

The Gift of Trey

A nuclear reactor is nothing more than a glorified water heater. Sailors as young as nineteen, kids, bombard uranium atoms with neutrons until the binding energy of the atom is no longer able to hold it together. When it finally rips at the seams, it throws energy: heat, kinetically agitated neutrons, which strike more atoms and keep the reaction going.

Inside the core, we've planted the enriched fuel in such a way that we can control the reaction, but new elements are created in the process, venomous isotopes which will outlive us for hundreds upon hundreds of generations. When time has wrought language obsolete, when it has split the cities from their foundations, the Frankenstein elements will still hurl packets of energy into the dark, so that they can rest once again. We entomb them someplace where no one can reach them, where time may work its healing. Monoliths, literal pillars of stone, adorned with skulls and lightning bolts are designed in a gracious effort to keep our future selves at bay. All this simply to heat water. We're kids with matches and an endless supply of gasoline.

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My watch team at the nuclear plant has been operating in rotating shifts for nearly seven months now, simulating what life beneath the sea shoved into a tin can submarine will be like. A place where the hours of the day have no bearing, where sunlight has no relevance, a place where sleep will be a luxury and stress a constant companion. I work noon to midnight one week, then daybreak to sundown the next, and then graveyard to noon the next in an ever-revolving, never-failing pattern of lost memory and fuzzy intentions. I stand watch in the engine room of a submarine, quite literally, on blocks located in the center of a forest in the middle of nowhere upstate in New York, far from everything and everyone I've

ever known. It took me a year and a half to finish the theoretical, classroom portion of my training in the swamps of South Carolina, and now I'm here to receive my working knowledge of the plant itself: the boiling, unsympathetic heart of the submarine where atoms slam together endlessly releasing their heat for us to capture.

I've been floating for weeks now. That's what it feels like—floating, like I'm inside a bubble where all my senses are subdued, where light and sound and taste and touch and smell all pass through some kind of foggy membrane. When I wake for the next shift, my room is very dark. The windows are covered over by aluminum foil and heavy blankets to seal out daylight. The steady drone of white noise from the television blocks all outside sounds.

There's a numbness which invades my every cell. This world I find myself in, a system of autonomic duty, lays waste to individual freedom of all kinds. My thoughts are not my thoughts. My deeds are not my own. My duty is another's.

When I finally pull myself from the bed, the alarm having screamed at me for twenty minutes, I make my way through the unadorned hallway and into the small bathroom I share with a couple other sailors. I stare at the young man in the mirror without turning on the light, the day streaming in through the window enough to cause me to wince. I look him over—large ears, dark brows nearly joined at the nose's bridge, sharpness of the cheek bones. I hardly recognize him.

