

New Fiction: “Plink, Rack” by Steven Kiernan



The re are many moving parts in a gun. There’s the trigger, which most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They’re the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one

in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you. Sometimes not.

Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn't hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands. Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack. Plink, rack.* Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced

with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen comrades. For a few days after the bricks were laid, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack.* He swiveled towards the other soldier. *Plink, rack.*

"Doing alright up there, Hal?" J asked from the driver's seat.

"Just great," Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I fucking hate pulling security for 1st platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound," J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

"Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer."

"I got ya, bro," Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn't yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

"This is just getting ridiculous." J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

"You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted." J said.

"No shit?"

"Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I wanted to be." He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. "Then I got this great fucking idea, *I'll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film,*" he said in a nasally voice. "Even told my recruiter about it."

"I bet he fucking loved that," Hal said. "Why didn't you go combat camera? He get you with the old 'Infantry is the only slot open right now' line?"

"Guilty as charged."

"So, how's your 'epic war film' working out? I bet it'll be realistic as fuck."

"Don't you worry, I got it all planned out. It's gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic."

“Yeah. But those ten minutes though...”

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

“My grandfather fought in World War II,” J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. “Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn’t until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what’s it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

A man kicked his brother down the street.

A policeman shows up and says, “Hey, why are you doing that? You can’t do that.”

The man turns and says, “It’s alright, he’s dead anyway.”

“I didn’t get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it’s pretty fucking funny.”

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you

apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see him."

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, shit. He's got an RPG!"

"What?!" J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. "Shoot him, man. Shoot him!"

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power

scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

“Shoot him!”

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn't really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn't breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he

just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He exhaled. *Plink, rack*. There was a knock on his door. "Hey, Hal, ya in there?" Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack*. "What are you doing, man?" *Plink, rack*. It's alright, Hal thought. It's alright.

Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps