive. Must have run four hundred meters down that hallway until we got to the stairwell and descended to the first floor to find ourselves gasping in the sun before a concerned Arnold. But on the way out, after the other three had made it outside, I waited a moment. I noticed that the stairs leading down to a lower level had disappeared, or they were never there in the first place.

24

06/22

Arnold and Ginge flew out this afternoon. Got them on a CH-47 with a bunch of the other Royal Marines. Said our goodbyes, took a couple pictures together, exchanged emails and Facebooks, promised to stay in touch after we got out of here. Traded Ginge an extra one of my Gerbers to get a pair of those damn shorts they wear, even though I won't be able to wear them until after I get home. And even then, I'll be wearing desert camouflage cargo shorts just in the hope that someone will ask where I got them, and then I can tell the whole fucking story about how much of a hero I was for coming here. Maybe I'll get a free beer out of it. Tried the shorts on and they fit, pretty comfortably. Most comfortable piece of clothing I have with me that I'm not allowed to wear. What else won't we be allowed to do when the artillery battery shows up?

The last I saw of them was after the CH-47 lifted off and hovered to the staging area to take a net load of British gear with them. We did our thing, hooked up the load in the downwash. Wind blew a rock right into my groin protector damnit, they had the rotors turned up high to take the extra cargo. Sometimes I feel like I'd rather get hit in the eyeball. Then I saw up into the hell hole where the crew chief watches us while we're working under the bird. Could see Ginge strapped in between some Royal Marines, and then we made eye contact and waved goodbye. And that was it.

Now we're all out of friends, with them and the lieutenant gone. Feels like we're really on our own. No more games, literally. Had some fun yesterday watching the World Cup with Arnold and Ginge on the TV in the chow hall before it got packed into a box and staged at the LZ with the rest of the Brit gear. We even went up to the LZ with them one last time in the afternoon, said they'd show us a spot to walk down behind the dam and go for a swim in the

lake. Last chance to do it before they leave probably, except taking this chance wasn't as much of a risk as going to the militia house, or even a risk at all. But yeah, SSgt. Ryker would probably be pissed if he found out we were doing anything that made us happy. Said when the humvees fly in, we'll have to sign ourselves out of the FOB with a driver and be in constant radio communication. We'll have to note a "reason" for signing out a humvee in a logbook. *No more of this lackadaisical limey shit.* Doubt anyone would let us sign out a humvee if the reason was listed as "pleasant afternoon swim." By the way, it was barely pleasant.

Water was cold as shit. How can it get this cold! It's the middle of summer in the hottest damn place I've ever been. Shivered my ass off which cracked up Arnold and Ginge. They provided us some "security" while we stripped down and took a dip, meaning they sat off to the side and smoked cigarettes. They would've smoked cigars if they had them I think, celebrating the end to their deployment coming up soon. Said they would've joined us but they'd already been swimming before and they already knew how cold it was. But it's fine. We were down a slope at the water's edge, pretty concealed. Safe I think. Got in up to my waist and then slipped on a rock and fell all the way in. Usually that's how you get used to it, but I didn't. Blount splashed Tillman, who looked like he was going to drown him if he did it again. Then he splashed Vargas, who splashed him back harder until he begged him to stop. There were fish in the water. Birds flying. Sometimes a combat zone doesn't have to be a combat zone. It can just be a place in the world.

25

Dear General McChrystal,

You're free to join us in sunny Kajaki whenever you feel like, sir. Consider this an invitation, sir. Plenty of MREs to go around, sir, now that the rest of the artillery marines all flew in this afternoon, so I can at least guarantee you won't go hungry while you're getting down and dirty with us peons here. But I need to let you know about the new rules first, sir, just so you don't cause the first sergeant to have a temper tantrum. First, fresh haircuts whenever possible, so if you want, my marine Lance Corporal Vargas can hook you up with a sleek high-and-tight like all these other jokers. Are high-and-tights popular in the army? Probably not. Soldier hair always looks normal to me whereas we look like a bunch of dumbasses when we're within regulation standards. Looks like we're also not going to be allowed to wear our FROG gear anymore, even though, as you probably experienced whenever you leave your cushy air-conditioned office, it's a million degrees out and regular cammies are made of heavier fabric. But, you know, we always need to maintain good order and discipline even if it's at the expense of all the extra water I'm about to start sweating out every day. Also, they said we can't drive the humvees the birds dropped off today, the LS marines at least, since we don't have our licenses. Never finished my MarineNet courses to qualify for humvee school, so I'm out of luck. Not even my HE operator, Lance Corporal Tillman, how about that? He can drive a forklift for us but he's not allowed to drive a glorified pickup truck. How about you, sir? Do you have a humvee license? Do they handle it differently for soldiers in the army? Or do generals just get to do whatever they want? I can't even imagine, sir. That must be nice. Good for you. My invite stands regardless of your rank. You can help us tear out the dead grass in our backyard, since that's where they're planning to set up the triple-7 howitzers when they arrive. Can't have anything flammable in the

vicinity of a few giant canons and their explosive ammunition now can we? That's our chore for later today. And after that, maybe you could come up to the LZ with us and join in one of our HSTs. If you want to stay out of the dust you could be the outside director, giving hand signals to the helicopter pilot to adjust his positioning over those of us standing underneath. Except, they never listen to those hand signals. You're a general, so you're probably not used to people not listening to you. You know what? Officers like to get dirty, right? They like to get down in the shit with their enlisted, don't they? They like building some of those everlasting bonds and rapport with the mud-crunchers to gain their respect by being relatable. If we think you're cool we wouldn't have a reason to question any of your orders. So you could be the inside director in the downwash, standing with us and giving the hand signals for the outside director to mimic so the pilot can see, and then at least one person would be following your directions. Plus, you wouldn't have to hold anything like the static wand or the 40k cargo sling legs we hook up to the bird. You just get to stand there and watch us, experience the two-hundred-mile-per-hour wind under an Osprey or a Super Sea Stallion or a Chinook, get that little rush you feel the first time before it eventually starts to feel like a job. Make sure to bring your ear-pro; it gets loud under there, like spending a few hours in a nightclub except we don't have any expensive drinks for you or a person in the bathroom who puts soap in your hand for tips like they have at Kryptonite in Myrtle Beach. The best part is you won't be hungover the next day like you were for all those big morning lectures in college or the academy or wherever the fuck you learned how to be an officer. No hangover, but you'll have to spend a couple days snorting sand out of your nose, sir. I guess being enlisted isn't all that glamorous, is it? We're the ones who do all the bleeding and the dying, the same ones who dust your mahogany desk and take your trash out. What a wild party we've all been having here, especially now that all the Brits are gone and the Americans

are in charge. So, come on down and check it out. Come with us and watch paint dry in between the moments you think there's a chance someone's going to find you and kill you. Either way, we'll show you around, show you a good time. I'll introduce you to Lance Corporal Blount. He's your number one fan.

Sincerely and with such a great deal of respect, your number two fan,

Corporal Heywood

26

Dear Caroline,

I have a random question in my head that doesn't seem to have to do with anything else: All these new people who just got to the base I'm at keep chanting these lyrics to each other from some song by this rapper named Nicki Minaj. They keep saying, "Ruh-ruh-roger that," in response to like every damn thing they say to each other and it's annoying as hell. I had no idea what was going on at first. It seemed like their thing, some weird defining way they interact with each other that served as a unique brand for their interactions or something. Not even the advon marines know who Nicki Minaj is since they've been in country longer than the rest of their unit. Who the hell is she? Have you heard of her? I guess she got popular while I've been gone? Just asking since you're probably more in-the-know on pop culture right now. I'm pretty much out of the loop right now with music. All I got is an iPod that's broken and doesn't display anything on the screen. I can scroll around and hear the little clicks, and the only two things I can find without seeing anything are the *shuffle songs* option and a random album of James Bond theme songs I had loaded on there for some reason. Anyway, all we get is this lame ass newspaper sometimes called *Stars & Stripes* that only provides a bunch of news about wars, so I don't know about anything else happening back home. Hard to keep track of everything happening in the States when you don't have the Internet. Can't keep up with current events, which is ironic because we're part of one. Makes me wonder what else will be different when I get back, or who else I've never heard of will suddenly be a celebrity. I wish I could send this to you. Then you'd be able to respond and tell me everything I've been missing out on.

Love,

Trent

27

06/25

Dreamt about the militia house last night. Running up the stairs with an AK-47 clutched in my hands, all these rounds popping behind me, small arms going off and fire and smoke filling the claustrophobic space of the first deck corridor and stairwell until my ears start ringing like the one and only time I forgot to bring my ear-pro to the range for rifle qual. Then all that's left is this flatline intonation singing over the muffled screams and the chatter of machine gun fire vibrating up through me from my boots, which I then notice aren't my boots, the two hundred dollar Danners they issued us for the deployment. They're someone else's boots.

At the landing on my way to the second deck I spin around and find that I'm not alone among a group of several other men in unfamiliar uniforms, but somehow I know they're the Soviets. *We're* the Soviets. One of them goes down, exit wounds bursting open across his back as 7.62mm rounds pass through his body. The men with dark cloths wrapped around their faces close in on us, muzzle flash flickering like strobe lights from the barrels, bullets chipping away concrete and plaster shards that spin through the smoke-filled air. I know I'm asleep, dreaming, but I can't wake myself up.

I squeeze the trigger and the AK-47 buttstock drills into my shoulder as the rifle tries to jump out of my arms, the barrel spewing smoke and flame. Some of the mujahideen running toward me collapse face forward, the ones who I've killed myself, the others behind them hopping over the pile of fallen bodies, and then more behind them as they flow into the building. We're making our last stand in the barracks, and they're cornering us, overrunning us completely.

The covering on one man's head unravels as a round takes away half of his face. Another round hits a man in his left arm and another in that man's stomach, the assault rifle in his left hand firing indiscriminately at the walls as he falls back, the rounds punching into the concrete above me. Spent casings ejected from the weapon of one of my comrades twirl through the smoke and a few of them land inside my shirt collar, singeing my back as they roll down to the floor. Little bursts of wind from the gunfire wave against my bare head, had no time to put my helmet on when they showed up. When the magazine empties I drop it and load another taken from a pouch strapped to my belt.

My friends are dying around me. The full auto fire tears them apart like fabric, nearly disintegrates the torso of a man whose body turns to pink sludge inside his uniform in an instant, flecks of him splattering against my face. The Soviets behind me beckon me to the second deck while those in front of me disappear into the growing cloud of gunpowder smoke, the dull muzzle flash the only indication that there are still people standing there were I'd lost sight of them. When I reach the top floor with the last of us it's already too late as the mujahideen reach the floor from stairs at the opposite end of the corridor, the two forces set to meet halfway if we don't all kill each other first, but my friends lead me into one of the side rooms, the barracks rooms where we've slept since we've been in Afghanistan. We haven't stopped firing, the angry barrels burning red.