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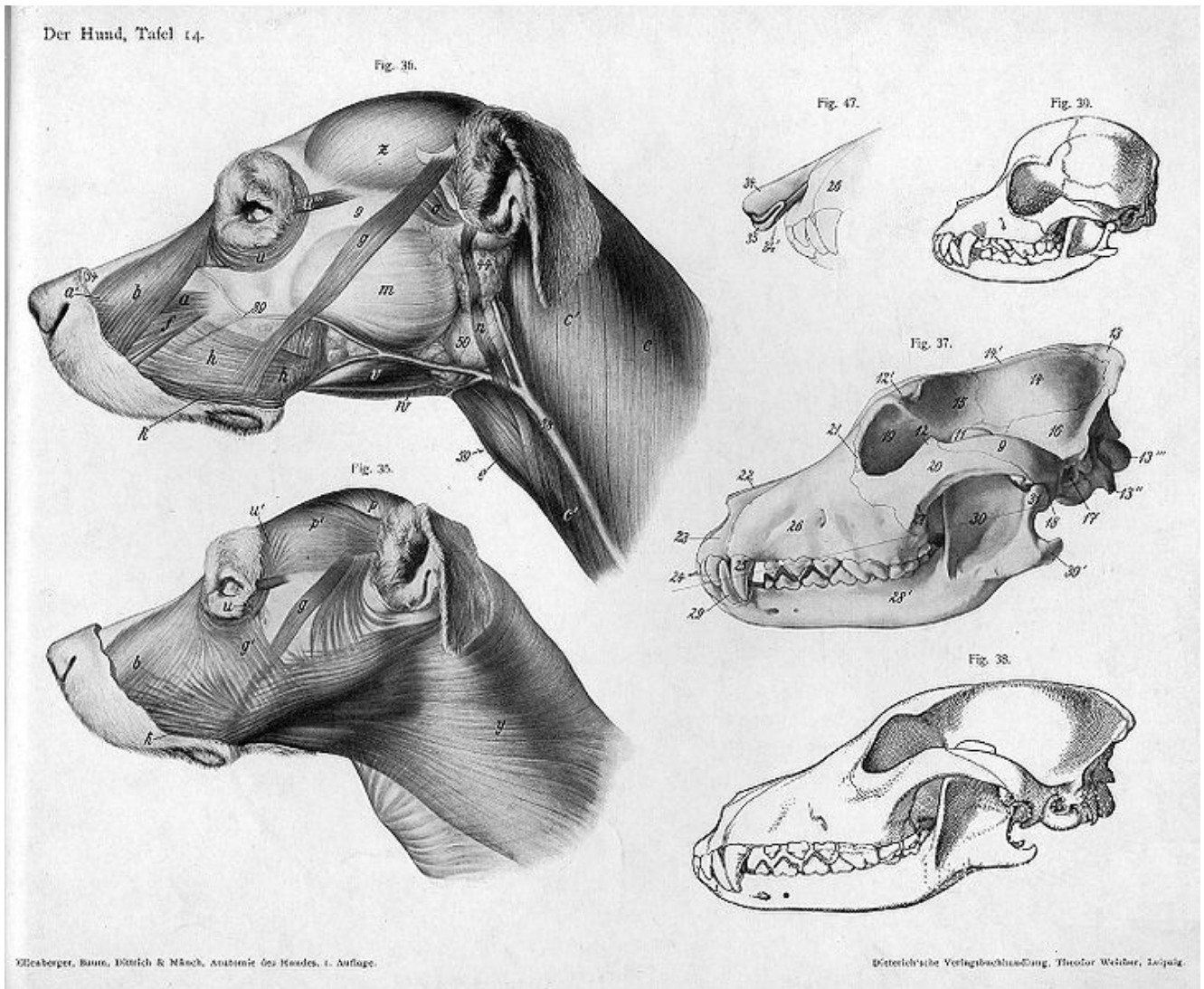
Between schools, I was granted leave. I went home to Mississippi for the first time since I joined up. My father hosted a barbeque, inviting his enormous Catholic family. My uncles were there, a few of my aunts, and a dozen or so cousins including Trey, a close friend as well as cousin, born on the same day I was, making us the same age. Trey had

recently been discharged from the 187th Infantry, The Rakkasans. He'd been embedded with the first surge of troops into Afghanistan, then later Iraq for the ousting of Saddam. I hadn't seen him for a couple years and only heard faint hearsay of what he'd been doing with his new-found freedom.

Trey and I sat together on the porch swing at the back of the house overlooking forest running the opposite direction. His normally healthy face was drawn taut, dark rings around his eyes. He'd lost weight since I'd last seen him.

"How's things, Trey?"

"Ah man, you know, never been better," he said, smiling sarcastically, exhaling blue cigarette smoke between gritted teeth. He told me of his new place out in the country in Holly Springs, Mississippi. He bought a trailer on a few acres of land all to himself and his wife. Horses and chickens ran the place. He raised fighting cocks for money and for his own entertainment. He raised pit bulls as well. "I had to shoot one of my studs the other day," he told me. "He was growling and acting crazy with a neighbor boy, so I cut his head off and hung it in a tree on the property as a warning to the others." He fought the cocks on an Indian reservation near his home where the laws of Mississippi don't apply. Most of his sales of the cocks go to illegal Mexicans who carry over the tradition from their home country. "They love it, man. Can't get enough," he told me. "They've got me on all kinds of pills, you know," he continued. "I haven't been exactly stone sober since before I got out."



