

New Fiction from Adam Straus: “ANA Checkpoint”



Sergeant

Reiss insisted on giving a full patrol order every time we left the wire. I thought it was overkill, but I didn't mind as much as some of the other guys. Haggerty especially was always going on about how it was a waste of time. It's not like there was anything else to do, but he was obsessed with efficiency. Back in Twentynine Palms, he had a million little projects he would work on in our barracks room during the endless hours we spent waiting to be told what the plan for the day was, waiting to be released in the afternoon, waiting to deploy. While I'd sit and play video games like a normal person, he'd try (and fail) to learn foreign languages, do hundreds of pushups, and pace like a maniac. Haggerty just couldn't accept that some time wasn't his to spend.

On deployment, he had the bunk above mine in our squad's platform tent. Inside, there were six other racks and a beat-up TV that the guys we relieved had left for us. Outside sat a generator that sometimes coughed exhaust into the tent. Our stained sagging mattresses had been around since the war started, and I could feel the bedframe's springs under my ass as Haggerty and I sat side by side on my rack, taking notes while Sergeant Reiss briefed.

"Fuckin' simple shit tonight, gents," he began. "We're going to depart the east ECP, swing by the ANA checkpoint on Highway 1, and return via the airfield. Orientation remains the same. We've still got Little to our east, the highway to our north, Big just past that, and fuckin' nothing to our west and south. Weather tonight will be clear, with 6% illumination..."

I copied down all of the meteorological data, along with the same enemy situation and the same friendly situation that had held true for the previous three months of deployment. I wrote word for word "the Taliban are active throughout Washir. I expect them to mass to fireteam size in order to carry out hasty ambushes if they are alerted to our presence" and "the ANA maintain checkpoints along Highway 1. At night they are

often high or asleep, so we can't count on them for help. 3rd squad will be on QRF and they'll be able to reach us within 30 minutes." I glanced over at Haggerty's field notebook. All he'd written down was "ANA checkpoint, Highway 1." In his defense, that was all any of us really needed. We'd already done this exact same patrol at least ten times.

Sergeant Reiss read off our mission statement ("On order, 2nd squad interdicts the Taliban in the vicinity of Highway 1 in order to deter enemy activity and strengthen our partnership with the Afghan National Army") and walked us through the patrol route, using empty cans of dip to signify our vehicles on a mockup of the surrounding grid squares he kept in the middle of our tent. He finished by listing all the frequencies to program into the vehicle's radios (the same frequencies we'd been using the whole deployment) and telling us the succession of command, in case he went down. Sergeant Reiss asked for questions. There weren't any.

"Alright. Check your shit, then get some sleep. We're pushing out at 0200 so I want everyone at the vehicles by 0130."

The brief over, we turned to personal preparation. My pre-patrol routine was automatic: I kept my kit staged in the same spot, with my rifle hung from the same bedpost and my boots pointing the same way with one sugar-free RipIt (the caffeine equivalent of two cups of coffee) stashed in each of them. Everyone had their own way of getting ready, from the rosary Schumacher prayed to Doc Warrington's habit of jerking off before bed. Whatever it was, we'd all had plenty of practice, and 30 minutes after Sergeant Reiss' order ended, the squad racked out with our alarms set for 0100.

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Everyone killed their alarms on the second or third ring. We got dressed and kitted up in silence, each set of bunkmates in an island of light from the bare bulbs that hung from the

canvas above our racks. I chugged one of my RipIts and pocketed the other, in case I started nodding off later. The center of the tent was still dark.

February nights in Helmand are cold as fuck, and we shivered underneath our flaks and kevlar during the five minute walk to the motor pool where our up-armored MaxxPros sat waiting. Haggerty and I took our seats in the back of vic one, with Sergeant Reiss in the passenger seat as vehicle commander, Donahue driving, and McClellan in the turret.

Our interpreter Aziz was already in the vehicle. He rolled with our fireteam, but he never came to Sergeant Reiss' briefings. He'd already been working out of our FOB for nearly two years. His job was to sit inside the vehicle, get out when Sergeant Reiss told him to, repeat whatever shit Sergeant Reiss and the Afghans were trying to say to one another, and then get back in. He was older, with bifocals and flecks of gray in his well-trimmed beard, and he wore a knit sweater under his castoff flak. He looked like a college professor.