One of us doesn't make it into the room, taking several shots to the chest, thrown down by the force of it and sliding out of sight. The rest of us reload our AKs and I can see their mouths moving, their desperate eyes. They're imploring something of me, but my ears are dead and I can't hear anything they're saying. I can't read their lips. We hide behind the bunk beds, trying to take any cover we can to get in position, bracing ourselves for whatever's coming next,

rifles quivering in our trembling hands. We open fire at the first sign of movement in the doorway, chunks of it blasted away, pieces of rubble and bits of dust and debris streaming against my face. One of the mujahideen takes cover on the other side of the wall and blind fires his AK into the room, some of his shots hitting their marks, killing the friends of mine whose names I don't know. We back into the corners and the space fills up with smoke and the wall above the doorway chips away, the bullet holes I remember having seen in the militia house blooming right before my eyes. Then I'm out of ammunition, no more magazines. The footsteps of the attackers reverberate through the floor as the crowd closes in from either side of the hallway. The last of my friends pulls out a handgun, points it at his head and fires. My ears kept ringing for about fifteen minutes after I woke up.

Blount was still asleep in the dark and I couldn't tell if he was snoring because everything remained muffled. Vargas's cot was empty. When I sat up I noticed my daypack was missing from its usual spot under my cot, but my M16 was still there. Thank God. Then I saw the pack through the back door, lying on the ground as if someone had thrown it there or dragged it. So I got up and stumbled out back. Vargas wasn't out there, and the pack was open.

When I got close I found the ground strewn with MRE garbage. The pack was fine, but it was open and everything had been taken out and thrown all over. My notebook was on the ground, hygiene supplies such as a toothbrush and my cheap electric shaver. Don't remember leaving it open, so someone or something else did that for me. The jackals maybe, or a dog? They're smart little fuckers, they know what an MRE looks like and what's inside. I want to believe it was an animal, but I wonder about the militia house. People can go inside of it. We went inside of it. But the thought of something coming out of the house. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to believe it's true. Turns out when I picked up the daypack that it had been

resting on a pile of porcupine quills arranged in no discernible pattern. Shit. It wasn't jackals. I took the pack and looked around for Vargas, to see if he'd gotten up to take a piss. Then I waited for a few minutes in case he walked to the long drop in the middle of the FOB to take a shit, but he never came back. I walked back into our house to drop my pack before taking a look around, but Vargas had returned to his cot and was sound asleep.

29

06/27

Previous entry is in my handwriting, looks like I wrote it real fast. But I didn't. I didn't write it. Could just be I don't remember, but how could I forget writing something like that? Didn't even notice it until I was in the COC earlier for a meeting. SSgt. Ryker called up on the radio, said I needed to be there for the first COC meeting since I was technically a section head, and the battery CO wants a briefing from all the section heads every evening. Found the briefing room full of staff NCOs and lieutenants when I got there, a bunch of platoon sergeants and platoon commanders. Could tell from the look on their faces that they didn't think I belonged. None of the other sections heads are below the rank of sergeant.

No one moved over to give me any extra room on a bench, so I made my way to the back and waited behind everyone while they glared at me. I was the only one standing before the captain walked in, but everyone stood up from their seats and greeted him nonetheless. Pretty bland guy, I thought. Probably a real boring dad back in the States. Gave us a typical introduction, welcoming everyone to the briefing, noting that it was the first time all the section heads had met in the same place at the same time. Continued with a vague summary of everything else, the basic goals of the operation to turn the FOB into an artillery base to provide fire support for patrols throughout the immediate AO. Figured I should take some notes so I opened up my notebook to the next empty page and found all that random writing. *Where's your EGA?* Addressed to Bruce, signed by me. What the fuck was I talking about if I wrote it? I took his EGA pin out of his dresser and threw it into the forest years ago. Gone forever. The battery first sergeant had been standing off to the side with his arms crossed, noticed something was

distracting me from the briefing. Dude's eyes were bugging out at me like he couldn't even close them if he tried. Must have been a former DI.

"Something more important than what the CO's saying, Devil?" said the first sergeant in a gravelly frog voice.

"No, First Sergeant," I said, closed the notebook and stood at parade rest with my hands behind my back, with the notebook hidden.

"Okay," said the first sergeant, unconvinced. "And who are you exactly? You're not one of ours." SSgt. Ryker was sitting on one of the benches near the first sergeant, raised his hand as if he were getting a teacher's attention in a classroom.

"He's the landing support NCO, First Sergeant," said SSgt. Ryker. He glanced back at me and kept talking. "They offload the birds and do the sling loads and all that trash. Guess their platoon ran out of sergeants." He wasn't wrong. LS platoon was short on NCOs before we even left the States.

"Roger that," said the first sergeant, and then to the CO, "sorry to interrupt you, sir, just want to make sure all the marines are on the same page." Was pretty sure no one was on the same page as me. I guess the captain was intrigued because he stayed focused on me.

"You drive that forklift I see parked out there?" asked the captain.

"No, sir," I said. "I have an HE operator, Lance Corporal Tillman. He takes care of it."

"*Sir*," said the first sergeant.

"He takes care of it, *sir*," I said, corrected.

"Help me understand what your job is, son," said the captain. Predictable question, I thought. No one fucking knows what our job is except for us, and we hardly even know sometimes.

“We facilitate the movement of pax and cargo, sir,” I said, sounding like a textbook. Facilitate? Really? Everyone in the room looked at me like I was a moron. I went on and said, “we log all the cargo weights, keep track of the passenger manifests. And like Staff Sergeant Ryker said, we handle all the external lifts, the slings or the net loads.”

“*Sir*,” said the first sergeant again, so I repeated my last sentence and added the word *sir* on the end so the staff NCOs in the room would hear me showing respect to the captain, whether or not the captain actually felt respected.

“We can’t spare the personnel for any of that,” said the captain, “so I’m glad you’re here. You’ve got an important job. You make sure to let us know how we can help you do your job.”

“Good to go, sir.”

“Do we know when we’re getting the howitzers?” asked the first sergeant.

“I’ll need access to the flight tracker on the SIPR network before I can give you an answer on that, first sergeant,” I said. “Whenever your computers are set up here.” The Brits had taken theirs with them. The whole conversation was pointless and obvious. Anything I said they should have already known, because they’d probably been told it by my command. Was just some kind of power play for him to grill me in front of everyone, ironic since he was still interrupting his own superior. The captain hadn’t even finished his briefing.

“We’ll make sure you get computer access ASAP,” the captain said, then he continued on with the rest of the briefing and got his updates and reports from the platoon leaders in the battery before dismissing us. Finally got out of there and had the chance to look closely at the weird letter to Bruce. Maybe it wasn’t in my handwriting. I don’t know. Who would’ve done it? When I got back to the house, the other three were sitting together on Vargas’s cot, gathered around Tillman’s laptop which they’d set on Blount’s cot, swatting flies away from the blueish

glow of the screen. Didn't mention anything about the COC meeting and none of them asked. Ignored me in favor of whatever movie they were watching. Didn't bring up the writing I'd found in my notebook.

30

Dad,

Been in Afghanistan about five months and hadn't seen any of the bad guys until yesterday, might as well have not existed until then. Some Taliban tried to blow themselves up near a foot patrol just after breakfast. I guess you would probably call them terrorists, wouldn't you? We can listen to them talking sometimes, by the way. We hear them on the Icom radios if we're on the right frequency. One day we were at the LZ waiting around and we listened in on one of the ANP's radio for a bit. Just sounded like a couple dudes getting stoned, mumbling things to each other and laughing. Not what I expected. Was the first time I heard the voice of the people who would kill me if given the chance.

Anyway, there were three guys yesterday who screwed up pretty bad and the bombs they had strapped to themselves didn't work, which is obviously good. So the marines on patrol detained them and called back into the FOB letting everyone know they were bringing them back. The rest of us had to help out and clean up this dirty old shack next to the COC while the patrol walked back to the FOB, set up a jail cell for these guys basically. Emptied the place of all the broken wooden boards, rusty shards of metal and broken glass, and all the other garbage and dumped it in a burn pile so the detainees didn't have anything to kill themselves or each other with I guess. Would've killed myself out of embarrassment if I was them. Bunch of dumbasses. Cleaned up the inside so it was regulation with the Geneva Convention or something like that, made the living conditions acceptable for their final stop before Guantanamo. Probably got themselves a nicer place to stay overnight than even we do now. We secured the windows with chicken wire. There were about twenty of us working fast to get the place ready in time for them to return, when we would get our first look at them in person.

The patrol came in through the front gate and they had the three guys with their wrists zip-tied behind their back, the ANP guys in their blue uniforms escorting the prisoners while the marines seemed to keep their distance a little bit. The prisoners had black pillowcases pulled over their heads which weren't removed until they got put in the cell, but I didn't see any of that. Hard to say if anything about them stood out since I didn't get a look at their faces, but it seemed like they were just wearing typical clothing, same as the people who live in some of the little houses along the road to the LZ. Not sure how old they were. My age? Younger? I wouldn't be surprised.

We kept the prisoners overnight and the ANP and artillery marines kept watch on them. Then there was a flight scheduled to get them out of here today. Normally we'd have an ASR number to log in for passengers departing, like a tracking number for a package you mail across the country or something. But these guys didn't even have that since it was so last minute. Just three prisoners on their way to be interrogated somewhere I guess, so apparently no need to dignify them by adding them to a manifest. Either way we all went up to the LZ with the ANP and the artillery guys just in case the inbound flight dropped anything off for us, any gatorade or Rip-Its the lieutenant or anyone else in the platoon might have sent from Delaram. We were hopeful, but we didn't get anything.

The ANP made the prisoners kneel down on the ground while we waited for the birds. That terrifies them, we learned. Ordering someone to kneel here means they're going to be executed, that's what the people here expect. But these guys weren't so lucky I don't think, depending on whatever was in store for them down the road. The ANP circled around them, sort of blocking our view. Maybe five uniformed ANP, a bit older. Looked weary and quite a bit older than the regular Afghan army guys. Heard that some of them used to be part of the

mujahideen back in the 80s. Now they spend their time fighting the Taliban. Trying to clean this place up I guess. They seem kind of sick of it, sick of these assholes and all the bullshit they put the people in this country through. They took turns slapping the detainees in the head, saying things I couldn't understand. The detainees had their heads covered up by the pillowcases again, so they never knew when a hand was about to whip out and strike them. The rest of us kind of turned around and ignored it, or tried to. I think hitting prisoners is a war crime. Seemed like something I would've been better off not seeing or even knowing about. This is obviously a letter I cannot send you.

Trent

31

06/29

Had a flight drop off a few tri-walls while the artillery marines were on a patrol tonight. Tillman unloaded them from the 53 and the wind was so damn gusty one of them would've blown right off the forklift tines if Vargas hadn't been close enough to run and shove it back on. Turns out all that was inside them were folded up GP tents as if tents is what anyone needs, especially GP tents which just keep all the hot air in. Wasn't an ASR number to go with anything either so we didn't know the exact unit or individual who had sent them. Asked the crew chief if he knew anything about it and he just shouted over the engines that he didn't know. They were for us. So I guess someone down at Leatherneck just sent us a bunch of tents for no reason. Maybe we're supposed to set them up at the LZ but I don't fucking feel like it. We're only up here for flights and it's not like we need shelter from rain. Everything's dry as hell and the river's water level keeps dropping. The Brit gear is almost totally cleared off the lot now but who knows.

And the weird part wasn't even the phantom tents. Two gunnery sergeants came off the flight before it took off in the dark, a man and a woman, but we somehow didn't see them until they found us in the dark, both of them decked out in their flaks and kevlar carrying some folders with them. They introduced themselves, don't remember their names, said they were from our battalion but we didn't recognize them. Guess they're a couple of admin clerks who stay in the office all day. But who knows, maybe I've met them before. Made us do command climate surveys. Ridiculous. It was pitch black. We could hear another bird in the distance, not a 22 or a 53 but something else like a Cobra or a Huey, and there was small arms fire on the ground to go with it from the patrol over in the green zone.

These motherfuckers made us sit down and fill out these bubble surveys asking us what we thought about our command and shit, in the dark, while a firefight was going on. Said it was battalion orders. Circle 1 for *strongly disagree*, 2 for *disagree*, 3 for *don't know*, 4 for *agree*, and 5 for *strongly agree*. Statements like *My unit is characterized by a high degree of trust*. Disagree. *Individuals in my unit are held accountable for their performance*. Don't know. *My CO makes clear what behavior is acceptable and not acceptable in my unit*. Don't know. *Resources in my unit are well managed*. Don't know. *The environment in my unit is characterized by good order and discipline*. Disagree. *Leaders/Supervisors are actively engaged even during off-duty hours*. Don't know. *My unit provides a safe environment against sexual assault*. Don't know. *My unit would take appropriate action in case of a hazing investigation*. Don't know. *Members of my unit who consume alcohol do so responsibly*. Don't know, and also don't know where anyone could get alcohol here since we're not allowed to have it. *Leaders/supervisors prioritize morale and troop welfare in my unit*. Disagree.

I wrote down in the ending comments, *I'm filling this out in the dark and there's a firefight going on a couple miles away so thanks for that*. Imagined the soldiers at D-Day pausing to fill out a survey. Nothing really surprises us anymore. One of the gunnys stood behind me and no shit held a flashlight over my shoulder so I could see the papers, and the other gunny helped Tillman and then he and I switched out with Blount and Vargas, and no one really said anything or complained since what the fuck can you say to an E-7 when you're an E-4 and below? Not shit. They said the whole battalion's taking the survey.

The same bird must have had to drop off gear somewhere else nearby, but then it came back and picked the gunnys up, just the two of them, and they lifted one of the net loads of Brit gear and took it back with them. Didn't drop anything else off. No one said much about it when

we took the Humvee back down to the FOB, other than *that was pretty stupid*. We all thought it was fucking stupid, sure. Didn't need to be said. These assholes brought little pencils with them for us to use too. Was like doing one of those surveys at the end of a college course where some jackoff complains that the professor cancelled too many classes.

Definitely one of those moments when being in Afghanistan didn't feel like being in a war, or what you'd expect from seeing too many movies. First it was Leatherneck, all these civilian contractors walking everywhere all over base like we're back on the block, now it's taking surveys while we're in earshot of a firefight. Would give anything to be a fly on the wall in a room of battalion staff reading the responses to everyone's command climate survey.

32

06/30

Couldn't sleep again because of Vargas's whispering. Leaned over him for a bit to listen, but I think he was talking in Spanish. Couldn't understand. Woke him up and told him he was keeping me awake, felt bad about it but I need sleep too damnit. It worked for a couple minutes, but Vargas fell back into his sleep and started whispering again. Fucking Blount just kept snoring through it. Don't think that lucky fucker has ever noticed. Carried my cot outside to the backyard and set it next to the tree, figured it'd be quiet if there weren't any jackals or dogs howling, maybe get a little breeze. Brought out an extra mosquito net with me and when I first climbed in and lied down I wondered why I hadn't been sleeping outside since we first made it to Kajaki. There *was* a pleasant little breeze instead of the hot still air in our house. But it was only nice for a while.

Lied there and watched a single fly crawl around on the mesh, obscuring my view of the moon. The fly looked like it was darting around on the surface of the moon, a giant black fly on a tiny white moon, that's what I was thinking about when I finally fell asleep under the shadow of the tree. Don't know how long I was out after I drifted off, could have been hours or mere moments before I woke up again and found the mosquito net covered in flies, encased in them. So many that they blocked the moonlight completely and hid themselves from me that way, but I could hear their whining buzzes and the patter of them bumping into each other and the mesh like moths. Didn't have a flashlight with me, didn't have anything but my M16 which is never out of arm's reach. And what good would an unloaded M16 be against a swarm of bugs? What good would a loaded one be for that matter? Kept still and made myself as small as possible in the center of the cot, trying not to let myself touch the edges of the netting and feel the fly legs

and winds flickering against my skin through the fabric. Don't know how long they were there before I heard something else.

There was some shuffling next to me, like someone or something walking, dragging their feet or dragging something else along with them. Called out to see who it was but no one answered. Tried to wake myself up, but I couldn't because I wasn't dreaming. There was some more fumbling or rummaging through something, actions unfolding near the tree, or in the tree. A branch snapped and fell to the ground. Then the stumbling footsteps trailed off elsewhere and were gone while the flies kept me covered.

Was wide awake then. The flies gradually began disappearing, and eventually I could see through the mesh that a daypack was hanging from one of the tree's branches. Watched it sway back and forth in the gentle breeze until I passed out. If you can learn to sleep with the constant backdrop of a violent war then I guess you can sleep just about anywhere under any circumstances. When I got up I confirmed that it was my daypack in the tree, and everything was still in there, but my notebook was open to the page with the letter to Bruce about the EGA like someone had been reading it, but no one knows I've been writing journal entries, and no one except for me knows anything about Bruce's EGA.

There was some dirt tracked into our house, but that doesn't mean anyone came out and hung my pack up. There's dirt everywhere. It could've been from my boots from yesterday. Blount and Vargas were asleep when I woke up, but Tillman was awake. Saw that I looked a bit off, his words, so he asked me about it. Told him things were stacking up and I just wanted to get the hell out of here after they brought in the howitzers. And all we really need to be here to do when that happens is to take the slings off them so the artillery marines don't fuck it up and cut

them off which would ruin them, which is a real possibility. After that our mission's pretty much over and we can go back to Delaram until we go back home in August.

“You didn't fuck with my pack, did you?” I finally asked Tillman.

“No, Corporal,” he said, and I noticed bags under his eyes.

“You getting any sleep?”

“Not as much as Blount's snoring ass,” he said. “Been having some weird dreams lately, I don't know. I keep waking up in the middle of the night.” I asked him what he meant by “weird dreams,” and he thought for a second. “It's like,” he said. “I don't know. Like we woke something up over there when we went in that place.” But then he shook his head. Said he didn't want to talk about it. Guess I'll keep my eye on him. Probably the same way he feels about me.

33

Dear Mom,

We don't have much left to do here. This whole thing should be wrapping up soon, and we'll finally get out of here and we'll come back home. Everything is changing. Most of the things that were green when we first got here are wilting and dying now. It's like all the plants give up as July gets close. There's like a spillway or something by the landing zone, I don't know what you call it, where the extra water that doesn't get funneled through the dam's turbines overflows back into the river. But it's completely dry now. The bird nest in our house is empty now. The little babies grew up and flew away.

Trent

34

07/02

Had our first guest at the FOB since we took everything over from the Brits. This female corporal with a bunch of tri-walls showed up and we had to load everything up into the humvees and cart it all down with us. She was some kind of retailer, travelling around with a mobile PX basically. She was the first woman I have seen in weeks, since the lieutenant left, which is weird to think about. Haven't even caught sight of any local women around here when we're riding to the LZ and back. Wonder what it's like for her being the only woman at the FOB. Female marines are usually outnumbered by men, so she's probably used to it anyway. Just here for a couple days before she heads back out. Enough time to give SSgt. Ryker a whole new set of hair regulations to bitch and moan about if he wants. It's probably an exciting prospect for him.

Vargas and I went to go check out her little improvised convenience store. She set her stuff up in this garage next to the COC and everyone lined up to waste money on a bunch of useless shit for the most part. She stood behind a stack of pelican cases functioning as her makeshift countertop and her cigarettes sold out right away, even with a limit on how many packs we could each buy. Still had a plenty of candy and Gatorade to go around though. I overpaid for a package of clean socks, but it was worth it, plus we're pocketing all this tax free money so why not. Vargas bought a tube of Colgate and a bag of Skittles.

"What unit are y'all with?" she asked me while she copied my debit card info into her official logbook. Guess it was obvious to her that we weren't artillery, maybe because we keep to ourselves or maybe we carry ourselves differently as pogues. Or maybe it was just that she noticed the red patches sewn onto the pant legs of our cammies which indicate that we're landing

support specialists. I told her which combat logistics battalion we were part of and got more of a reaction than I expected.

“Isn’t that the one whose commander just got relieved?” she asked, and handed my card back. Vargas and I exchanged a glance and then he shrugged at me.

“I don’t know anything about that,” I said, feeling pretty embarrassed that I didn’t even know the current news of my own battalion, and then added, “we’re kind of on our own out here. Don’t really get all the updates.” Thought about those surveys we took at the LZ and wondered if we’d actually gotten our lieutenant colonel fired by his commanding general because we complained about how shitty everyone was and how disorganized everything was. Figured I’d call the lieutenant after lunch and see what the story was if SSgt. Ryker would let me use the SIPR phone.

“Speaking of updates,” the PX corporal said, and pointed to a stack of *Stars & Stripes* for sale that I hadn’t noticed. The front page headline read *BOOTED!* over a picture of General McChrystal. Didn’t buy the newspaper but skimmed it real quick. Looks like he talked shit about Obama in a *Rolling Stone* article and got fired. Oops.

“How about that?” said the corporal. “Two COs relieved for the price of one.”

Thought it was pretty ironic that I wrote a blog and talked some shit about McChrystal and some of the leaders in my unit and got myself a slap on the wrist, and almost the exact same thing came back to bite him in the ass even harder. Maybe I was stupid for putting a blog on the internet and leaving my name on it, but fuck, I wasn’t getting interviewed in *Rolling Stone*. I guess common sense really is not a common virtue. Vargas and I left without asking what unit the PX corporal was with. Grabbed some MREs from the chow hall and took them to our house, told Blount and Tillman what we learned while we sat out in the backyard.

“I don’t even remember his name,” Tillman said when he heard about our CO. He opened his MRE and prepared to heat up the main course by pouring some water into the flameless ration heater to activate it.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw him,” Blount said. “He gave us some kind of moto-speech at CAX and maybe one other time but that’s it.” Blount held an MRE in each hand, trying to decide between one or the other. I thought about it too and I didn’t have that clear of a picture of the CO. He was just like any other officer really, like a boring dad who’s always wearing a polo tucked into his khakis when in civilian attire. They were right. He was barely ever around, hiding somewhere. Maybe that’s what got him relieved.

“Fuck officers,” Tillman said.

“Still sucks to get fired, fool,” Vargas said, and was about to add something else when he stopped himself, distracted by Blount, who was staring down at the MRE he’d chosen. The package in his hands remained sealed, but several flies had begun crawling over its surface, and as we watched there were more and more joining them. Blount looked back up at us and didn’t say anything. He set the MRE on the ground where more and more flies gathered.

“It’s a rotten one like before,” Blount said. “Like in the house.” We didn’t answer him. Half expected Tillman to come back with some smart ass remark, but he’d been there with us and seen the same thing. When Blount tossed the MRE against the wall and went to grab another one, Tillman went a step further. He walked over to pick it up and threw it completely over the wall.

35

07/03

Howitzers flew in today, three olive drab triple sevens. The CH-53s that brought them in had their rotors turned up all the way, so the downwash was worse than normal when they flew in over the house next to the LZ. Practically looked like they blew the roof off it. So much crap flying around, all the guards up there pissed as hell. The guns were all harnessed up like captured beasts, not much for us to do but watch the birds lower them down and cut the load before we can take the slings off. Tillman took shelter in his forklift cab. Buried my face in the crook of my arm while tiny pebbles stung my head.

The birds set the triple sevens down, then they landed so we could bring the slings back to the loadmaster. The artillery marines at the LZ with us encircled each of the guns and linked them up to the humvees to tow back to the FOB, right in our backyard, which looks like it's not going to be our backyard anymore. SSgt. Ryker told us we'll have to move out eventually, probably into the barracks near the COC where everyone else mostly lives.

"Goddamnit I don't want to move my shit," Blount said while we watched them set the guns up behind our house. The artillery marines unfolded these legs from each gun to brace them from the recoil when firing. They sprawled out diagonally like the legs of a mantis, two spindly legs pointing out in front and two sturdier legs in back with these large spades digging into the dirt like green paws.

"It's not that big of a deal," Tillman said. "We'll be closer to the chow hall and farther from the militia house. And you hardly have any shit to move." Blount agreed that he made some good points but nothing about the chow hall mattered when all we did was eat MREs now. I

liked our setup, we had our own house away from everyone. It was more laid back that way. But being further from the militia house, maybe that would be better for us.

Kept my eyes on the guns while the artillery marines tinkered with them and made adjustments, some of them shirtless in the sun exposing their farmers tans. Wouldn't be too long before they flew in the ammunition and the whole operation would be complete. They'd have their artillery base and we'd be out of here. Wasn't sure I wanted to be here when it was all said and done. I'd heard explosions here and there all through the deployment, but damn, the howitzers looked like they'd be fucking loud. Eventually the first sergeant was satisfied with the placement of them and the whole squad gathered all their gear and left these canvas covers over the end of the barrel of each howitzer.

Stood out back by myself for a few minutes, just looking everything over. A quiet scene. Wondered about what Tillman had said about waking something up in the militia house. If we hadn't, the howitzers sure would. They looked big enough to shake the earth. I don't know. Maybe that's stupid. Maybe there's nothing to awaken to begin with. Maybe I'm just putting too much stock in crap that doesn't matter. The dog with the porcupine needles, the flies everywhere, the MREs. That's what I thought earlier today, that it might all just be a bunch of bullshit and I'm just losing it. And what difference did it make now that we were pretty much done with this whole thing? They got their cannons, we didn't need to be here anymore. I headed back to the COC to check the tracker and see if they'd scheduled the ammo flight yet, and I wanted to talk to the lieutenant. One of the other NCOs in the platoon answered when I made the call.

“CLB-6 ops office, Corporal Melton speaking, how can I help you, sir or ma'am?” said Corporal Melton. I didn't want to talk to him because he's a douche and maybe the one good thing about getting sent out here was I didn't have to deal with him.

“It’s Heywood,” I said. “Is the ma’am around?” A moment of hesitation on the other line before Melton spoke.

“*Oh*,” he said. “*Oh*. Corporal Heywood? *The* Corporal Heywood? What a privilege. How’s the journalism business treating you? Winning the hearts and minds of everyone back home?” Realized he was talking about my blog, when I’d thought no one else knew except the lieutenant, my company commander, and the loadmaster who’d randomly found it online and reported me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I won the war single handedly. We can pack everything up and go home now.” Glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone else was within earshot in the COC, namely SSgt. Ryker. Thankfully I was more or less alone. Melton yawned on the other line.

“How’s Kajaki, dude?” he asked, his tone flat. “How long did it take you to fuck up? Leave your rifle somewhere? Burn the place down?” He laughed and my heart started beating a bit harder. I wanted to force feed him the phone in my hand.

“No, I just told you,” I said. “I won the war for us. I’m *the* Corporal Heywood, just like you said. Medal of Honor.” Pictured him sitting there, chewing gum, kicked back with his boots up on a desk in the ops office.

“Medal of Honor,” repeated Melton. “Sounds like we got a real all American hero in the platoon. Who knew?”

“Put the fucking lieutenant on the phone,” I said.

“Hey buddy,” said Melton. “That’s no way to talk to an old pal.” I didn’t answer him. “Alright,” he finally said. “I’ll go get the ma’am for you, but you probably won’t like what she has to say.” He sang those last words before setting the phone down and I heard him telling the lieutenant that I was on the phone.

“How’s everything going up north, Heywood?” asked the lieutenant.

“Everything’s running smooth, ma’am,” I said. “We received the triple sevens today.” I went on about being finished up once the howitzer rounds arrived. Could almost feel the warmth of the showers at Delaram already, the air-conditioned tents. Soon I’d be sleeping in a real bed on a clean mattress. Even *finishing up* was a phrase that made me feel good. Getting out of here to some better living conditions, sure, but also the piece of mind of having the mission complete. Leaving this place in the rearview mirror for someone else to deal with, the porcupine quills, the dreams, and never having to see these artillery assholes again.

“Ah,” the lieutenant said. “About that.” Before she finished her thought my mind raced through other possibilities. Maybe I’d be absorbed by the artillery battery forever, change units so I was officially part of theirs and I’d never get to leave. Really, nothing she said would’ve surprised me by this point, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t piss me off. So when she said we’d be in Kajaki another month, twice as long as she’d originally said, I just breathed.

“Good to go, ma’am,” I said, because it was an automatic response, but it ruined my day and I wanted to say something else. It was like she abandoned us, like the whole platoon abandoned us.

“We don’t have our relief in-country yet to come out there and replace you,” she said. “They’re delayed by about a month and there’s still an LZ there to run in the meantime, and that’s our platoon’s job.”

“Good to go, ma’am,” I said, and swallowed a lump in my throat. Of course my three junior marines back at the house wouldn’t be happy. Vargas wouldn’t complain, but Blount would. And I knew Tillman didn’t want to be stuck with us any longer than he had to. He’d been away from the HE platoon long enough, taking orders from me instead of his own sergeants. The

lieutenant said this is what we were here to do so it's what we were going to do. She didn't ask me what I thought or if I was okay, but she asked if I had any questions.

"I heard a rumor about the CO, ma'am," I said.

"Our CO is Major Jennings now," said the lieutenant. Major Jennings had been the battalion XO. She didn't elaborate. "Anything else? Want me to pass on any messages to anyone else in the platoon?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "I think I'm good." She told me to stay in touch if we needed anything else sent up here. Said she'd try and send some Rip-Its for us. That didn't really help when I broke the news to everyone else, when I said we had to stay here another month but the ma'am was trying to buy us off with a case of shitty off-brand energy drinks. Everyone reacted how I expected. Blount swore and Tillman grumbled, and Vargas was compliant and accepting about it, almost peaceful.

36

07/04

Had another dream that I couldn't wake myself up from. Carrying an AK in the militia house again, automatic small arms fire filling the first deck hallway until my ears start ringing and I can't hear anything over the droning intonation in my head. From the first deck I fire bursts from my rifle at the Soviets who are backed up in the stairwell, huddled on the landing trying to keep us pushed back. I'm not one of them this time. I'm not wearing the Soviet uniform. I'm one of the mujahideen driving them into a corner. But I'm not on autopilot. I can feel something else. I want them off my soil, I want them dead. I want to kill them myself.

One of them goes down in the cloud of smoke, exit wounds on his back splashing the concrete wall behind him with splattered blood as if someone had flung out the contents of a bucket of red paint. The ragged Soviets fall back gradually, their tan caps cast off while they stumble up the stairs. Chunks of concrete and plaster chip away and trail through the hazy air. Some of the men with me fall, their spraying blood and tissue blocked by the covering over my face. A round hits a man in his left arm, then another in his stomach, his right hand grasping an AK as he falls back and sends a line of rounds into the wall above me. Spent casings eject from someone next to me and bounce off my shoulders, bursts of wind from muzzles flickering against my head. When my magazine empties I find another and smash it into the weapon's magazine well. The stairway is littered with bodies, some of which I can no longer tell whose side they're on because they're just a pile of flesh, fabric, and maybe a pair of boots. We climb over them and follow the Soviets upstairs.

Some of them disappear into a doorway in the hall, two groups of us closing in on either end of the upstairs corridor. By the time we reach the doorway there's so much smoke from all

of us spewing rounds from our AKs that we can barely see six feet in front of us. I close my eyes and hold my rifle through the doorway to blind fire indiscriminately while the Soviets fire from the inside. Some of my friends are more brave. They hop in the doorway and let off a few more rounds before they themselves are shot. When it finally seems like they're out of ammo in there, we storm into the room and I come face to face with Blount and Vargas, and when they look at me it's like they recognize me with faces full of shocked horror, even though my face is covered. Their AKs are lying on the floor, but Blount has a pistol to his head. I don't let him pull the trigger. And when I squeeze the trigger and wave my rifle back and forth across their bodies and little clouds of red-tinged smoke puff from their chests I wake up in my cot with my arms reaching out in the air, as if I were demonstrating the proper form to hold a rifle. Checked my watch for the time, saw it was July 4. Happy Independence Day...