Hermann Dittich, 1889, from Handbuch der Anatomie der Tiere für Künstler (University of Wisconsin collections).

“Is that all you’re on?” I asked him. “The pharmaceuticals, I mean?”

He grinned. “I’ve been taking just about anything I can get my hands on—street pharmaceuticals, whatever,” he chuckled.

“It really is rough over there, isn’t it?” I said stupidly, thinking outloud.

He laughed. “Shit, man, that part was easy. Over there, I knew my job and I was good at it. I didn’t have to worry about bills or what I was going to make for dinner. The enemy was clear. He was the guy shooting at me and my brothers. I only had to focus on staying alive.

Over there all the bullshit is cut out. Life is just having to survive. The petty shit didn't matter like it does here. It's coming back here that's the hard part. Over here I gotta worry about being evicted if I don't pay the bills. Over here I gotta fit into this consuming, selfish society. No one knows what I did over there," he said, gazing out over the forest, "and they don't care. And now that I'm back it's hard to tell who the fucking enemies are. The bad guys here aren't shooting at me. Here they sit behind big desks in expensive suits at the bank when I try to get a loan or they stand there with their arms folded when I try explaining how I could just use a break. They blend in with everyone else. And the enemies over there are harder to recognize too, now that I'm removed from it. I gotta keep telling myself what we did over there—what I did over there—what we are still doing over there—is right. I can't live thinking what I did over there was a waste. I have to tell myself it was worth it all. I don't have a choice." Trey's hand began to tremble, but he noticed and tucked it into his jacket pocket before I could ask about it.

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Something inside of me shattered then, something which was already cracked. I never should have been a part of this, I told myself. It kills me to see someone I love in the shape he's in. Trey had been a gung-ho person his whole life. He was always wound tight. The reason he was in the military to begin with was because he was caught selling weed in high school and given the ultimatum between jail time and the Army. He chose the Army, but he doesn't deserve this, I remember telling myself, no one deserves this, to be used up and left out alone, utterly reeling from the fall. I can't be a part of something that does this to anyone no matter the side. I can't, I argued. Suddenly the war became concrete for me, the abstractions now solidified. A fog descended I haven't been able to shake since.

Returning to Ballston Spa and the Knoll's Atomic Power

Laboratory, I resolve to start the process of actually trying to get myself relieved from active duty with an honorable discharge. I set up a meeting with the yeoman regarding the application for receiving conscientious objector status, a designation placed upon some people due to their spiritual belief regarding the sacredness of human life, disallowing harm or death to another person. When the day comes, I find the yeoman to be a nice guy. He wears black-rimmed glasses and has large Sailor Jerry tattoos stitched along his arms: pinup girls wearing Navy uniforms and sailing ships flying banners, sea monsters and anchors. "I've never seen one of these go through, just so you know," he tells me outright, "but I'll try my best to help you along the way." He goes over the paperwork I'm to fill out to put the process in motion. He tells me I'll have to build a case for myself, much like an attorney, with corroborating evidence showing beyond a doubt that my belief against harming another human being for any reason is contradictory to my moral obligations. Normally in these situations the person trying to prove oneself can lean on letters and statements from spiritual leaders or fellow church members, but I don't have any spiritual leaders, and I haven't been to church in years so it's not an option available to me. The meeting only serves to reiterate how improbable this route will be. Instead of my hope being renewed, I feel as though my last option has disintegrated. The earth has crumbled beneath my feet where I fall five-hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface.

The next several weeks are spent with my black-polished boots hovering, floating above the steel-grated decks of my engine room, the whirring of the steam turbines, the hum of oil pumps, the clicking of meters counting off various plant pressures and temperatures acting as my soundtrack. Time churns on ahead of me, catching me in its slipstream just behind enough to be unable to catch up. I wake up, attend to my duties, drive home, and fall asleep without much of anything coming into actual contact with me. The memories of

the day glide straight through much like the unseen gamma radiation from the reactor itself.

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It's an unseasonably cold night in November and sleep won't come to me. Something forces me get dressed and leave the apartment, which I rarely do, makes me walk the streets of my little town. The cold doesn't faze me. My phone rings, but I don't pay it any mind. I can see myself from behind, as though I'm walking a few steps back. I watch myself, the silvery mist exiting my lips to wrap about my head before dissipating into the air. My phone rings again, the vibration of it carries through my thigh. I continue to follow me around the block, back to my building's door and up the two flights of stairs and into the bathroom where I can see myself shutting the door. The light is on, but I don't recall if I turned it on. My phone rings again. It's my father. I press the silent button and the vibration stops. Four missed calls, the screen reads. I can see my hand reach up to the shelf beside the mirror. I watch my fingers lift the straight razor my roommate uses to keep the nape of his neck clean. Without a sense of any feeling at all, I observe myself open the razor, placing its surgical edge against the bluish twists of veins within my wrist, and then I hear the vibration of the phone against the ceramic sink. I look down, this time inside myself, and see that it is again my father. Still holding the razor in my leading hand, I slowly pick up the phone after a few rings.

"Hello."

"Hey, Son..." my father's familiar voice trails off.

"Hey, Dad."

"It's Trey," he says.

Silence.

“Son?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Trey’s shot himself.”

“Is he—?”

“No, he’s been airlifted to the hospital. They say he’s gonna make it.”

Silence.

“We’re, uh, hoping you can make it down here. Seeing you would, well it would...I know it’d make him feel better.”

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With four days off between my shifts, I get a plane ticket to Memphis, where my brother picks me up from the airport with a glowing smile and a hug lasting longer than I’m used to. After a night spent at my mother’s, my brother drops me off at the entrance to the hospital where Trey’s being treated. There, I speak to a nurse and she directs me to the ICU. Trey’s father, Uncle Mark, sits on the floor against the wall smiling faintly as I walk to him. His face is sagging beneath the heaviness of sleepless nights. His eyes are blackened.

“How is he?”

“He’s doing great after the shit he pulled,” he says. “I should’ve told you, he’ll be going into surgery here in a little while...he blew out part of his tongue. He’s on a lot of morphine.”

“Can he talk?”

“He tries to talk,” he says. “He’s been singing.”

He leads me, in an exhausted shuffle, to Trey’s room.

“He got really excited when I told him you were coming,” he tells me. He stays outside the door as I enter.

I find Trey sitting up in bed, legs stretched, smiling the best he can as I walk in.

“Hey Cuz,” he slurs, with upturned inflection.

“Hey...Trey. How are you, man?”

“I’m fucked up, isn’t it obvious?” he says, smiling through his eyes because his mouth won’t cooperate.

His speech comes out mushed and drunken, but I’m able to make out some of what he’s trying to say. His face is bloated and highlighted yellow with shadows of bluish-purple bruising. He wears a metal halo, a cylindrical cage around his face, screwed straight to his skull to prevent any movement of his neck. The force of the bullet broke his neck in two places. They haven’t been able to bathe him properly since he got here because of the risk involved with moving him so he uses a suction tube to clean himself: his saliva, snot, sweat, the thick oil excreting from his pores. His skin has a fluorescent sheen to it from the glaze of the stuff. My eyes follow the journey of his murky fluids through a transparent rubber tube from the vacuum he holds in his hand, through the air, collected finally inside a clear plastic jar filled with liquid the color of yellowed bile mounted above his head onto the white wall behind him. The sucking sound of the tube against his skin pierces worse than any dissonant tone.

He speaks in a garbled mess like a three-year-old trying to tell a story, so he asks me to hand over a white board lying on the stand next to the table. I uncap the marker and situate the board upon his lap. He has a difficult time holding the navy-blue marker and I have to reposition it between the fingers of his right hand more than once. The words are hard to make out as his handwriting is nearly as garbled as his speech. I have to reread the scribbled lines over and over

again before I'm able to decipher them.