Like Aziz, Haggerty and I didn't have anything to do until we got to the checkpoint. There, our job was to get out with Sergeant Reiss and Aziz and make sure none of the ANA shot them in the back of the head. An implied task was to not get ourselves shot either.

While Sergeant Reiss got comm checks with the operations center and requested permission to depart friendly lines, Haggerty bent towards my jump seat and motioned for me to lean in.

"I think Gabby's cheating on me."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, I'm not 100% sure. It's just little things. Like I saw on her Instagram story that she was at a party on Saturday night. When we talked on Monday and I asked her what she'd

done over the weekend, she said 'nothing.' And the other day some dude commented on one of her photos. I asked her who he was, and she said it was one of her cousins. But I remember her telling me like six months ago that all of her cousins are girls. My point is, why lie if there's nothing going on?"

"Fuck, dude. Do you know anyone she's going to school with who could keep an eye on things for you?"

"The only people I know there are her friends, there's no point asking them."

"Fuck. I don't know what to say."

I really didn't. But I did know that Gabby was a junior at UC Riverside. She had two older brothers that she got along with well, her parents lived in Palm Springs, she was majoring in biology, she wanted to be a doctor someday, and she played on the club volleyball team. She was tall for a girl, she almost always kept her hair tied back in a ponytail, and she wore the same floral perfume as my sister. Gabby chewed gum constantly, which made kissing her taste like spearmint.

Haggerty knew all of this too, except for the fact that I knew any of it. He turned to our terp.

"Aziz, you're old. You got any girl advice for me?"

Aziz laughed. "I am maybe not the best to ask. My wife, I have not seen her in more than one year. The Taliban came to my house and said they would kill me next time I come home. So she tell them I'm already dead. Now, she pretends to be a widow until I make my three years and get our visa. Then, both of us go to America." He wiped his glasses on the sleeve of his sweater. "I still send money home and we talk on the phone. So that is maybe my advice to you. Call on the phone and send money."

"Goddamn Aziz, you always keep it heavy."

He shrugged. "You ask me, this is what I tell you."

We fell silent, listening to the low throb of the MaxxPro's engine as we left the FOB. Our route took us through what used to be the largest American base in Helmand. We'd turned over most of it to the Afghans, and our perimeter was now a square postage stamp in the corner of their envelope. The Afghans manned the outer fence, sort of. In between our walls and theirs was a wasteland of materiel: Old canvas tents, rusted out vehicles, coils of barbed wire protecting nothing, long-empty concrete bunkers. The Afghans had taken anything worth the effort years earlier, when the American tide had first receded. All that was left now were the equivalent of tidal flats, wide expanses of dust reeking of dried piss and rotted wood.

We crossed this nothingness and reached a small guard post with a metal arm blocking the road, the main entry control point for the Afghan base. Beyond was Afghanistan. The real Afghanistan, not the FOBs on which most Americans spent most of their time. To be fair, in our armored vehicles and flaks we were basically tortoises who took the FOB with us like a shell. Still, beyond the ECP was something closer to reality. A small Afghan in tattered camouflage trousers and a yellow t-shirt that glowed under the shack's lights jumped up from a plastic chair and lifted the arm for us.

"MANANA!" McClellan yelled from the turret. Sergeant Reiss was big on making us say "thank you" to the Afghans. He was kind of a boner about counter-insurgency stuff. The way I saw it, if saying "please" and "thank you" was all it took to win this war, we would've been out of here fifteen years earlier. But it couldn't hurt, I guess.

No matter how many times I'd done it, I still got a bit of a rush from leaving the wire. Even though there was no real difference between the desert we'd just crossed and the desert we now entered, there was something unmistakably different on

the north side of that guard post. An undercurrent of electricity ran through the air. We were out and about in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; anything could happen. It could be the last ten minutes of our lives and we might not even know it. I straightened in my seat and craned my neck to see out the MaxxPro's portholes. I could just discern the outline of a cluster of mud huts some 800m distant, the hamlet we called "Little" (to distinguish it from "Big" on the other side of the highway).

Even outside the wire, Haggerty couldn't keep Gabby off his mind. He whispered now, having gotten bitched out by Sergeant Reiss plenty of times for talking about bullshit on patrol. Haggerty was saying something about how he didn't want to waste his time, and if they were going to break up, they might as well do it sooner rather than later. I pretended to listen, muttering that if that was the case he shouldn't date anyone he wasn't going to marry. But the truth was I couldn't keep Gabby off my mind, either.

