

This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

Terrell Fox

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Sarah Dowling

Rebecca Brown

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Abstract

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Terrell Fox

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Sarah Dowling, Assistant Professor

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences
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This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things is an experimental memoir about one Marine officer's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. It weaves together journal entries, short stories, and private reflections in an interrogation of the personal and emotional costs of war: how one's humanity can get sacrificed overseas and what burdens are carried home from deployment. The memoir progresses in a non-linear fashion, making connections between battlefield relationships, dark humor, and physical discomfort set against a backdrop of unrelenting absurdity. The narrative begins and ends in a way that speaks to the cyclical nature of American warfare in the 21st century.

I want this war to go on forever.

I want it to end today.

Went for a quick chow, then came back to the tents for the 1300 Purple Heart awards ceremony. We watched Cpl D get his award for getting shot. The guys congratulated him by patting him on the back and saying, "Smooth move."

Got a call from H that a guy from their supported platoon stepped on a PPIED and got killed. H ended up with 1 medevac, 2 FW ISR, 3 RW ISR, 2 ITG, & they had 2 detainees being held for tactical questioning. The kid had a sucking chest wound and died on the helo to Dwyer. Went into River City. Listened to the hooks (ANGLICO Command) while SALT C dealt with an ambush and an IED strike. 4 FKIA and 1 FWIA. Medevac got canceled because they were still looking for all the body parts of the 4 guys so they could bag them up.

Osama

"Dude! Did you see the news? We got Osama!"

"Does that mean we won? Are we done over there?"

"We won!"

"Sweet! Good! Where was he? Who got him?"

"Pakistan? Those lying motherfuckers."

"Goddamn, we were close to him!"

"Celebratory shots!"

"Shots! Shots! Shotsshotsshotsshots!"

I sat on the couch in my empty Colorado apartment and watched a hawk on a wire outside. It surveyed the golf course green beyond the wrought iron fence as I traded texts with my friends from Afghanistan. CNN was muted on the flatscreen TV. An excited Wolf Blitzer made soundless proclamations as the details of the raid crawled across the bottom of the screen. I sipped at the gin and tonic I made when I first heard that a SEAL team killed Osama bin Laden. The ice clinked in the glass as I swirled a lime wedge around, chasing bubbles with the little black straw. It was almost ten AM.

I had slept through the initial reports from the day before and woke up to a dozen message threads all talking about the same thing. It seemed like everything we went through over there was finally worth it. Maybe the nightmares and the stress from coming home meant something. Maybe my pending divorce wouldn't be a total loss. Maybe the Marines would leave the desert and get back to fighting from ships again. Maybe I could put my uniforms away and finally be done with it all.

I found out there was an article in The Early Bird about the anti-malarial pills (Mefloquin) we've been taking. It said it causes psychotic episodes, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

While I was stretching out at the north side of the tent by the SNAP terminal, I was startled by our two rats who came blazing out of a gap by the Hescos and almost slammed into my shoes. They turned around and ran back the way they came, but one of them (I think it was Fat Jesus) stopped after a few feet and gave me the stink eye. He left after a few seconds and I continued my workout.

IEDs sound like low whumps or thumps from a couple hundred meters away.

No big flash either, just dust & smoke & debris.

The Most Scared I'd Ever Been

It's always interesting what people ask me about the war. Did you kill anyone? Is it like the movies? Was it scary? What was it *like*? They think they want to know but they don't really want to hear the true answers because the answers don't line up with their CNN or Hollywood version of war. Sometimes, when someone thinks they know me well enough to ask, they'll pester me to find out just how scary it was or how afraid I was. My buddies and I talked about this phenomenon and how annoying it can be. My friend Tyler had the best answer to the being scared question I'd ever heard and I realized his experience was almost exactly the same as my own.

Marines who wanted to be officers had to go through something called Officer Candidate School (OCS), which was six weeks of fun in the sun in the middle of summer in Quantico, Virginia. It was hot and humid and the instructor's unstated objective was to make us die. We had one guy shatter his femur when he fell off a rope obstacle. We had another guy contract meningitis from a water obstacle known as The Quigley. Two guys tried to escape in the middle of the night about a week into it, got caught, and were never heard from again. The training was designed to weed out the sick and the weak. It was meant to tear down the unworthy and cast them aside. It was designed to thin the herd and ensure that Marine officers were capable of shouldering the responsibility of leading Marines in combat.

I went through OCS in the summer of 1999. I suffered sleep deprivation, emotional humiliation, and physical torment. I failed at impossible tasks designed to be impossible just to see how I'd react to

a no-win situation. I survived uncountable bug bites and plant-related rashes. I went from 190 pounds of muscle to 160 pounds of sinew in six weeks due to the constant physical exertion. I lost badly at pugil stick training but I passed a uniform inspection with flying colors so the instructors rewarded me by forcing me to march around with an ironing board at right shoulder arms for an entire day. I went into OCS knowing it would be difficult but I had no idea how aggressively terrible it would be.

The field shitters at OCS were ancient damp wood structures built to accommodate roughly a dozen people at a time. They were constructed over deep lye-lined pits that were filled with decades of rotting and festering shit piled almost to the tops of the toilet holes and it was all infested with fat black flies. The stink was eye watering and the toilet paper was the thin, rough, industrial kind rejected by prisons and mental hospitals for being too inhumane. The soggy rolls were placed on rough wooden dowels which were set between each hole cut in the long parallel benches so that one roll serviced two places. There were no toilet seats. We were only allowed very brief breaks between training evolutions to make head calls and in the span of the allotted five minutes, 40 Marine officer candidates had to storm the shitters in waves and evacuate our bowels and bladders in the most expeditious of fashions. In theory, it was possible. In practice, it was a nightmare.

The first time I found myself in extreme gastrointestinal distress after a six-mile conditioning hump was terrifying. I was in the second wave for shitter use and my stomach gurgled out warning after warning. It was a crisis and I was deeply and urgently concerned. Some people

had already shit their pants earlier in the day and almost all of us had pissed ourselves at some point, usually electing to do so while low-crawling through a mud obstacle or while splashing through a stream or pond.

I had to shit and I had to shit now. After two agonizing minutes, I was finally able to elbow my way inside. I had to breathe through my mouth but even then, the stench was so thick it coated my tongue. I jostled forward through the rush of sweaty Marines racing out to get back into formation, hastily fastening belts or tucking in fly-away uniform bits on the go. I found an empty hole, noticed the ring of fresh wetness around the edges, decided not to care about it, shucked down my trousers, and performed a maneuver known as "unload, show clear." It felt like a hose of hot pinto beans blasted out of me. The hastily eaten chow hall food barely had time to digest before my body rejected it. I exhaled with relief and looked down at the scuffed black leather of my combat boots poking out from the camouflage of my bunched-up trousers. Then I looked up.

The next few seconds stretched out into eternity as the realization struck with the full force of a martial arts instructor demonstrating the proper way to kill someone with one blow. Sitting across from me, hovering over his own disgusting hole, was another shaven-headed candidate. We locked eyes and sudden understanding shot white-hot fear adrenaline through my chest: I would have to wipe my ass in front of another man. For the first time since I was potty trained, another human would witness me at my most undignified and vulnerable. Never in all my life had I considered that I would be in this scenario. No one ever told me that this was part of the OCS experience. And it wasn't

just the Marine across from me who would see this. There were Marines elbow to elbow with me shitting themselves raw. There were Marines storming their way into the shitter with their own desperate agendas and there were Marines stomping past me in a rush to get out while the instructors outside shouted at us to quit sucking each other's dicks in there and hurry the fuck up.

I had to wipe my ass, but what if I did it wrong? What if the technique I developed over the last two decades in the privacy of my own bathroom was weird? What if I was the only one who wadded up the sad excuse for toilet paper so that there were more edges to scrape the poop off instead of using a folded flat surface that might only smear poop around my buttohole and make me itchy for the rest of the day? What if I reached around and wiped front-to-back while everyone else reached between their legs and wiped back-to-front? What if I used too much toilet paper? What if I didn't use enough? Was it gross if I folded it, wiped, and then folded it and wiped again? Was it wasteful if I didn't? Did it matter since the toilet paper provided was horribly thin and if I didn't use enough of it my finger might poke through and smear shit on my butt cheeks or possibly get it under my fingernail? What was everyone else doing? Was there a Marine Corps way to wipe my ass that I had not learned? I had just met the guys in my platoon. Would they shun me if I got caught trying to sneak a look at their wiping technique? Would I get branded with an embarrassing nickname like "The Poop Looker" or "Candidate Butthole?"

The hot sweat from PT in the relentless sun turned to the primal chill of fight or flight. All these thoughts raced through my head as I broke eye contact with the Marine across from me. I tore off a bunch

of toilet paper and tried to mentally block out everyone around me so I could wipe my ass as fast as possible in my normal fashion and just get out of there.

Afterwards, in the steamy Virginia heat, as the instructors screamed at us to line up nut-to-butt so we could file off into the woods for additional training, I breathed in the thick humidity and let the green smell of the wet underbrush rinse the stink from my nose. Shitting and wiping in front of everyone rapidly became commonplace and soon it didn't even register as something to worry about.

I had trained to react in certain ways in response to incoming fire or enemy action. I had trained to overcome the paralysis of emotional intensity that came with the recognition of my own fragile mortality. I had even trained to fight through the shock of traumatic amputations and potentially apply tourniquets to my own severed limbs, but I never trained for the scenario where I would have to wipe my ass in front of other fully-grown adult males.

So now, whenever someone asks me if I was ever scared while I was in the Marine Corps, I say yes, yes, I was, and I tell them this story and then I laugh at their horrified expressions the entire goddamn time.

"So, what explodes around here? Everything? Oh, good."

-1stLt S

Covered in little bites from either the tiny sand flies or there are fleas in my cot. (hopefully not, but I wouldn't put it past this place to get even more miserable).

Lose Yourself

We were crammed into our Amtrac. Our packs were slung over the sides to give us more room to stand on the seats and poke our upper bodies out through the top of the open hatches. The sharp aluminum edges of the hatch seals dug into the backs of our SAPI plates as we leaned against it and tried to let our knees absorb the bumps and jostles of the tracks on the uneven sand. We were keyed up and excited, but also suspicious and nervous. We didn't know what to expect about the coming fight but the thick black smoke from the distant oil fires gave us some idea that it would probably be an aggressive one.

The air was hot and dry. Remnants of the previous night's sandstorm added fine grit to the wind. It coated and abraded my throat. I sucked down uncomfortably warm water through the tube of my Camelback and swished it around in my mouth to rinse out the sand.

I had the radio handset jammed in between my helmet chinstrap and my left cheek. The hard black plastic dug into my ear. Occasionally the Marine next to me would shift his position and snag the coiled line of the handset that linked me to the radio, yanking my head hard over and to the left. Bits of comm chatter filtered through and I half-listened to PosReps, northings, updates, queries, and acknowledgements, waiting to hear my callsign. The steady rumble of the diesel engines and the shouted orders and exclamations of the Marines around me made it difficult to hear anything specific. It blended together into a wall of noise.

Over it all I could hear the squeaks from the strained suspension and the sharp taps of our rifle barrels as the motion of the Amtrac made us bump them around on the lip of the hatch. The track commander shouted and gestured at the other vehicles around us as he repositioned them in line or moved them out of our way. I felt the transmission grind and I heard the fast slap of the thick rubber track pads as they passed over hard patches of sand. I couldn't hear my heartbeat anymore.

We pulled up and halted, on line and in columns, stacks of green amphibious vehicles spread out across the sand of a wide-open desert. I heard the buzz of scout motorcycles as their engines argued with the deeper rumbles of idling diesels. They zipped about in between trucks and tanks and tracks. Humvees, some hardback, some soft top, and some open air, were scattered throughout the columns like tan colored punctuation marks in the sentences of olive drab. I heard all the different engines, running at different pitches and tones, their timbres combined into one all-encompassing mechanical voice.

I heard the Marines behind me, facing outboard on the other side of the track, excitedly shout something so I shuffled my cumbersome gear around and looked out over my shoulder. Four Psy-Ops Humvees pulled up in a line at the front of the entire armored column right on the bleeding edge of the Line of Departure (LOD).

The speakers mounted on the backs of the Psy-Ops Humvees crackled. I saw distorted movement behind their thick armored windows. The Psy-Ops guys were preparing something, either for us or for the enemy. The radio chatter petered out and all attempts at conversation died. Our attention focused on the Psy-Ops guys.

The hiss of the high-gain speakers increased in volume. It was the sound of pre-noise. It was amplified anti-silence. The non-sound from the speakers made my teeth feel tight. I wanted to bite something.

The speakers erupted. Sound blasted out. The treble and bass fought each other for supremacy. Eminem's first few piano notes shot over the diesels and reverberated across and through the triangular ridges of the up-armor on the Amtracs. The thumping bass guitar kicked in and it strummed with violent potential. The music drowned us. I felt it in my lungs when I breathed it in. No one cheered.

We collectively started to move to the rhythm. It was a gentle back and forth and a subtle helmet nod. At the first lyric, "*Look,*" I glanced at the Marine beside me. We locked eyes and then looked away from each other and back out to the horizon. The engines surged. The Psy-Ops Humvees stepped off. Our Amtrac lunged forward. Eminem's anger floated out into the desert. We charged across the LOD to the opening chorus, feeling invincible, and raced north towards Baghdad.

We are still in River City due to a guy in Marjeh getting shot in the chest. They changed the terminology for referring to a FKIA from 'Angel' to 'Fallen Hero.'

Things to remember: moving my cot away from the tent wall so the wind would stop blowing it into my shoulder; a big black cricket cruising around on my cot; watching a desert mouse go tear-assing around by the poker table, leaping over sandbags & zipping into a hole in the floor in the other tent; seeing fresh beetle & bird tracks in the sand outside my tent window; having huge moths bonk into my head while flying towards the light of my headlamp; the smell of cinnamon & pee in the port-a-shitters; the fact that sitting on my REI campstool for extended periods of time makes my taint go to sleep; smoking my pipe while sitting on the hood of the Humvee in the dark watching foreign stars; having the stupid crap-lousy Iridium phone keep dropping my calls; NIPR still down (going on 5 days now); having dry, dusty feet all the time; showering at night & waking up with crazy hair; standing over the hygiene pit & having little drops of water splash on my boots; having the heat melt the glue off the Velcro patches on my helmet (for my lights); the fact that the A/C blows cold for about 6 feet, then it just gets hot again.

"What's your name?"

"Bush yes!"

"Good Bush!"

"No Saddam."

"Give me money."

"Give me watch."

"Mister, give me pencil. For baby."

-Typical Iraqi streetside sayings, 2003

Whomever is praying for my safety is doing an excellent job.

Pancake Man

Everyone saw Pancake Man.

We were on the move. There were tracers and explosions, fires, and thick pillars of smoke all along the way. We drove all night and through the next day, stopping only for gas attack alarms.

We pushed up and through to An Nasiriah, where we raced across one of the only bridges left standing, taking small arms fire from all directions and firing back blindly into the night. I saw Pancake Man as the sun came up the next morning. He was an anonymous Iraqi citizen dressed in the typical man-dress fashion. He died in the street, killed either by gunfire or run down by unstoppable vehicles. He fell in the middle of the road and no one dragged him away.

We couldn't pull off to the side due to potential mine threats so we drove over his body. Every vehicle in the column drove over his body. It was crushed and smashed and pounded flat by heavy rubber tires and endless metal tracks. He was utterly flattened, his bones pulverized, and his skin was stretched out like a deflated balloon.

The dust and sand had long since absorbed his blood so all that was left of him was a rolled-out husk in a stained dashiki. He looked like a Looney Tunes character. We laughed and cheered and pointed at the pancake of a man marking the way to Baghdad.

He became a minor celebrity. He was an excellent conversation starter for anyone you just met.

"Yo! Did you see that flat dude? Pancake Man?"

"Fuck yeah, I did! Wild!"

"I took a picture."

"No way! Can you send that to me when you get the chance? I couldn't get my camera out in time."

Pancake Man.

The only casualty of the afternoon was the blow-up tiki god. Cpl H bumped into it with a lit cigar and melted a hole in it, which caused it to deflate. When I found out what happened I said, "This is why we can't have nice things," and he said, "I knew you were going to say that."

Good Piece of Gear

My friend Lewis was an exceptionally talented infantry officer. I had the opportunity to work with him in Iraq when he was a Weapons Platoon Commander. After our respective first tours were over, I got out to join the First Civ Div while he opted to do a lat-move to another command. He chose to go into the procurement department and I thought he was crazy. I felt like his leadership talents would be wasted in an otherwise steadfastly bureaucratic part of the Marine Corps but he had a solid argument as to why he wanted to do so.

He told me that, first of all, he needed a break from the physical demands of the infantry. His body took a lot of punishment in both training and war and he wanted some time to recover. Secondly, he said he would be in a position to prevent the Marine Corps from being screwed over by defense contractors who only wanted to sell us the most cumbersome and pointless pieces of equipment that the out of touch generals thought the Marines should use.

He hit his breaking point in Iraq when we desperately needed our infrared thermal scope to work but the logistics chain didn't have any of the proprietary special batteries that the gear required. The scopes didn't have a way to run off AA batteries, the most ubiquitous battery in the Marine Corps. If it did, we could've pulled batteries from anyone's flashlight or radio or camera but instead we weren't able to use the IR scope at all. A critical piece of equipment turned into a useless piece of serialized government plastic for want of an alternate power source. It was a blatant money grab by the defense contractors to ensure a steady revenue stream by selling the Marine

Corps specialized batteries that got used up and couldn't be recharged and it drove us all bonkers since it was a dangerous liability in combat. Lewis wanted to do something about it.

We met up for beers one day about six months into his new gig. I asked how it was going and he gave me a disgusted laugh. He said he had one contractor come out to his office to give him a demonstration for some new laser rangefinder and the contractor kept going on and on about how amazing it was and how the Marine Corps would function so much more efficiently by adopting it.

He took Lewis outside to the parking lot to give him a quick demonstration of its capabilities in the East Coast sun. The defense contractor started pointing the rangefinder at the different cars in the lot, calling out the distances to various vehicles, and talking all the while. It could fire its laser beam through fog and dust or rain and snow, he said. It was waterproof. It could last for days on a single charge of its proprietary battery.

Lewis paused and asked if I remembered the old joke about the Marine and the ball bearings. I smiled and recited it back to him:

Take a Marine and put him in an empty windowless room with five steel ball bearings. Shut and lock the door and wait one minute. At the end of the minute, open the door. During that time the Marine will have managed to lose one, break one, eat one, steal one, and set one on fire.

Lewis said he took the laser rangefinder and turned it over in his hands, admiring its ergonomics and functionality. The defense contractor kept pushing his sales pitch and extolling its virtues. It could operate in temperatures ranging from minus 30 to over 120 degrees, he said. It could display the range in meters or feet. It was unbreakable, he declared proudly.

Lewis raised an eyebrow. He called over to one of his Marines, a Corporal who happened to be headed past where they were standing. The Corporal saluted Lewis, Lewis returned the salute, and handed him the laser rangefinder. Lewis said, "This guy told me this thing is unbreakable. Break it."

The Corporal said, "Aye, aye, sir!" and he wound up and threw the laser rangefinder down as hard as he could onto the pavement. The laser rangefinder shattered and blew out its internal components all over the deck. The contractor stared at its electronic guts in disbelief.

"Why would you do that?" he shouted.

Lewis turned to the Corporal and dismissed him. The Corporal saluted again, Lewis again returned the salute, and the Corporal went on about with his original business, leaving the incredulous contractor to stammer at the destruction of his multi-thousand dollar widget.

Lewis looked at the contractor and said, "You told me it was unbreakable. Bullshit. Claims like that cost lives and I refuse to let people like you try to kill my Marines. Please clean up this mess and leave. I'll send your boss my report later this afternoon."

The defense contractor bent down to pick up the pieces. His shock turned to anger. "You're paying for this!" he cried.

Lewis knelt down and looked the defense contractor in the eyes.

"No," he said. "I'm not."

We all piled over to DFAC 4 for dinner to celebrate FCT-9's homecoming as well as the Marine Corps' birthday (235 years old). The Third Country Nationals (TCNs) and contractors made a life-sized Iwo Jima flag raising statue out of foam, cardboard, and cake icing with a seal underneath that said 'Uncommon Valor With Common Virtue.' We laughed.

ANA marching in formation is unbelievable but we can't laugh because we have to be professional. Arms swinging, elbows high, chin at the sky, right leg straight and locked, striking the deck with joint-jarring force each time.

The Embedded Training Team (ETT) 1stSgt doesn't go out with the teams or the ANA but instead chooses to focus on high-and-tights & utilities vice FROG suits. He makes fun of our guys for their hair, calling them 'female FET teams,' which literally translates to 'female Female Engagement Teams teams.' So . . . sick burn, 1stSgt.

Ticks, Bugs, and Spiders

Taco Bell Supper. Teachers Being Stupid. Total Bull Shit. The Basic School.

TBS is the six-month-long officer training course for newly commissioned Second Lieutenants in the Marine Corps. It is held deep in the woods of Quantico, VA. There I learned about different types of weapons systems, hand-to-hand combat, land nav, comm, admin, etiquette, tactics, strategy, logistics, maintenance, protocol, what an ogive plunger was, and how to hate most of my fellow officers without making it look like I hated them.

My class spanned three seasons, from summer to winter. I watched Lieutenants fall out of humps from dehydration and heat exhaustion only to get the dreaded Silver Bullet, a thoroughly public rectal thermometer, and a stern rebuke from the corpsmen about not drinking enough water. I got attacked by ticks as big as my thumbnail while I lay prone and silent in an ambush position waiting for the 'enemy' platoon to come crashing through the crunchy fall leaves into our kill zone. I had the water in my canteens freeze to slush in the middle of a nighttime sleet storm while I was out on an LP/OP as I tried not to crash out from sheer exhaustion over the sights of my rifle.

The staff officer instructors at TBS were mostly Marine Captains or Majors, and they seemed to fall into one of two categories: those who volunteered for the assignment and were way too excited about it, or those who wanted nothing to do with TBS but got orders there anyway and

hated their lives so much that they did nothing but pour their hate out onto the class of new Lieutenants. It sucked for us either way.

One of our instructors, Captain Gant, stood out from the rest. He was a huge man, tall and solidly muscled, with a threatening voice and a permanent scowl, and he was a dangerous combination of the two main categories. He most definitely did not want to be there as an instructor and he genuinely hated us but he was so damn *excited* about hating us that he took every opportunity he could to torment us.

Once, while our entire class was packed into the main auditorium for a lecture about infantry tactics in a defensive scenario, a Lieutenant made the mistake of getting caught while looking bored and immediately flagged himself for a deeply personal interaction with Captain Gant. Captain Gant, speaking from behind a polished wood podium with a giant Marine Corps emblem on the front, stopped mid-sentence. He reared back and kicked the podium over. He pointed his thick right arm straight out into the crowd and he extended his index finger from his clenched fist, aiming it at the Lieutenant.

"You," he said.

Panicked Lieutenants looked around. Captain Gant's finger was an area fire weapon. No one could tell exactly whom he was pointing at.

"You, the one I'm pointing at."

More looking. Lieutenants started leaning away from each other, afraid of being collateral damage.

He raised his already formidable voice. "Am I talking out loud right now? YOU, with the eyes! I know you see me."

I was far enough away from the line of fire that I could sneak a gleeful aside to my buddy next to me. "Oh, man," I whispered. "Someone's about to get their shit pushed in." My classmate snickered quietly and we both glanced sideways to watch.

"You cannot be this stupid. You. Yes. You. Stand up." A little vein throbbed in Captain Gant's temple. He still pointed.

A shaky Lieutenant stood up. His camouflage uniform was green. His face was deep red. He looked like Christmas.

Captain Gant raged. "No, goddammit! Not you! The one I'm pointing at! YOU. WITH THE EYES."

The Lieutenant sat down fast and slumped low. A different Lieutenant in the same general vicinity cautiously stood up.

Captain Gant lost his mind. "I SAID 'YOU WITH THE EYES'," and he ran up the stairs on the side of the auditorium, taking them three at a time, moving faster than I ever thought a man of his size could. He cut into the seats about halfway to the back, blowing by the standing Lieutenant and knocking black pens and green notebooks off the little folding desks like a selective tornado. The standing Lieutenant dropped into his seat and hunkered down with his back to the storm. The Lieutenants who were too slow to dive out of his way got shoved roughly aside as Captain Gant locked onto his target.

"YOU BETTER STAND UP RIGHT NOW BEFORE I DESTROY YOU!" he roared as he grabbed the offending Lieutenant, the one with the eyes, by his uniform collar and yarded him onto his feet.

Captain Gant shook the Lieutenant back and forth while he shouted in the Lieutenant's face, giving each of his words a physical emphasis. "I know you good and goddamn well know I was pointing at you! Am I boring you? You keep looking at your watch so I must be boring you. And you just sat there while you let your fellow Lieutenants take the hit? Is your watch more important than learning about proper concertina wire emplacement? Well all right, then. Guess what time it is."

Captain Gant dropped the Lieutenant but grabbed the Lieutenant's wrist, yanking his arm back up and around with one massive hand while he dug under the Lieutenant's black rubber watchband with his other one. Captain Gant pulled at the watchband clasp and it broke apart. Captain Gant thrust the broken watch under the Lieutenant's nose and held it there for a long moment, and then he spun around and threw the watch hard against the painted cinderblock wall of the auditorium. The watch detonated. Its case left a small nick in the pale yellow paint on the wall.

We froze. No one breathed. I didn't even dare think about grinning. The lone clock in the auditorium ticked the seconds away. Captain Gant stood there and exhaled loudly through gritted teeth. He held his arms down stiffly at his sides. He clenched and unclenched his fists in a slow rhythmic manner. He glared down at the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant stared at floor as he rubbed the red mark on his wrist. No one looked directly at Captain Gant as he turned and threaded his way through the aisle to the stairs and stomped back down to the front of the auditorium. He stopped at the podium and picked it up off the floor. He adjusted it so it was covered and aligned to the edge of the carpet. He cleared his throat and resumed his lecture.

The F-18's guns sound like huge sheets of cloth being torn forcefully and quickly.

Sat down next to LCpl B, who was looking at collages and pictures of puppies. He had the puppy images up whenever his other pages were loading. I asked him about it and he said that it calmed him. When I talked to Sgt H later that night, he told me that at PB Beatley, they had the porn on their computers in a file labeled 'puppies,' so he thinks B misinterpreted what they meant when they said they were looking at puppies in his attempts to emulate the rest of the team.

Weapons

"Fighting is like fucking: the goal is to put your hard parts in their soft parts.

Use your forehead to headbutt your enemy's face and crush their nose and cheekbones. Your teeth are powerful tools, so bite chunks of skin and meat off their cheeks if you can. Gnaw off their lips. If possible, tear into their throat and chew open their jugular. The windpipe is usually too gristly, but the sides of the neck are relatively unprotected. Don't just use your fists. Get creative. Pull a Samson and see if you can rip someone's jaw off. Ears are easy targets, too, so tear those off. Shove your thumbs through their eyes. Grab hold of their fingers and break them apart by pulling them in any direction they don't normally go, even sideways. Chomping off fingers is also effective but be sure to really grind down with your molars. Tendons are tough to sever.

Do some quality muscle gouging on their forearms and biceps by pretending you are ripping the meat off the bone of a hot wing. If they are wearing body armor, go for their armpits and floaty ribs. Use your elbows to snap the floaty ribs off and see if you can't get them to lacerate their kidneys, spleen, or liver. Internal bleeding is still bleeding. Get up under their groin armor and give them the ol' twist 'n pull. The fight usually goes out of people when you rip their testicles clean off their body.

Stomp on the tops of their feet. Those foot bones are brittle and easily crushed. Just keep stomping until they fall over and then ride

them down to the deck. Elbow-strike their head against a hard surface to cause skull fractures and brain damage. While you're doing that deliver knee strike after knee strike to their groin and stomach. Have some fun with it. Your body is an amazing set of weapons limited only by your imagination."

I talked with Sgt H for a half hour about how he likes FOB Marjeh (he hates it ~ "It's a former drill instructor's idea of what a FOB should be."), how Corporal W is doing, how Lt W is doing, and how both the SgtMaj and the MSgt fell out of their > 1km hump they went on while the CO was there. It was a useless, senseless patrol that the CO insisted on and it put the whole team in danger for no reason.

W pushed us to try DFAC 5 because "it might have disco balls and be full of women." It didn't and it wasn't.

1330: Convoy depart Dwyer

1335: Halt for cargo falling off Vic 5 & white Vic traveling E to W
(sedan or SUV)

1405: Halt for Vic 5 to adjust cargo (41RPQ013xxx50xxx)

1418: OM

1424: Halt for Vic 5 to adjust cargo (41RPQ02xxx53xxx) (110 degrees in
our Vic)

1452: Walled compound (41RPQ035xxx)

1605: Arrive Marjeh district center

1715: Depart Marjeh district center

1720: Arrive FOB Marjeh, drop off Cpl M to ETT LtCol & 1stSgt

1833: Depart FOB Marjeh

2138: Arrive Dwyer

Princess Jasmine

Females were a rare sight aboard Camp Dwyer. There were a few washed-out looking Russian girls working at the barbershop and some sturdy competent doctors and nurses at the CASH. The Engineers had a few women working with them running route clearance and leading supply convoys. There were two wizened Mongolian women working in the laundry facility who looked constantly angry about handling bagfuls of dirty skivvies (for good reason, I suppose). And there was Princess Jasmine.

Princess Jasmine was an Afghan linguist working with the FETs to translate and interpret for the women and girls in the outlying villages and she was a hard 10. Afghanistan changed the rating scales due to rarity and scarcity, so if a woman were a snarly three or a plain four back home, she would be a soft six or even a solid seven in Afghanistan. Princess Jasmine was a for-real nine back home, which made her a chart topper aboard Camp Dwyer.

She was tall and strong, with well-defined shoulder muscles and smooth, flawless caramel skin. She had large, dark almond eyes and she seemed to have no need for eyeliner or makeup. She held her head high, poised and graceful, never deigning to acknowledge the stares she drew as she walked across the moon dust and crushed gravel of the roads between commodity areas. She wore loose-fitting khaki trousers and tight-fitting olive green t-shirts. She kept her long black hair pulled back in a simple ponytail. Her only jewelry was a set of dog tags on a thin chain.

In the misogynistic Afghan culture where women were expected to go around with their faces covered and eyes cast down or else they would be violently corrected, Princess Jasmine walked with regal elegance that no man, Afghan or American, dared challenge. Oftentimes she had a cadre of male Afghan interpreters follow her around as a sort of an ad hoc security detail. They circled around her in the chowhall line and made sure the rowdy junior Marines kept a respectful distance from her or the TCNs serving her food kept civil tongues in their heads.

She generally ate at a corner table by herself with her retinue sitting on battered white plastic chairs arranged loosely around her. The male interpreters ate curried chicken with their hands, picking at the individual grains of rice and gesticulating wildly as they told fantastical lies. Princess Jasmine ate daintily with her own personal utensils she brought with her, straight-backed and silent. She looked around at everyone in the chowhall. Her large eyes seemed to miss nothing.

I was aboard Camp Dwyer for about six months total, not counting the convoys and time off base for other errands. I frequently walked around the base alone to coordinate team missions, work out logistical issues, or make liaison with disparate Marine Corps sections and ANA units, but mostly I went out alone to get away from the cramped quarters of our raggedy tent. I spent a lot of time getting to know the other personnel in those outlying units, especially the individuals who could actually get things done. Sometimes I brought along my own interpreter, Rahat, and it was during one of those times where we walked across the base in the heat that Rahat offered to introduce me to Princess Jasmine. The linguists and interpreters from the various

units often hung out together in their down time. He told me that during one of their chai breaks, she said she had seen me around the base, usually alone like her, and she was interested in who I was and what I did. I didn't really believe him when he said that she noticed me at all, so I brushed him off and declined his invitation. We talked about other things.

Some weeks later, our other linguist, Sadin, came up to me after a meeting with the communications section of the ANA and asked me if I wanted to talk with Princess Jasmine since she asked about me. Again, I thought this scenario was unlikely so I said no. I thought that maybe Sadin and Rahat were messing with me because they knew I thought she was beautiful.

I started to see her around the base more. She remained aloof and alone, but she seemed to glance my way from time to time if she wasn't surrounded by her detail. Once I thought she smiled at me and I walked back to my tent on the far side of the base, unaware of the thick dust and the oppressive heat, thinking about the way her eyebrows crinkled down just a little bit towards the middle.

Events overtook me and I spent a while off base interacting with my geographically dispersed teams. They were scattered around Marjeh and I took multiple convoys out and around to check up on them from time to time in order to see first hand what their AO conditions were like. I got back to Dwyer late one night, sweaty and gritty from a 14-hour convoy. I was tired, hungry, and cranky so I went to the only open chow hall to try and get either a depressingly soggy burger or a scoop of unaccountably bland curry and rice. I stole a small bottle of Heinz

taco sauce from a DFAC aboard Leatherneck on my last trip up there and I kept it with me just in case the curry at Dwyer was ever weak.

I looked bad and smelled worse. My hair was helmet-crazy and my sweat left muddy lines down the sides of my face. Ordinarily one was not allowed into the chowhall if one was gross or dirty, but it was late and I was tired. I was also a Major, and one of the higher-ranking individuals aboard the base at the time, so I opted to give myself a pass and in doing so, gave tacit approval for the other Marines in the convoy to do the same. I saw some grimy junior Marines come in and cluster together in hushed groups, trying to pretend like they didn't see me see them. I didn't care because I was just as disgusting as they were and we were all exhausted from the stress of the convoy. I ended up with a plate of curry. It looked and smelled like I would have to add some taco sauce. I thanked the TCN who served me and I stepped away from the line to find a place to sit.

Princess Jasmine was tucked in the corner with her security group and they were all looking at me. I tried to act normal but I felt very self-conscious about how I walked as I went to find an empty seat by myself in a row of tables away from her. I sat down and poked at my curry, debating if I should Heinz it up with my limited supply of sauce. One of the male interpreters stood up and came over. He asked permission to sit with me and then he gestured back towards Princess Jasmine and said that she would like me to join her for dinner. He said that she knew I would be here tonight because both of my interpreters, Rahat and Sadin, told her where I was, when I got back, and that I went straight to the chow hall after dropping off my gear at the tent. I was annoyed my linguists broke security protocols and I

wondered how she beat me here. When I looked over his shoulder at her, she smiled directly at me and waved.

I hadn't heard from my wife in three weeks. She decided to move from our home in California to take a job in Colorado and she didn't tell me about it until she had already left. Things were strained between us and it was difficult to resolve our situation via the sporadic emails that distance and circumstances allowed.

I had not been with a woman since I left the states six months prior and in a world almost exclusively comprised of men, the draw of an intelligent, strong, beautiful woman was powerful. Her invitation seemed innocent and most likely represented nothing beyond an interest in developing a professionally friendly relationship but I remained conflicted. Perception is reality in the Marine Corps. If people saw me, a married officer, sitting and interacting with an attractive female linguist, then they would assume the worst. Our professionalism and credibility would be in question, but I wanted to talk with her.

I wanted to get up and go sit with her. I wanted lean in next to her and watch the flex and sway of her body and the sweep of her jaw line as she talked with me. I wanted to say witty things and see her smile at me. I wanted to watch the green fabric of her t-shirt stretch and conform to her muscles as she made inflective gestures while she told me stories about her missions into the surrounding villages. I wanted to hear her thoughts about the war. I wanted to know what her glossy black hair smelled like and I wanted to let my eyes slide across her skin as she pulled her hair tie off and let her ponytail cascade down

her back. I wanted her to look at me with her wide dark eyes. I wanted her to touch my hand. I wanted her.

I thanked the interpreter and I diplomatically declined her invitation. He seemed confused as to why I would do so, but I thanked him again for the offer and asked him to relay to her that I could not join her. I couldn't explain to him that if I got up and went over to her, I might be lost. Instead, I threw away my uneaten curry and walked back out into the night.

I still think about her from time to time.

I wish I'd asked her her name.

"We're going after their hearts and minds. Two in the heart, one in
the mind."

-Maj K

Therapy

I saw a therapist once, right after I got back. He asked me if I had any stressors in my life and I laughed until I cried. He leaned in, all professional and interested, vivisectioning me with his questions. Why the tears? Where did those come from? What was I feeling? Why was I feeling that way? I laughed again and told him.

My wife had an affair. I came home to an empty house. I only had a month to pack up my remaining stuff. She took the cats. She took the bed so I slept alone on the couch. I drank too much. Sometimes I had nightmares. Sometimes there was just nothing. The trees were too green. Things were too bright and too loud. The air smelled weird. No one paid attention to where they were going or what was going on around them. I found a lump on my left testicle and I had to go through extensive testing before the docs could determine that it wasn't cancer. I didn't tell anyone about it or about how scared I was. I had to move a thousand miles away from where I spent the last ten years. I didn't recognize any of the new celebrities on TV. The songs on the radio were unfamiliar. Everything was falling apart. My family kept telling me I wasn't over there anymore.

He nodded. He steepled his fingers. He said, "Mmhmm."

"I hope you survive the whore."

-Note from an American kindergartener

Me, A, H, & Sgt H were talking about how gross all of the smoke we inhale over here is, with the lithium batteries, the shit, the piss, the semen, and the garbage all going into the same burn pit. It's a wonder that when we inhale, we don't get our noses pregnant which, of course, lead to a discussion about nose abortions and it generally took a turn for the worse. Sgt H had the best quote with, "Oh, so my behavior is socially unacceptable? Well, how 'bout I go take a shit in a bag, masturbate into it, and then set it on fire. Or is that not allowed in America either."

Sgt H & Cpl M did a 60mm mortar mission up by PB Beatley. Capt W had 5 controls today ~ x2FW ISR, x2 Shows of Force, x1 RW ISR. Busy day for them. Sgt H's memorial service for his friend got shifted to the right a few days. Capt S fell out of his chair while eating a microwave dinner.

I'm wedged uncomfortably into the VC seat with a backpack under my legs and no way to straighten them out. The MATV, like every other vehicle the Marine Corps has, was in no way designed to be comfortable while wearing a full combat load. BFT & DAGR both shit the bed right before we left the ECP @ 0407. Figures.

Found out that CO Mobile won't be at FOB Marjeh until some point in the afternoon, so we all crashed in the chapel to wait. W and I tried to sleep while lying across 4 metal folding chairs. The Chaplain & RPs were very nice about letting us stay there all day. I migrated between the chairs and the floor between the chairs, finally settling on a pillow comprised of a paperback book and a pair of gloves, a keep-cool piece of cloth as a cover for my eyes, and no way to make my back not hurt.

Row of piss-tubes has replaced the piss-pit; the trash pit is disgusting; WAG bag shitters with actual toilet seats; thick, thick moon dust everywhere; huge wasps by our MATV; wandering ANA and Afghan people all over the place (one ANA was carrying 2 plastic grocery bags full of raw lamb meat); the Afghans don't wear shoes so when they have to put boots on, they don't tie them up or anything and they just slop around in clompy boots, looking ridiculous; MRE for lunch; dinner at the chow hall (buffalo chicken over brown rice with corn and peaches ~ my peaches had buffalo sauce on them).

Osprey inbound so we had to stop, shut all the lights off, and wait for the bird. The rotor discs at night made really strange green glow/electrical discharges in the air.

Piss Test

Checking into a new unit always required a new urinalysis. This was usually done as a group with some Marines designated as meat gazers and sample controllers for those of us who were on the piss test roster. Each Marine had to sign in, take an unopened sample jar, initial the seal, initial the roster, and then take the sample jar to the head to fill it. The meat gazer had to watch the stream leave the body to make sure no one taped a baggie of clean urine under their ballsack and squeezed it into the sample jar. It was generally a time of giggles and hilarity when 40 or so men all got together to watch each other pee. The Marine Corps took it seriously since drug use was still illegal but the whole process was demeaning and ridiculous, so of course we made it a festival.

I met my friend Aaron for the first time right when I checked into 3rd ANGLICO in Los Angeles. He was a Sergeant and I was a Captain and he got tasked to watch me piss in a jar. He had an infectious grin and I liked him immediately. I initialed the roster, took my sample cup, and held it high as we paraded through the long line of Marines pounding water or antsy dancing around desperately waiting for their turn to go. We made the usual get-to-know-you small talk as we hit the head together.

"So, sir, is this your first time with ANGLICO?" he asked me as I balanced the sample jar on the flushing mechanism of the urinal.

"It is indeed," I said. "Thank you for throwing me this fine welcome aboard party." I unbuttoned my desert camouflage trousers and pulled

my penis out, holding the fly open and keeping my boxer briefs down with my right hand so it wouldn't pinch my dick while I fumbled the sample jar closer to the stream with my left hand.

He laughed and said, "You're welcome, sir. I planned it this way so I could get a good look at your cock."

I held the jar down by the urinal and started to pee. "Ha. Excellent. Oh, hey, by the way, if I give you five dollars, will you tell everyone that I have a big dick? I know it's a lie but I'd appreciate any prestige you may be able to generate for me, what with me being new and all." I pinched off the flow, held the jar right below the tip of my penis, and started to pee again. The jar rapidly filled.

Aaron smiled and said, "Hell, for five bucks I'll tell everyone that not only is it big, but that it makes me a little afraid of it."

Now it was my turn to laugh. I stopped peeing and juggled the full bottle of urine back up to its precarious balancing place on the urinal handle. "Worth it. I'd shake on it but I got my hands full. You know how it is." Aaron shrugged and smiled as if to say he did, in fact, know how it was. I finished peeing, shook it off, tucked my dick back into my underwear, buttoned my trousers, put the lid on the jar, flushed, and moved to the sink to wash my hands.

Aaron said, "I feel like I know you pretty well at this point, sir. We've gotten close over these last few minutes so I'll consider it a done deal." We were both grinning at each other in the mirror. It can be a rare thing in the Marine Corps to find someone with a similar

sense of humor, who can laugh with you through the boobery and inhumanity.

I held my full jar of pee aloft as we went out the door and out into the crowd of tan uniforms and green skivvy shirts. The warm jar was starting to cool. As we walked towards the sign-in table Aaron turned and looked at me. He said loudly, "Wow, sir! I don't know how you walk with that thing. Seriously!"

Some of the other Marines overheard and started asking him questions.

"Does the Captain have a big dick?"

"He sure does!" answered Aaron.

"Like, how big?"

Aaron held his hands out about a foot apart.

"Wow, did he let you touch it?"

Aaron waved them all down. "Gents, I gotta tell you. I was a little afraid of it when the Captain first pulled it out. I didn't know what to do. And no, Pookie, he didn't let me touch it." Aaron winked.

"Yet."

He smiled at me as the Marines laughed and judged me, their newest officer. I turned in my urine sample and the Staff Sergeant checked off my name on the roster. I initialed the seal on the top of the lid

and signed on the line next to my name and Social Security Number. I looked at Aaron standing next to me. "Pookie?"

"Pookie, sir. His girlfriend dropped him off late to formation one morning and said, 'Have a nice day at work, Pookie!' in front of the entire unit and that was it. I think I'm one of the only people left here who even knows his real name. Even the CO calls him Pookie."

Aaron held out his hand out expectantly. I pulled my wallet out, removed a five-dollar bill, and slapped it into his palm. He pocketed the money and we finally shook hands. "I look forward to working with you, Sergeant Anderson."

"And I you, sir. I'm going to go get a Pepsi. You want one? You're buying."

"Ha! Sure. I'm dehydrated from all this hot piss-test action. Thank you."

He held out his hand for more money.

"Dude, are you serious?" I said. "I just gave you five bucks."

"Yes, sir, you did, but that was for me lying for you. This is for Pepsi."

"This is the weirdest unit ever." I reached for my wallet again.

"Yes, sir, it is." He grinned wider as I gave him more money.

Later, after the war, he asked me to be a groomsman at his wedding.

It was my honor to stand with him.

"Snakes and dots, man. Snakes and dots."

-Sgt H re: Afghan writing

*The meeting room was crowded with all sorts of new mustaches around.
The Saddam lookalike shaved his off and our friend Capt Amin has let
his hair grow out quite a bit. He shook my hand for too long again.*

Being in an ANA meeting is like being in a spaghetti western mixed with a Kurosawa film dubbed in gibberish.

Morning Meetings

Every morning we sat in on the Brigade Staff Meeting for the 1/215 ANA. We were in direct support of them for Marine Corps fires assets, be it mortars, artillery, or airstrikes. They were not yet ready to handle the battlefield responsibility of blowing things up by themselves, so we mostly sat around the meeting table and said good morning to the staff officers and occasionally drank tea with them. For the most part I was an observer during these meetings and I didn't want to interrupt their process or proceedings. Unless we were asked a pointed question or we noticed that their plans would turn out catastrophically, we didn't interfere.

The ANA held their all-hands morning formation on Saturdays since they took Fridays off from the war. They practiced marching around the deep gravel of the parade area in front of the command post.

This particular Saturday was special because the ANA Brigade XO was fed up with his soldiers. He stood out in front of the fidgeting formation and berated them about how they needed to wake up on time, pick up their trash, not go AWOL, and stop doing drugs. I stood in the back of the formation behind the ranks of ANA soldiers next to two other Marine officers, with one of us watching our backs. I had my linguist Sadin with me so he translated the XO's speech. The XO emphasized his new 'just say no' campaign because, as he told us earlier that morning, over half the Brigade was addicted to opium or hash. This included a large chunk of the staff and explained the glassy, bloodshot eyes I saw most days around the briefing room table.

He tromped around in the gravel for a good ten minutes yelling about how drug use was unprofessional and in violation of not only ANA policy but also Allah's will. The soldiers didn't seem very concerned about either one.

The XO raised his hand and waved to someone behind the formation. He was about to make an example.

At the XO's command, one of the ANA Sergeants marched up to the front of the formation. He held a medium-sized camouflage bag. He reported to the XO, unzipped the bag, and held it open. The XO reached in and pulled out a brick of hashish the size of a Kleenex box. He held it aloft and glared at the soldiers. The XO took his time to place the hashish on the ground in front of him by his feet, arranging it just so. He stared down at the brick. I looked around at the soldiers in front of me and they were all at looking at the hashish with worried intensity.

The Sergeant stood there. The XO stood there. All eyes were on the hashish.

Nothing happened.

After a long few seconds, the XO barked at the Sergeant and the Sergeant tried to move in all directions at once.

My linguist leaned over to me and said that the XO just yelled at the Sergeant for not bringing anything to burn the hashish with even though apparently those two had talked about doing exactly that earlier in the

morning.

The Sergeant shouted at a couple of ANA soldiers and they ran to a nearby ditch to fish out some old scraps of windblown cardboard. Another soldier ran back to the CP and came out with an empty silver teapot and a full can of gas. The two soldiers tore the cardboard into shreds and placed it around the hashish while the other soldier slopped gasoline from the gas can into the teapot. The Sergeant stood with his hands on his hips and the XO glowered at everyone over his mustache.

The Sergeant grabbed the gas-filled teapot from the soldier and waved everyone away. He waited for the soldiers to fall back into formation and then he tipped the teapot over and poured the gas out onto the hashish.

The cardboard and hashish soaked up the gas. The Sergeant took a step back towards the XO.

Nothing happened.

The XO and the Sergeant traded a look and the Sergeant yelled something out to the formation. Sadin whispered to me that the Sergeant was now asking for a lighter.

A different soldier broke ranks and ran out to the Sergeant with his cigarette lighter held high. The Sergeant grabbed the lighter and shooed the soldier back into formation. The Sergeant crouched down over the hashish to ignite it. One of the other Marines leaned over to me and mumbled that maybe we should've brought a first aid kit with us.

The Sergeant flicked the lighter.

Nothing happened.

He cupped his hand over the lighter, held it down by the base of the cardboard scraps, and flicked it again.

It caught with a whoosh.

The fireball shot up into the air and the only thing that kept the Sergeant from burning his face off was a lucky gust of wind that blew the flames away at the last second. He scrambled back towards the XO, kicking up gravel.

The hashish and cardboard cooked right along. It spat black smoke and the occasional glowing ember. It was in no danger of going out but the Sergeant stepped forward again with the teapot, leaned over the flames, and poured more gas on the fire. There was another fireball but this time there wasn't another gust of wind. The Sergeant just barely managed to jerk his head away in time. Little drops of gas from the teapot spout scattered in an arc as he stumbled backwards. He kept his distance from the fire now.

The hashish was ablaze and the soldiers stared at it mournfully. The wind kicked up and swirled the smoke around, blowing it away from the formation so no one could even get a contact high.

Everyone watched the hashish burn down until it was just a small

smoldering pile and then the XO stomped it out. He commanded everyone to fall out as he ground his heel into the gravel. The soldiers marched awkwardly away while the officers converged back at the CP so the XO could yell at them some more before the daily briefing with the CO.

We filed into the CP and the other Marines and I stood in the back while the XO berated the company commanders and staff officers. Sadin offered to translate but I told him not yet because I thought the tirade sounded funnier in Dari. The XO pointed and yelled for a while until he finally wound down and dismissed the staff for the next meeting.

Everyone seemed mad that the XO burned the hash stash and the meeting devolved into a shouting match. I finally asked Sadin to translate and he could barely keep up with all the accusations. The Intelligence Officer called the Admin Officer a liar, the Support Officer called the Operations Officer a liar, the Operations Officer called both the Admin Officer and the Intelligence Officer liars, and finally the XO jumped in and called everyone liars. Sadin and I never figured out exactly what the accusations were about but we suspected it had something to do with the origins of the hashish.

The XO dismissed everyone and we all filed out into the operations center. The Operations Officer and the Support Officer got into a shoving match over whose turn it was to sweep the sand off the floor. Sadin and I sidestepped the fighting and walked out into the heat of the morning. Sadin shook his head in disappointment.