"I've been rapping for the nurses," he writes right before launching into some ridiculous, incoherent freestyle about who knows what, as only the syllables and a specific rhythm are detectable. I'm laughing the whole time, more than I have in a long while. He's keeping rhythm by drumming along on the chrome bed railing. It's ridiculous. He writes how he's been hallucinating on the morphine he controls via pump with his left hand. He briefly describes surreal scenes of fantastical creatures and dream-world happenings. His brain tricks him sometimes into believing the halo is a chain-link fence his head is caught in. He writes of hearing the voices of the nurses gossiping and his mind blending it with his memory, building shitty soup operas he can't escape.

"devil playing with my trigger," he writes. "angels...scared. deserted me. dont understand. they're automated...dont know how it is to be gods experiment, guinea pigs with habit and conscience...grieve truth." He points to himself with the marker before writing, "still here."

One of the nurses comes to prep him for surgery, casually offering something to the effect of, "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine." She's telling him, "There's nothing to worry about." She's making an honest effort at resting his nerves, but a switch in his brain throws and he lights up. He pushes her with strength I wouldn't expect him capable of, and he starts frantically pulling at the IVs in his arm. I don't know what to do. I'm helpless. I stand frozen witnessing the scene as if I'm somewhere else watching it. He jerks the needles from his veins causing blood to run in trickles down his arms and onto the clean sheets before splattering abstract forms on the dustless white tiles below. Trey tears the electrical monitors from his chest, from his temples.

He's screaming and for the first time I'm able to make it out,

at least I imagine I can. "STOP! STOP! MY DOGS! MY DOGS! HE'S KILLING THEM! HE'S GOING TO FUCKING KILL THEM ALL!"

He's slinging blood around the room. He yells something about a horrific worm eating his roosters alive, struggling to explain to the staff the triggers aren't working on any of his guns, he's trying like hell to fight a war unfolding within his mind and all I can do is stand there, mouth open and wide-eyed watching the nurses freak out. The nurse who'd been shoved has picked herself from the floor and is now crying, her body limp and trembling against the wall. The doctor runs in with another nurse, yells for me to leave and from outside the room through the glass, my uncle and I watch as the doctor strains to pin Trey's upper body to the bed, shouting coarse commands for one nurse to "Hold the legs!" for the other to go get some medicine I've never heard of. The new nurse runs from the room returning a few moments later unwrapping a needle from its sterilized plastic, her face changing to iron as she plunges the needle into Trey's jugular, pushing the stopper down, injecting him with calm. She then inches away and watches, taking her place beside the first nurse still against the wall staring straight-faced and drained, the front of her uniform speckled crimson, Pollock-like, with blood. Almost immediately, Trey recedes. His breathing slows as his eyes collapse into shallow holes.

The surgery is rescheduled.

I walk down the hallway with Uncle Mark. "I'm the only one who can really figure out what he's saying," Uncle Mark says. "Just like when he was a toddler. From what I've been able to make out, he was playing Russian Roulette with this homeless kid who's been coming around his place. He told me this kid came over with the gun and was talking about wanting to kill himself so Trey says he decides he's gonna scare it out of him, said he told the guy they were going to play a game. He said he put two bullets in the gun, spun the chamber, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger, and when nothing

happened he handed it to the other guy but the guy was too scared so then he put it in his mouth and..." Uncle Mark demonstrates with his fingers, throwing his head back in an act he's probably been continually playing out in his head since it happened. He then turns and looks me straight in the eyes, his gaze commanding mine. "Trey said he knew he would save him, the kid." His eyes drop to the floor. "Here, I thought worrying about him dying stopped when he came back...I never imagined this."

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Upon my return to New York, I sit with my advisor, a Chief at the plant, and I tell him about what's happened with Trey and about my decision to apply for conscientious objector. He seems to care about what I'm saying, asking me straight away, "Have you had suicidal thoughts?"