I remembered sitting across from her at a table in the back corner of a bar, comparing the fake IDs we'd used to get in. Hers was from New Jersey; it was a joke between her and her cousins (yes, they were all girls) that they'd used the same uptight single aunt's address in Cherry Hill for their fakes. Mine was from Minnesota, a hand-me-down from one of the older mortarmen. It'd cost me \$100. Gabby's had run her five times that, and it was laughably bad. But a perk of being a girl that looks the way she does is that bouncers could give less of a fuck whether her ID is any good. So we'd both gotten into this bar, a fifteen minute walk from her dorm and a two hour drive from my barracks. I'd insisted on making the trek, partially to be a gentlemen and partially on the off-chance she'd invite me back to her place. After a round of drinks, she was laughing at my jokes and leaning towards me while she compared our IDs side by side.

"This doesn't even look like you," she laughed.

“At least it looks like an ID. Yours looks like one of those fake permission slips kids try to make where they sign their mom’s name in crayon, saying they were late to school because their dog escaped or whatever.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad. It worked, didn’t it?”

We mostly just joked back and forth like that. It wasn’t one of those epic first dates you read about where the couple talks until dawn and gets married as soon as the courthouse opens the next morning. But we didn’t hate being around one another and she was seriously cute, both of which are big wins whenever you meet someone off a dating app. Still, we only had two beers, because I was driving, and there can’t have been more than an hour between our awkward “nice to meet you” hug and when I settled the tab.

The part I think about the most is the last twenty minutes or so, beginning with when I asked to walk her back to her dorm. It was the sort of thing I thought grown men were supposed to do. The entirety of my experience with women up to that point consisted of a long-term high school girlfriend and a handful of one night stands in San Diego; I didn’t know how to handle a real, no-shit date. But walking Gabby back to her place felt right, and she agreed at least enough to have me along.

I still had some vague idea of fucking her, but as we traced the leafy edge of her campus, it became more like a fantasy than something I could be doing within the next hour. I felt like I was carrying a priceless Ming vase in my hands, and the only thing on my mind was not messing it up. Not tripping on a crack in the asphalt and splitting my face open, not saying the wrong thing, not pushing too hard too fast.

When we reached the stone steps of her dorm, Gabby paused, looking down at her feet. My heart pounded in my ears and I found myself breathing hard, like I’d just run the half-mile from the bar to her place.

“Well, thanks for the drinks. I had a nice time.”

I don't think I said anything back; I just kissed her.

Normally, driving up the hill to Twenty-nine Palms is the most depressing shit in the world. First the road weaves between these angry-looking mountains, and then for the last half-hour civilization slowly fades away until you find yourself in Two-Nine, a town with a “Hundred Miles to Next Service” sign on its far edge. But for once I didn't mind the desert. I was blissed out, my truck's engine wailing to maintain 85 MPH going uphill. I thought I'd found an oasis with Gabby, I really did.

In a different desert, far from the smooth asphalt of Highway 62, we turned off the gravel access road leading in and out of base. Our command didn't want us driving on the Ring Road itself. The shoddily constructed highway could barely handle the weight of our vehicles, and the few long haul truckers who kept Afghanistan's economy running hated having to slow down for our convoys. At Sergeant Reiss' direction, Donahue eased our MaxxPro onto a washed-out dirt path that led to the Afghan checkpoint we were visiting. As we bounced along, I could hear the occasional truck fly by on the highway 200m to our north.

The checkpoint consisted of two buildings, a new guard shack made of corrugated metal reinforced with sandbags and an old, abandoned mud hut that the Afghan soldiers had claimed as their hooch. Our squad seamlessly brought the three vehicles into a tight 360 degree security perimeter between them, forming a peace sign if viewed from overhead. Donahue lowered the back stairs, and Haggerty, Aziz, and I walked out to link up with Sergeant Reiss and head inside.

I dropped my night vision goggles down for the short walk. Our NVGs worked by magnifying ambient light, but it was a new moon, and with no light to magnify, I could barely make out where the buildings ended and the sky began. Looking up,

though, I could see all of the stars that were normally too dull to be visible. I thought of an old Incubus song I'd liked in high school: *The sky resembles a backlit canopy, with holes punched in it... I wish you were here.*

I pulled my NVGs up and off my face when we arrived at the guard shack. The four of us stepped inside and were greeted with the overwhelming smell of hashish. An Afghan soldier sat on the floor, reclining against the sandbags that lined the wall. His back was to the highway.

"Salaam aleikum," Sergeant Reiss said, placing his hand over his heart in the traditional Afghani greeting. The Afghan nodded and smiled. He didn't stand or gesture for us to sit. Sergeant Reiss told Haggerty to post up just outside the door. He'd brought both of us because there were supposed to be two ANA soldiers inside.

With his own knowledge of Dari exhausted, Sergeant Reiss turned to Aziz to translate. They made small talk with the Afghan, discussing how cold it was outside and how much traffic had been coming by on the highway. The purpose of the checkpoint was to deter the Taliban from moving around freely on Highway 1, but short of stopping every vehicle and ripping it apart to search for weapons, there was no real way to do this. The actual value added of this particular spot was to serve as a bullet sponge, drawing attackers away from the larger base half a mile to the south. This guard shack was a reincarnation of one that had been leveled by a vehicle-borne IED a year and a half earlier. The Afghan seemed to accept this, replying to Sergeant Reiss' questions with the tired air of a man who knows his answers don't matter. Or maybe he was just stoned.

Sergeant Reiss eventually cut the shit. "Aziz, ask him why there aren't two guys in here. Tell him we know they're supposed to have two guys in here."

Aziz and the Afghan went back and forth in fast, lyrical Dari. The Afghan punctuated his sentences with a series of shrugs and flicks of his hand.

“He says it is because two of their men are home on leave,” Aziz explained. “They were told to be back two days ago but they could not travel because of violence. At the checkpoint, they do not get a replacement and now only four are here. If they have two awake all night then there is no time to sleep.”

“Alright, whatever.” Sergeant Reiss shifted his shoulders under the weight of his flak. “Ask him all the oversight questions. You know, last time he was paid, last time he got leave, last time one of his NCOs came out here to check on him, all that shit.”

While Aziz and the Afghan talked, I continued to scan the room. Besides a ceramic bong, the only other furniture was a chamber pot. Thankfully, it was empty. The walls were lined with sandbags stacked up to waist height. A light machinegun stood on a fixed post, pointed out along the short strip of dirt road that led from the checkpoint to the highway itself. It wasn't loaded. Belts of ammunition sat coiled in a rusted can on the floor.

Aziz finished with the Afghan and turned to Sergeant Reiss. “He says they were paid last week but not enough. I do not know if this is true or if he just wants more money. They have not seen any of their leadership in two weeks. He says it is because they are with the operation in Marjah right now. And he has not been home in six months. He is from the north, near Mazar-e-Sharif he says, and he wants you to know that there, the people are very good, but here, in Helmand, they are very bad.”

Sergeant Reiss nodded. “Alright. Tell him we say thanks for his time or whatever. Let's get the fuck out of here.”

We said our goodbyes and filed out the door. I went last. The

Afghan stared up at me from the floor, and before I turned to leave, he flashed a toothless smile. I waved back awkwardly and closed the door behind me.

Haggerty was waiting for us outside. "Sergeant, are we going to go over to the other compound?"

"Nah, they're just sleeping in there. No point in waking them up."

"Good to go, Sergeant."

Donahue saw us coming and dropped the stairs. We took our seats and began the drive back to our FOB. While the vehicle turned, I looked out the porthole and caught a glimpse of the Afghan highlighted through the checkpoint's window. He was standing up now, but instead of watching the highway, he was watching us drive away. I thought to wave again, but he had no way of seeing me in the dark.

"Anything happen in there?" Haggerty asked.

"Nah. You see anything?"

"One of the guys from the hut got up and took a shit, like, right outside. That was it."

"Cool."

"Yeah. I got some good thinking done, though."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not gonna break up with Gabby."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, what's the point? I'm over here. There's nothing I can do about it. I guess it's nice having someone to talk to. I'll see what the deal is when we get home."

“I feel that.”

“It’s not like I have any other options, you know?”

I told him I did. I hadn’t chosen to end things with Gabby, either. We’d actually made plans to hang out again the weekend after our first date. She was going to take me to a house party off-campus. I wondered what she would introduce me as. Friend? Acquaintance? Something else? We’d be drinking, obviously, so she probably didn’t expect me to drive back to Twenty-nine Palms that night. I hadn’t told any of the guys, not even Haggerty, because I didn’t want to jinx anything.