Up around 0500 although the call to prayer, the donkeys, and the roosters all started going off around 0400 and continued until well after sunrise.

Capt A gave me a bag of Planter's skinless almonds and I finished the whole bag only to find out that a mouse chewed a hole in the bottom of it. Now I probably have the Hanta virus. I took my anti-malaria pill, so hopefully I can have some crazy dreams. I miss my violent and bizarre dreams.

I mixed my drink and went outside and enjoyed the cool evening under a full moon and let the lone airline bottle of whiskey get me buzzed. My tolerance is extremely low. I will be a cheap date when I get home.

House Party

My buddy Tyler was a Deputy with the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department. I flew down to visit him about a year after we got home from Afghanistan. He was working when I got into LAX so I rented a car and drove north to meet up with him. I fought traffic for way too long and eventually linked up with him about halfway through his shift that night. I was able to do a ride along for the tail end of his shift. As we drove around the dark streets of Santa Barbara, he told me this story.

Santa Barbara has a robust hippie/surfer college population and Tyler's beat takes him out by the college from time to time. One night, a few months back, he picked up a call about a fight at a house party down by the college. He rolled out along with another car to break it up and to see what's what. When he got there, things had already settled down and he found a group of four junior Marines up from Camp Pendleton sitting quietly apart from an agitated mob of college kids. Tyler interviewed the rowdy college types and then went over to talk with the Marines.

They said they drove up to hang out with some friends at this house party they heard about when some hippie kid started mouthing off about how the Marines were bad for supporting a corrupt administration and an unjust war. The Marines tried to ignore him but the hippie kid just wouldn't let it go. The kid thought he was tougher than he actually was and he started shoving one of the Marines and giving the Marine a hard time about the war. The Marine took it for as long as he could and then he up and beat the hell out of the college kid. A few other

college kids tried to jump in but the Marines gave them a beat down as well. The college kids didn't like losing so they called the cops.

Tyler identified himself as a fellow Marine and a combat vet. The four Marines were relieved. They thought they found someone who could understand them. One of the Marines, frustrated almost to the point of tears, said, "They don't care! We gave everything for them and they don't care! We just wanted to come home and be happy."

Tyler sighed and told them a difficult truth. "They will never care," he said. "They don't care about you or what you gave up. They don't understand how close they came to death just now or how much self-control you had to exert to not kill them. They don't care about you at all and you need to learn that no one will ever care about you or what you did. I'm sorry, brother. You all just go home tonight and try to avoid talking with anyone who isn't a Marine. No one else will ever care."

Tyler told me it was the only thing he knew to say to keep those guys out of any future trouble with civilians. The faster they learned that the world didn't care about what they sacrificed or who died or who got their legs blown off or who got their face burned up, the better off they would be. I told him that he did them a great kindness. He and I had to learn that lesson the hard way.

"If you don't argue, it will be easier."

-Unknown Lt

A vehicle rollover killed 1 Marine & injured 2 more out in Marjeh. A goatherd triggered a PPIED which killed some goats & injured the LN.

Patrol Socks

"Just a little field advice for the new guy: picking a good patrol sock is a big deal. You need something soft, but not too soft. Silk is too thin and will leak like crazy. Microfiber or fleece gets quickly clogged with jizz so you want something with a little coarseness for absorbency to allow for repeated uses. Not too coarse, obviously, because you don't want chafing. Pure wool is a terrible idea. Smart wool is a good option, or even a sturdy cotton-poly blend sport sock.

Your wife's or girlfriend's socks will probably be softer but make sure that they're neutral or earth-toned. Don't pick something that will stand out color-wise, like pink or yellow or red. Bright colors will alert everyone to your jerk-sock. It needs to blend in yet still be different enough so you don't accidentally put it on in a rush and get splooge between your toes.

Dress socks work sometimes but if you use a dress sock be sure to get them without monograms since all that extra decorative stitching can rub on your dick the wrong way. It's also smart to forgo a longer tube sock in favor of something a little sportier. The bend in the heel allows you to come in the toe box but still have room left for additional loads in the heel if need be.

Some guys just use their dirty socks after a hump but then you run the risk of getting athlete's dick, even if you turn it inside out, so I don't recommend that technique. No one wants an itchy dick that you constantly have to dump Gold Bond on.

I opted for tan smart wool socks for the patrol option. They are soft enough, absorbingly thick, and readily identifiable from my regular green socks, so I always keep a pair on hand."

*Woke up earlier around 0430-0500 to the sound of someone jerking off.
Either S or Capt S. Didn't investigate too heavily, just tried to
cover my ears as best I could.*

Everyone's hair is out of control. Doc looks like Wolverine, Sgt H has a thick beard, P has Dragonball Z hair, & J has the best moustache that I've seen this whole deployment (they say it has magical powers).

It was very good to be with these guys again. It felt good to laugh with them. I can tell they have spent the last few months fighting. It is easy to see in the eyes. They are disillusioned with the ANA and the Afghan. They refer to them as cavemen. This war is such a pointless waste. W told me that they could go home tomorrow & never come back and that would be just fine.

Beard Scalps

Beards are a sign of manliness in Afghan culture, so naturally we talked about

beard-scalping the dead Taliban and mounting their beards on our map board to cure. We decided that our bayonets and fighting knives were too clumsy so we would probably have to settle on using the scalpels in our trauma kits since no one thought to bring a filet knife on deployment.

Doc walked us through the best way to skin someone's face and how to avoid accidentally poking holes in the back of the scalp due to a reckless or hasty carving of the cartilage and connective tissue. We talked about whether or not we should keep the lips on but we decided the fat in them would probably just rot and smell gross before they dried, so no lips.

We drew the line at taint scalping.

*Ladybug landed on me after I poured water over my head & I watched it
drink from my belly button for a few minutes.*

"Guns don't kill people. People with moustaches kill people."

-1stLt W

Have to work on a classified materials inventory tomorrow. Took my malaria pill so we'll see what kind of whacked out dreams I have. Hopefully it won't be like a few nights ago where I dreamt that I was shooting up a playground full of kids with an AK-47. That was a lot of fun. Bunch of ants invaded my area so I spent some time mooshing them and spraying bug repellent over everything. I hate it here.

Sweet callsigns: Dracula One One & Doom Zero Seven.

Rollo and Fat Jesus

When my unit arrived in Afghanistan we did a turnover with the unit we replaced. We took over their makeshift command center on the outskirts of Camp Dwyer, about 30km south of Marjeh. The tents were large tan military canvas GP tents with thick metal poles stuck up through hastily constructed plywood floors. The outgoing Marines gave us a good tactical brief but they failed to mention that there were two locals who were part of the remain-behind element: kangaroo rats of unusual size.

Once discovered, the Marines, being Marines, quickly named them Rollo and Fat Jesus (after the imaginary character Rollo Tomasay from the movie *LA Confidential* and Fat Jesus from a line of dialogue from *The Hangover*). Rollo and Fat Jesus stayed under the plywood floorboards during the day to escape the heat and commotion of our daily activities, but they would come out late at night and in the wee hours of the morning, sometimes alone and sometimes together, to steal food and rummage through our gear for any unsecured treats or snacks.

We didn't see them often but they were big enough to cause a stir whenever someone spotted them. Seeing just how big they were, we promptly decided to try and bulk them up to outrageous proportions. The Marines got in the habit of leaving out protein bars, beef jerky, bits of MRE cheese spread, and little piles of weight gain powder. I didn't officially condone it, but I didn't discourage it either, because Rollo and Fat Jesus acted like enforcers; they kept the other rats, bugs, and spiders away from our tent. I was also curious about just how big we could get them.

Rollo had slightly different markings than Fat Jesus. Fat Jesus had some serious jowls and was already larger. After several months of purposeful feeding, I noticed that it seemed like they were packing on muscle as well. Prior to Afghanistan, I never thought kangaroo rats could develop defined deltoids or visible triceps.

One night, about five months into our deployment, I woke up to a strange sound. It was maybe 0300 in the morning and everyone else in the tent was fast asleep. The only light came from the subdued dials of the radio and I could barely hear the soft beep-beep-BOOP of the crypto key indicating the radio was still able to receive transmissions. I didn't hear anything beyond the electronic beeps and the gentle snoring of a half dozen men crammed into the tent. I wasn't sure what woke me at first and it caused me to worry. Nothing good ever came from unusual sounds in the middle of the night.

I slept with a loaded 9mm pistol tucked under my right side in my sleeping bag and I slowly reached for it. I always found it better to be armed and suspicious in a war zone than unarmed and dead. I also let my left hand drift down to get my flashlight but I didn't turn it on yet. I held my breath and listened. After a few seconds, I heard the noise again. It was a soft sshhhhk, sshhhhk, sshhhhk and it came from somewhere in the middle of the tent. It was also back towards my cot and close to my feet. I took a shallow breath and heard it again. Sshhhhk, sshhhhk, sshhhhk.

It was too low to the floor to be a person crawling towards me and the sound didn't have any significant bulk to it. It wasn't metallic so I

didn't think it was a grenade or an explosive tied to a stick being shoved down the tent towards me. It was a small sound. There was a long pause as if whatever made the sound knew I was awake and that I was listening for it. After a while, it came again, only softer. Sssssshk. Sneakier. Sssssssshk. Another pause. Sssssssshk.

I had my flashlight held close to my chest and I pointed it at where I thought the sound came from. I aimed my pistol towards it and let my thumb rest on the safety selector. I clicked my flashlight on.

Fat Jesus froze. His black eyes flashed green as the light reflected off them and he stared at me. He didn't move. I didn't move. I was mentally prepared to see a Taliban insurgent or a ninja or even another Marine sidling up to play a prank, but what I saw instead was Fat Jesus on his hind legs, standing up, with his forelegs stretched out, holding on with his little paws to the top of a small squeeze-box of irradiated goat milk.

There was a flat of strawberry flavored irradiated Jordanian goat milk up by our communal snack pile on the table by the radio at the front of the tent that no one ever drank because it was disgusting. I didn't know why the Marine Corps would willingly purchase something like that. It was too hot outside for milk of any kind, let alone a box of artificially flavored foreign goat milk. Maybe they thought we would like it on cereal.

I tried a sip of it once and it tasted like the smell of spoiled sour cream spread over soggy bread, simultaneously fruity, curdled, yeasty, and musky. I spat it out immediately. I heard there was a regular

goat milk flavor available as well, but I refused to try and track some down for a taste test.

I was surprised and impressed by Fat Jesus' strength and ability, if not his choice in beverages. He had to locate the milk, climb onto the table, pull out a box from the plastic shrink wrap, get it off the table, and then push or pull it all the way down the length of the tent to his little bolt hole entrance in the floor by the rear support tent pole.

What woke me up was Fat Jesus slowly scooting the goat milk down the sandy plywood tent floor. The imperfect edges of the cardboard squeeze-box caught on the sand grains and Fat Jesus had to push hard to overcome the friction. That's the sound I heard: Fat Jesus would push the goat's milk three times, sshhhhk, sshhhhk, sshhhhk, take a little rest, and then resume his efforts. We had succeeded beyond our wildest dreams in bulking him up but we sure didn't do him any favors for his cardio.

Fat Jesus looked right at me. My flashlight beam connected his beady little rat eyes to my incredulous night-vision-ruined ones. He stared me down. Exposed and with a pistol pointed at him, he started to push. He shoved the box out with his forelegs as far as he could and then he took a few steps in with his hind legs, like an inchworm. Sshhhhk, sshhhhk, sshhhhk.

He paused to rest but he maintained eye contact with me. Sshhhhk. I had thrown his rhythm off but he remained resolute. Sshhhhk. He was just a few inches away from his goal and he radiated intensity.

Sshhhhk. With one final push, he tipped the box of goat milk into his bolt-hole and it fell down into the dark sand beneath the floor with a little flump. He looked down to make sure his prize was secure and then gave me one last look as if to say, "No one will ever -EVER- believe you, so go ahead and tell them about this. I don't give a fuck." Then he dipped into the hole and out of sight.

I clicked the flashlight off with my thumb and lay back onto my cot. I tucked my pistol and my flashlight away but I stayed there staring up into the blackness of the tent with my eyes open. I couldn't see anything beyond the dancing afterimages of the light. It was like looking at a disco ball. No one else had witnessed this event and I feared that Fat Jesus might be right: they might not believe me if I told them about his midnight heist. I listened for any sign of his progress as he maneuvered his box of irradiated Jordanian strawberry flavored goat milk around under the tent but I didn't hear anything. I fell asleep with a newfound respect for our tent mate.

The next night I left out a small piece of beef jerky for him by his bolt-hole.

"Man, they're going to spank us and sodomize us."

"Sodomy! They might even do bad stuff to us!"

-1stLt F & 1stLt H re: Crossing the equator and preparing for the
Shellback Ceremony aboard the USS Anchorage

Man-Love Thursdays

Thursdays were the start of the weekend for our allies and the ANA soldiers celebrated it regardless of whether they were out on a mission or back on base.

Thursdays meant it was time for them to smoke some hash, drink some illicit

Formaldehyde-based whiskey, grab hold of the most slender and doe-eyed soldier in the bunch (if no chai boys were on hand), and rape the shit out of him. Men, they told us, were for pleasure and women were for babies. It became a common joke for us to ask the Marine squad leaders if all their Lance Corporals were accounted for. Sometimes the young Afghan soldier wasn't that into being raped and he would scream and cry until the other ANA soldiers beat him unconscious.

Our superiors told us that it would be culturally offensive for us to interfere with our strategic partners and that we were just supposed to ignore it. The Afghans told us that Allah forgave them every Friday morning. I heard that once in a while, if the sounds got to be too much for the Marines, the "Taliban" would throw a grenade or someone's weapon would have a negligent discharge and the screaming from the ANA side of the COP would stop for a few weeks.

The New York Times did a piece about it on 20 Sept 2015. I never heard if the publicity made for any policy changes.

"If the world was fair no one would be in a wheelchair."

-Unknown Sgt

Sgt M sings quietly to himself as he surfs the internet.

W came with me and S to the ANA meeting. He laughed about the TI-85 graphing calculator on the S-6 slide as well. Also, the Med officer had pictures of injured ANA & a Taliban soldier missing his left leg & lower jaw. Funny because the S-1 didn't have any report of anyone being hurt or injured.

Hurt today ~ just depressed & angry and tired of wasting my life here.

Saw a Dealer flight (2 Cobras) and a Dustoff flight (2 Blackhawks) head out. Checked the SigActs & saw that someone from G's AO got hit. That is where Sgt H is bombing around. He's sked for a patrol at 1000 to the same location so I will worry about him all day.

WAG Bags

At the remote COPs, all the human waste had to go into big burn pits because they had no running water and indoor plumbing was a distant memory. The teams had to shit in WAG bags, plastic bags filled with silica beads to absorb moisture, which ostensibly provided a more hygienic method of excrement disposal. They burned the bags daily with diesel fuel and the stink was horrendous. Shit stirring duty was assigned to whichever junior Marine did the dumbest thing the day prior. Dumbness was decided via a democratic and complicated round-table discussion that involved multiple factors: the transgression, degree of severity, frequency of occurrence, personal injury potential, and overall humor level. Regardless of who had to stir the melting, smoldering, gently bursting bags of shit, everyone inhaled the drifting ash of burnt plastic and charred shit flakes all day, every day. It clung to their clothes.

At first, they would just piss and shit in the bags. As time went on, it became a game to see who could pull off the Trifecta (piss, shit, cum) but even that got too commonplace. Eventually, the goal was to achieve the Septfecta, the crown jewel of horrific human evacuation behaviors.

To win, they had to brush their teeth and spit in the bag, shit in the bag, piss in the bag, blow their nose in the bag, jerk off and cum in the bag, cry and drip tears in the bag, and then vomit in the bag out of pure physical disgust at the sight of what they'd done and the inhuman conditions to which they were subjected (it was a collective agreement that blood wasn't included because it didn't naturally expel

from a male orifice - if it did, they had to go see a medical professional but that also meant they were in the running for the Octofecta). Every stage occurred out in the open under the sun's all-seeing eye. Sometimes they would get a standing ovation depending on how much of a performance they made of it, but most of the time they would just quietly burn their prize in the pit and drink hot water out of plastic bottles and then toss those bottles into the burn pit as well.

Once, around the toxic fire of the burn pit late one night, I listened to my buddy ask another friend about what he was supposed to tell his wife, after he got home and they were getting ready to fuck again for the first time, about how he couldn't get hard without taking a shit in a bag and then burning it on the bedroom floor or if it would be OK for him to ask her to wipe her tits down with Wal-Mart brand wet-wipes because he now associated that smell with getting a boner. We all thought about it and no one really had an answer but one guy did recommend that he burned the bag of shit in the bathtub rather than on the bedroom carpet so he could just rinse it down the drain after it smoldered down to a plastic sludge. Everyone agreed that was wise.

"Remember, when you get home your wife is not a porn star. Don't treat
her like one."

-Unknown Chaplain

Hometown Hotties Scientific Survey

"Sir, we have a problem."

I was down on my cot for a sweaty after-dinner nap, resting before I had to type up the SitRep later that night. It was still hot in the tent, even now, hours after sunset. I opened one eye and looked up at Max. He stood there shirtless in a pair of dusty blue board shorts and untied combat boots. He rarely interrupted my naps unless it was a crisis. He looked agitated but not concerned so I figured it wasn't a dire emergency, but he obviously felt it was important enough to warrant my attention. "What's up, dude," I said.

He held up a *Maxim Hometown Hotties* magazine pull-out and pointed to the ranked girls. "This list is bullshit and we need you to arbitrate something for us. You can be impartial about hot chicks, right?"

"Yes," I lied. He was high if he thought that anyone except Olivia Munn would ever be number one. Luckily, she wasn't part of the Hometown Hotties list so I wouldn't have to compromise my integrity.

"Awesome. We're trying to rearrange this list to more accurately reflect reality because *Maxim* sucks and the editors there are idiots."

I sat up and thought about it. "Well, what's your plan? How are you going to go about figuring this thing out?" I was curious but I also didn't want to do any more work than I had to, even for a bunch of airbrushed boobs.

Max scrunched his nose. "Sir, we thought we'd just jerk off to these pictures and see which one takes the least amount of time to bust a nut to. Then that one would be the hottest and we'd just kind of go from there." He grinned as if verbalizing his plan made it sound stupid, which it was, but I was awake now, and kind of bored. It wasn't the crisis I expected but it was still sort of intriguing.

I held out my hand for the magazine spread and Max handed it to me. I looked at the display of tanned bikini bodies and thought about the process. "That could work, I think, but we'd need a control group. And we'll have to control for individual efforts, personal tastes, times of day, times between jerk off sessions, and probably put a limit on the whole shebang. Maybe go top ten instead of the full 50? How about ten girls in ten days? Otherwise people might get chafed and I don't need Doc on my case about why none of us can walk around without bleeding and crying."

"Sir! Yes! That's the best," Max enthused. He knelt down and I grabbed a notebook off my cot, pulled a map pen out of a MOLLE loop on my armor hanging on the gear tree by my desk, and handed them to him. Together we sketched out our plan.

"OK, so, who's all involved in this thing? Everyone?" I asked.

Max nodded. "Doc, too."

"Good," I said. "He can keep us in hand lotion and wet wipes. Let's make up the list of names down this side and then a matrix across the top for the girl, and another column for the total elapsed time."

Max drew a grid and filled in the Marine's names by rank.

"We need a control group, though," I said. "A baseline reading of standard non-sexy jerkoff times."

Max grunted an affirmation and drew another column for the control group. I reached past him to my desk and picked out a *National Geographic* from a stack of porn mixed in amongst my science magazines. I thumbed quickly through it and found a picture of an alpaca. I tore it out.

"Everyone jerks off to the alpaca first. They'll check in with me, take the alpaca to the shitter, rub one out, and bring it back, hopefully unsoiled. I'm gonna be pissed if someone cums on the alpaca. I'll clock people in and out and write their times on the sheet."

"What about the time it takes to walk to the port-a-shitter and back?" Max asked. "Some people walk faster than others. Anderson walks like he has a lit firecracker up his ass and Boaz shuffles around like an old man who forgets his own name."

I thought about it. He had a good point. "Margin of error, I guess? I don't know. I'm not going to follow you all with a stopwatch and stand outside waiting while you guys whale on yourselves, if that's what you're getting at. Not even for science."

Max frowned. "That makes sense, sir, but still- too many errors. They'll start compounding and skew the fuck out of the results."

Him and his goddamn computer science degree. "We're not going to the friggin' moon, dude. We're just timing the masturbation sessions of a bunch of men in the middle of the desert. Totally normal stuff." He laughed at that and turned back to the notebook.

"OK," I said. "So we'll have to go in order so that as the days go by and people get tired, there's a consistent drop off in times correlated to the individual girls rather than a random spread across random girl selection. We won't know for sure what the errors will be but we can at least conclude they'll be sort of in the ballpark of each other, right? And I don't think anyone's an unstoppable Jerkinator, so no matter who checks out what picture, it'll be the same for everyone. I'll have to cut up the pictures to prevent someone from splooging to like Akron or Dallas or somewhere terrible like that. Also, everyone gets Portland first. She has sexy hair."

"After the alpaca," Max corrected.

"Yes, after the alpaca. Also, if the alpaca wins, all of you have duty forever because seriously." I said it as a joke but then I got worried. We were only about halfway through the deployment and having someone develop a gross new perversion was still a distinct possibility. I already had to stop one team from ordering t-shirts with "*We Watch Crush Porn*" written above a cartoon of a lady's red high-heeled foot stepping on a cute yellow baby duck.

"Sir, so ten girls, ten days, after the initial alpaca, and you hand out the pictures in order, start the clock, we go jerk off, come back, turn in the picture, and you stop the clock?" Max said.

I confirmed the plan. "Yep. Sounds like a good use of our time."

"Beats getting exploded, sir." Max stood up and turned to go. "I'll go let everyone know if you want to cut out the pictures."

"I'm on it," I said. I flipped open my pocketknife, took the sheet of pictures over to my desk, and started cutting.

Max paused on his way out of my tent and turned back. "Oh, sir, are you participating? Who's going to time you?"

I focused on slicing along the edges of the pictures. I didn't want to slip and cut out some busty woman's eyes or something and give my teams yet another reason to discover some weird new fetish. "I'm going to stay impartial on this one, dude," I replied. "I'll just jerk it to that picture of your mom she sent me like I always do."

"That's fucked up, sir."

I laughed. "Everything's fucked up here, dude. Everything."

Sent in the morning report and did battle with CLC2S & the RCT-7/RCT-1 LOC. The ASR sheet that the Gunny sent me was the wrong format so it wouldn't upload, so I had to save it as a Windows 03-07 document and then reload it. Then the RCT guys sent the request to MHG so I had to delete it (because they rejected it & the LOC couldn't figure out how to send it to CLB-5) and resubmit it, but then the LOC jacked it up again, so I had to resubmit it a fourth time.

Camp Leatherneck is so crowded & new structures are going up every day. There is an air of permanence here that is distressing. Also, so many tents that I am worried about S-vests or some other strike. A garbage truck pulled up during our TOA & I figured that it was a truck bomb. There seems to be so little control of this area. I worry about the strike from within because it's what I would do. Actually, I would poison the water or the food & kill an enormous amount of people in one hit. I get the attempt to be comfortable but Leatherneck is out of control. So much duplication of effort & wasted resources.

We discussed putting together a real SitRep with columns for naps taken, books read, emails sent, movies watched, shits shitted, shitters christened (jerked off in), chows eaten, and bottles of water drank.

Got a call from R at 2200 about a firefight that Sgt H, Doc, Cpl P, & LCpl J (along with their ANA & Marine partners) were in. L-shaped ambush with sniper overwatch. Guys were taking fire from all directions and ended up in a compound where Marine snipers killed the enemy sniper with a .50 cal (took his head off). Multiple sections of air on station for 2 shows of force. RW assets on board for ISR. The team fired for suppression IOT allow the other guys to maneuver on E. Apparently, E got within 50m of them, to where they could hear the cries of 'Allah Akhbar.' Everyone came back safe despite the fact that rounds impacted less than a meter from them. Also, a donkey got killed. H said dust flew off it.

*I discovered the joys of Reese's Pieces again. Drinking lots of water.
Read some Penthouse, Hustler, and Discovery magazines (science & porn ~
oddly enough I enjoyed the science magazines more).*

I am constantly having micro-daydreams about drawing my pistol, loading a magazine, racking the slide, & shooting someone in the face just to see their look of total surprise.

Final Exam

Our final academic event at TBS was daylong exam testing our knowledge of tactics, history, terminology, weapons nomenclature, and any other obscure factoid that may have been presented during any class throughout the course. It was the culmination of six months of study and our future MOS assignments heavily depended on how we scored. Our class rankings dictated our position in the quality spread so the smartest or the best students didn't all go into the same occupational field. People who were gung-ho about administration got sent to the infantry and natural leaders with obvious warfighting abilities got sent to logistics. Quality spread, Devil Dog, we were told. Quality spread. We stressed about the final exam for weeks.

It was worse than we imagined.

The instructors played looped videos of war atrocities and scenes of intense violence on the big projector screens in the auditorium. The sound system pumped out screams and explosions and machinegun fire at maximum volume. They would run around shouting and yelling and generally tried to mess with our minds the entire time. They would come up and look over our shoulders at our answers and question us about whether or not we thought it was a good idea to mark C instead of E. They wanted to make us doubt ourselves. They wanted to tear at our confidence and make us hesitate. They wanted to disrupt our decision-making process.

The videos were horrific. This was before YouTube and the proliferation of every kind of terrible video imaginable so the images

had unprecedented shock value for us. The videos were carefully curated, hunted down from militaries all over the world, and compiled just for this event. An instructor favorite was a section of film showing the gruesome execution of a captured Serbian soldier in Chechnya. The instructors silenced the explosions soundtrack and kept their voices down so we could hear in painful detail every sound and noise the Serbian made as his captors cut his throat.

It showed a close-up of his head. He was lying on pebbled concrete. There were small pieces of gravel by his face. He was pale and young with just a little bit of stubble. He was about my age. His eyes were clamped shut. He didn't struggle or cry. His neck was exposed and his Adam's apple moved when he swallowed in fear. He never raised his hands to defend himself so I assumed his arms were bound. There was talking and laughter in the background off camera. They sounded Russian.

The camera lingered on the man's face for a few seconds and then a dirty hand with an old bayonet reached in from the right hand side. The hand displayed the bayonet blade, an AK style bayonet, with an oblong hole near the tip so it could be used in conjunction with the sheath as wirecutters. It had linear serrations across the back for sawing through branches. The hand rested the blade against the Serbian's throat, just to the side of his windpipe. The hand pushed the tip of the blade into his skin. The Serbian's neck dimpled. His Adam's apple moved up and down. His eyes squeezed shut harder.

The hand pushed the tip of the bayonet in with more force and the Serbian's skin stretched like thin leather. There was a sudden little

puncture sound. The first drops of blood burbled up and slowly ran down the crease made by the pressure of the bayonet. The hand shoved the rest of the blade in through the hole. The hand started working the blade up and down, up and down, cutting forward and out through the Serbian's windpipe towards his Adam's apple. A wheezy gurgle rushed out of the hole in the Serbian's neck as the blood bubbled up and ran down his open windpipe and into his lungs. The Serbian aspirated his own blood as the hand kept moving the blade up and down, up and down.

The blade encountered cartilage and gristle so the hand transitioned to a chopping motion. The hand hacked with the blade. The serrations snagged on the skin and roughly tugged at it. The Serbian's blood spurted out. It got everywhere. The hand was slick with it. The bayonet hacked and sliced as the hand yanked it back and forth and up and down. There was just a little flap of tissue left. The bayonet tore through the front of the Serbian's throat with one more slash. The Serbian's head flopped back. His breath whistled in and out of his blood-clogged windpipe. The blood kept pumping out in thick streams. A few fat drops splashed up and landed on the Serbian's still-shut eyes. The hand held up the bayonet and gave it a little waggle. Someone chuckled somewhere off camera.

The video ended.

The instructors cheered and cranked up the explosions again.

They played that video every five minutes.

The exam went on for hours.

*Took my pistol off because Taliban target the people with pistols
(corpsmen too ~ they've been using local sick calls to identify
corpsmen so they can be targeted while they are out on patrol).*

The Death of Bobby Jenkins

There was an explosion and then Jenkins was down.

"He's got a shrapnel wound to the thigh!" Henry shouted. "Stop the bleed!"

I was the first to reach Jenkins. He was unconscious and spraying blood from a deep slice high up on the inside of his right leg. Henry, Anderson, and Boaz scrambled for cover behind the low mud walls and the old wood beams of the hut, scanning the village for threats. They kept their eyes outboard but I could feel their worry.

I started talking to Jenkins like we'd been taught. Smooth, calming lies and a constant stream of reassurance. "You're gonna be ok, man. It's not too bad. You caught it in the leg but your balls are OK and your dick is all there and this is gonna hurt like a motherfucker. I'm sorry." I kept talking and soothing and calming and it kept me focused on stopping the jets of blood shooting out of him. I slammed the palm of my left hand high up Jenkins' leg, forcing it up and into the wound. His blood pumped hard out of the femoral artery and I had to lean my whole body weight into it as I tried to crush the artery against his pelvic bone to keep him from bleeding out. It would take less than half a minute if I fucked up.

I ripped the nylon tourniquet off the shoulder strap of my armor and used my teeth to tear the Velcro flap open wide enough to slip it out of the black plastic loop. I had to ease off the pressure on his leg for a few seconds in order to lean back on my knees far enough to use

my right hand to shove the tourniquet under the back of his thigh. More blood squirted out from under my palm. I was sweating and cursing and then I remembered to be soothing and I started up again, telling Jenkins what I was going to do and why I was doing it. His eyes lolled and he remained limp, unable to respond to my voice. "Dude, I gotta put a tourniquet on you and it is gonna hurt so fucking bad but I have to stop this bleeding and we're gonna get you out of here you lucky sumbitch you get to get the fuck outta here." I pinned the plastic ring of the tourniquet to the dirt with my left knee and reached over his blood-smeared leg to grab the free end of the strap with my right hand. I leaned in closer to keep pressure up and in his groin. I felt the heat of his blood on my arms and I saw glimpses of his femur shining through all the damage.

I jammed my face down towards his thigh and again used my teeth to bite the end of the tourniquet. I shut my eyes and visualized slipping the end through the ring and I let training take over as my hand guided itself through muscle memory. "All right, dude. I have to tighten this fucker and I know it hurts but I have to do it and here we go!" I yarded back on the tourniquet. The strap dug deep into his quad and hamstring. I strained and pulled on it, getting my left hand snagged in the process. The blood around the edges of the wound was already sticky. I had to wiggle my hand around to get some fresh blood on it to slide it out from under the strap. I got my hand free and I started tightening the hard plastic rod on top of the tourniquet, twisting and twisting to keep the pressure tight against the severed artery.

"Bobby, I got it stopped. We're gonna get you on the litter and then get you to the LZ so it's gonna hurt to move you and it's gonna keep hurting for a good long while but you're tough and it isn't that bad

and you'll be OK." My team kept listening to me the whole time, keeping track of my progress, so when they heard me say that I got the bleeding stopped they bent to their tasks without any orders from me.

Henry was on the radio calling in our grid and reading off the 9-line medevac request that Anderson worked up while I fought with the tourniquet. Boaz kept his eyes moving around the buildings of the village, scanning for any sign of the people who planted the IED. Anderson wrestled to set up the litter and get it slid next to Jenkins so we could roll him onto it. Henry finished the 9-line, turned and gave me a thumbs up, and said that the medevac would be here in 20 minutes. I nodded and quickly rubbed sand on my hands to scrub off some of the blood. "All right," I said. "Let's get him up and moving. Which building?"

"That one, sir." Henry pointed at a low mud brick structure with a faded tasseled rug hung over the doorway. "I'll go first. Sir, you and Anderson follow with Jenkins, and Boaz brings up the rear. Sound OK?"

I nodded. "Everybody good?" I asked. Helmets bobbed yes. "Rad. Let's go."

Keeping low, Anderson scooted around on the ground towards Jenkins's head, scraping his kneepads across the dirt and banging the barrel of his slung rifle against the wall. I leaned down to get better leverage on Jenkins's legs. "OK, Aaron," I said. "On three. Lift and roll. One. Two. Three!" We heaved together and got Jenkins up on the litter. Anderson picked up Jenkins's rifle and tucked it under Jenkins

while I checked the tourniquet to make sure it didn't come loose. Anderson took out a black Sharpie marker from a MOLLE loop on his gear, wiped the dust from Jenkins's forehead, and wrote a big capital T on it. Underneath that he wrote the time and the initials RL for "right leg." Anderson put the Sharpie away and nodded to me. We strapped Jenkins down on the litter. A hot wind kicked up and dust swirled around the dirt road in front of our objective. Sweat dripped into my eyes and I wiped it away with the back of my hand. "On your go, Tyler. Aaron and I are set."

"Roger, sir. Boaz!" he shouted. "Watch our six! As soon as Anderson and the Captain get clear of the door, you roll out and follow, got it?"

Boaz spoke for the first time since Jenkins got hit. "Yes, Sergeant. Cover, wait, follow."

"Good boy," said Henry. "Now go!" and he ran out, crouched low over his rifle, towards the covered doorway.

"Up, Anderson!" I said. "Let's move!" We lifted Jenkins up with a grunt. The magazine of my rifle dug into my armor as I flung it around behind me on the sling, out of the way of the litter handles. Anderson and I ran. I tried to match his steps to minimize jostling Jenkins but the terrain was uneven and the deep dust of the road hid fist-sized rocks. My boot caught the side of a rock and my ankle rolled. We stumbled and Jenkins swayed against his straps but we didn't fall or drop him. Boaz started yelling, "Covering fire! Covering fire!" and I heard him open up with his M-4, firing behind us in controlled bursts.

Henry made it to the doorway and hastily scanned for tripwires or pressure plates. Nothing exploded so he held the rug open while Anderson and I barreled in with Jenkins. An automatic weapon opened up from across the village. Henry kicked over a battered wooden table to make room for the litter and a tarnished tea set clattered to the ground. We set Jenkins down as gently as we could. Anderson took cover by a window and I crouched beside the doorway. Boaz, running backwards and firing down the dirt road towards a cluster of palm trees, fell on his ass as he flew in past me. Henry's arm shot out and grabbed Boaz by the drag handle on the back of his armor, yanking Boaz in and around the corner to cover. The machine gun kept firing.

"Sounds like an RPK," Anderson said.

Boaz, out of breath, patted himself down and then reloaded.

Henry looked at me and said, "Goddamn, what a fucking pickle."

I looked at Jenkins and said, "Fuck."

Jenkins had caught two rounds to the side of his chest during our movement. Blood oozed out of the holes and pooled under him on the litter. I called over to Anderson. "Aaron! Get the gauze and chest pads out of my IFAK!"

Henry laid down suppressing fire out of the doorway and across the village towards the sound of the incoming fire. I looked out the window where Anderson was and tried to find a target. I felt Anderson

tearing into my first aid kit attached to my armor on the left side of my back. "Got 'em, sir!"

"Get on it, dude! Check for exit wounds!" I glanced back at Jenkins. Frothy blood bubbled out of the side of his mouth, the sign of a collapsed lung and a sucking chest wound. I turned back around and listened to Anderson talk to Jenkins. I heard gauze packs being ripped open and plastic chest compresses being applied. I could smell the medical plastic underneath the metal blood and the burnt cordite. Boaz was on the hooks amending the 9-line request. The incoming fire stopped. Henry reloaded and waited. I heard Anderson work and swear and try to keep Jenkins alive.

Henry leaned in close to me. "Sir, we have to bounce. The LZ is still a few hundred meters east."

"OK. Boaz and I will cover. Give Anderson a hand and we'll scoot out of here as soon as he can move."

"Roger." I heard Henry rustling about and saying, "Fuck fuck fuck!" under his breath as he helped Anderson stabilize Jenkins. I adjusted my helmet forward and down, low over my eyes, and peered around the corner of the window. Nothing moved outside but the palm fronds and the churned-up dust.

"Ok, sir. We got him stable. Two hits, two exit wounds. Jenkins is missing a chunk of his back but we got it packed with gauze and we got the chest seals in place. I think he's got a few broken ribs, too. He's still unconscious but we have to get moving."

"Good job. Henry and Boaz with Jenkins. I'll lead, you follow. Anderson, you tail gun. Ready? Go!" I rolled out and up and through the door and down the side of the road, watching the tree line and the empty windows as we ran down the road, around the curve, and towards the clearing up ahead. I heard Henry and Boaz breathing hard as they lugged Jenkins's litter. Anderson was right behind us.

We rounded the corner and the tree line exploded around us. We all fell. A fireball blew by and a column of dark greasy smoke poured up into the wind. It swirled around us and the smoke mixed with the dust. I choked on it. Anderson opened up on the tree line. Henry checked Boaz and I crawled back, firing into the trees and getting between Jenkins and the flames. The litter had tipped over. Jenkins was face down in the dust and sand and sparse grass. "Get him up! Help me get him up!" I shouted. Henry and I lunged into it, trying to keep our heads down while twisting the litter around without dumping Jenkins again. Boaz reached in and tightened the litter straps. He tucked in Jenkins's rifle and gave the tourniquet another turn. Jenkins had severe burns across his shoulder and arm. His skin was blackened and I saw where the fat had bubbled up through the cracks in his flesh. Henry spun Boaz around and dug into his IFAK, pulling out more gauze and tape. He crouched down low and applied the dressings as best he could. There wasn't time to amend the 9-line again. We were exposed and trapped.

Anderson fired a few more rounds into the trees and, without saying anything, we picked up Jenkins and pressed on towards the LZ and out of the ambush. My throat was raw from the smoke so I took a quick

mouthful of hot water from my Camelback tube. I swished it, swallowed some, and spit the rest out when I saw movement in the tree line by the LZ. I raised my rifle and fired. Anderson, still tailgunning, turned and rattled off a three-round burst. Henry and Boaz pressed in close behind me. I saw more movement behind the trees. "Watch for secondaries! Watch for secondaries!" I said as the tree line erupted again. Two more close explosions sent dirt and rocks up into the air and it rained down on us as we ran.

Then the heavy double boom concussion of a shotgun was right there next to us and Henry fell back and I saw Jenkins get hit again. His lower jaw blew in half and showered the ground with teeth and blood. His nose blew apart. He aspirated fragments of his own teeth and tongue. I yelled and I saw Henry stand up and he and Boaz dragged Jenkins out of the kill zone.

Anderson emptied a mag, reloaded, and fired again. The shotgun blasts stopped. My ears rang and I reloaded without thinking about it. I dropped the empty magazine into the dump pouch on my waist and we took cover behind the low rise of sand around the base of a palm tree. Boaz was on the radio to Dust-Off and we heard the distant sound of an inbound Blackhawk helicopter. Anderson kept cover while Henry and I went to work on Jenkins. We lay down next to Jenkins and I faced him while Henry scrambled behind him.

Henry reached over to check the chest seals and I checked the tourniquet. No fresh blood seeped through. It was still tight. I reached up to scoop out bits of teeth and I moved the stump of his tongue from out of his mouth. Henry leaned down and placed his ear by

Jenkins's neck. "Sir, he isn't getting any air. His face is blocking his airway. We gotta tube him." I nodded and grabbed for my cricothyrotomy kit. I pulled out the flexible crike tube and handed it to Henry. I pulled the cover off the scalpel and felt for the windpipe in Jenkins's throat. I found the right place on his neck, pressed two fingers against it as my guide, and tried to cut in with the scalpel. The handle kept slipping in my hand and I couldn't get a good angle from my position. Henry said, "Here, let me try," and took the scalpel while I moved my hand to hold Jenkins's mangled face still. Henry pierced Jenkins's skin and blood welled up around the edges of the blade. Jenkins's windpipe resisted so Henry pressed harder and finally punched through the gristle. A bloody wheeze blew out of the incision and I saw Jenkins's chest rise and fall again. Air blew out the bottom of his chest seals as his collapsed lung whistled uselessly.

Boaz shouted, "Dust-Off is 30 seconds out!" Anderson popped a smoke grenade and tossed it out into the LZ. The wind grabbed the purple smoke and swirled it around. My hands were sticky with blood and I pressed Jenkins's head back while Henry twisted the scalpel sideways to hold open the incision. Henry snaked the breathing tube down into Jenkins's open windpipe. I grabbed my last roll of gauze and wrapped it around the plastic tube to keep it from bouncing loose and wound a loop around Jenkins's eyes to keep out the dust. I pulled my own goggles down off my helmet and onto my eyes. They immediately fogged up from the heat and sweat. Henry put more gauze pads over the ruins of Jenkins's face and I put Jenkins's rifle on safe and slung it across my back. I saw Henry wipe his bloody hands on the cargo pockets of his trousers. I looked over at Anderson, who had the radio handset in one hand, shouting the terminal guidance info to the pilots as he fired

into the tree line with his rifle in the other. Boaz loaded his last magazine and laid down suppressing fire as well.

The Blackhawk came in fast. Grape smoke blew down from the rotor wash in two beautiful recurving spirals. It swirled back up and around and obscured us as we lifted up Jenkins. We ran, hunched over, towards the open side of the helicopter. I was by Jenkins's head this time and I shouted into his ear that he was going to be fine and that we were getting on the bird right now and that pretty soon he would be eating ice cream and drinking beer and fucking all the sexy Army nurses his dirty little Marine dick could handle. Henry hiked up the litter and we shoved it into the helicopter as the door gunner helped us aboard. Anderson and Boaz stopped firing and sprinted towards us. Anderson dove in headfirst and slammed into me. Boaz flopped in as both the door gunner and Henry reached down to grab him as the Blackhawk's turbines roared and the blades bit the air and we surged up out of the smoke and into the sky.

The Medics tried everything on Jenkins and we tried not to get in their way as they worked. I had one hand on his chest and the other on his arm. Henry kept a low running talk going. Anderson patted Jenkins on the leg over and over. Boaz was wide-eyed and looked like he didn't know what to do with his hands now that it was all over. Jenkins's heartbeat was barely there and finally one Medic looked at me and shook his head. Anderson shut his eyes but Henry kept his on Jenkins. I kept my hands on Jenkins's chest and I felt his heart slow, slow, and then stop.

Hours later, when we were all cleaned up and back together at a local pizza joint, we toasted our fallen friend. "To Lance Corporal Robert Jenkins. May his death not be in vain," I said. Henry, Anderson, Boaz and I all tipped back our beers. Henry let out a satisfied belch and set his beer down on the table.

"Jesus Christ! I don't know about you guys, but that fucking sucked! I was crying my ass off there at the end," Henry said. Anderson and I laughed because we cried, too. Boaz smiled but he didn't laugh out loud because Henry had told him he wasn't allowed to laugh, since he hadn't deployed yet.

We toasted again to completing the most intense medical training we'd ever received. It was a little-known live tissue combat aid program operated out of a private ranch designed to simulate the battlefield environments of rural Iraq and Afghanistan and Lance Corporal Robert Jenkins was our patient. He was a 150-pound male pig, the recipient of a nerve block and a whole cocktail of drugs administered before and during the training evolution to ensure he was unconscious and unable to feel any pain throughout the whole exercise.

Our unit broke into four-man teams, each team with its own pig as a patient. We had to come up with a name and a backstory for our patient, with the only rule being that we couldn't name the pigs anything derogatory or food-related. The intent was to humanize our animals so that we would bond with them and take the training seriously, so no one could call the animals "Bacon" or "Hambone" or

anything like that or make jokes about getting a breakfast platter at IHOP or Denny's.

Lance Corporal Boaz, the youngest and least experienced Marine in our unit, came up with Jenkins's name during our naming brainstorming session right before the first scenario. "In every war movie," he said, "there's always some guy named Jenkins who gets killed or something, so I think we should call him Jenkins."

"Makes a weird kind of sense to me," Sergeant Anderson said. "I dig it." Neither Sergeant Henry nor I had any objections so we settled on a first name of Robert, since we figured Jenkins sounded like he was from the south and was probably named after General Robert E. Lee. We shortened it to Bobby because it seemed like something Marines would do to someone with such a storied namesake.

The training lasted for over 18 hours and each scenario provided a different life-threatening injury to our patient that we had to identify and treat while moving through the evolution, solving tactical problems along the way and using all our combat, medical, and communications experience to keep our patient alive until EndEx. Some patients died during the training but those teams had to keep working on their dead pig throughout. We managed to keep Bobby Jenkins alive until the very end. The four of us really did cry for him when the on-site veterinarian administered the final euthanasia injection.

We spent some intense hours with the unconscious animal and we took him in as a member of our team. I stopped a deep femoral bleed. Anderson saved him again with his timely application of chest seals. We treated

his burns. Henry actually did perform a cricothyrotomy in the grass after Jenkins took two shotgun blasts to the head. There were simulated explosions and real explosions. The trainers fired blank rounds at us and live rounds at Jenkins and we could only return fire with blank ammunition and swear words. The medevac was simulated with loudspeakers, industrial fans, and a converted Conex box but the injuries inflicted and the attempts to save Jenkins were genuine.

We were conditioned to blood and guts and noise and stress and exhaustion and later, when it was all real, we gave thanks to Lance Corporal Robert "Bobby" Jenkins for everything his sacrifice taught us.

I noticed that my handwriting is getting smaller and tighter, probably manifesting the dense ball of rage that I bottle up everything into and bury deep inside. I wonder what it will be like when I finally snap? Hopefully fun until I get caught and go to prison.

Justifiable Fratricide

I killed a fellow Marine officer.

I killed him every single day for seven months.

Sometimes I killed him multiple times a day if he was being a shithead.

I worked with a terrible Marine. His complete lack of physical fitness was paired with a total disregard for anyone else's thoughts or opinions and the Marines hated him right from the start. I tried for several weeks to give him the benefit of the doubt but his lack of motivation to do anything beyond eating garbage, pirating movies, and being physically revolting eventually wore me down.

Being fat is the cardinal sin of the Marine Corps. It doesn't matter what someone looks like as a civilian but body composition is something else entirely in the Marines. A Marine can be mean, ornery, nice, considerate, dumb, clever, skating, motivated, morally bankrupt, deeply religious, ugly, attractive, timid, naïve, goofy, aggressive, big and muscled, short and wiry, be a for-real genius or be alarmingly mentally deficient (there are ways to correct for all of those things, and sometimes the Marine Corps actively encourages a few of those traits), but a Marine cannot be fat. A Marine could be the smartest, most technically and tactically proficient military mind in the whole Corps, but if that Marine looks like ten pounds of shit crammed into a five-pound bag, no one will take that Marine seriously. Fat Marines are considered so offensive that the Marine Corps instituted the Military Appearance Program in order to ensure that Marines weren't straining

the buttons and seams of their uniforms even if they were within the height and weight standards. The Marine Corps doesn't want Marines to look even a little bit fat.

Most of the Marines on our team lost 20-25 pounds over the course of our deployment. The Marine officer I worked with was the only Marine I knew who went to war in Afghanistan and actually got fatter.

The Marines called him Captain the Hutt.

Our tents weren't that spacious and we had a lot of communications equipment that we had to cram in as well so our cots were relatively close together with no real privacy beyond a few strung-up ponchos. I worked, ate, and slept no more than ten feet away from Captain the Hutt. Someone mailed him a Costco-sized bag of Jolly Ranchers and he sucked and slurped and slobbered them down piece after piece, while he lay flopped back on his cot with his laptop balanced on his gut, watching movies and mouth-fucking his candy for hours. I had to wear headphones and listen to the ocean waves of the white noise app on my phone at an uncomfortable volume to drown him out.

He chewed with his mouth open, getting crumbs and bits of food all over his lips and clothes and the floor. He would tromp around the tent barefoot, leaving sweaty footprints all over the dusty plywood floors and propping up his greasy splayed toes on everyone else's chairs and cots. He continued to do so even after multiple Marines (including me) pointed out that it was both unsafe and unsanitary. He farted with abandon, following each gassy outburst with a little exclamation ("Rick James!" "That's disrespectful!" "Ahhh!") and a wheezy giggle. He

repulsed me so much that I took copious notes about his behavior in my journal. It started out as just a quick sentence or two about his annoying personal habits but it quickly became the only way I could unburden myself from the unrelenting build-up of his daily offenses:

25 May

The new SALT leader and I may not get along. He just walks around saying stupid shit like "Glorious!" and "Warriors!"

03 June

The Marines call him "The Hutt" because he's fat. He eats all the time, he never PTs, and he stays on his rack watching movies all day long. All we need to do is put Boaz in a Princess Leia slave outfit and have him chained to the foot of Captain the Hutt's rack.

14 June

I had to break out my iPhone and fire up the white noise application because Captain the Hutt's lip smacking, coughing (he chain smokes), and mouth noises are totally repellent and indescribably aggravating.

15 June

Tried to find an armorer for Captain the Hutt since he put his rifle back together minus the firing pin and got the bolt stuck.

09 July

Captain the Hutt cranked up his mini speakers as loud as they would go (to the point of distortion). I think he is both deaf and inconsiderate since I was trying to take a nap. Ended up having to put my own headphones in just to drown out his crappy music.

02 Aug

Captain the Hutt just decides to be loud. I just can't stand to be around people who can't be quiet. I think I'm going to spend more time PTing because I know he won't be doing that.

03 Aug

Went to bed around 2300, woke up a half hour later to the sound of Captain the Hutt eating chips. From across the tent. He was that loud. Jesus, he finally quit it after a solid half hour of chomping and smacking.

05 Aug

Turns out the battery in the humvee died because Captain the Hutt left the fan on (despite me telling him to shut it off).

06 Aug

I have been short with Captain the Hutt all day mostly because he doesn't listen, he is deaf (or retarded), and so I have to raise my voice and basically shout at him for him to hear me, and he is still a lazy shit.