38

07/06

Turns out Tillman had one of those dreams too, a lot like the ones I've had. Didn't want to talk about it the last time, but he finally opened up about it when I showed him the two letters in my notebook that I didn't remember writing and asked if he fucking knew anything about it. Not that I don't exactly trust Blount or Vargas, but Tillman's a little older and I just feel like I can have an adult conversation with him. We exchanged some of the details and they were the same. The Soviets, the mujahideen, the militia house, everything. Tillman said he woke up in the middle of the night because he felt someone touch him. Someone put their hands on his face and his feet. Was terrified but opened his eyes and no one was in that little room he stays in on the other side of our house. Said none of us were awake when he came out to check either, but said he heard Vargas whispering to himself. Makes sense that he'd never heard before since he's always in a different room. Said he got closer to try and hear him, but he didn't elaborate any more without me asking.

“Well, did you understand him? What the fuck did Vargas say?”

“No, Corporal. I couldn't understand. Just mumbling in his sleep,” said Tillman.

“Dreaming about something.” He thought those words over for a second and then he shrugged.

Don't know if I believe him. Seems like bullshit he wants to keep a secret, but maybe he thinks the same thing about me since I've claimed to know just as little about what's going on. But the business about Tillman feeling something touching him, hands touching him. Not sure. He wouldn't lie to me though. He's an asshole but he's not the type to stir up some crap just so he's the center of attention. Seems like he's always wanted as little of my attention as possible. If anything, he's the type who wants to slip through the cracks.

Told me he felt someone touching him for the rest of the night, kept waking up at the feel of it, and each time he fell back asleep his dream would start again. Asked me what I wanted to do and I said I don't know yet. There's not much of a choice when we're slated to be here till the end of July. Not really in a position to make any decisions for ourselves until we get that discharge paperwork and move on with the rest of our lives.

Asked Blount if he had any problems sleeping and he said yes but he didn't have any dreams, doesn't normally have them. Wouldn't go into any other detail about it though. See, but Blount *is* the type of person to make up a bunch of crap to be the center of attention and cause drama. So if he's hiding something then he really must have some secrets hidden beneath the surface. Vargas told me he dreamt that he had a headache. Nothing woke him up during the night though. No one touched him. But he said the headache was real when he woke up, like he was hungover. Then it eventually wore off.

Had a flight bring in a tri-wall of Gatorade and a couple other boxes of supplies for the artillery battery. One of them had another stack of the *Stars & Stripes* newspaper on it from when the PX marine was here, the one with the McChrystal story. Just another reminder that he got himself fired, but what does that really matter when you're a four-star general? Didn't want to buy a copy last time, but since these were free I read the whole thing after we had lunch earlier. Funny thing is it doesn't even matter for McChrystal, just like I thought. Blount was the first person to bring it up. He'll just get forced into retirement, make six figures for the rest of his life, probably go become a business exec somewhere like officers end up doing. Lesson learned: disparage the president in a public space like that and you get to retire. He'll even get a whole ceremony I bet, a full formation of troops, some guest speakers and all that crap to say what a

good guy he is and what a good general he's been. Meanwhile any joe shmo enlisted who pops on a piss test for weed gets kicked out no questions asked and then they take away your GI Bill.

39

Mom,

Do you remember the story you told me about the silverware? The one I told you to stop telling us? Right after grandma died, you unloaded the dishwasher and put all the dishes and silverware away but when you came back into the kitchen later you said all the silverware was laid out neatly on the counter by the drawer? I'll tell you what. That is a story I struggled with for a long time and never even told anyone else because I thought it was BS. I'm sorry I didn't believe you.

Trent

40

07/09

Another dream about the house last night. But it wasn't about me. I wasn't in the dream, just Blount and Vargas. I watched them as if I was watching a movie, the two of them geared up in their flaks and kevlar, carrying their rifles in the darkness so dark it was like a cave, but I know it's not night time outside. Remembered the house being bright enough inside during the day, but there's no natural source of light for them. Realized they were in the basement of the militia house, had gone down the stairs that disappeared the day we visited. My ears started ringing again. Couldn't hear what they were saying. I knew they were lost and trying to find a way out of there. Their faces with shadows fluttering over them, flashlight beams cutting through pitch blackness. In the dream no one else in the FOB knew where they were or had started searching, like they'd disappeared without a trace and the search party had given up before doing any work. Both of them eventually sat down, but there's something wrong with the ground, something different that made it not a good idea to sit down. That part was fuzzy. Couldn't see what it was, but I knew there was something in there with them, or something beneath them. Then they disappeared.

Then I woke up and Vargas wasn't in his cot. Blount was there still, but Vargas gone. Rifle and gear still there though. Got up and found him standing in the backyard between two of the howitzers, shirt off, just wearing his skivvy shorts like he'd gotten up and walked outside right away. Thought he was taking a piss since his hands were hidden in front of him so I waited for him to finish, but he just kept standing there facing the back wall, facing towards the militia house as if the back wall wasn't there blocking his view. Didn't move from that spot after several minutes, so I got closer, tried to see what he was doing, if he was holding anything. Turns

out his hands were folded and he was whispering something in Spanish. He didn't seem to hear me coming, but I wasn't even trying to sneak up on him. Walked right up to him and stood in front of him, really close, but he ignored me, even when I waved my hand back and forth in front of him. His eyes were about half open, didn't seem to notice, so I grabbed his shoulders and shook him a little and asked him what the hell he was doing. That was stupid because he shuddered real hard like he'd been shocked by an electric current and his fists flung out at me and almost punched me in the face. Was eventually fine after stumbling back into one of the howitzers and bumping his head into the barrel. Well, he wasn't fine, but he was at least awake.

"Hey, man, you okay?" I asked. "You were sleepwalking like a fucking weirdo." He looked at me funny and when I asked if he was dreaming or if he remembered what he was dreaming about he said he didn't know how to describe it. Told me he couldn't remember anything specific.

"I always dream about running, Corporal," he said. "Almost every night."

"You usually remember your dreams?" Not sure why I asked, or what I would from whatever answer he had. As if I was some kind of Navy doctor, some kind of head shrink.

"Yes, Corporal, but not tonight."

"What do you usually run from?"

"Nothing, Corporal," he said. "I just run forever, like I can't do here since there's not enough space. I dream about running, like I'm back home in Cali."

"But you weren't dreaming about that now," I said.

"No, Corporal," said Vargas. "It was like, dark. I dreamed I was in the dark."

"When we were in the militia house, did you see the basement stairs?" For some reason I was afraid to know the answer to that question, but he shook his head. I told him to go back to

sleep, and I zipped his sleeping bag up to his shoulders with his arms inside, tucked him in like I was his mother reading a bedtime story, so it would be harder for him to escape in his sleep again.

41

07/12

Blount and Vargas are fucking gone. Woke up and their gear was gone, their flaks, their kevlar, their daypacks, their M16s. No flights scheduled today, no reason for any of us to gear up and go anywhere. Spent the morning searching the FOB, walking through all the other houses near the back wall and found nothing. Checked the chow hall and the COC, even asked the marines on back gate duty if they saw either of them come by at all. They hadn't. They must have snuck out the back gate somehow. No idea how they would have done it.

Been a couple days since I found Vargas sleepwalking out back. There's no way that doesn't have something to do with this. He's been sleepwalking this whole time, I know it. He's the one who put my pack up in the tree, he's probably the one who took my pack behind our house the first time as well. Did it all in his sleep. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter why they left, just need to find them before the battery command finds out anything's gone wrong. Before SSgt. Ryker finds out, before the lieutenant finds out, before they're given any reason to burn me and bust me down in rank, but mostly before anything happens to Blount or Vargas. Decided to try and stand duty at the back gate so we have a way to sneak back to the militia house, which is the last place they could be. It's the only way I can see us getting off the FOB without anyone noticing at first.

Found SSgt. Ryker at the COC and gave him some BS about punishing my junior marines, made up a story about Tillman being disrespectful. Said I wanted to put them on duty at the back gate because they've been getting lackadaisical and complacent. Just like the sign at Leatherneck, *Complacency Kills*. Thought he'd go for that for sure, but he told me gate duty isn't

a punishment, phrased it something like “*This is the real shit, Corporal of Marines, not boot camp firewatch.*”

But I changed his mind by convincing him that my junior marines had too much free time on their hands, which meant that I also had too much free time on my hands, so he put me on duty with Tillman. He scheduled us paired up with each other for a shift tomorrow, Tillman and I for a couple hours and the other two for the next two hours. So we’ll have a four hour block before someone notices we’re missing, unless they do radio checks, which they probably will, and then we’re fucked. Tillman didn’t want to go obviously, but I convinced him that we’d all burn if something happened to Blount or Vargas and it turned out we knew where they were. Reminded me we have to move fast in the militia house, even with all the time we might have. The way the hour passed all weird last time. Who knows what four hours out in the real world means in the militia house.

We talked about what we might find if we didn’t find Blount or Vargas, and we didn’t have any predictions. I told him about the porcupine quills appearing in the backyard, which I’d been keeping a secret because I thought someone could be fucking with me. If we find a giant porcupine in the militia house, oh well, we’re armed. We also talked about what we might find if we did actually find Blount or Vargas, alive or otherwise. All I want to know is where they are. Can’t see any other possibility but the militia house.

III

42

07/13

Waited for our turn on post, relieved the offgoing artillery marines with Tillman, and then snuck out the back gate with our daypacks and a couple MREs and went into the militia house. We found the basement stairs I'd seen the first time, and a door at the bottom. Went condition one with our M16s, then we went through the doorway. Wish we hadn't. Should've just come clean and been honest with SSgt. Ryker. Can't find our way out of the militia house now. Can't find Blount or Vargas. Pitch black in the basement. Using my moonbeam to write this. Only source of light we have is through the red filter. Eyes are starting to go a little crazy, seeing only red. Seems useless to write this while we're lost, but we have no way of getting back out at the moment. The basement door disappeared after we walked through. Turned around and it was gone. The wall was gone too. Thought maybe we were looking in the wrong direction, but we didn't find any walls in any direction. All that's down here is a concrete floor and emptiness, no echo if we call out in the dark. Don't know what to do.

Have no radio. Just have our rifles and each other. I sat down to write this but Tillman has been on his feet for hours. Won't sit down to rest. Keeps telling me he can hear something. Maybe. Not sure. Just stands there listening and tells me to stop scribbling so he can listen again. He keeps asking me, "don't you hear that?" Whispering like he's afraid someone will hear him, but we want people to hear us. We came here to find someone, but now we want to be found.

"Hear what?" I keep asking. Haven't heard anything.

"I can't tell what it is."

Don't want to lose my cool in front of him, trying to keep calm as much as I can. I humored him and listened for a moment but heard nothing. It's just silence in here. Asked him

what direction it was coming from but he couldn't say. Both of us are too afraid to leave this spot, like we'll get lost if we do. Maybe the door will come back. Maybe we'll just get lucky and the right person will come through it to rescue us. That's what it would take at this point.

Think they're going to burn me for this one either way now. If we find Blount or Vargas we'll all get burned for going outside the wire, especially doing it twice. They'll bust me back down to lance corporal. If Blount and Vargas are gone for good, we're fucked. They'll send me to Leavenworth and I'll be writing a book in prison.

Can't believe how selfish this reads, looking back at the words in my notebook. Worried about my rank and my career and my GI Bill and they really could be dead for all we know so far. No one in our entire battalion has gotten hit the whole deployment. Assholes tried to shoot rockets and mortars at Delaram when we were there but that IDF never hit anything. Other than that it's been cupcake city compared to what the grunts deal with. Strikes me as funny how not-worried I am about the Taliban right now. But nothing's ever funny when you think about it.

43

Caroline,

I never told you we went swimming. It was a while back, a few weeks ago. The two British guys we were working with, Ginge and Arnold, you would've liked them. They took us up to the LZ one day when we didn't have any flights. The LZ is right next to the Kajaki Dam, so we all walked over and took a swim. It reminded me of walking over to the Carter's house down the street back in the day, "sneaking" into their backyard to use their pool even though half the neighborhood had their permission. But anytime Bruce was doing something stupid like soaking us with cannonballs or bracing himself on the slide to block us from going down behind him, I was always scared the Carters were watching us from inside their house, and then I would spend the rest of the time feeling like we were being watched even though we probably weren't. I used to feel that way up until the moment we finally walked home with our towels wrapped around our shoulders. We didn't have any towels at the dam though because we were too stupid to remember to throw them in the truck when we left.

We just laid out our cammies on the rocks and then tiptoed down into the lake while the Brits kept watch over us, even though we knew nothing was going to happen. Isn't that crazy to think? The first thing I thought when I stepped off the plane into this country was this sense of dread. Just a bad feeling, one of the worst. At first you realize you're in a place where someone wants you dead. It's scary. But then you spend several months getting used to it and almost forgetting, or forgetting to care. I realized that in the lake. It felt like someone was watching us.

The lake's kind of surrounded by these cliffs. Anyone could be up there hiding and looking down. I kept stubbing my toes on the rocks while I treaded water, not wanting to get too far out into the lake. The water was so freezing I couldn't stop shivering, I could barely swim I

was shaking so hard. It made the Brits laugh. The other marines with me, I told them to stay within arm's reach of the rocks. We eventually got back out and couldn't really dry off, so when some wind kicked up we all got caked with dust, which I needed to take maybe my third or fourth shower since I've been here. I don't know why I'm telling you this. I guess I just thought you would think it was interesting if I told you we went for a swim here. It's not what you expect, but even the Soviets had a swimming pool when they lived here. It's not the kind of thing they show on the news, if they even show us on the news anymore at all. I'm just writing to you because I need to get some sleep. I've been awake for a while and when I go to sleep I don't know what will happen.

Trent

44

07/15?

Have a little bit of the MRE left, been sharing it with Tillman. We split an apple cinnamon flavored First Strike bar when we woke up this morning, or whatever time of day it was. Forgot my watch before we left for the militia house. Thought we heard someone after that, Blount or Vargas, or at least Tillman thought it was them. Not sure what I heard. Could have just been wind blowing, wind howling somewhere far away from us. Still haven't found any walls, but decided not to stay put anymore and walk in the direction of the sound. Maybe it's them. Just going to end up getting more lost down here if we keep chasing vague sounds in the distance. Feels like we walked a half mile before I said that was enough and we stopped again, even though that makes no sense. It's impossible. But we'd have found our way out the side of the hill that the house is sitting on by this point. Should've ended up in the river or something. We can't be that deep below ground. The basement was only a single level down from the first floor. Don't know how many hours we've been in here. Seventeen? Eighteen? Who knows? And who knows what that means for how much time has gone by outside. Days? A week? By this point they've got to know we're missing. Are they even looking for us?

Tillman unclipped a carabiner from his flak and tossed it up in the air after wondering out loud about the ceiling. The beam of my red light keeps getting swallowed up in the dark when I point it ahead of us or straight up, only good for lighting this notebook or the floor right in front of us when we're walking. So Tillman wanted to test it. No walls anywhere down here but maybe there's a ceiling. He tossed it up in the air and there was a little metal clink like the carabiner struck a concrete surface way above us after he threw it, maybe the ceiling. But the carabiner never fell back down to us.

Tillman had his camera with him. Pulled it from a grenade pouch on his flak and shot a picture straight up into the air with the flash on, but it was almost like there was no flash at all. A little blink on the front of his camera, but the darkness swallowed the light up completely. Then his viewfinder flickered on to show the exposed photograph. It showed only black like the other pictures he'd taken inside the militia house, which was obviously happening now because there was no light. But this time there was something else. It was like a smudge, hard to tell. I could see his face dimly lit by the digital viewfinder, looking up in disbelief. Then he rubbed his thumb across the screen to wipe off the blemish, but it was part of the photograph, not a mark on the screen. Whatever it was, it was right above us. Told him we should probably walk somewhere else if we were going to find another place to wait and maybe sleep again.

Walked maybe another half mile, not saying much. Talked earlier about what we'd do if we found Blount and Vargas. When we first left, I thought I might be pissed when we found them, even though I was terrified. I'd give them the ass chewing of the century, but I realize I'm not sure what exactly I would say. Fuck. Maybe Vargas was sleepwalking or they both were when they left, and maybe sleepwalking had been a problem with Blount since we'd been inside the militia house the first time and I never realized it or noticed. Or something brought them here. Or something forced them to come. Don't want to think about the possibility that they aren't here at all. Still don't have any idea how they got past the back gate guards when they left.

Tillman asked me while we were walking, "So how do we get out when we find them?"

"Maybe they know the way out," I said, and then, "maybe they'll find us." Seems so unlikely we'll come across anything we're looking for. If we couldn't even keep track of the basement door from an arm's length away, how could we locate anything more distant than that? Then if we do find them and can't find the basement door we'll all starve. It's ridiculous. Don't

know what's down here. Don't understand what this place is. Feel pissed off because nothing seemed to work out starting the moment we set foot in this country and it seems like there's never been anything I could do about that.

Tillman kept snapping shots with his camera as I lit the floor in front of us with my moonbeam. We've been walking slowly. If there's no walls and there's no ceiling, or whatever's happening above us, the floor could end at any moment for all we know. Tillman wasn't seeing any more of those strange smudges or clouds on his viewfinder. Nothing else hiding from us for now. Eventually decided on another spot to take a break and sit down, as if any single place down here is different from another. It's all just one big open space. Spent some time staying quiet and listening. Didn't end up hearing anything new, maybe some wind howling in the distance again. Whatever that sound is. Will alternate sleeping shifts.

45

?

Alone now. Tillman was here at first. Now he's gone. Woke me up because of Blount. He could hear Blount. I could hear him too. Was close, in the same room, well, the same area as us. Not sure how else to describe it. Right in front of us almost, don't know what he was saying. Calling out for someone or just making noise, but it was him. Tillman shook me awake and we got up and headed towards the sound. Tillman had one hand on the pistol grip of his rifle with the buttstock braced against his shoulder but he was using his other hand to hit his camera flash over and over again. And eventually Blount's voice stopped and we heard something else, like the crackling of a plastic bag or something being poured out. Pieces of something shifting around.

Tillman hit the flash again right when the red light of my moonbeam landed on something other than concrete. The floor stopped, ended, disappeared, whatever. It was not a floor anymore, something else. Porcupine quills. The giant ones. Could hear the whole pile clicking against itself like a beanbag chair, settling, like there was nothing beneath the top layer of needles but even more needles. The needles were the floor. It was too late.

The lightning bolt of Tillman's camera flash lit it all up right before his next footstep went over the edge of the floor and onto the quills. His boot twisted and he cried out and lost his balance and fell into them right at the edge of the floor as if he'd fallen off a cliff. Some of the needles were stuck into his boots and into his back and arms. Set my light and my rifle down and reached out to grab his hand, but then his boot went under. It disappeared beneath the quills and then he shouted and tried to grab me. Flailed around and all these needles went flying. His leg disappeared, he was sinking down, was being pulled down while he screamed. Then he was up to his waist as if sinking in quicksand. He sunk down lower and held the edge of the concrete and

tried to pull himself back and I held onto his wrists but I wasn't strong enough to stop it. Then for a second it was just his arms left, reaching up until the hands were gone. Could hear him for a while, muffled, going deeper and deeper until there was nothing. Couldn't do anything but wait there at the edge of the concrete and listen. All that was left after he disappeared was a depression in the sea of needles where he'd been pulled in. His rifle and camera rested on the surface, bathed in the red light. Reached behind me for my rifle, decided the best idea was probably to walk in whatever direction was opposite of the porcupine quills. Anywhere else. But my rifle was gone. When I turned around, it wasn't where I had left it on the floor.

Took Tillman's rifle and camera from where they rested near the edge, thought something might reach up and get me but I was okay. Whatever okay means. Got up and headed away from the needles, hit the flash every few steps to see if anyone was there. Nothing like that smudge on the viewfinder again though. Was like my M16 literally disappeared. Wonder if that's what they're saying about us back at the FOB, that we literally disappeared, like Bowe Bergdahl. But I'm trying not to.

47

?

Oh my God. They found me.

48

07/17

Was too weak to move before they found me. Ran out of food, gave up trying to find the basement door to get back out. Gave up trying to find anyone else partly because I was too scared to find someone who wasn't Blount or Vargas. Decided to lie down and sleep once I got tired of walking, but I was too hungry to sleep because my stomach was eating itself so I just curled up on my side until my flashlight battery went dead and the light went out and then I was in the dark and there was only silence until I heard some kind of light tapping that grew into a bold knocking. Like something chipping away at stone or concrete. Then they broke through, above me. Was SSgt. Ryker and the other artillery marines breaking through the ceiling. The sun bursting through was so bright I couldn't keep my eyes open. They carried me out and I don't know what happened after that.

