

New Fiction from Cameron McMillan: “Call Me Nobody. Let Me Live.”

I can still see his smile as I settle into my desk and the normal morning wave shuffles in. First comes the pinstripes of the best and the brightest, carrying their expertise and experience like an expensive briefcase by their side, letting it swing around for all to see. They speak of exotic and noteworthy places all the same, making no distinction between a Washington and a Baghdad. Their presence and self-importance is ballooned by the special assistant that seemingly exists to fan the flames of their egos, oohing and awing with every detail of the important missions the guests recount, and gesticulating at the carefully placed references to impressive figures they dealt with on their travels. I tap on my keyboard to log into my computer and listen in on the personal odysseys of guests' respective self-declared, world-saving pilgrimages. I place my second coffee next to the cheap frame at the corner of my desk and there it is, the smile.

Like every morning, I peer over at it and see the sparkle of Mulligan's teeth above the sand-caked filth of our fatigues. I try not to smell the smoke or taste the dust, as I know that leads down a dark road littered with smoke, fire, and demons. That I cannot stand. So, instead, I distract myself from the tightening in my chest with a gulp of the warm brew and some shuffling of papers. I blink hard and take a deep breath as the final straggling dignitary drones on about the misfortunes of his delayed connecting flight and the plights of business class. I think he's a former ambassador turned senior fellow of some kind with an expertise in economic development or the like. Just for kicks, I look at the special assistant's schedule to find the reason for the wayward ambassador's troubles. In block letters, I see the title of the conference

he has been invited to attend: DIPLOMACY AND BUSINESS SYMPOSIUM: ADDRESSING POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH.

The worn down dirt roads and begotten mud huts along the banks of the Euphrates replace the calendar on my screen. The smell of wretched decay, sewage, and wastewater penetrates through the windows of our M-RAP. I hear the laughter of the little girl who chases a deflated and torn soccer ball down the trash-filled alleys of Al Baghdadi. She waves at our convoys as we pass by until, one day, she follows the ball onto an unexploded mortar cache that sends her flying high into the sky and litters her tiny bones and flesh across the same roadway.

“I’m Dean Miller’s 9 a.m.”

I look up to see another suit standing above my desk. This one is slim and powder blue, matching the relatively young man in it. He does not look at me. Instead, he is glued to his phone, which must contain urgent emails that will assuredly save little girls from blowing themselves up playing soccer. I begin to say that I am not a receptionist, but bite my tongue as I look at his expensive watch and down at his polished shoes. He’s never been near Al Baghdadi or any town like it. Instead, I give him a smile and lead him to the Dean’s office where they commence a discussion about their understandings of the harsh realities of intra-state conflict and prospects for resolution after sucking down their French-press and marveling at the Indonesian artwork on the Dean’s wall. From their air-conditioned haven, they will save the world, for they know war and violence.

Walking back to my desk, I try to guess the blue suit’s age. He looks as old as D’Angelo was when he died. Early thirties. D’Angelo played guitar and had a Harley at home. He showed me a picture of his kids once, but I can’t remember if it was one girl and two boys, or two girls and one boy. That’s about all I can remember about him. I didn’t know him well, but our few

interactions were cordial enough. I wasn't there when the IED ripped apart his legs into a mangled mess, either, but I heard on the radio that he was still alive when they put him in the medevac chopper. He bled out somewhere over Al Anbar province. I look back at the frame on my desk, focusing on the American flag we're holding in front of a row of Hescos on our second week in country. We're wearing boonie caps and our full combat load, flaunting our weapons, ammo, and Kevlar. I wonder if it was one of the boys or one of the girls who was handed the folded flag at D'Angelo's funeral.



General Lee lies on its side after surviving a buried IED blast in 2007. The Stryker was recovered and protected its Soldiers on more missions until another bomb finally put it out of action. Photo by courtesy of C-52 of 3/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team

see:

<http://www.army.mil/-news/2008/06/06/9708-general-lee-rides-again/>

The computer bings and I look at my email to see an announcement about a new security studies fellow. I scroll

through and skim the highlights. *Army. Lieutenant Colonel. West Point. Intelligence officer.* Always intelligence officers. Sometimes pilots or JAG lawyers. But no grunts. That must be the unwritten rule in the veteran's affairs office down in admissions and financial aid. I imagine a not so distant reality where the security studies fellow conducts an intelligence briefing. He details the security of a road in the Hit district of Al Anbar and deems it free of IEDs. He declares it safe for travel by convoy and foot patrol. He stands in front of a PowerPoint presentation in a faraway headquarters in Kuwait or Qatar. That's that, and so, off D'Angelo goes.

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It's 10'oclock now and all the suits have filed off to their respective conferences and meetings. With the fanfare died down, the stream of faculty trickles in. The pinstripes of the best and brightest are replaced with the tweed of the wise and prognostic. Reading some of their bios on the website, one wouldn't be alone in mistaking them as manifestly prophetic. A well respected professor of gender studies decides to engage is some small-talk with an associate dean behind my desk. I can't help but overhearing as I sort through expense reports of faculty research trips to Italy and Montenegro. They discuss her recent book on women in the US military and consider branding techniques to effectively showcase it on the website. The dean suggests a meeting with marketing.

"It's remarkable work, Kathleen. The section on women in combat arms units was so inspiring."

I hear the creak of Carhart's door flying open from her chu as the clash of metal pierces through the silent air of the desert night. Thompson runs out as he pulls up his OCP trousers by the belt and holds his rifle in his left hand. He swivels his head from left to right and scans the surrounding compound before he runs off and disappears from the moonlight.

I hear Carhart's screams. But it's more than screams, like the unrelenting howl of a wounded animal about to die. I walk into her room and see her sobbing on the floor, cradled into a ball, and notice the blood on her sheets and the gash above her eye. I follow the procedure. I get her to medical care, notify the commander, and pester him into opening an investigation. I tell her she can trust me. I promise her justice. "No probable cause" is the official finding. Three months later, we stand in the same rank of formation and watch him get promoted to first sergeant. I check my phone to see the last time she responded to one of my calls or texts since we got home. Three months ago, "don't worry about me." The second try at a sober living home hadn't worked out. I hope she's alive.

Professor Goff is next, the director of security studies, who is even more ancient than the academic institution itself. Carrying himself with a purposely relaxed gate and attitude, he emanates purported knowledge my way. He's wearing his usual attire, knee-length khaki shorts, a wrinkled polo shirt, and his all-weather Birkenstocks. What's Professor Goff up to today, I wonder, as he plods along the hallway towards the dean's office. Pasted on the front page of the school's website, I see the usual overbearing text and logo advertising "Great Power Symposium: Deterrence and Conflict in a Polycentric World." Professor Birkenstocks is the headliner, calling all of the future national security leaders that roam the halls to be blessed by his presence in the large auditorium. I roll my eyes and take another sip of coffee. I think of the professor's book about Iraq that launched him into the stratosphere of academia's giants. It's about Al Anbar Province, where my friends and I served, and deals with the Marines who "bore the brunt of the fighting." I look up an op-ed of his from 2003. He's arguing in support of the invasion. I find another from 2007 where he explores the logic and efficiency of the surge. He says losses are inevitable. I remember Mulligan's obsession with reading. Sci-fi and flash

fiction, I think it was. I see his smile. Don't do it, I think. More coffee.

The dean comes out to greet Professor Goff with the normal platitudes and mutual self-congratulation. It's almost noon and I decide to leave for my daily walk around the quad before eating lunch. I like to sneak away from my desk for fifteen minutes to breathe fresh air and see the finely cut grass. I see a group of undergraduates playing ultimate frisbee outside and try to guess their age. Probably 20 or 21. With some quick math, I realize that Mulligan would be a junior if he lived long enough and his GI Bill paperwork went through. The undergrads laugh as they toss the frisbee back and forth and I see Mulligan's grin. I hear him chuckle as the older guys in the platoon mess with him. Thankfully, that's how I remember him, smiling. I'm grateful I wasn't there when they found his body. Blasted brains and blood all over his chu. His left hand still gripping the trigger well. No note. Nothing. Just Mulligan smiling one day and his own rifle in his mouth the next. I'm glad that I'm left with his smile.

Heading back into the school, I pass the framed awards and photographs that line the halls of the entrance to honor famed alumni who went on to shape world events. They include a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, an ambassador, and a head of the World Bank. I see the students scurrying about, cramming articles, academic journals, and other forms of knowledge into their brains as quickly as they can. I look back at the pictures and wonder which one of them will be on the wall next. I wonder if anyone in the building has taken the time to look at the picture on my desk, at Mulligan. I think of all the current, former, and future leaders of geopolitics that roam the halls around me that could benefit from having known him, from having known his smile. Maybe it would make the world a better place. Maybe not. The idea brings a poem to mind, but I'm not sure why. The author escapes me. It says, "Call me nobody. Let me live."