08 Aug

Captain the Hutt took off at 1845 to race to the PX to grab a microwave. His wife sent him a bunch of microwave soups and such so he decided to buy a microwave in order to heat them up. It will probably end up shorting out all of our power.

13 Aug

Called Captain the Hutt on the Iridium and it sounded like he was fucking things up all over the place. I am worried about what I am going to come back to.

14 Aug

I went back to the PEB, dropped off my gear, went to chow, and then headed back to the CP where I checked my emails only to find that Captain the Hutt had successfully destroyed any kind of unit cohesion we had left. While I don't think that Gunny has done a great job out here at all (in fact, he's been a colossal disappointment), I wouldn't have sent it to him in an email like Captain the Hutt did. Plus, it sounds like yesterday was a clusterfuck of a movement and everything got all jacked up with little to no explanation to the teams about who was going where and why. So now I get to go back and repair the damage (or at least try to).

18 Aug

I keep getting reminded about just how much Captain the Hutt grosses me out. He is always dirty, always smells bad, there is a constant pile of food scraps around his area. Plus, he just flat-out lied about his weight for his promotion picture (187 my ass ~ he has to be pushing 210 or 215 and he is a couple inches shorter than me). I walked in on him duct-taping his fat gut in so he wouldn't look like a bag of ass for his photo. The shit of it is the CO doesn't care because they are libbo buddies and they perv on other women whenever they're together, which I'm sure their wives would love to hear about.

22 Aug

Went to lunch up at DFAC 3 by myself because Captain the Hutt was rearranging the tent area to make room for his icemaker, microwave, and coffee pot (all conveniently within arm's reach of his rack). I have decided to just get to-go boxes for him that consist of only the fattest, most high calorie of foods so I can fatten him up even more. He is one of the most out of shape officers I have ever seen.

24 Aug

Went to chow at DFAC 4 w/ Captain the Hutt. He is a surge driver ~ completely unable to just cruise along ~ constantly accelerating and braking, never keeping a steady speed. His driving gives me a headache. I can't believe he's a pilot.

25 Aug

Earlier, Captain the Hutt and I went to RCT-7 to rustle up some maps from them. I was so embarrassed to even be near him. He was so fat (and getting fatter) and smelly and just so obnoxiously loud and pushy that it was all I could do to not scream at him. Some days are harder than others to keep the peace between him and everyone else. He kept hitting up everyone he saw for movies ("Who's the movie guy?") The only time he is motivated to do anything is if it is for his benefit or comfort, or if it gets him out of any work. He has no regard for other people's perspectives or interests. What a jackass.

26 Aug

Went out to get showered up. Captain the Hutt came with, which marks the first time in at least a week that he has taken a shower despite having every opportunity to do so.

27 Aug

Got back only to find that there was a fuck-up with our secret materials count. Instead of amending our CMCC sheet, Captain the Hutt spent more time arguing about why we don't need to count it or make changes to the account than if we had just made the changes.

28 Aug

Watched some episodes of *The Wire* just so I wouldn't have to listen to Captain the Hutt chew or smack his lips or otherwise be disgusting.

31 Aug

Captain the Hutt has decided that he is absolutely going to try and work out today. Capt T was over from his run so I suggested that he take Captain the Hutt running. He did and Captain the Hutt almost died. He is so fat and out of shape that he hurt his knee pretty much immediately and will most likely not PT for another month. Leadership by example.

01 Sept

Ended up watching *The Hangover* & trying to ignore Captain the Hutt's loudness. He also flails around with little regard for other people's personal space or activity. Sgt H and Doc picked up the mail. I got some cube organizers, a hanging bamboo organizer, magazines, sweet aviator sunglasses, and headache medicine (and ninja stickers). Captain the Hutt seemed annoyed that I didn't get any snacks or food to share. He didn't understand why I was happy to get things to help me stay organized. At some point he is going to have to PT. The Marines are very aware of the fact that he doesn't work out at all.

02 Sept

Captain the Hutt's quote of the day: "This is the only thing I want to do this deployment - collect movies."

03 Sept

I poked into the tent to see if anyone wanted to go to chow with me. No one did until I told them that Captain the Hutt wasn't going, then Doc volunteered to ride with me.

04 Sept

I think that he doesn't want to do anything war related so he actively prevents others from doing anything worthwhile as well.

08 Sept

Got back from lunch and Captain the Hutt was on the warpath about the fact that the little A/C unit died again. He is never more focused or passionate than when the A/C dies and he can't spend all day watching movies. The Marines hate him. I hate him. Everyone else resents him. Ugh. Only 4 more months to go.

13 Sept

Came back and checked my email finally, which Captain the Hutt took as his cue to start talking to me again while I was trying to type. I don't think it's intentional but rather he genuinely doesn't have a concept or consideration for anyone but himself. It would be amazing if it weren't so repugnant.

16 Sept

The ETT LtCol stopped by to borrow Sadin for linguist duties. They both laughed at the fact that Captain the Hutt took the NTV to go to the gym. Sadin said at least he was taking 'baby steps' and then made me promise not to tell Captain the Hutt that he said it. You know you are out of shape when the linguists are making fun of you about it.

18 Sept

Captain the Hutt wanted some of my Wheat Thins so he tried to reach into the box to take a handful. He is gross and unhygienic so I had to stop him and give him crap about having nasty hands and not even asking to have any of my crackers. He pisses me off.

19 Sept

I get unbelievably annoyed with all of Captain the Hutt's attention-getting noises. His wheezy cough is irritating as hell.

20 Sept

Got back and found Captain the Hutt with his shirt off cutting his hair. His gut is mottled and he has the kind of back fat that somehow goes straight down into where his ass should be defined, but isn't.

06 Oct

Unsure as to why Captain the Hutt feels compelled to talk to me while I am exercising with my headphones in.

Seriously. Tried to compose some emails but Captain the Hutt also talked to me the entire time I was typing.

07 Oct

Captain the Hutt came back from the convoy brief to get 5 boxes of Clif bars.

14 Oct

Captain the Hutt keeps wondering why he doesn't lose weight. He only drinks Crystal Lite, Rip-Its, and soda because he doesn't like water. Why is it that fat people and people with health problems don't like water?

15 Oct

Swung by the camp's Master Planner's office because Captain the Hutt was convinced that she told us some Army guy had Alaskan tents for us. I didn't remember that part of our conversation. He barreled into the office, asking ridiculous questions, and making us look completely stupid. It was embarrassing. He has no people skills whatsoever. I had to smooth a bunch of ruffled feathers after he left.

14 Oct

I wore my headphones and listened to the ocean waves crash on a distant beach just so Captain the Hutt would leave me the hell alone. He was feeling sick and congested so he

was sneezing and not covering his mouth, coughing and not covering his mouth, hacking up wads of grossness and not covering his mouth, and doing his weak-ass wheezy coughing that absolutely enrages me. Like at a genetic level. He is a fat disgusting smoker and he complains to me about how he is not losing weight. Goddamn. He is the only one who drives the Toyota to the gym to work out. The Marines make fun of him and I pretend not to notice.

15 Oct

Went to chow with Captain the Hutt. He said, "What's that?" 12 times at lunch alone. I cannot stand repeating myself to him.

16 Oct

Got some stuff packed up for our move. Boxed up the stuff in my desk and moved my desk out to the admin iso. Captain the Hutt didn't want to load his up. He is the only person who kept his desk in the tent instead of packing it in the iso like everyone else.

21 Oct

Captain the Hutt is walking around with his iPod on and his crap music blaring in his headphones. I can hear it from across the tent. No wonder he's deaf. My new game is to make him repeat himself as often as he makes me do it. Also, as an aside, he has not once ever said please or thank you.

22 Oct

I went and took a shower and met up with Captain the Hutt who (surprise) actually finished his own workout. We walked back to the compound from the RCT-1 shower area and he kept drifting into me, bumping into my hygiene bag. I can't tell if he's clueless or if it is some kind of subconscious action that he does when he's feeling inferior. Maybe it's because he caught me staring with open disgust at his fat gut in the shower bench/sink area.

02 Nov

It is unfortunate that Captain the Hutt is our representative here because, despite his feeble attempts at exercising, he appears to be getting fatter and the FROG suit is not a flattering uniform for him.

04 Nov

We went to chow at DFAC 4. Captain the Hutt went in with his gut on prominent display through his FROG suit and drew the stares and snickers of a bunch of enlisted Marines in the chowhall. I was embarrassed to be near him so I made sure I had a huge salad in response to him grabbing two grilled cheese sandwiches and a bunch of other fried food (tots, fries, chicken wings, egg rolls). He can be truly disgusting when he eats.

08 Nov

We could not be more opposite if we tried and, despite what TV and movies tell us, opposites do not make good buddies.

29 Nov

I planned ahead and packed a Clif bar since I knew we would miss lunch, so of course while I was snacking, Captain the Hutt woke up from his fat slumber to ask me where I got it and he seemed annoyed when I told him I brought it with me and I didn't have one for him. He actually got up and looked around the ADACG to see if I was telling the truth.

25 Nov

Sometimes I catch myself looking at him and thinking at him, "I hate you. I hate you so goddamn much."

03 Dec

I can't stand the sight of his fat head.

So, all of that, only for seven long months.

I started daydreaming about murdering him. I learned (from all his ramblings) that he was severely allergic to aspirin so I planned on grinding up a bunch of pills and lacing his food with it. I wanted to watch his lips and tongue swell up as he coughed himself into oblivion while he slipped into anaphylactic shock and died. I had a bottle of aspirin on hand and I fantasized about it for a solid week. I took the bottle out of my pack from time to time and rattled the pills around. The sound was soothing.

I imagined pretending to be supportive of his exercise endeavors and inviting him along on my daily runs around the base. I would jog along

next to him, encouraging him through his wheezing and complaining, and I would wait until we were far away from the prying eyes of the GBOSS cameras, out by the ends of the airfield, and then I would push him out in front of one of the big container trucks that were always driving by way too fast because sometimes bloody but fortuitous accidents happen. The TCN truck driver would get blamed for unsafe driving habits and fatally hitting a Marine, especially with my witness statement attesting to the fact. It wasn't unheard of for foreign contractors to inadvertently run people down.

I thought about killing him so much that I snapped awake one night, standing over him, with my pistol pointed at his snoring face. I had no memory of getting out of my cot and walking the few short steps over to his sleeping area. I stood there for a long time wondering if I could get away with it. I figured that I could take his pistol, shoot him with it, and then shoot one of our linguists with my pistol, so I could spin the story that the linguist went nuts and killed Captain the Hutt before I could shoot the linguist. Instead, I turned around and went back to my cot. I settled in and looked back at Captain the Hutt's sleeping girth and then I looked over at our linguist Sadin. I could just make out Sadin's eyes watching me in the dark. I smiled at him and went back to sleep.

The Marines were also tired of Captain the Hutt's bullshit. He didn't start PTing until late in the deployment and even then he wanted to drink protein shakes in addition to, not in lieu of, his usual diet of fried food, cigarettes, and candy. The Marines somehow managed to find two boxes of vanilla cake mix at the PX and they snuck into the tent one night and swapped out all Captain the Hutt's protein powder for

cake batter. I knew what they were up to and it made me laugh, but not as hard as I laughed when he consumed the whole container of "protein powder" in less than two days. He exclaimed it was the best-tasting protein powder he'd ever had so he drank three shakes a day until he shit himself so hard that he ruptured his butthole, got an infection, and Doc had to take him to medical.

It was the only time I was glad I didn't kill him.

He got promoted, last I heard.

Up early to get ready & head to breakfast before heading out to the counter-IED training. 5 buses (shitty Asian mass transit buses) to transport the whole of ANGLICO. Have to wait for the second wave. Very hot already. Pile on additional buses (ours had A/C) only to be told to get off & fill in the first 3 buses. So, 5 buses went to the training area ~ 3 full & cramped with no A/C and 2 empty ones with A/C. Because of course.

Ended up waiting 3 hours before stepping off for who knows why. Route up was hot, flat, and dusty. Passed numerous walled compounds, scrap vehicles. Got into Marjeh & went over narrow dusty roads & canals. Lots of bamboo & moon dust. Children making the same 'feed me' hand gesture as well as throwing rocks at our vehicles and swimming/playing in the canals. Passed motorcycles, children, goats, oxen, old men napping on the ground in the sun, more bamboo, mud-walled compounds, deep canals with green water in them, old trash, angry young men, and a heartbreaking sunset.

"If this is Eden, no wonder they ate the apple."

-Cpl R

*I woke up at 0330 to some weird noises but it was only Gunny eating a
Pop Tart.*

We are in River City since a Marine got shot in the neck. I read in the SigActs that he was medevac'd to Dwyer and saw in my email that they activated the walking blood bank and then deactivated it a half hour later. They implemented River City 20 minutes after that so I think he bled out here.

Rest for the Weary

Aaron rotated back with his team after spending weeks out at a COP supporting the ANA assigned to that part of Marjeh. They got mixed up in a day-long gunfight right before they were scheduled to come back to Camp Dwyer and his team was dirty and exhausted.

They were fighting with such intensity in the heat and sand that the CLP they normally used in their weapons burned off and they were having problems with jamming and stoppages. It got to the point where they had to raid a mud hut on the outskirts of a village and steal a jug of cooking oil so they could lube up their rifle bolts. Aaron said that the cooking oil made it smell like they were shooting up a McDonald's.

The team survived and made it back to the COP with some good stories about the close calls they had and the stupid things they did during the fight. At one point Doc had to dive off a roof out of the way of incoming AK fire and he landed on the SAW gunner, much to the delight of everyone except the SAW gunner.

Their flight out was delayed by a dust storm. Air was "red" which meant that visibility had dropped to zero and no one could move or be extracted. All units had to go firm and not move from where they were since if someone set off an IED and got their legs blown off, no medevacs could fly in to rescue them and no gunships would be on station for air support. This made Aaron and his team sit in the dust and dirt for another day and it did little to improve their morale.

A stiff wind kicked up and blew the dust away. Air went "green" and they made it back with no more trouble. I met them at the ADACG with our MAT-V and the busted Humvee and I helped them offload all their gear from the helo. Some of the other Marines and I went to the chow hall before they arrived and we loaded up some to-go boxes of food for them so they had something other than MREs to eat when they got in. Aaron had dust caked into his eyebrows and he tried to look everywhere at once while we drove back to our tents. He was trying to adjust to even this small level of civilization. It was hard for him to believe that everything around him wouldn't immediately explode.

I wanted to pat him on the shoulder but I knew from experience that he didn't want anyone to touch him at all. I'd been there too, and I knew what it was like to come down from an adrenaline high, feeling like everyone everywhere was a threat. I knew he didn't want anyone in his personal bubble so instead I gave him the can of warm Pepsi I smuggled out of the chow hall. He cracked it open and sipped at the bubbles while he told me all about the firefight.

We got back to our tents and I helped the team unload their gear. I tried to make sure they felt welcome and secure back here on base. Once the reunions were over, some of the returning team struck out for the shower tents while Doc took off to be alone out by the fire pit. Aaron just wanted to crash on his cot.

Once Aaron was out, Tyler came up to me with a wicked grin. He reminded me that Aaron was terrified of clowns. He also reminded me that my clown costume was in the Ratfuck Box.

The Ratfuck Box was actually a pile of boxes heaped high at the front of the tent and it contained all the stuff from our care packages that was worthless or useless or so stupid that no one wanted it. It was communal and anyone could grab anything from it at any time, but since it was just a bunch of junk, no one ever did. It had dozens of cases of baby wipes (not the good kind you could jerk off with, but the thin, crappy kind that were scented like grape or apple and somehow made your butthole feel greasy rather than clean); it had outdated *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* magazines plastered with the faces of celebrities we'd never heard of doing crap we didn't care about; it had packets of melted lip balm in gross flavors like pina coloda and root beer that we would never use, emblazoned with the names of churches we would never attend nor send thank you cards to; it had expired Clif bars from the company in Oregon looking to make some big donations so they could write off their unsold expired garbage as a tax deduction and make it look like they were SUPPORTING THE TROOPS; and, of course, all our leftover Halloween decorations.

I scooted the dusty Ronald Reagan mask out of the way of the tattered pink tutu and pulled up the clown suit I wore to the chowhall on Halloween night. Tyler rubbed his hands together in the exaggerated way of cartoon villains everywhere. Aaron was frazzled. Aaron was weary. Aaron was on edge and Aaron was dangerous. But Aaron was also asleep.

It was time, he said, to fuck with Aaron.

Aaron was my friend and I respected him as a Marine and I loved him like family. He and his team had a rough time of it recently and all

he wanted to do was sleep in a place where he felt safe and comfortable.

I only felt sort of bad.

Tyler managed to get everyone else cleared out of the tent. He stripped down to just his green silkies and a pair of running shoes so he could sneak around the tent like a big, sweaty, mostly-naked ninja. The plan was for Tyler to creep up on Aaron and steal Aaron's rifle, pistol, grenades, and knife while I lurked just outside the tent dressed in my grimy, yellow-and-green polka-dot satin clown suit. Once Tyler disarmed Aaron, I would run into the tent, attacking Aaron and hopefully making him pee himself out of fear. Tyler wanted me to be the one in the clown suit since he thought that Aaron might recognize me as an officer and probably not try to beat me to death like he would one of his own teammates. There was still that risk, though. I settled the rainbow wig on my head and decided it was worth it.

Tyler slowly moved Aaron's rifle out from arm's reach. He arched over Aaron's snoring body and gently pulled Aaron's 9mm from its holster. Sweat beaded down Tyler's nose and threatened to fall onto Aaron's face. Tyler wiped it away. He tucked the pistol under the pillow of the cot behind him and went back for the grenades. One by one he took the frags and smoke out of their pouches and set them down in a row along the backside of the tent. Finally, he felt around by Aaron's waist and in a delicate maneuver straight out of a heist movie, he unsheathed Aaron's K-Bar. Tyler flipped the knife around into an ice pick grip and motioned to me that Aaron was disarmed. He put the K-Bar blade-down into an empty boot on the floor. Doc was back from staring

into the fire pit and some of the other Marines were back from the shower tent. They saw what we were up to and egged us on with breathless grins. We had an audience now and we owed them a good performance. They watched me while I made a few last-minute adjustments to my costume. Aaron snorted and rolled over. He threw his arm up over his eyes and settled back to sleep.

I charged.

I screamed into the tent. I shouted Aaron's name and I stomped my boots as loudly as I could and I launched myself onto his cot. Aaron was instantly awake. He flailed around for his rifle but it was gone. I straddled him and yelled, "Boogah-boogah-boogah!" in his face while he abandoned his search for his weapons and started throwing punches. He wailed, "GODDAMMIT GODDAMMIT!" as he swung his fists into my wig.

He hit me in the nose and I fell off the cot. Aaron was up and ready to kick my head in. Tyler ran over and put Aaron in a bear hug. He used his size to swing Aaron up and away from me as Aaron kicked at the air and screamed and threatened me with murder.

I could not stop laughing. Tyler fell backwards with Aaron still wrapped up. Tyler laughed the whole way down to the ground. The Marines howled. Aaron slowly realized what happened and he was pissed the fuck off. Tyler kept him in a bear hug while he made Aaron promise not to kill us all in the night. He made Aaron promise this over and over. I took off my wig and tossed it on Aaron's cot. I went over to where he and Tyler laid in a heap on the sandy plywood and I offered Aaron my hand to help him up. Aaron, wild-eyed and breathing heavy,

reached up and took it. Tyler let him go and I pulled him up to me, into an actual hug. I said, "Welcome back, brother," and he punched me in the stomach. I doubled over, retched, and kept laughing.

He went back to his cot and knocked the wig off. He looked around for his rifle, found it, picked it up, and lay back down with it over his chest. "Oh, you bastards," he said. "You miserable bastards. That was my nightmare. That was my fucking nightmare."

Then he started to laugh.

2nd ANGLICO had one guy conscientiously object while he was in Leatherneck ("I can't sleep!"), one Navy LT freak out and have a breakdown, and the guy replacing W, Capt R, had some kind of freak out, too, and called down to the SALT complaining that he couldn't handle the stress and that he needed help after only one day of being in-country. Also, found out from W & H that the 2nd ANGLICO team ignored their advice about only bringing 1 bag. Instead, they each brought 4 and the Capt brought a guitar. Jesus. Then the first question they asked was, "Where is the internet?"

Game, Set, Match

The ETT asked us for our help in forming a volleyball team to play against the ANA since the Afghan soldiers loved volleyball. We thought it would be an easy win but we didn't count on the fact that the Afghans loved cheating at volleyball even more than they loved playing it.

Our little group of seven tag-teamed with the ETT's Lieutenant Colonel and subordinate officers and we tried to stack up by height, skill level, and motivation level. Some of us were more enthused about playing volleyball in the middle of the afternoon in the middle of July in the middle of an Afghan Army base in the middle of the southern Afghanistan desert than others.

The Marines changed over to the typical green on green PT uniform (green t-shirts and green PT shorts) and tan desert combat boots. Some of the guys wore their old green silkies, the Marine Corps version of catch-me-fuck-me shorts, and others had on the more sensible and much less revealing new style of PT shorts. The skinny chai boys, with their delicate features and painted fingernails, floated around the edges of the volleyball court and took pictures with their camera phones of the Marines wearing the tighter shorts, as did some of the larger Afghan soldiers who were lined up to watch. The ANA all wore a mix of black soccer shorts and colorful soccer jerseys. One soldier, who looked all of 17 years old, had a green t-shirt that just had "Special Forces" on it in shiny gold letters printed against a red striped background. We took a picture with him after the match just to get a shot of his shirt.

The Afghans fielded a team of 12 while we stuck with the generally accepted number of six players on the court at a time and that pretty much set the tone for the rest of the day. Their CO, Colonel Ali, served most of the time. He called for do-overs whenever his serve launched the ball into the net or off the back of one of his soldier's heads or out of bounds. The other soldiers would catch or lift the ball in order to set it up in the perfect location for their teammates to spike it at us. We tried to call foul on their rule-breaking but the Afghan referee just smiled at us and twirled his whistle around and posed for pictures. He only ever called a foul if one of the Marines broke a rule. The whole situation went from being frustrating to being sort of annoying to being funny to back to being frustrating again as the matches wore on.

We tried to rotate servers like in a normal volleyball match but once we figured out that Boaz (of all people) could actually serve well, we took a page from their playbook and left him in that position for the rest of the game. It became a serving duel between the Afghan Colonel and the Marine Lance Corporal and I wish I could say that playing by the rules won out over the most egregious rule-breaking that I've seen this side of a *Mighty Ducks* movie, but we totally didn't win. We spent the whole day losing to the ANA. The best we ever did was get to 15-10 (ANA 15, Marines 10), and that was when Colonel Ali had to take a break to rest his serving arm so he subbed in a Lieutenant whom he yelled at the entire time for serving poorly.

Afterwards, as a gesture of goodwill, Colonel Ali invited us to dine with him in his private quarters. We all crammed sweatily into his

office vestibule and watched an Afghan version of *Deal or No Deal* on the big dust-covered TV by his desk while we waited for his staff to not wash their hands before they prepared the food. One of the bigger Marines managed to accidentally break a chair by sitting on it wrong. He tried to play it off like the chair was already broken but everyone knew he broke it. The ETT Lieutenant Colonel promised to get Colonel Ali a new chair.

We sat down to eat and our linguists were on hand to help us through all the conversations taking place around the table as we tried a little bit of everything to be polite. We had naan (tasty), rice with raisins (tasty), goat and lamb (greasy and gamey), chicken legs (salty), mystery melon (like honeydew but not honeydew), watermelon (dry), grapes (sour), onions (oniony), cucumbers (tasty), fried potatoes (very salty), tomatoes (bland), bottled water (warm), and soda (also warm). I had some sips of an orange drink called Miranda that was a lot like Fanta but much, much sweeter. I didn't care for it.

Dinner ended earlier than anticipated due to an IED-related mass casualty event with one of the ANA Kandaks.

We stopped in a cotton field where I picked some as a souvenir. Saw some donkeys, children, farmers, huge wasps, a dog, and the wheel from an MRAP that had been blown out into the middle of it all.

Very dark outside. Crescent moon, no Seabee or ESB lights, so I assume camel spiders lurk behind every shadow. All in all, a very underwhelming 33rd birthday.

The Cat Shelter

Things went to shit fast. I thought maybe we could figure it out but she told me she cried every night on her drive back from work because she was coming home to me and not him. I slept on the couch. She deployed in two months so my plan was to gut it out until she left. I had a few more weeks of my 30-day post deployment leave and I just needed to get out of that apartment. I couldn't sit there anymore, waiting.

I drove around Denver aimlessly, hating the city I'd been forced to move to. It was bleak and cold.

I found a cat shelter close by so I went inside to see if they needed volunteers to help clean the cages, pet the kittens, or play with the strays.

The lady at the front desk said that they needed someone to help euthanize the leftover cats since they had a backlog. She asked if I could put down 15 to 20 cats a day for a week or so. I said no and left. The little bell jingled as the door shut behind me.