But then one of my seniors decided he wanted to go to LA that weekend, and he voluntold me to stand duty for him on Saturday. Gabby was busy Friday night, and I would be in the field the following weekend. So we had to slow our roll for two weeks.

And then two weeks turned into forever. It was day three of the field op we went on the week after I had to stand duty. Our platoon had some downtime between shooting all day and shooting all night, and a bunch of us were hanging around on our packs. Haggerty was bragging about this girl he’d been talking to on Tinder, an absolute dime he said, and he passed his phone around so we could all admire her profile.

It was Gabby. I didn’t blame her for that; I still don’t. We’d only hung out once, it wasn’t like we were exclusive. And I know that’s how the game works, that you have to keep your options open until you really commit to someone. I just felt weird about the whole thing. Which is why I tried to change the topic every time Haggerty brought her up after that, why I made a point of being at the gym while he got ready for their first date, why I avoided hanging out with them on the weekends once they started seeing one another, and why as far as Haggerty knows Gabby and I have only met each other once.

The one time he knows about was impossible to avoid. She came

to our farewell before we deployed, and I obviously had to be there, too. The parking lot cordoned off for our goodbyes was pure chaos. Some of the wives were bawling, a bunch of overtired toddlers were running around, and guys were trying to chug final beers without their leadership seeing.

Haggerty, of course, insisted I meet Gabby. I followed him to where his truck was parked. I realized that, for the moment, I was more nervous about seeing her than deploying. She seemed at ease, though, sitting on the tailgate, chewing a stick of gum and kicking her feet in the air.

“Gabs, this is my roommate Joey that I told you about.”

A flash of recognition crossed her face. Having had more time to prepare for our reunion than she had, I covered for her by introducing myself and saying I’d heard so much about her. The three of us made small talk, trying to focus on anything other than the fact that Haggerty and I were potentially heading off to our deaths and that the last time I’d seen Gabby she’d been running her hand through my hair while we made out.

Our platoon sergeant saved us from any further conversation, shouting with his gravely former drill instructor’s voice that we had two minutes to get on the fucking busses.

“Well, you two keep each other safe over there, ok?” she said, voice quivering.

We both nodded. I took the hint and boarded the white prison-style bus to allow Gabby and Haggerty a private goodbye. Somehow, I managed to resist the urge to spy on them through the window of the seat I’d claimed. Haggerty seemed shaken when he sat down next to me.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah, man.”

And then the bus lurched forward and we were gone. Gabby stood

in the middle of the crowd of crying women, waving goodbye until they melted together and vanished behind us into the desert. I thought to myself that I'd see her again at our homecoming.

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The same Afghan with the yellow shirt let us back into base, but this time we took a hard left along the fence line. Sergeant Reiss refused to take the same route out and back, so even though we were inside the Afghan wire, we had to take a dog leg by the airfield. Our FOB was too small for anything bigger than an Osprey to land, so we still relied on the Afghan flight line for most of our troop movements. They were supposed to have a guard posted 24/7, but as we drove by, the tarmac was empty. A random assortment of runway lights blinked on and off. The control tower was chained shut.

"You see anyone, McClellan?" Sergeant Reiss asked.

"No, Sergeant."

"Fuck it, let's just head back to the FOB."

Donahue reversed our MaxxPro onto the muddy road that skirted the perimeter of the airfield and turned towards home. I caught myself starting to drift off, but I didn't want to drink my second Rip-It this close to the end. Instead, I smacked myself in the face twice, hard enough to make my eyes water, an old stay-awake trick I'd learned in boot camp.

"Are you alright?" Aziz asked me.

"Yeah, just trying not to fall asleep."

He laughed. "Yes, I know you do not want to miss a second of this." Aziz spread his arms wide to encompass the MaxxPro, the checkpoint, all of Helmand Province, the whole country, the whole war.

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It was almost dawn when we got to the tent and dropped our flaks with a collective groan of relief. Sergeant Reiss told us to hang out for a minute while he went over to our platoon commander's hooch to debrief the patrol and get some word on what was next for us. While he was gone, I brushed my teeth with a water bottle and got into my sleeping bag, ready to pass out the moment we were allowed to. By the time Sergeant Reiss returned ten minutes later, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. He said we were going to the same checkpoint on our next patrol, departing at 2200 that night. I rolled over and went to sleep.