Next thing I know I'm lying on a bed and they're telling me I'm not in Kajaki anymore. They're telling me my gear's being shipped back, most of it at least. Still have my notebook obviously. Just here in this hospital tent now, no visitors or doctors or anyone except a nurse who comes in and checks on me, except the nurse is an officer so it's not as comforting. Feel like I have to say "Good morning, sir," every time he walks in and jots something down in a logbook. Won't answer my questions, told me I needed to wait for someone in my command to talk to me. His job is to make sure I'm healthy, not to make sure I'm informed.

Soon enough the lieutenant called me from Delaram. Wasn't sure if I was going to get my ass chewed or what. The nurse plugged in the SIPR phone with the red cord by the bed and the next thing I knew I had the ma'am on the other line, asking me if I was ok, seeing how I felt.

Asked her if she knew where Blount and Vargas and Tillman were, if they were ok. She said they were fine. They'd been located and rescued. They were recovering on their own.

“They're alright, Corporal,” she said. “You four are going home early.” Figured it was a little weird that I wasn't getting my ass chewed by her yet so I just asked point blank what was going to happen to us. She said not to worry about that until the time came, that we'd be home on leave recovering until the rest of the battalion made it back to the States and demobilized, then we'd head back to base and they'd have an investigation. Almost sounded like she was my lawyer giving me advice. Told me not to contact any of the others and to keep to myself while I was home. Don't do anything stupid, don't get in any trouble.

Asked her how they found me, and how they found the others. All she said was they'd been searching for a couple days and finally tracked us to the militia house since there was nowhere else we could have been. Pretty simple logic. Didn't explain how they pinpointed my exact location underground. Guess I don't have the security clearance to know how. Above my pay grade. Doesn't matter, just glad it happened. I thought that was it back there when I finished the rest of the food and my flashlight batteries died. Never been so happy to see a staff NCO when SSgt. Ryker poked his head through that hole in the ceiling. Told the lieutenant that too and she laughed, but I don't know. They'll probably burn us for this still. How could they not? Straight to court martial. So I guess when I get home I need to live it up a little, just in case it's the last chance I get to do so before they lock us up for going UA outside the wire. But I'm glad they're ok.

Asked the lieutenant about everyone else back at Delaram, about how the platoon was holding up. She said not to worry about that anymore, just to relax and get my feet under me.

Asked her about the militia house, if they found anything else there. I really just wanted to know

how they found the others down there, how they did it successfully when Tillman and I tried and failed. Wanted to hear the story. She said not to worry about that either. We'd get debriefed after the battalion finished their post deployment leave and we headed back to Lejeune.

"I saw Tillman disappear, ma'am," I said, and I told the story.

"Well, we undisappeared him," she said. "Plus, it doesn't sound like that really happened, Corporal," she said. "You were weak from malnutrition. You weren't in your right mind."

"Aye aye, ma'am," I said after a minute. Just kept telling me not to worry about anything anymore. Everything's okay now. The mission's over; the important thing is we did our jobs. Were the first landing support specialists to perform our duties in Kajaki in history, she reminded me. Said I should be proud of that no matter what happens. Nothing can take that away. Feels like a weight off my shoulders. Feels good to be done, but I just feel confused about it. Don't know what to think. Told me they'll send me home soon. Within a week, she said. Doesn't feel right to be going home early while everyone else sticks around for the rest of the deployment. That's not fair to them.

49

07/20

Was drunk as hell when I stepped off the plane to meet my family. Didn't know what else to do at the airport in Leipzig or Romania on my way home, so I drank. Wasn't like I had a book to read or anything else to occupy myself. Only took one or two beers to get the job done since I hadn't had any in about six months. Made the whole trip by myself so I guess I was technically drinking alone. Didn't feel right coming back without anyone else in the platoon, or knowing how Blount or Vargas or Tillman were doing. But they said we'll be home a month before we all go back to Lejeune and they'll sort everything out, and I can't complain about being anywhere other than Lejeune. Even if it's Afghanistan, which says a lot. Still, weird to be back home, even weird to see my parents and my sister for the first time in so long, waiting for me in the airport. Haven't had the chance to hear their voices since I was back in Delaram where they had a phone center.

Was covered in dust when I stepped into the terminal, probably smelling like crap. Was wearing the same stiff cammies I'd had on for weeks. Everyone around was staring when I saw my family and we all got together and hugged each other, like it was a kind of fairy tale with some kind of happy ending unfolding right in front of them. Everyone had to come up to me and shake my hand and thank me for something to feel better about themselves. Some guy just said in this voice like he was about to cry, "Thank you...for everything." Wonder if they'd thank me if they knew all I did was sit around and watch other people load and unload helicopters. Would they thank me after watching us hook an external load to a helicopter? What is there to thank me for? Probably wouldn't be so impressed if they knew I wasn't actually saving the world every day.

First thing my dad said was just, "Here." He was standing with Mom and Caroline. All three of them looked like they'd seen a ghost. Dad handed me a duffle bag, said there were some normal clothes in it, so I walked through the crowd to find a bathroom. So many people wandering around aimlessly in the airport. The most people I'd seen in one place in a long time. Got into the bathroom and all these guys are nodding at me with this solemn look on their face. Guess they approved of something, the uniform maybe, whatever it represented to them. Never thought it would be so difficult to blend in while wearing camouflage. Tracked dust all over the floor, leaving these faint footprints blocking the reflection of fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Had a t-shirt and a pair of jeans that looked like they took them straight out of my dresser, all wrinkled to hell, just how I left them when pre-deployment leave was over and we shipped out. Had a pair of tennis shoes packed in too. Was so excited to put the shoes on I could barely get my Danners off without falling over. Just some normal shoes for once, not these boots keeping in all the bacteria. Lost my balance in the bathroom stall, banging into the wall. So many firsts after a long span of time.

First time in months standing in a normal bathroom that wasn't a wooden shack, a porta john, or one of those modified shipping containers with the sinks and showers in it. First time seeing my own reflection in a mirror that wasn't those shitty blue shave-mirrors we get issued that you can't see anything in. First time putting on a dry, soft pair of clean socks since before Kajaki, back when we had real laundry machines and not just buckets and powder detergent. First time thinking of myself as Trent in so long instead of thinking of as Corporal Heywood. All of it would be so much more meaningful if I knew Blount and Vargas were ok but after what the lieutenant said I guess I'll have to wait. Not sure what I'll do for a whole month at home.

Caroline was waiting again when I came back out with the duffle bag, now full of all the filthy shit I'd been wearing. She couldn't help herself from latching onto me and I hugged her back even harder. Can't imagine what it's like for her, both brothers abandoning her like we did. Can't imagine how happy she must feel to have one of them back, at least temporarily. Feel so scrambled up with overloaded emotions but I guess I'm happy when I boil it all down. I'm at least relieved.

Both Mom and Dad look how people look after you haven't seen them in half a year. Partly how you expect and partly a surprise. They're the same, but there's something different about them, maybe a style change or something you can't put your finger on. Both still have gray hair and dress like parents I guess. Seems like they don't want to ask anything about Afghanistan, which is fine because I don't want to be asked anything about it right now. Must be hard for them not to though, since every TV in the terminal is playing CNN and it looks like there's some ongoing news about McChrystal getting relieved of his command of NATO ISAF. I saw them watching and almost made a joke about Obama promoting me to McChrystal's position. They would've laughed but yeah, again, don't feel like having the conversation if there's any way it could stray into the more serious side of things. Everyone will be asking me all my opinions and philosophies soon enough, as if I'm the one who started the war in the first place. Probably better be sober when that happens too. And any of these conversations, they're just going to come back to the militia house. And there's no way to talk about that without sounding crazy.

Finally got back home, slept the whole ride there from the airport. No one tried to wake me up. No one said much while I was trying to fall asleep. Mom asked if there was anything special I wanted to do while I was back but I pretended I was asleep already since my eyes were

closed. Not sure if she could tell I was fake sleeping, just said she was so glad to have me home no matter how long I'd be there. Could spend all day and night sleeping and she'd be happy, was what she said. Felt bad for ignoring her. I should've answered.

Upstairs, my bedroom was like no one had touched it. Like Bruce's room, except my door was wide open, ready for me to walk in. Everything still in place, the old *Spider-Man* posters around the room and the stupid boot camp headshot of me in dress blues hanging in a frame. Kind of want to take that and put it in a drawer somewhere, or just give it to my parents so they can hang it in their room or their offices at work or something. Don't want to come off as bitter. Even though I am. Last thing I want is people at home to be uncomfortable. Or afraid of me. Even though that's kind of how I lied to myself about joining in the first place, to make people afraid of me, to see me as some big tough guy for enlisting after Bruce died.

Didn't have much of my gear to bring back, just my daypack and my notebook since they shipped everything else back to Lejeune I guess. Reactivated my phone and texted Avery, the one friend who never left home to do anything with his life. Figured he'd want to know I was back in town. He'll want to go out probably, get fucked up. Can't say that I don't want to exactly, but I know it'll feel weird. Didn't get an answer from him right away so I went and took a shower in a real shower. Kind of disgusting to watch all the brown mud water flow off me, all that Afghanistan dirt swirling down the drain, but I couldn't believe how it felt. The best feeling. Would stand here for the next month if it was possible, no matter how pruned I'd get or how much water I wasted. I would waste all the water right now. Would at least do it for all the artillery marines still in Kajaki with their shower bags. Realized I've got all these notes still, from the deployment, but the story's not over yet. Still need to figure out what's next, whether it's good or bad or anything else in between.

50

Bruce,

The previous journal entry is ridiculous right? I was just in Afghanistan less than a week ago.

How the hell did I get home? Is this real life?

Trent

51

07/21

Phone started buzzing in the middle of the night, unknown number so I ignored it, but the phone started ringing a second time so I finally picked up. Couldn't imagine who it would be since I just reactivated my cell phone service. Clock radio next to my bed read about two fifteen. No idea who would've been calling so urgently. Turns out it was Vargas, but I couldn't tell at first. Figured it out eventually. His voice came through all fuzzy like we were on the radio.

"Trash Six-Four, Dwyer flightline," said Vargas after I said hello. He didn't respond to me so I ended up saying the line again as if no one had acknowledged him. Made no sense. *Trash* was the call sign for the C-130 squadron down at Leatherneck and at Camp Dwyer, where Vargas worked the first couple months of the deployment before moving to Delaram with the rest of us. First impulse was to assume he was calling me in his sleep, dreaming about Dwyer.

"Vargas?" I said. Only got some static back in response at first, didn't want to shout into the phone and wake up my parents across the hall so I just waited for an answer. But he didn't answer, so I played along and said, "Send traffic for Dwyer." Vargas finally came back.

"Radio check, over," said his broken voice.

"Broken, but readable," I said. Then Vargas responded as if we were back in country, working an inbound flight, communicating to me as if I were the loadmaster of the plane.