I sat in the truck. It was a long time before I could go home.

Fuck.

Kindred Spirits

I was out late one night on my way back from the shower tents. My habit was to get cleaned up at night since the showers weren't as crowded and the camp was quieter. I tried to step lightly on the heavy riprap of the roads. I liked to walk the quarter mile back to our compound in the dark so I could go from shadow to shadow while I imagined what it would be like to slip into a random tent or can or structure and slit the throats of the people sleeping in them. I had a headlamp but I kept it off most of the time so I could fade away if I encountered anyone else during my walks to and from the showers. I was halfway across the plywood planking set over the ditch by the RCT-7 LSA when a shape came slinking out of the dark behind me.

The fox was about the size of my cats back home. I could just make him out in the faint starlight. He was an even dusty tan with a black nose and huge black-tipped ears. His tail was about as long as his body. He padded in until he was almost to the edge of the ditch and then he put on a burst of speed to run by me over the little wooden bridge. I felt the movement of displaced air breathe against my ankles. I lost him in the dark so I closed one eye and shined a burst of light from my headlamp to see where he went. He had stopped just a few meters beyond where I stood. His yellow eyes reflected back at me and his ears stuck up like he expected something from me. I clicked off my light and whispered, "Stay safe out there, crazy."

I opened my dark-adapted eye and let it take over for the light-dazzled one. I heard the faint sound of his paws on the gravel as he turned and loped away.

I walked the rest of the way to my tent in a better mood. There were still some wild and beautiful things out in the desert and one of them had stopped to say hi to me.

Found out a Cobra crashed up north a ways. Both pilots killed. Sucks because I always feel like they're invincible. Aside from losing one of our Marines, this is the worst news to get.

The CO posts pictures and team locations on his Facebook account, much to the dismay of anyone hoping for OPSEC or to keep their families from knowing about the dangerous places we operate in. What a jackass. I have no respect for him.

Two Weeks

Because the ANA General had a culturally ingrained inability to admit a mistake or even consider the possibility of losing any kind of face, it took him and his staff two weeks to properly reposition their wall-sized topographical map. It was only a matter of taking out some pushpins, rotating the map 180 degrees, and putting the pushpins back in. One minute of work, tops, from start to finish. But it took two weeks.

I brought a compass and showed his staff which direction North was and I demonstrated how our location in the province actually lined up North to South, so the standard map orientation made the most tactical sense. I patiently explained why it was important to have a common reference point for conducting joint military operations against the Taliban. I even pointed out the fact that the way they had the map positioned made the writing on it appear upside down.

No, no, no, map is good. Good map.

It took two weeks to finally convince them to properly orient the operational map in their command post. Regulations stipulated that we weren't allowed to have a round chambered in our weapons on base but after two weeks of arguing, cajoling, explaining, ordering, requesting, and physically demonstrating, I couldn't take it any more. I started attending the joint staff meetings with a round in the chamber of my 9mm, a full magazine inserted, and the safety off because I wanted to be able to execute every ANA officer in the room as quickly as possible should they ever insist on going back to their original upside-down map

orientation.

Two weeks.

Pie Hole

"Shut your fucking worthless motherfucking pie hole right the fuck now. Shut it, you fucking goddamn oxygen thief! No! I said shut the fuck up. Shut. The. Fuck. Up. What did I fucking say. WHAT DID I JUST FUCKING SAY. SHUT THE FUCK UP. I said close the fucking feed tray cover and you just kept running your FUCKING SUCK.

Did you or did you not close the feed tray cover. Did you or did you not close the feed tray cover. I asked you a fucking question and you better fucking answer me right the fuck now. Did you or did you not close the feed tray cover. DID YOU OR DID YOU NOT CLOSE THE FUCKING FEED TRAY COVER. FUCKING NO! NO YOU DID NOT! Stop. Shut your mouth. SHUT YOUR GOD DAMN MOUTH. NO. STOP.

I swear to fucking Ma and Pa Christ and Sonny fucking Jesus that I will reach down your throat and rip your fucking goddamn lungs out just so I can wring out the last little fucking bits of fucking air molecules that cling to your motherfucking lungs because you insist on stealing fucking oxygen from the fucking rest of us. Give me back my oxygen you selfish motherfucker!

Now tell them. Tell them! SHUT YOUR FUCKING GODDAMN MOUTH. TELL THEM why you hate them and why you want them to all die because you are unable to close the feed tray cover. Tell them why you are physically unable to follow a simple instruction like CLOSE THE FUCKING FEED TRAY COVER. Failure to follow simple instructions, Devil Dog.

Go ahead and tell them why you need all the precious oxygen in the air to fuck up more than they fucking do to do it the goddamn right way. Tell them why you are so fucking mentally deficient that you cannot perform ONE SIMPLE TASK like closing the goddamn motherfucking FEED TRAY COVER. You are the stupidest piece of shit in the entire world. Don't even fucking try to open your mouth right now. SHUT THE FUCK UP. You better keep your fucking cock holster clamped fucking shut and you better fucking CLOSE THE FUCKING FEED TRAY COVER WHEN I GIVE YOU THE COMMAND TO CLOSE THE FUCKING FEED TRAY COVER. You disgust me. Get the fuck out of my sight."

Our trash fire turned into the Springfield Tire Fire & the smoke from all the plastic bottles poisoned the whole camp's air.

Doc was telling us about some great graffiti in the port-a-john. 'Lt K is hot. I would put it in her butt . . . fast.' We laughed and laughed about the 'fast' part. It implied an ambush mentality.

"Why has God forsaken us?"

-Capt M

Donkey Cart Jet Ski

We got called out one afternoon to run a presence patrol through a particularly terrible section of Saddam City, up in the northeast corner of Baghdad. Saddam City, now known as Sadr City, was a slum. It was rank, poor, dirty, and mean. There were piles of garbage strewn around every street corner. The air had a filthy, smoky haze that clung to every surface and was only exacerbated by the heat. There were animal carcasses alive with maggots in the sewers. Thick black flies crawled on everything. Feral dogs lurked in the alleyways. Small dusty children threw rocks at the dogs and chased the dogs with sticks for fun. It smelled like burning garbage and scorched plastic. I had to breathe through my mouth most of the time to keep from gagging.

Once, on an earlier patrol, one of our Marines stepped in a puddle of mysterious purple liquid and sank up to his knee in some kind of festering filth. He had to throw his boot away and get a whole series of shots from medical. We never did determine what the puddle was from or why it was so deep. No one wanted to investigate it too closely.

Mud brick structures of varying heights lined the streets, and the large empty squares between the blocks collected swirling whirlwinds of blowing trash. Everything was a uniform sandy tan with small pinpricks of color in the garbage. A punctured yellow plastic jug. A wisp of green sheeting. A crumpled blue water bottle.

Our Amtrac was parked on the corner of an intersection close by the remnants of an old bank that was looted prior to our arrival. The

local government broke down after the invasion and there was a lawless period of looting and mayhem that lasted for several weeks. Our orders were to stay out of the neighborhood conflicts as best we could, only intervening to prevent a rape or a murder. We watched countless break-ins, beatings, and reprisals as the oppressed rose up against their oppressor, or as the poor turned on the rich. The Iraqis left us alone most of the time.

Sometimes the children would mob us and point their fingers to their mouths, all five fingers extended together forming a cone as a sign they wanted food. "Ah, ah!" they would say. "Ah, ah!"

Sometimes old men walked by us barefoot, sandals in hand, and they squatted down in front of us and hit the road with a sandal shouting, "No Saddam!" with every strike and then they looked up at us with toothless smiles, like they said the magic words to keep from getting shot.

Other times, younger men would escort small groups of women around, the women's faces concealed, and the men would give us a thumbs up and say, "Good Bush! Bush yes!" and they would hit the women if the women looked directly at us.

We had orders to refrain from collecting war trophies or souvenirs but that didn't stop us from mugging for the camera from time to time. I have a picture of me standing in the middle of an intersection next to a broken light pole holding an AK in one hand and an RPG in the other, grinning like an idiot.

We were standing around in a loose cordon, checking vehicles for anything suspicious, when one of the Marines in the track gave a shout for us to come look at something. We gathered around the track and I saw a donkey cart, cobbled together from scrap wood and bent metal, towing a brand-new gleaming white jet-ski.

It was a pristine Bombardier jet-ski, the sit-down kind. It was white with deep royal purple seats and a purple and black handlebar set up. A young Iraqi man sat on the nose of the jet-ski, his bare feet dangling, cheerfully beating the donkey with a switch to get it to haul his looted jet-ski off to wherever he lived. He smiled and waved at us and gave us the obligatory thumbs up followed by a "Good Bush!" just in case. I was too amazed to lift my camera. He couldn't afford shoes, let alone a real donkey cart, but by God that man knew something expensive when he saw it.

We didn't know what to do so we let him go about his day with his looted jet-ski. We spent a few minutes convincing each other that we all saw the same thing and then the next hour or so trying to figure out what he was possibly going to do with it. The Tigris and Euphrates weren't that close and the Army's riverine forces would probably just blow him up if he took it out for a summer cruise, and that was assuming he could even get gas for it or figure out how to get it started.

I wish I had a picture of that tired, abused donkey pulling the smiling, shoeless man on an immaculate jet-ski in the middle of a land-locked slum.

I spent a lot of time trying to block out images from Iraq, but I like that one. I like to think about that happy man and his shiny new jet-ski.

"That's why I like artillery: you do some calculations and people die.

Math equals death."

-1stLt W

Escalation of Pants

The team out at PB Beatley had a gauge for how intense an engagement would be based on how much they had to get dressed up for it.

PB Beatley sat out on the Western edge of Marjeh. There wasn't much beyond Beatley except desert until the Afghanistan sand turned into Iranian sand. It stayed a consistent 110-115 degrees every day and there was little cover or respite from the sun. The team hunkered down in a thick-walled compound on the edge of a small farming settlement and the walls helped funnel the heat down into their living areas. Camouflage ponchos and cammie netting were strung on tent poles in an effort to provide some shade. The Marines sat around in skivvy shorts and flip-flops most of the time. They occasionally misted themselves with hot water squirted from crinkly water bottles with holes poked in the lids. The compound would get shot at from time to time, depending on the mood of the locals or if any outside Taliban agitators came into town. The shots ranged from a single rifle round fired overhead to multiple RPG rounds fired directly into the compound walls but the Marines used their pants as a guide for how troublesome things really were.

If they had to man the walls after taking a few rounds of small arms fire, everyone was in skivvies, flip-flops, and helmets. They would peek out over the tops of the walls and wait for an hour or so and then go back to trying to stay cool and comfortable. If things sounded more lively, they would put their boots on, popping up still in just skivvies and maybe body armor along with their helmets. When things

really hit the fan, then they would get in full kit, including actual FROG suit combat trousers.

Heaven help those who agitated the Marines to the point of putting on pants.

It rained briefly while we were in the meeting. The sand looked like someone threw invisible BBs at it. More things to remember: the green ditch water by the ANA chow hall; piles of rotting bread on plywood; fat Army people running down the middle of the damn road; sweeping the tent and having a tick come after me; prepping for the CO's visit; having mysterious bites all over me; cutting off a huge chunk of dead skin from my left foot due to repeated callousing and blistering; waking up every day with a sore throat due to the heat & sand; having an empty Gatorade bottle labeled 'Fox Piss' for convoys; having nowhere comfortable to sit; responding to email radio checks via HPW with words that start with 'L' & 'C' (for Lima Charlie ~ loud & clear); current favorites are Leather Chaps, Lightsaber Chipotle, and Lipstick Candlewax.

Evidently I lost a day and ended up combining Monday & Tuesday's entries. Not a big deal since I guess I didn't do too much on Mon that was worth remembering except for smoking cigars with T and his team.

I went back to reading and presently one of the mice that live in the new tent poked his head out from behind my footlocker. I was able to move slowly enough to get my camera and then I spent the next 10 minutes trying to get a good picture of him. He was very small and showed no fear of me, up to the point of coming over and sniffing around my flip-flop. His whiskers and nose tickled my heel. I only moved when it looked like he was going to dash up my leg.

Glutes Magazine

We had stacks of porn all over our tent despite porn possession being one of the big no-nos of being deployed in the Middle East, but after months of the same fake tits, even the most hardcore porn magazines got dull. Our favorite, despite technically not being porn, was *Glutes* magazine. All glutes, all the time. We thumbed through it and made approving noises at the muscley butts and glistening asses on display but the thing we loved most of all about *Glutes* magazine were the ads. There were ads for rock-hard boner pills, fancy butt oils, flavored lubes, and various throbbing mechanical sex devices.

Our particular favorite was an ad for a supplement called Ball Refill, which promised "thick ropey loads" and "markedly increased volume." It was a source of speculation and curiosity, since none of us believed that we could ever convince our wives or girlfriends to allow us to test it out on them, but we wondered about how it would work anyway. Eventually months of speculation and boredom lead Aaron to approach me one night and ask if he could call the 800 number on the ad for more information. I was in my cot trying to read some shitty adventure novel when he came into the tent.

"Sir, I want to call about Ball Refill."

I put my book down. "Dude. Why?"

"Because it's insane and I want to know what it does," he said. He folded the well-read copy of *Glutes* open to the ad and tapped it like I'd never seen it before. "Thick ropey loads, sir. What the fuck."

I kicked my legs around, slipped on my flip-flops, and sat there for a second. I looked up at Aaron and said, "You know the sat phone costs like a thousand dollars a minute, right? To call *Glutes*. About Ball Refill."

Aaron looked at me with intensity. "Yes. About Ball Refill."

I sighed. I was curious, too, and it was late enough in the deployment where I didn't give much of a shit any more about wasting government resources. If the Marine Corps could spend billions of dollars to build a permanent base in the middle of the desert as a staging area for our temporary presence then I could spend thousands of dollars on something hilarious to boost morale. "Fuck it. Get the phone, but!" I said, waving him down as he started to dance with happiness, "Let's get everyone in here so we don't waste this call or start having everyone calling goddamn *Glutes* all the time."

"Oh, fuck yeah!" Aaron said as he raced out of the tent to wrangle up the other Marines.

Before I was even fully out of my cot he was back with Henry, Max, Boaz, Doc, Pookie, and Michaels. They piled into the tent like it was a reverse clown car, jostling for position around the sat phone. Aaron elbowed his way to the middle of the pack, hunkered down at the front of the tent in a beat-up metal folding chair, slapped *Glutes* on his lap, and started punching in numbers on the Iridium sat phone key pad. We all crowded around. Aaron held the phone up so we could all hear the hisses and beeps of the connection bouncing up from Helmand Province, to some secret communications satellite miles above us, and

then back down to a regional call center somewhere on America's East Coast. One Marine accidentally rustled a bag of potato chips and was violently shushed by the rest of us. The phone rang.

"No fucking way."

"Sir, are we allowed to do this?"

"I can't believe we're calling about Ball Refill."

"Oh yesyesyesyesyes."

After another ring, someone answered. Aaron bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud. A sweet-sounding woman with a southern accent said hello and Aaron replied that he saw the ad in *Glutes* magazine and he was curious about it as a performance enhancer and about exactly what the product did. The woman spoke in a friendly, conversational tone and we were immediately captivated.

I don't know exactly what she said. It was magical to just hear a real live woman talking with us. Aaron let slip that we were deployed to Afghanistan and we were bored and curious and the conversation turned from the clinical effects of Ball Refill (which, apparently, really did cause one to have increased semen production up to 600% normal volume and shortened refractory periods for "repeated and lasting pleasure") to the weather in Georgia (where she worked), to sports, food, and just how her day was at her job. I was fully prepared to shut the whole thing down if it started to devolve into an attempt at phone sex on Aaron's part or anything inappropriate like that, but it didn't. He

asked benign get-to-know-you sorts of questions and all of us were transfixed.

It was nice to listen to her discuss her coworkers, her life, her car, her plans for the future, and her hobbies and interests. Homesickness held us there, listening to this anonymous woman talk about mundane, everyday scenarios like they were a normal occurrence. She didn't concern herself with convoys or operations or IEDs or immediate action drills. She lived her life free from those worries and it was like a window into another world. She talked with us for 25 minutes. When Aaron finally said goodbye and hung up, he just put the phone back down on the desk, got up, and walked away. Everyone else quietly dispersed back to their respective places in the tent. I flip-flopped back to my cot, lay down, and stared up into the dark thinking about a different life far away. I never saw a bill for that phone call but I consider it to be the best \$25,000 I ever spent.

Read up on the SigActs. We are back in River City due to another FKIA in the AO ~ GSW to the head, died in the medevac bird. Also, a LN got exploded when a herd of sheep triggered a PPIED. Had a good laugh about that one. Also also, a 6-year-old girl got shot in the head ~ still alive but 'grey matter exposed.' Bit of a rough couple of days for the guys but I got some nice emails from the family.

Cpl W told me a story about how one of their vics took an RPG to the turret but the way the truck moved caused the antenna to whip the RPG's tail & smacked it just enough off course that it bounced off the turret & exploded on the ground. It broke some windows & gave the gunner a mild concussion.

Convoy rolled in and we helped unload all the trucks. All the guys smell terrible. The whole tent stank. T came out & we all (slowly) walked up to DFAC 3 for chow. Came back, started the SitRep while everyone else took showers and aired out their nasty clothes. We had to Febreeze everything just to keep the funk down.

*The dried apricots I had for breakfast made me piss fire out of my ass.
I had to run to the port-a-john 6 times in 2 hours to have violent and
strangely orange shits.*

Restless night. Bad dreams. Woke up to the sound of Rollo fighting with a bottle of water by my gear tree. He was chewing on the lid, which had a small hole in it for use as a squirt/spray bottle. I think he could smell the water and he was very determined to get at it. His chewing and dragging were pretty incessant. He would lift the bottle up with his mouth and front paws in order to drag it around the corner that my gear tree and my stool made since they were next to each other. He was doing a good job until S & Capt S got up and started making noise. Then he darted away and abandoned his efforts with the water bottle. In the interest of being a good neighbor, I got up and scooted the water bottle over to the hole in the floor by Gunny's area and propped it up on his shoes. Hopefully Rollo can get at the water from that angle. My next recourse is to put out a dish of water for him.

There are concrete intersections, paved roads, street signs, 10-foot high barricades, razor wire, an entry gate, and some kind of huge red 'torii' sign for 5th ANGLICO. This place is dumb.

Place Sucks, Bro

Allen and I shared a secret verbal handshake that we adopted in a stuffy Ops room somewhere in the heart of Camp Leatherneck. We were stuck in a briefing, listening to pompous senior officers blabber on and on about stupid shit we didn't care about when some random Sergeant Major got up to chastise the group about rolled-up FROG suit sleeves.

"Gentlemen, it is imperative to good order and discipline that your Devil Dogs out there keep their sleeves rolled down and buttoned up. This is not Vietnam. They are not back on the block, out at Two-Niner or La-Jern. I do not want to have to go out there and see Marines looking like they are working on their tans. They need to be professional and disciplined at all times, so stay on them. It is up to you gentlemen to enforce it so I do not have to come out there and hammer anyone. Sleeves down. It prevents circumferential burns. No need for anyone to end up as a pink mist and a memory."

Allen leaned over to me. I tucked my head down to pretend like I was taking notes. I let my eyes drift over my doodles while he whispered, "He knows that IEDs don't burn people, right? They kill you with chunks of metal. I'm pretty sure my sleeves aren't going to stop a bunch of scrap engine parts going Mach five from blasting through my wrists. We're just going to overheat. And he mispronounced 'circumferential.'"

I hid a laugh with a cough and whispered back, "Yeah, well, just Motrin and hydrate, Devil Dog. This isn't Vietnam."

He pursed his lips and went back to not taking notes either. It was like the whole Marine Corps wanted to pretend we weren't at war while we were still at war. The Sergeant Major droned on about field hygiene and shaving every day and wearing eight-point covers when we were back at the COP.

Allen leaned in again. "Eight point covers? Are we standing inspection? I wear a Red Socks hat when I'm not dicking around. My team doesn't have enough water to drink let alone shave daily. Jesus. Leatherneck is for the leatheriest of necks for sure. Besides, the Sergeant Major just watches MMA videos all day and jumps people's shit for having an IP on their flak or not having the highest high or the tightest tight. It's not like he leaves the wire. You can tell by his gut."

I drew little circles and slashed them anarchy As, one after another, while the Sergeant Major complained about making sure no one hung up pictures of their families or girlfriends or whatever.

"So, no reminders of home then, yeah? Perfect. Hey," Allen said as he tugged at my uniform sleeve. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I glanced over at him and he looked around at the other officers in the room like he was a spy in a movie.

"Sure," I said. I scooted my uncomfortable metal chair a little closer to him.

He made one last scan of the room, watching for any undue attention from our CO or XO or anyone else not enraptured with the minutiae of crushing our fighting spirit and he confided his secret to me. "I hate it here."

I almost died. I bit my lip hard to keep from braying out loud. I shut my eyes and tried to think about anything else except how much I thought I was the only one. After a few minutes of settling myself down, I kicked his boot with mine to get his attention.

He nodded while staring straight ahead, pretending to listen to the imperatives about wearing a glow belt around the base at all times on all days.

"Dude, have you seen that movie *Surf's Up*? About the penguins?" I asked quietly.

"Hell yeah," he murmured. "That movie rules."

"There's a part in there where Shia LaBeouf's penguin guy is talking about the surfing conditions of wherever and he goes, 'Place sucks, bro.' That's how I feel every single day."

Allen giggled. "Place sucks, bro. Oh my god. I forgot about that line."

I whispered back, "Place sucks, bro." We gave each other an easy little fist bump and went back to listening to how bad flying an American flag in our compounds would be for our morale.

It became our greeting and our goodbye. It was our aloha.

Grey water smells like a rotting, liquefying mouse was put in a mason jar full of hot piss and left out in the sun for a few days, then sprayed on the gravel roads. It has a sweet, corrupt smell that makes me feel like gagging.

Got all cleaned up (hand sanitizer wipe-down and Gold Bond down the shorts) and hit the rack.

We got all sorts of phone calls about EDL stuff. There was a CLRF that no one could find, to which I had to ask what the hell a CLRF was (apparently it's a laser rangefinder) and I had to track it down by serial number on a set of Vector 21Bs. What a pain.

FitReps

"Oh, you motherfucker! Suck my thick, fat, veiny, throbbing 10-inch dick you shit-eating ass-fucker! I'm going to force my cock so far down your stupid bullshit throat that I'll burn the tip of my dick off on your goddamn stomach acid you worthless ball-biting man-whore! I'm going to cock-choke you so hard that you're going to shoot semen out your nose you goddamn motherfucking dick-gargling fucking piece of shit asshole fuckstick!"

"Holy Christ, dude! What's happening? Are you OK?"

"Goddamn it! No! I'm doing FitReps and I'm fighting with APES. It keeps autocorrecting 'NCOs' to 'nachos' and 'MSgt' to 'mascots' and I'm losing my fucking mind. Why in the blue hell would the Marine Corps buy a computer program *specifically designed* to write personnel evaluations *for the Marine Corps* and not program it with the ranks and verbiage *of the fucking Marine Corps*? Why would I ever say 'nachos' in a performance review? 'He ate a whole plate of nachos so give him a motherfucking promotion?' Fuck you. I fucking hate everyone everywhere and I hope the contractors who sold us this program get some kind of super-ultra-mega-AIDS and die from a motherfucking syphilitic fucking exploding colon disorder. Goddamn fuckers."

"Dude. It'll be OK. I did one for Gunny the other night and it changed 'performer' to 'perfumer,' so, that was weird. I almost didn't change it back. And did you break a chair?"

"Yeah. I did. I kicked it into the fucking wall. Fuck this and fuck that and fuck them and fuck you. I'm done. I'm fucking done. I'm going to drink until I shit my pants and black out."

"Ha. All right, man. Good luck."

*Had that dream again where I was beating a guy to death with a length
of chain.*

The fat Sgt at the help desk had a shitty moustache, talked with a mild lisp, and had the mannerisms and social graces of someone you wouldn't want to leave alone with your kids.

*I've had ladybugs land on me every day for the last three days. Very
flattering.*

Speeding Ticket

Humvees were useless junk heaps and MRAPs were comically impractical, so to get around on Camp Leatherneck we drove a battered Toyota Hilux pick-up truck. The base had expanded exponentially since we left it for southern outposts seven months prior and there were now paved roads and a six-story deep bunker-related construction project happening in the center of the base that we speculated would end up being the most expensive Taliban terrorist training center in the world once we left Afghanistan. The paved roads meant that some General somewhere thought safety in a combat zone necessitated the use of radar-gun-equipped MPs enforcing an unposted, but apparently email-disseminated, speed limit of 13mph on a base where everything else was measured via the metric system and the speedometers in almost every non-tactical vehicle were in KPH so of course we got pulled over one day while we were on our way to the chow hall for going 15 in a 13 zone.

My boss, a high-ranking fighter pilot, was driving because he hated having anyone chauffeur him around. He was incredulous. I laughed from the passenger seat. The MPs were intent on scanning his ID card and dinging him for some arbitrary amount of mysterious driving points in a bizarre infraction system we had never even heard about. The more they tried to explain how safety was paramount, the more annoyed my boss got, and the harder I laughed because a week earlier he was calling in airstrikes and destroying Taliban fighting positions. They scanned my ID card, too, because of some excuse about me not taking safety seriously.

My boss was so mad at that point he could barely talk. I thought he

was going shoot the MPs and we would spend the rest of our limited time in Afghanistan being hunted by our own military for killing two idiots who had never, and would never, actually see any kind of combat. It would've been the perfect end to such a ridiculous deployment.

Instead, I agreed that speeding was dangerous and I promised that I would watch out for my boss from now on and the MPs finally decided to just give us a warning this time and let us go. My boss carefully, but with great rage, drove us to the giant DFAC where we had to wait behind a long line of slow-moving government contractors before he could get a dish of chocolate ice cream. We sat together, surrounded on all sides by a sea of soft, clean, loud-talking military personnel all carrying unloaded firearms. I watched him take the first bite of ice cream that he'd had in over half a year. His jaw clicked as he ate in silence.

It was unusually hot and humid. Lots of bugs out, so lots of bird activity. The birds were absent for a while, but now they are back in force.

Self Love in the Porta-Shitter

Sometimes there were blue and white plastic porta-shitters available instead of WAG bags or piss tubes. They were stinking, festering saunas full of curried shit and they were usually covered with the baked-on remnants of explosive diarrhea despite supposedly being hosed down every 24 hours, but they were the only source of privacy within hundreds of square kilometers. Pornography was banned from the country for cultural sensitivity issues but that was a stupid, worthless practice because Afghan men loved pornography almost as much as Americans did and we got it in the mail by the truckload.

It was common courtesy to announce to everyone that one was going to go "take a shit" while waving around a pouch of wet-wipes and an issue of *Glutes, Hustler, or Wet and Wild Backdoor Bimbos* (people sent us weird shit ~ we read it, but it was weird). This indicated that no one should expect you back immediately and that they shouldn't try to knock on the door or otherwise use the porta-shitter until you returned and gave them a thumbs up or an all-clear. It was a small, but important, bit of wartime decorum and it prevented embarrassing mid-jerk interruptions.

The air inside the porta-shitters was aggressively humid despite being in the desert. Ammonia salts built up on the sides of the urinal as well as the floor and the seat (if there was one). Shit mountains formed. Some of the most insane graffiti I'd ever seen existed inside those walls ("Hi, I'm toast!" "Fuck you, toast!"), alongside intricately drawn veiny penises or lovingly crafted benippled boobs. Everything was mostly rendered in black Sharpie or colored map pen, but

sometimes it was carved in with a fighting knife. Bored Marines were both artistically creative and artistically destructive Marines.

Procedurally, jerking off in a porta-shitter was no joke. I had to balance the porno mag on the round plastic toilet paper dispenser, drop my trousers (but not too far because I didn't want any part of my uniform to touch any surface in there), spread my legs far enough to keep my waistband braced against the sides of my knees or thighs to prevent trouser slippage, pull out about a half-dozen wet wipes (the first couple generally had sand on them so those got tossed out right off the bat to prevent any potential chafing), wrap my dick up with wet wipes, and then try to jerk off without rocking the porta-shitter so much that I knocked the magazine off the toilet paper holder.

Sometimes I wore headbands because regardless if it was day or night, I worked up a sweat going to town on myself inside that blue-filtered sewer booth and the sweat stung my eyes but my hands were too busy to do anything about it. After I finished, I would cover up my cum-blasted wet-wipes with some unused toilet paper if there was any available, as kind of a snowy peak on top of Shit Mountain. I tried to be polite. It was a technique that required practice and refinement. Fortunately, I had plenty of time for both.

I saw a raggedy orange & white cat (very skinny) zip around the wall by the ANA area at Azadi and then slide back around a few seconds later with a mouse in her mouth.

Earlier in the morning, when I was in the COC, a fat black & blue & grey bird perched on top of the GBOSS camera, effectively blocking the view of everything everywhere. It was kind of neat since the bird looked so aggravated that the camera was moving around the whole time.

Had a strange mix of macaroni, hot sauce, sauerkraut, kielbasa, and hotdog buns for dinner (to-go box from H).

Lost in the Sauce

I got lost one afternoon out on the big land nav course at TBS. I had my points plotted and I shot my azimuths and I thought I did all the correct clicks on my lensatic compass but I still somehow ended up out in the middle nowhere in the deep Virginia forest.

I got hung up on wait-a-minute vines and I tripped over fallen branches. My map case got snagged on brambles and deadfalls. I splashed through slow creeks and almost lost a boot to some stinky mud. I was tired and frustrated and I was running out of time. I had a few more boxes to find and I didn't want to be on the weekend remedial land nav list.

I stumbled through the woods swearing to myself. I tried to keep my pace count going and I alternated walking to the left and right as I encountered trees or boulders. I moved a ranger bead down every hundred meters. I stopped frequently to check the terrain around me to see how it compared to the contour lines on my map. It was a bright fall day with just enough of a crisp chill that I didn't overheat despite my flailing. I saw a snapping turtle the size of a Frisbee lurking in the shallows of a small pond. I kept my distance from it.

I resolved to go just another hundred meters before I tried a spiral search pattern in case the faded red ammo can with the yellow numbers stenciled on it was close by. I hoped it was. I wrestled through a line of tightly woven trees and fell out into a small clearing. High green grass covered the roughly square area, maybe ten meters on a side. There were faint outlines of old stone blocks set in a narrow

rectangle towards the middle. A few meters beyond the blocks leaned a deeply weathered headstone, the simple kind with a curved top. I waded through the grass and knelt down in front of the headstone.

The name was worn and unreadable. I could barely make out the numbers of the last inscribed date: 1789. I stood up and touched the top of the headstone. It felt warm. I listened to the birds chirp away in the trees and I took a sip of water from my canteen. I turned my face up to the sun and closed my eyes.

*Got an excellent HPW message from W: "Controlled Dealer from TOC w/my
TO weapon, PRC-117. Expended .25 BA5590s."*

"I'm laughing at something I probably shouldn't simply because I don't
want to cry."

-Cpl L

Suicide Prevention

"All right, listen up. I have to give the goddamn suicide brief *again* because some asshole made a big splash over at 9th Crime *again* and now the base CG is all fired up *again* about Marines offing themselves all over the place during Christmas leave, so everyone shut the fuck up and open your ears.

Do not fucking kill yourself goddammit, but *if you do*, don't fuck it all up and make a goddamn mess all over the place. How 'bout fucking having some goddamn fucking common courtesy, motherfuckers. If you're gonna slash your fucking wrists, do it in the fucking shower so you don't fuck up the carpet. And for fuck's sake, slice elbow to fucking wrist lengthwise, not across your damn tendons like some attention-seeking fucking daddy issues Hooters hooker. Cut deep so you bleed out fast. Don't waste my fucking time. Or, better yet, fucking slice your goddamn femoral arteries so you can still use your hands to get both legs so it shoots out like a fucking *fire hose*. But do it in the fucking *shower*, goddammit.

If you're gonna fucking *hang yourself*, use fucking 550 cord so it fucking jacks up your neck and blood-chokes you right the fuck out. Don't use a fucking belt like you're David fucking Carridine trying to get a murder boner over some fucking underage ladyboy. Wear fucking *Depends* or some shit so you don't piss and shit all over the floor. I say again: be courteous and professional because we all have to clean up after your fucking weak-ass bullshit. And fucking use a tall chair so you get a good drop and wear a fucking mask because your eyes are gonna fucking bulge out and shit and you'll look fucked up as hell.

Don't fucking shoot yourself. Do. Not. Fucking. *Shoot* yourself. You'll get fucking brains and shit everywhere and then a whole freaking NCIS platoon in their fucking khakis and fucking space suits has to come out and wipe everything down and put up plastic and repaint the walls and then your barracks room is all closed down and no one can get to your PS3 or whatever and we have to get the fucking *Chaplain* to counsel your fucking *roommate* to see if he's all jacked up in the head or not, and fucking *stomp stomp, guess what, he's fucking gonna be*, so good fucking job you inconsiderate asshole. And if you *miss* and *blow your fuckin face off* or something then your mom has to look at all the fucking spackle or makeup or whatever the fuck the fucking coroner uses to fix your fucking busted-ass melon and all she can do is wail and cry about how her precious little man now looks like fucking *Mel* fucking *Gibson* in that shit-ass movie *Man Without a Face* or whatever. Yeah, keep laughing. I don't know, I didn't fucking see it. So don't do it.

But if you fucking just can't fucking help yourself and you're boo-hooing because the Marine Corps sucks and the fucking Sergeant Major is mean and your fucking Platoon Sergeant keeps making you police-call the fucking smoke pit because *someone* can't fucking *pick up* their fucking *butts*, then go to the fucking PX and buy a bunch of random fucking pills and choke them all down with a fifth of Jack like a *fucking man* and just remember that Chesty fucking Puller is *disappointed as fuck* with you, you fucking quitter.

Clear your fucking browser history and delete your fucking porn stash, you sick bastards. I'm fucking serious. We have to give all your fucking shit to your family and your fucking Ma is gonna wanna see all

the pics of you on your laptop being all tough and patriotic an' shit so if it's *full of twisted shit* from like BackdoorGoatFuckers.com or BallsDeepInAClown'sAss.org or whatever the fuck you jerk off to, she's gonna see that shit and then she won't believe the *CACO* when he says you died like a goddamn *American hero* because all she'll remember is how you liked to look at sick shit on the internet all fucking day and fucking beat off until you got goddamn dick blood all over your fucking hands. *Jesus Christ.*

And do your fucking laundry. Make a goddamn will. Get your fucking REDs updated so your fucking cheating slut of a girlfriend doesn't get all your fucking insurance money or your poor wife can get enough dough to get a fucking boob job and go whoring around Oceanside or wherever *sucking dick* and taking it up the ass hard enough to forget about what a sorry piece a shit you are for suck-starting a 9 mil and leaving her alone with your fucking *crusty fucking socks* and a fucking computer full a goddamn gross-ass animal porn.

So don't fucking kill yourself. If you're fucking *sad*, stop listening to fucking *country music*. That shit will mess you the fuck up. Call Gunny if you feel like you want to jump off a cliff or something. *He* won't care but at least fucking *someone* will know where to find your goddamn *body* so we don't waste a fucking week trying to locate your stupid ass. Oh, and write your fucking mom a fucking goodbye letter or some shit so she doesn't have to wonder 'bout what a big a piece a shit you are. Something simple, like 'Dear Ma, I'm a big piece a shit. Sorry. Not your fault. Adios! Love, Lance Corporal Schmuckatelli.' Not that fucking hard. *Goddamn.* OK. Now sign the fucking roster

saying you got the brief and have a fucking Merry fucking Christmas,
goddammit."

*Up at 0500 to some stupid phone call about nothing important from 2nd
ANGLICO. Hard to go back to sleep. I had a dream that I killed a guy
with the spike end of a tomahawk. I think I killed more people, too,
but it is difficult to remember. Hopefully this marks the return of my
violent dreams. I have not felt like myself without them.*

Maj A is going high and to the right because the awards are late (to him) and our comm was down so he couldn't yell at us, which made him more mad.

The ANA are currently working on fixing an RPG with a stick and an axe.

It looks like they are going to blow themselves up soon.

Cinco de Mayo

We flew from California to Japan for the first leg of our deployment to Afghanistan on the fifth of May. The Marine Corps opted to fly our small unit commercial since it was somehow more cost-effective to send 21 Marines and all our gear on All Nippon Airways than it was to fly us there via military air.

We were dropped off at LAX with a mountain of olive drab seabags, desert tan duffles, black Pelican cases, and camouflage packs loaded up with personal items, uniforms, communications equipment, specialized gear, and all of our weapons. We had a dozen Pelican cases of rifles, pistols, bayonets, knives, grenade launchers, and machine guns. My boss tasked me with ensuring all of our serialized weapons and gear made it through security and onto the plane while he made sure all the Marines made it to the right gate on time. The poor desk attendant at the check-in kiosk had no idea what to do when the first Pelican case weighed in at over 200 pounds. She looked at the piles of identical cases behind me and then back to the Pelican case on the scale. She asked me what was in it. She called security when I told her it was full of guns.

Fortunately, the LAX head of security was military savvy. He was surprisingly cordial while he personally escorted me and my train of cumbersome Pelican cases through the airport's special security areas. I had to verify the serial numbers of every weapon at every stage of the process and multiple airline personnel and security individuals spot-checked, cross-referenced, and inspected the weapons against my roster of serial numbers and weapon types. I had to explain what each

kind of weapon was and what it did ("That's an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon. It shoots lots of little bullets really fast." "Oh, Ok. And this?" "That's an M203 grenade launcher. It launches grenades."). To their credit, the security personnel made the process much less painful than it could have been but it still took me the better part of three hours to get everything sorted out before the airline was satisfied that it was safe to load up the 40 different unloaded weapons in their double-locked hard-sided waterproof cases into the plane's restricted-access cargo hold. The head of security shook my hand and wished me luck and told me I only had about 20 minutes before my plane boarded. I had to hustle across the airport to make my flight.

I made it to the gate with minutes to spare but no one from my unit was in sight. I looked around and didn't see anyone familiar but I heard a ruckus coming from further down the concourse and I recognized some of the cursing so I headed that way. They had all posted up at a small airport bar a few gates down from our gate and they were trying to drink the place dry. The bartender was frazzled and sweaty. My boss, drunk on the last of the tequila, patted me on the back and ordered me a shot of the cheap well rum with a salt and lemon chaser. They were, he said, out of almost everything else. The Marines celebrated Cinco de Mayo in style by getting totally shitfaced and scaring everyone else out of the bar.

I knocked back the shot, bit the lemon, skipped the salt, and started to give my boss a quick recap of the whole process but he wasn't in the mood to hear anything beyond that everything was fine. The gate agent called our boarding info and my boss picked up the entire tab.

Everyone, including the bartender, cheered. We all tossed cash onto

the bar for the tip and my unit stumbled over to the gate and onto the plane.

Our seating assignments scattered us all around the aircraft. I lucked out and sat next to one of my Marines. Everyone settled in and prepared for the twelve-hour flight to Tokyo. Some Marines popped in headphones and rocked out to their pre-flight playlists. Some of them tried to read. Some of them wrestled with their tiny airplane pillows in order to try to get comfortable enough to sleep it off. A few Marines perused *SkyMall* and loudly suggested new and outlandish pieces of gear for us to order and have shipped overseas as they shouted to each other across the aisles about whether they should get the four-foot-tall concrete Sasquatch yard statue ("It's authentically styled!") or the radio-controlled Mylar great white shark blimp ("The blimp has a 40 foot range!"). One of the Marines fired up the in-flight seat-back movie screen and proceeded to binge watch episodes of *SpongeBob SquarePants* while singing an R-rated version of the theme song every single time it played. Things gradually simmered down as we reached our cruising altitude and the other passengers were finally starting to relax when a flight attendant got on the PA and announced they would now be serving drinks in the main cabin and that all beverages on this flight were complimentary.

We went wild. We weren't purposefully trying to be offensive but we were the rough and rowdy Americans amongst the quiet Asian families and professional businesspeople and we were the only ones on the plane on our way to a combat zone.

Two hours into the flight the attendants announced that there was no more beer on the plane. Three hours into it and they announced that

the wine was gone. All beverage service was suspended at the five hour mark and two flight attendants came up to my friend Allen's seat and asked him with controlled diplomatic politeness ("We are concerned.") if we would help them drag our friend Parker out of the lavatory because he had passed out in the aisle and was half in and half out of the bathroom with his pants partly off laying in a puddle of his own vomit. The last seven hours went by mostly without incident.

It was the second deployment for all of us, save one, and we were excited about it. We were going to war again, this time to Afghanistan. No one knew exactly what was going to happen there but we were ready to have some fun.

The squads providing LZ security came under fire so R ended up doing 2 RW gun runs on a treeline. They ended up losing a guy to an IED (double amputation) and R did 5 RW ISRs, 2 FW SOF, 2 LZ ITGs, 2 medevacs, and the 2 gun runs. They later lost another Marine to another IED (another double amputee). He died on the flight to Dwyer. Tried to take a nap but there was too much activity in my head to rest. Watched the green swirls, red whorls, and shifting shapes as they flowed behind my eyes.

The PB is constructed of Hescos and moon dust, with a piss pit, a burn pit, WAG bag shitters, some Base-X tents, and some sand bags. Not a whole lot to the place but from what I understand, 2ndLt C and his guys have done a lot of work to make it habitable. The guys here can't stand the ANA and there is constant friction, especially since Ramadan just gives the ANA an excuse to be lazier than usual.

I am tired of dirt under my nails. Tired of smelling bad. Tired of hearing about people (1stSgt C) who won't allow energy drinks, personal items (calendars, pictures from home, flags, etc.) to be posted or hung in the living areas. Tired of sleeping in uncomfortable locations.

The only saving grace for this entire area is the fact that there is very little light pollution and, as a consequence, the stars are amazing.

Other notes: I call MRAPs 'Mega Weapon' in my head & laugh about it to myself; a ladybug landed on me today & cruised around for about 5 min; started listening to my iPod music again just for something different; weapons maintenance is continuous since the issued pistol magazines suck (rounds just pop out); we are all concerned about the fact that BP broke the earth and is poisoning the world; the showers are running colder & smell like mildew.

Big T

"See that guy out there?"

I followed Tyler's rifle through my NODs as he pointed to a shape out in dark in the middle distance. It was a shadow moving quietly by the roadside. I could just make out the figure's motions. It looked bored.

"Yeah, I got him. Can you see what he's up to?" I couldn't tell for sure what was happening in the weird green underwater light of the eyepiece. Tyler sat quietly for a moment before he answered.

"He's our friendly neighborhood IED emplacer. He comes out once a week or so to bury a little yellow PPIED jug in the moon dust by our route into town. We always see him since he isn't very sneaky and he always buries it in the same spot. Keeps the EOD guys employed."

Tyler leaned against the mud wall of the compound and made a note on the laminate of his folded map. He poked the laser rangefinder up and clicked the button to give it a squirt. Nothing happened. He swore quietly. "This thing's such a piece of shit." He smacked the tan plastic casing and tried again. It fired its invisible beam out to the shadow. He checked the range on the display and measured off the distance on his map, confirming what he already knew.

"Yeah. Same place. This is like the fifth time he's put something there."

"That's so weird," I said. "Why don't you all shoot him?"

Tyler sighed. "The team talked about it, sir. He's little 't.' He's just some random farmer the Taliban threatened to kill if he didn't help them by trying to blow us up. He's got a family and some goats and so he just scoots out here every once in a while to bury an IED so he can go back and tell them that he did his Jihadi part. I'm sure he lies about how many Marines he's killed so they keep giving him bomb-making materials and they leave his family alone. Besides, if we kill him the Taliban will just send someone else out who might be more dedicated or better at his job. They might send Big 'T' out to play. Which is fine, I guess, like with what happened last month, but he's not hurting anyone right now and it's a nice quiet night. Nah, this guy's just fine with us."

I watched the Afghan farmer/bomb-emplacer struggle to cover the jug with the fine silty sand. He looked like he was trying plant an uncooperative tree. What Tyler said made more sense to me than anything else had in a long time.

We both stared out into the dark. Tyler set down his NODs. "Hey sir?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You mind not telling anyone back at the CP about this? They'd just want to put together some dumb raid tonight and cause heartache for everyone. The last time we had to go out with the ANA the damn Afghan soldiers kept smashing all the windows out because they liked showing the villagers that they're big tough guys. It didn't do much for us and it sure as hell pissed off the locals."

"Yeah, don't worry about it," I said. "I trust your judgment. The Company Commander here seems like a dickhead. He and the First Sergeant suck all the fun out of war." I paused. "All the windows?"

"Yeah. Assholes." Tyler seemed satisfied by my answer. "And sweet. Thanks, sir. I'm going to go let them know where to check for the IED tomorrow." He went back to watching the shadow out by the road. After a while, the shadow finished what it was doing, walked back towards the village, and disappeared into the dark. Tyler pushed off from the wall and headed over to the guard tower. I gathered my gear and followed him across the compound.

Hushed voices and murmurs floated out from dimly lit tents and I saw the orange glow of the smoldering trash fire reflected on the faces of the Marines who were smoking stale Afghan cigarettes and staring into the embers. The black chemical smoke from the melting plastic bottles, MREs, WAG bags, and expended lithium batteries made my eyes water.

Tyler found the sentry softly snoring in the corner of the tower. He kicked him in the leg. "Rise and shine, Devil Dog. Right now the Taliban are planning on sneaking in here and ass-fucking you to death with the barrels of their AKs and here you are racked the fuck out and probably dreaming about sucking on the teats of that fat-ass mama goat out there."

The startled Lance Corporal scrambled to get his shit together. I held back from the post and snickered at his panic. He squeaked out a garbled, "Aye, aye, Sergeant!" while he tried to simultaneously rub the

sleep from his eyes and reach for his rifle. Falling asleep at his post during a time of war was about the worst thing he could do short of actively committing treason. Tyler carved into him with a string of quiet, savage obscenities. The Lance Corporal was now completely wide-awake and alert. Tyler gave him the ten-digit grid to where the IED was emplaced. He told the Lance Corporal to call it into Ops and relay the information to check it out in the morning. Tyler then threatened him with death if he should ever fall asleep on post again.

Tyler came back out to join up with me and we walked on back to his corner of the compound. "That kid's been on like a hundred patrols in the last two weeks. He's completely exhausted by all the bullshit these guys are doing up here. There's not enough Rip-Its in the world to keep him going like this. Useless patrols, pointless raids, poorly executed missions. It's almost like they just want to justify their existence out here without figuring out exactly why they need to do so and they don't care if they burn us out while doing it. It's frustrating, so I just yelled at him a little instead of having him get his life ruined by the First Sergeant or Company Gunny. I must be getting soft in my old age."

I laughed. "We both are, I think. Too much war, maybe."

"Maybe," Tyler conceded. "Too much of the stupid parts of war, anyway, that's for sure."

We heard the low notes of Frank Sinatra come crooning out of the tinny iPod speakers from the team's tent. Tyler stopped out in front, not

quite ready to go into the light yet. We stood together looking up at the stars.

"Sir, can I ask you another question?"

"Always," I answered.

"Who would you pick to play you in a Hollywood version of this shitshow?"

I laughed again. This was so much nicer than being surrounded by unimportant self-important officers in some briefing room somewhere. This was more real.

"I played this same game in Iraq once," I said. "For a while I figured it'd be Owen Wilson, what with this" - I gestured at my nose - "but now I think Andy Samberg would be a better choice. There's still the nose thing but I think he's more of a better representation of my sense of humor."

Tyler laughed. "Ha! That's a good choice. I always figured that what's his name from *Transformers* would play me. The 'bring the pain!' guy. The sexy one, not the weasely one." He snapped his fingers. "Josh Duhamel! My wife has a lady boner for him."

"He is pretty sexy. He's no Ryan Reynolds but he'll do. Yeah, I can see that, although even with as skinny as you've got, he'd need to put on like 30 pounds of muscle. And bleach his hair out."

Tyler shrugged his shoulders and patted his stomach. "I'll gain it back once I stop shitting my guts out. I think I've lost 15 pounds already."

I considered the rest of his team. "Who do you figure for Pookie? Michael Pena?"

"Nah," said Tyler. "He's funny enough but too doughy. Pookie's too wiry. And Michael Pena's not Cuban. Who are some good Cuban actors?"

"Is it racist of me to admit I don't know? Because the only Cuban actor I can think of off the top of my head is Cuba Gooding, Jr."

"Jesus, sir, that's so fucked up I don't even know where to start." Tyler laughed and I smiled in the dark.

He was quiet for a few seconds. "Holy shit, I've got it. Michelle Rodriguez!"

"Michelle Rodriguez is Puerto Rican, dude."

"Dammit. How do you know Puerto Rican actresses and not Cuban actors?" I shrugged. He continued. "Still, though. She's the best choice to play him. She's Cuban -"

"Puerto Rican."

"- She's Hispanic, she's hot, she's tough, she's fit, she's smart, she's fucking hilarious, and you know that Hollywood would PC this

thing up so hard they'd make one of us a woman anyway so it might as well be her."

"Damn, dude," I said, "You're right." I put on my Movie Guy voice. "Michelle Rodriguez IS Pookie. Pookie IS Michelle Rodriguez in the summer blockbuster event of a lifetime! *All-American Badasses 2: All-American Badasser*, Starring Michelle Rodriguez, Josh Duhamel, and Andy Samberg. A film by Michael Bay."

Tyler turned around and pushed the flap of the tent open. He called over to Pookie, who sat on his cot at the far end of the tent, quietly reading an old copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

"Hey Pookie! The Captain and I decided that Michelle Rodriguez is going to play you in the movie version of this deployment!"