"Roger," he said. "Standby for pallets." I imagined him in the plywood ops office at Dwyer, looking at a white board with the list of cargo weights scribbled in dry erase marker. But that was impossible; there's no way he could've been there. The lieutenant told me he'd been brought home separately along with Tillman and Blount. Was it a lie? He read me back a list of

assault support request numbers, and then the individual weights of each imaginary pallet of cargo and asked for my acknowledgement.

Didn't answer me after that, but I heard him breathing, a low rasping sound, like he was growling or out of breath. I disconnected the call and then turned the phone all the way off when I swore I felt his breath tickling my ear through the speaker. Couldn't fall back asleep after that, like I was back in my cot at the FOB.

52

07/22

Mom showed me her tomato plants today, and I smiled and nodded, but I don't know how to care about that right now. It was about as hot outside as Afghanistan and a hundred times more humid and she said the plants are doing well. I don't know what the difference is between tomato plants that are doing well and tomato plants that aren't doing well other than to recognize whether or not there are tomatoes present. When I look at Mom I see the militia house. When I look at the tomato plants I see the militia house. When I look at nothing I see the militia house. Spent some time with Caroline after that.

Went to get ice cream with her and didn't talk much about anything but school, just me trying to convince her she should take it seriously so she doesn't end up like me. She's smart enough already though. She doesn't need to hear it from me. I just sound like a parent. We sat outside and it was nice, but awkward. Can't remember what either of us ordered because my mind doesn't have enough room for anything other than Afghanistan right now. Figured after the call with Vargas I needed something else to distract me. So I asked her to drive me over to Best Buy. She asked what I was looking for.

"So I can get the Nicki Minaj CD," I said. Figured it couldn't be a bad idea to start catching up on everything I've missed here. I asked Caroline what the album was called and she said she didn't actually know. I'd expected her to since Nicki Minaj was so popular now. Everyone knows that song, right? The one the artillery marines kept quoting. Finished our ice cream and then Caroline drove us, but we didn't listen to any music in the car. I spent the drive watching the road.

Caroline dropped me off at the door and then she went to park the car and meet me inside. Been to Best Buy plenty of times, but hadn't been in a giant retail store like for a while really. Weird to see parents with their kids walking around, hadn't seen a normal family or even children in so long. Fluorescent lights in the store took me a minute to get used to. The only comparison to a giant open space like the store's interior is the large transient tents we stayed in when we first landed at Leatherneck, and they were always kind of dark inside. Seems like everything in Best Buy was lit up as bright as possible. Not a shadow to be found.

Took a moment to get my bearings, looking up at the ceiling to find the right sign showing me where to go to find the music section. To my left were the appliances, to my right were the computer and mobile sections, and then music straight ahead. Some guy in a blue polo shirt asked me if I needed help as soon as I passed by him. Don't blame him for asking even though it doesn't take a rocket scientist to find a CD at Best Buy, but I probably looked like I needed help. Probably looked like I was planning a robbery with the way I was looking around studying every detail, every nook and cranny of the store. But I told him I was just browsing. Then I couldn't find the album. They're arranged alphabetically by artist, so I didn't need to know the album name. But it wasn't there. There wasn't even a label for Nicki Minaj.

Was standing there practically melting under these fluorescent lights and all I could think about was that nothing in front of me was really important in the grand scheme of things and everyone back in Afghanistan was still sweating in the heat and sleeping in dusty sweat-encrusted sleeping bags, but it was driving me nuts that I couldn't find this CD. What a ridiculous thing to fail at. All these CD cases labeled in an easy-to-follow order but it wasn't helping me at all. Asked the guy whose help I turned down earlier if he knew where to find what

I was looking for and he walked with me down the aisle and sure enough couldn't find it. Then he checked on his computer at the little employee kiosk and no results came up.

“Hm,” he said. “I guess we don't have any on the shelf right now.” But he didn't mention the name of the album, which I was hoping he would do because I didn't want to sound stupid asking what it was called. But that didn't make any sense to me if this person was so popular. Wouldn't they carry enough copies in stock? The dude didn't even offer to order it for me, just said they didn't have any copies.

53

Bruce,

I went upstairs to check your room after going to Best Buy. The big red Marine Corps flag was still tacked up to the wall, a framed shot of your Boot Camp picture where you look like you're about twelve years old was hanging nearby. There was a seabag in the corner that we never opened, which was filled with all the gear they mailed back to us. I did not open it. Everything looked the same as before, but I wanted to check your dresser to be sure. That's where your EGA pin was when I took it out and threw it away. I went to the store earlier and I just had this funny feeling like something wasn't right and I needed to know. I opened the top left drawer and sorted through all the crap in there like a deck of cards spread around and old keychains.

The EGA was lying there in the ziplock bag just like I remembered it the day I came back from college to be home for your funeral. Nestled in with the rest of your trinkets and old wallets in the drawer was a long, pointed porcupine quill. I closed the drawer and I locked your room. Nothing was clear to me anymore except that I wasn't crazy for feeling like there was something strange going on. How did it get there? Where had it come from? Who went and found it in the woods after I threw it out there?

Then I found out Uncle Vance was coming over for dinner and mom and dad were acting normal like nothing was going on. I wasn't sure what to do so I just played along. I felt like something from the militia house followed me back home. Or it had never not been with me. The dinner went about as well as you could expect. It was like a lucid dream I couldn't wake up from, almost like the other dreams.

The doorbell rang and mom opened the door and let in Uncle Vance, who I wasn't really thrilled to see. If I really was dreaming, couldn't I dream up someone better? But it wasn't a dream. He was standing in front of us for real, gave me a big old hug and clapped me on the back. Everyone helped with the food and we brought it into the stuffy dining room with no windows. We had green bean casserole, mashed potatoes, chicken, meatloaf. It was all real. We had red wine. We had a terrible rhyming prayer given in meter beforehand by Uncle Vance. It felt so real, so I said, "This is trucking weird," and mom scolded me for using TV-14 language. But Vance came to my defense.

"Let the hero speak his soul," he said, and some other shit about earning my right to do so and whatnot. He was in the Navy but he's kind of a tool isn't he? Maybe there was a time he was a clean-cut sailor but now he was always between union jobs, getting laid off and laid off. No one asked why his wife Cheryl hadn't joined us. This is what I was thinking about while we ate the food that felt so real. Dad asked Vance about cousin Patricia's experience at college and then Vance asked Caroline how high school was going and if she was applying for scholarships to go and be a smart person but I knew Vance would ask me about Afghanistan soon.

"So how is it over there, Trent," he asked. "What's it like?" Maybe you're lucky you never had to deal with someone asking you a question like that, Bruce. I just want to ask him in return, How is *what* over there? What is *what* like?

"Golly," I said to the table. "Well, there are never enough driers. Plenty of washing machines, but never enough driers." My family laughed at that and I laughed too. Laughed and laughed because it was all a big joke. The food tasted like mom's cooking. I told them they should mail me candy and socks if I ever get deployed again.

“No sense in being dishonest,” said Vance. “What are my damn tax dollars going for if I can’t afford to buy our troops a few pairs of socks?” We laughed again because it sounded funny and it sounded funny because it was funny. I wanted to say we needed some new M16s too and some washing machines and some dryers for our M16s because they were always so dusty and also slimy when they were coated in lubricant.

“Knock knock,” I said. “Who’s there?” Uncle Vance read my mind and said to us that he thought M16s were beautiful even if you had to clear a stovepipe stoppage every other shot fired on the range, let alone when going door to door and clearing houses and buildings like they did during the Tet Offensive in ‘68. Then I heard you tell me I was right, Bruce, that M16s were a piece of shit. I didn’t say to anyone that I heard you outside telling me that, but it was happening. I listed off every other weapon I thought was a piece of shit in my head: *M249 Squad Automatic Weapon*.

“Check,” Dad said.

M240G Medium Machinegun, I thought.

“Check,” Mom said.

M203 Grenade Launcher.

“Check,” Caroline said. And then Dad cleared his throat and started talking about AR-15s and how everyone needs to cradle one of those beauties at least once before deciding to what degree they believe guns are so lovely and lovable. I was sinking into the wine and chewing on the green beans after that when they all started talking at the same time and they didn’t stop until a sharp knock at the door rose above all the jibber jabber to pause the conversations they were having with no one about nothing.

“Knock knock,” I said. “Who’s there?”

“Bruce,” Mom said.

“I miss Bruce,” Caroline said, and asked me to get the door please and hug you for her. I wasn’t sure what else there was to talk about. My tolerance for wine wasn’t as high as it was when I was still in college at parties trying to forget how much I hated my life so I was a little surprised that I wasn’t blacked out when I walked to the front door to let you into the house while they all sat at the table watching me and I didn’t know what to say. I’m not sure how to tell everyone that I’m not sure who I am or where I am or who anyone else is or why. They were all just there. *There were all just there last night at dinner.* Maybe tonight I can find out what they know, I thought. They know I opened the door and the outside was not there. Nothing was there but black. You weren’t there, and then I turned around and nothing was where everyone else had been. There was nothing where our house was and then I realized I was still in the militia house. I am still in the militia house. I had never even left it. No one had found any of us.

54

07/?

Just been sitting against a concrete wall dreaming it the whole time. That's all. Just been waiting here. But how did I write the previous entries? Can't remember how I found this wall. I got up again and followed it for a while. Doesn't lead anywhere. Just goes on forever and ever. My moonbeam's going dim. Battery's almost dead.

55

07/?

Found a daypack lying zipped up. Can't tell whose it is. Seems undamaged. Had an opened MRE inside with some of the food left. Some crackers, one of those tiny little Tabasco bottles. A pack of jalapeno cheese spread. Waited around a while, and then heard an explosion. Startling as hell. Not sure if it came from outside or somewhere in here. Ears won't stop ringing.

56

07/?

Running out of room on these pages. Just enough left to ask: where is George Bush? Where are Rumsfeld and Cheney? Where is Obama? Where were all the fucks in their thousand dollar suits and ties while we were in Kajaki? Where the fuck is McChrystal? The only one with me now is the dog. I found the porcupine needle dog from the back gate wandering around down here. Or the dog found me. All I have is a pet now. No needles in its face anymore. Finished the rest of the MRE food a day ago maybe, not sure where else to go. Maybe the dog can lead me somewhere. Maybe I can lead the dog somewhere. Explosions again. Realized they were the triple sevens firing. Keep blasting at regular intervals. Artillery marines finally getting to play with their toys. Our mission is finally over then, and I guess they don't need us anymore. Don't need us eating their food and sleeping in their cots. Wonder if they even looked for us when we disappeared. If they noticed the basement door in the militia house or if the stairs were gone again. Could have just reported us missing and then gone about their business like they forgot we were ever there to begin with.