Pookie looked up from his magazine and sighed. "Goddammit," he said. "I'd argue but that's pretty much perfect." He shot us the bird and tried to ignore the other Marines in the tent as they started to laugh and tease him.

Tyler giggled and closed the tent flap. His eyes slowly adjusted back to the darkness.

I chuckled and said, "Fucking Michelle Rodriguez, dude."

"Fucking Michelle Rodriguez. I wish I was fucking Michelle Rodriguez."

Got an email from my folks asking about how I'm doing but I couldn't reply because we were in River City. A Marine on a foot patrol hit an IED and lost both legs. He died later at Dwyer. Also, an 8-year-old girl got her intestines blown out by an IED. She was evac'd but I don't know if she lived or died. One of the Marines up at Beatley got shot through the calf so he was brought to Dwyer. Sgt H knows him so he went to visit him tonight, just to make sure he is doing OK.

"It gets to the point where cold is a flavor."

-Capt R

There is some tension due to the church in Florida threatening to burn the Quran (which I am fine with ~ freedom of speech and all that), but the ANA platoon commander got wind of it and told 2ndLt C that he would fight the Marines and C told him that if he tried, the Marines would kill all the ANA. We'll see what happens. I may sleep in my armor tonight.

For about a half hour I was the only American/Marine in a formation of close to 200 ANA soldiers. I wondered how many of them I could kill before they overwhelmed me.

Making Friends

I got out after my first tour in the fall of 2004. I was stuck in southern California and I needed a job so I signed on with Centex Homes as a construction superintendent. I didn't know the first thing about construction. I was an artillery officer so my background was in destruction. The homebuilding world was new and different but I had bills to pay and I was looking for a change. In my interview, the hiring manager asked if I had any construction experience. I told him I was pretty sure I knew what a hammer was but that I didn't really know what it did. He hired me anyway.

Centex had a lot of personnel meetings and jobsite luncheons so one hot California afternoon a bunch of us new-hires went out to eat at Albierto's, a local Mexican food joint, as kind of a get-to-know-you-over-salsa mixer. There were the usual flat-brimmed hats and Metal Mulisha big-dumb-truck-owning kinds of construction stereotypes there so I didn't feel particularly inclined to talk with anyone. They looked like the types of guys who shouted at their wives or girlfriends in public and their conversations convinced me that my carne asada burrito had better people skills.

One guy, though, stood apart from the group of loud braggadocio. He was tall, fit, and had his hair shaved short. He and I traded a look across the pushed-together fast food tables but we were far enough apart that it made casual conversation impossible. We were the only two there with our company shirts tucked in.

The luncheon wrapped up and we all went back out into the sun to look at someone's turbocharged diesel pickup in the parking lot. The highway, the 215, a major north/south route through So-Cal, ran on an elevated portion by an on/off ramp behind the Albierto's strip mall. There were tall, mature palm trees in heavy planter boxes spaced evenly across the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. They didn't provide much shade. Everyone had to talk in raised voices to be heard over the low roar of the freeway traffic. Semi trucks flew by and the gusts of wind from the trailers made the palm fronds shift and sway. Our little gaggle of Centex employees milled about and small groups of four or five guys shifted, broke apart, and reformed in different configurations based on who was talking about racing quads or going to the desert or lifting their trucks even higher.

A passing semi blew a tire. There was a loud boom and a whoosh as the steel-belted radial let go. Rubber debris shot into the concrete guardrails high above us. The out-rush of pressurized air reverberated off the stucco walls of the strip mall. I moved without thinking at the first sound of the explosion. I threw myself back and down, rolling up onto my shoulder and coming to a hard stop against the rough concrete of the palm tree planter box. The rush of air from the blown tire echoed around the strip mall and I scanned in every direction for the source of the incoming fire. My vision tunneled and my hands flew about uselessly, desperately trying to find my rifle. I kept my back to the planter and leaned around the corner, looking at a dozen incredulous construction superintendents as they stared back at me. I let out a breath I didn't know I held and let my hands rest on my thighs as I crouched there, embarrassed. I heard a voice behind me.

"Bro. That sounded exactly like an RPG."

I did a little turn-shuffle, still careful to keep my head below the top edge of the planter box, and looked over my shoulder. The tall man with the short hair was also pressed against the backside of the planter box. The sleeve of his white Centex polo shirt had a matching dusty smear like mine. He was down on in a tactical kneel, positioned outboard, covering the other direction and protecting my back with empty hands. He grinned at me.

I laughed and relaxed a bit. "Jesus Christ, dude. Yeah it did." We looked at each other and smiled and then almost simultaneously we reached out to help each other stand up. He stuck out his hand.

"Mario. Marine Corps. Engineers."

I shook his hand. "Terrell. Artillery. Also Marine Corps."

"I figured you were," he said. He stretched and slapped the dust off his shirt. The other guys were still looking at us. My hearing went back to normal and the roar of the traffic settled down into background noise again. The blood stopped surging and I no longer felt my pulse behind my eyes. "All those motherfuckers would be dead right now, so fuck 'em." He smiled big, waved, and addressed the group. "It's OK! False alarm. No RPGs. Good thing, too, since you all need to work on your reaction times."

I laughed again and set about dusting myself off and straightening my shirt. The construction guys turned away and went back to talking

about their trucks or us. Mario looked up and around at the highway. I looked up as well. We stared at the traffic racing by, each of us back in our own wars. He dug into his pocket and fished out a company business card from his wallet. "That's my cell. Let's get a beer and talk about how stupid everyone is," he said as he handed it over.

I took his card and gave him one of mine. "Yes, let's do that. We'll drink to RPGs."

"RPGs and clueless civilians," he amended.

"RPGs and clueless civilians."

This chowhall has a disturbing lack of Heinz taco sauce.

Sgt W is an interesting man. We talked about technology for a while, then he told me his story about Halfsie, an Afghan IED emplacer who was hit by a Hellfire missile and blown in half at the waist. Halfsie tried to crawl away, trailing guts but moving fast, until a convoy pulled up and someone shot him. I laughed at the visual of half a dude crawling as fast as he could over a dusty road. Reminded me of that kid I saw in Iraq.

Mission Prep

My goodbye letter was signed and sealed in my footlocker. I put my loose papers in a folder and tucked it into my deployment bag. I rolled up my sleeping pad and put my dirty laundry in my WP bag so it didn't stink up the tent. I tidied up my cot area and made a note in my journal about the weather. I let my buddy know the combo to my lock and the password to my computer as well as what files to delete. I made a list about what gear to salvage off me if at all possible. I wanted my knife to go to my dad and my wrist compass to my sister. I wanted the picture of me smiling by the American flag to go to my mom. My friends could fight over the dusty Jolly Roger. I tried to squeeze in a quick nap if at all possible. I didn't pray any more. I just hoped I wouldn't burn.

I did this every time.

Swung by the PX and bought a carpet for \$17. 4x6. It really ties my little corner of the world together. I was resistant at first because I remembered how nice carpet was when I got back from Iraq but then I decided that this place sucks enough already and I might as well try to make it comfortable.

'Merica

Tyler stomped through the thick Marjeh moon dust of the dry tilled field. Cotton plants grew listlessly in long rows. He dared an IED to go off with every step.

"This is America and this is America. Everywhere I step is America because I'm American and where I step is America. This is America and this is America and this is America. This. Is. *America*. America. America. America. 'Merica. Murica. Murica. Murca. Murca. Murca. Mur! Mur! *Mur!*"

Puffs of dust poofed out from under his boots with every declaration. I followed him, stepping exactly in his boot prints, laughing the entire way.

Sgt E told us that some of the DFAC TCNs were dressed up in trash bag and tin foil costumes so we had to turn around and suit up! Me in a clown suit; LtCol K in a grim reaper cloak; W in a banana costume; Cpl M in an afro wig; Cpl F in a ZZ top beard; Sgt H in a sexy cop outfit with tiny shorts, a moustache, wig, and aviators; Sgt A in a ladies' sailor outfit; and Boaz in a pink Gothic fairy outfit with fake tattoos, a Ronald Reagan mask, and a rifle (he looked like a murderer). Ran out of time for DFAC 4 since it closed at 2000, so we went to the CASH instead in an NTV and an MRAP covered in Christmas lights. Walked through the CASH under the auspices of visiting a 2/9 Marine (LCpl S), but he was already discharged so the front desk specialist took us through the CASH to the various rooms. We reverse-trick-or-treated to the Army guys playing cards. We gave out candy to the injured Local Nationals. One little girl, who was tiny and wearing a crazy red hat, had an injury to her left arm (possible gunshot). Her father was there so the nurse grabbed a linguist and asked if it would be OK for us to give her some candy. He said yes, so a big clown and a smiling banana handed her some Jolly Ranchers and hard candies. Like W put it, her memories of this crazy part of her life will be of getting hurt and being put on a huge noisy flying machine, getting poked and prodded by white people in the cleanest, nicest, brightest tent she will ever see, and then having these big colorful people give her candy and treats that she will most likely never have again. So bizarre.

Talked with H, W, and Sgt H while H practiced throwing his knife at an AFES poster with a picture of a baby on it. He got it (eventually) in the neck and both eyes.

Things to remember: Rahat's friend 'Mike' looking glassy-eyed at dinner with his vest open to the navel ~ hashish, probably; Sgt H killing a camel spider & being grossed out by it to the point of almost vomiting; my poor feet being constantly sandy & gritty; my bayonet looking dusty & forlorn; a creepy beetle trundling along towards my footlocker; drinking tequila smuggled in via a Listerine bottle while watching It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia; wearing soccer shorts & my light blue t-shirt with the shark & gorilla in front of an explosion on it around the hooch.

4th of July

The roads were dark and there was a thick grey haze that obscured most of the yellow illumination from the streetlights. The houses were blacked out except for thin beams of light coming from the edges of the windows where the drapes didn't quite completely cover the corners. The trees were a slightly different black from the night. Noisy bursts of firecrackers shot through the spaces between the houses. The muffled whumph of heavier explosives came from further on, out beyond the edges of the neighborhood.

The fireworks sounded like heavy machine gun fire, which I found peaceful. I could always fall asleep to the sound of distant outgoing .50 cal's, lulled by the talking guns chanting, "Die, motherfucker, die." It made me feel like all was right with the world because someone else's day was getting the high hard one. The explosions, the detonations - they were all familiar and comforting and they made me smile.

I had my small backpack on. It was full of beer and first aid equipment. I had the hood of my black sweatshirt pulled up but I was careful to keep it from covering my ears so it wouldn't interfere with my hearing. I walked down the right side of the street like I had so many times before.

I took smooth, quick steps. I scanned the rooflines and building corners for silhouettes. I kept my mouth slightly open to help me hear better. I hunched down a little in order to keep my head more obscured. I opened my eyes wide but I didn't fixate on any one thing

in order to take advantage of my peripheral vision and night adaption.
I kept my eyes moving. I licked my lips and tasted cordite and sulfur.

I was surrounded by sounds and smells that reminded me I should be part of a group instead of walking alone on an empty street at night. They were sensory inputs bound to feelings of teamwork and camaraderie. I paused and realized I had no responsibilities to anyone except myself. No SitReps or PosReps. No checkpoints or targets or grid coordinates or subordinates or superiors or unit tracking or radio checks. I was all by myself and everything around me was potentially hostile.

It was liberating.

I was free from my life: no bills, no family, no friends, no work, no school, no pets, no wife, no girlfriend, no past, no future. No hope.

No rifle.

My hands ached for it. My hands told my brain that there was something fundamentally wrong with them because they were empty and toothless. I flexed them repeatedly to try and get the sensation to go away. It didn't work.

I kept walking. There was nothing else I could do.

Cool night, moon casting a blue shine over everything.

Once More, with Feeling

Fri, 06 Jan 2017, 17:14

Tyler: *"Today's Marine Corps Times headline - The U.S. Marines are sending a task force back to Afghanistan's Helmand Province."*

The U.S. Marines will deploy a 300-person task force to southwestern Afghanistan this spring to help local security forces beat back Taliban gains in the restive Helmand Province. The deployment will last nine months, marking the first in what's expected to become a series of similar rotations for the Marines, officials said.

Tyler: "215 Corps ANA - Great at volleyball, terrible at war."

Me: "Déjà vu all over again. And they cheated at volleyball."

Tyler: "To quote the always quotable Rust Cole, 'Time is a flat circle.'"

I can't wait to get home and forget about all of this.

Afterwards

I set out to tell a story about war, not to tell a war story. I wanted to tell a story about my experiences with war that would never make it into the pop culture collective consciousness of America: the boredom and the filth; the things that made me laugh or the things that made me question why we were there (even though those were frequently the same); the small moments of beauty; the jarring emotional shifts from one moment to the next.

My intent was to write something that Hollywood could never film. It was not going to be an action-packed blockbuster or a heroic stranger-in-a-strange-land patriotic journey into and through the fiery crucible of war. Instead, I wanted to write about the in-between time, the time where my friends and I sat around and joked with each other while we waited for something to happen. My thought was to have everything revolve around my initial title, *Interaction*, so I could explore the experiences in between the fighting and the action as well as between the characters and their experiences or surroundings. I hoped to challenge the perception of the media's portrayal of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that we were more than just quick soundbites or boots on the ground.

I also pushed back against the red-blooded hometown hero idea in movies like *American Sniper*, *Lone Survivor*, or *The Hurt Locker* because those stories did not resonate with me. They were not about anyone I had ever met, served with, or even heard about during my service in the Marine Corps. While those films had some small elements of humor or pathos (especially the scenes where the main character returned home

and felt out of place), they predominately ignored the tedium, frivolity, and pervasive disgusting conditions that existed for my friends and I in the Middle East. The stories I wanted to tell were about the time we called a sexual enhancement pharmaceutical company from a satellite phone in the middle of Afghanistan (*Glutes Magazine*) or when I saw a guy pulling a jet-ski with a donkey in Iraq (*Donkey Cart Jet Ski*), not about my close calls with death or the rush of a firefight.

I struggled with how best to tie those types of stories together in a way that made narrative sense but my thesis continually refused the structure of a traditional novel. I looked to some of my favorite war authors for inspiration, like Kent Anderson's *Sympathy for the Devil* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Both authors set their stories in relatively short time periods whereas my memories and experiences spanned almost 20 years. My memories also did not come to me in a linear fashion. I experienced them haphazardly, triggered by a smell or a sound, or randomly with no apparent reason at all. How then could I capture that experience of disjointed memories while revisiting the feelings that those memories brought on? How could I translate those experiences into a format accessible for the reader?

I realized that I could not make a linear narrative structure work for me in the context of my thesis as a whole. I had a collection of short stories, vignettes, and journal entries that were disjointed and disconnected in time, linked only by their descriptions of what it was like during wartime downtime. I wrote some of them, like *Suicide Brief* and *Beard Scalps* for shock value, to show the reader how the horrible can become the mundane. I wrote other stories, like *Big T* and *Pancake*

Man, to show the reader how emotionally or experientially extreme situations were normalized and accepted. *Two Weeks* and *Rollo and Fat Jesus* were examples of situations that I felt no one would ever believe could be real.

I decided that variety, nonlinearity, and disjointedness would be my structure for an experimental memoir. I revisited my journals from Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2010 and thought about the overarching tone or feeling in the entries. What, besides me as the writer or time as the connector, bound the journal entries together? The answer, I felt, was a sense of constant anticipation. The entries chronicled events, experiences, places, people, sights, smells, opinions, hopes, and fears but they kept me off balance as I read them. I could see how the person I was when I wrote the entries never knew what the next day would bring or how he (I) would react to it. I could relive those experiences by rereading the journal entries but I was more struck by the experience of seeing myself not knowing what was about to happen. I could see how different training scenarios helped inform my reactions and I could see how my own worldview shaped my responses, but it was the build-up, the tension, and the anticipation that inspired my thesis structure. I wanted the reader to experience that same sense of anticipation and trepidation that I felt every day while I was deployed. I wanted the reader to feel off-balance and wary, to feel the same weariness and black humor that I felt. I wanted the reader to smell the smoke, taste the grit, and, at the end of it all, feel wrung out and exhausted.

I used four different formats in my thesis: journal entries, short stories, quotes from other individuals, and what I called rants, which

were profanity-laden monologues, with each format informing, playing off, setting up, or softening the blow of the other.

The journal entries were the connective through-line and became the framework around which I structured the stories. They were events meant to anchor the reader in reality. Some journal entries, like "*The F-18's guns sound like huge sheets of cloth being torn forcefully and quickly*" (p.43), are included to give the reader both sensory description and to act as a reminder to the reader that the battles, fights, chaos, action, and destruction were all just a backdrop to the included stories. They provided hints to the larger scope of the war, or, in this instance, a glimpse at the tail end of a pitched battle in Iraq that culminated in multiple airstrikes and gun runs against entrenched Iraqi soldiers. Others, like the following entry, showed how fast the shift from tragedy to normalcy could occur:

Read up on the SigActs. We are back in River City due to another FKIA in the AO ~ GSW to the head, died in the medevac bird. Also, a LN got exploded when a herd of sheep triggered a PPIED. Had a good laugh about that one. Also also, a 6-year-old girl got shot in the head ~ still alive but 'grey matter exposed.' Bit of a rough couple of days for the guys but I got some nice emails from the family. (p.199)

This acronym- and jargon-heavy excerpt highlighted the unique nature of military language. It also captured how I reacted to (and how I gave the reader permission to react to) different deaths. A Marine was killed in action and the flat tone understated the frantic circumstances surrounding his injury and the efforts to save him (both

of which were previously explored during the training evolution described in *The Death of Bobby Jenkins*). A local national died when one of his sheep set off a pressure-plate improvised explosive device and my reaction was one of incredulous hilarity. His death made me laugh until my stomach hurt. Finally, a little Afghan girl was shot in the head (by who? Marines? The Taliban? An Afghan National Army soldier? I never found out) and the cause of her tragic injury was left unpursued and unresolved. All those deaths happened on the same day and within hours of each other but my parting thought was a note about how good it was to hear from my family again. Thematically, the journal entries throughout my thesis go from dark humor to horrible catastrophe; from the tragic to the mundane; from intense to ridiculous. I used them to give the reader a larger and more dynamic background to set the stories against.

The stories, however gross or horrifying, took place outside of, in between, before, or after the fighting. They documented the downtime and daily life of what it was like to train for, deploy to, and spend months living as a Marine fighting a war in a foreign desert.

I struggled between wanting to tell the stories truthfully or to tell them in a manner that would keep the reader from tossing away my thesis in disgust. If I was honest in my storytelling, people may not want to read the stories and my efforts would be wasted. If I glossed over the ugly parts, which was almost all of it, then I was not being true to myself or to the people who suffered alongside me. So, I compromised: I told the stories in what I felt was a more palatable approach. I retained the shocking and unbelievable subject matter but I altered some of the dialogue and descriptions. For instance, the scenarios

described in *Man-Love Thursdays* and *WAG Bags* were much darker and the attendant conversations more vulgar than what made it onto the page. Likewise, *The Most Scared I'd Ever Been* and *Self Love in the Porta-Shitter* do not fully do justice to the filth of the toilets and outhouses, nor does *Final Exam* truly capture the raw violence of the execution video. Yet several people who read the final drafts of those stories (fellow cohort members, family, friends - i.e. a cross-section of my intended civilian readership demographic) felt like the descriptions were still too much. I wrote the stories with an eye towards balancing how things actually happened against what readers might be willing to suffer through. For the most part I felt I was successful. To further address this discrepancy between the flat reality of the journal entries and the more polished events in the stories, I wrote a series of rants.

I tried to recapture what I felt I sacrificed in the stories through the inclusion of four distinct rants, placed in order of escalating intensity. Each rant was written as if a Marine spoke (or yelled) directly to the reader. Whether that Marine was me (or the narrator version of me), or someone else I overheard, was left intentionally ambiguous. Each rant explored a different way of communicating but still maintained the casual cursing and interweaving of horrific descriptions that permeates Marine Corps culture. *Weapons* approached the pragmatic nature of hand-to-hand combat through a calm, instructional voice; *Patrol Socks* discussed the pros and cons of using innocuous clothing items as masturbatory aides in friendly yet graphic detail; *Pie Hole* attempted to grab the reader by the scruff of the neck and inflict punishment; *Suicide Prevention* screamed about a delicate and emotionally charged subject in the most profane way possible. Each

rant was designed to elicit shock and discomfort on the part of the reader and I intended them to act as reminder that horrible things could (and do) appear without warning, much like they did in war, and that they can (and do) get so much worse.

The final component of my thesis was the use of direct quotes from other Marines, military personnel, or civilians. I was inspired by Henry Berry's *Hey, Mac, Where Ya Been?*, which is a collection of first-hand accounts told to him by Marines who fought in the Korean War. Like the journal entries, the quotes stand alone on the page with minimal context. I positioned them to answer questions that the reader may not know how to ask, or to provide an additional voice for the reader to listen to. I went back through my journals and I pulled lines from the hundreds of quotes and snippets of conversations that I recorded over the years. I selected the ones I felt would best add another layer of humanity to my thesis, but mostly they were intended to be punchlines to jokes that were never told.

My thesis's formal structure was heavily influenced by Layli Long Soldier and Claudia Rankine's use of white space in *Whereas* and *Citizen*, respectively. I was interested in how they used the space around their words to allow the reader to dwell on their poetry. I drew from their examples and tried to position quotes and journal entries in such a way as to allow the reader time to pause and readjust to new information, or to sit and think about the absurdity of a situation, much like I did from time to time, while staring out across the desert horizon or looking deep into the flames of a trash fire. I also considered the white space to be the time that surrounds events, in that the passage of time was visually identified by the amount of

space surrounding the words. For example, there were several instances throughout my thesis where I strung together long chains of short journal entries, usually about mundane topics, to show how there could be a solid week where nothing exciting happened. My intent was for the reader to linger on the small details and to think about what it was like to have a ladybug landing on my stomach be the only noteworthy event of a day in the life of a Marine at war. Sometimes war is boring.

The white space also bled into the structure of the individual stories. The Marine Corps used Standard Naval Letter Format for all official correspondence and it looked like blocks of text in paragraph form, single spaced, without indentations. The blocks built off each other but were also separated from one another by a double space. The space served as a pause and as way to make things uniform, yet distinct. I found myself unconsciously reverting to that style as I wrote the stories (and this poetics statement). It was a familiar format that provided me with visual comfort while I wrote about difficult things. I elected to keep that same format throughout, but I used double spacing for academic grounding. There are no paragraph indentations in the stories but the paragraphs are still separated by a double (now double-double) space. It was an interesting style choice to see after the fact and I viewed it as a bridge joining my Marine Corps life and my civilian life. Even now, one still impacts the other.

I noticed recurring parallels between my experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Things happened in cycles, like they seem to do in every war. I chose to structure my writing after those cycles. My thesis begins and ends with quotes from my time in Iraq, which was more

violently intense than my more supervisory role in Afghanistan, but it also begins and ends with stories about my life after Afghanistan. I realized that the stories, journal entries, and experiences could all exist in a non-linear format because of their circular nature. What I felt in Iraq translated effortlessly to what I felt in Afghanistan and to what I felt before and after those two wars. My wars ended but they weren't over. My deployments finished but there was never closure.

Additionally, I felt like I lived through the physical embodiment of Smedley Butler's *War is a Racket* and I tried to reflect this in my thesis without explicitly discussing the politics behind the war. War is, and has been for some time now, a for-profit endeavor. I could see it manifested in every bloated government contract and redundant logistical activity aboard the camps and bases I visited. I tried not to include journal entries that spoke directly to my political beliefs because I felt the reader could reach their own conclusions about those underreported parts of war. I left additional white space around journal entries and stories for the reader to stop and consider what was said as they worked their way through my thesis.

The general expectation was that war stories were about violence but my thesis was structured to challenge that expectation. Most of the violence that takes place in my thesis is imaginary and directed towards other Americans rather than towards the people who we are told are our enemies. The violence in *Justifiable Fratricide* never happened, despite how much I wanted to do it, while the potential for violence was established immediately in *Big T*, but then it never materialized because the people involved were tired of fighting.

I reflected on how I used violence (or the absence of violence) and how I addressed (or did not address) the political implications of my experiences to find the right title for my work. My initial title, *Interaction*, informed my process and my overall theme of exploring what took place between the fighting, but it was, I was told, very boring. I made a list of almost fifty possible titles, but the one that I felt encapsulated both the larger scope of the wars beyond my individual experience as well as the issues I struggled with after coming home was *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. I felt it perfectly summed up the relentless absurdity and the fiscal and human waste of modern warfare. Plus, it made me laugh.

Things come out of nowhere in my thesis. Characters won't do what a reader expects. Situations that start bad but seem resolvable get so much worse. Things that seem innocuous end up horrific. Dark scenarios turn light and funny. Things progress to illogical conclusions. I tried to have the reader get into the Marine Corps mindset of "expect the unexpected" (which is logically flawed, but still an ubiquitous Marine-ism) and "adapt and overcome" without knowing they were doing so. I designed the first 25 pages to prime the reader for exactly that kind of experience, to prepare them for what it was like for me to go to war.