"Uh...well..." I slip, having not expected the question. "I mean, I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it."

"I want to take you to the hospital so they can ask you some questions, just to see if everything is all right," he says grabbing his jacket. "Can we do that?"

I nod.

The next morning, as instructed, I see the base counselor, a pudgy, balding, middle-aged man named Joe Aschner, who grew up in the city; a civilian, thankfully. He sits behind a cluttered desk beside a bookshelf lined with psychology manuals. He gazes out through large, unfashionable glasses wrapped in a disheveled blue sweater vest, khakis, and worn brown loafers. He smiles when I enter. He introduces himself with a moist handshake as I sit across from him avoiding his eyes. He knows why I'm here and begins by asking general questions about my life: where I'm from, my age, my interests. "In your own words can you tell me why you are here?" he asks.

"I don't belong here," I tell him. "I made a mistake and now I'm finding it difficult to live with the decision."

He nods. Then he asks me if I read, and we begin to talk about books and authors. I tell him I've been reading Kierkegaard, how I understand what he means when he says in *Either/Or*, "I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle." Joe puts down his notebook and tries to lighten my mood. He asks if I listen to music and I nod. He tells me how he loves jazz, especially the standards: Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker and though I share his love of them, I don't feel like talking.

"Have you thought about medications to help?"

"I'm not gonna take the meds," I tell him.

He nods.

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Over the next few weeks, though the dream-states still hold sway over me, bringing with them a numbness I find hard to shake, and though the agoraphobia continues to try to coax me to remain beneath the familiar weight of my covers, I now hear the imagined words of Trey to the homeless kid echoing through my head. "You don't deserve death...You're just a fuckin' coward." The words help to ground me in some way, help me to place myself inside myself. My sessions with my counselor, Joe, begin to become the highlight of my week.

I start to feel again. Sadness mostly, but any feeling is welcomed at this point. And then, at the end of one of our sessions, Joe with uncharacteristic professionalism, seriously gazing into my eyes, tells me, "I have determined that due to conflicting with your moral beliefs, your involvement with the military is producing such stress upon you that it has affected your mental state to such a degree that it has placed your well-being in jeopardy. You are not fit for duty, which

places both you and those around you at risk. Since you refuse medication, the only course of action we have is let you go. It is necessary for your improvement. I am going to write a recommendation for you to see the Navy's head psychology department in Groton. I am going to recommend you be discharged as soon as possible. We will see if they agree." We share a smile.

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When the time comes, I drive several hours to Groton, I've been pacing back and forth wearing ruts in my mind. I'm panicking. My heart jumps along with my legs.

I sign in with the uniformed receptionist and she tells to take a seat in the waiting room. It's bland, nearly empty: no magazines to read, no inspirational posters to occupy my eyes. I'm alone in a race with my thoughts. After what feels like an hour or more a tall slender woman in a beige uniform addresses me, motioning for me to follow. She leads me to a computer at a lone cubicle in a room down the hall where I'm asked to sit down and complete a series of questions on the screen.

Would you like to be a florist? Yes or No.

Well it depends, I think to myself. Maybe.

Have you always loved your father? Yes or No.

Yes. I mean I've been pissed off with him, but yes.

Do you have a difficult time relating to others? Yes or No.

Well, sometimes...I don't think any more than what's normal.

Do you tend to choose jobs below your skill level? Yes or No.

Uh...I'm not sure. Always? I mean, I have, but...

There are hundreds of these questions, all asking me to tell the whole truth in a single word. It's impossible to do

honestly so I end up choosing conflicting answers to make them believe I've completely lost it. Afterward, the lady prints my results and takes them with us as we walk to the doctor's office. He sits in the far corner at a large wooden desk crowded with a computer and thick piles of white printer paper. The lighting is low and a dull brown washes the room. I sit in an uncomfortable chair as he takes my folder from the young officer before she turns to leave, pulling the door behind her. He reads silently for a few minutes then asks what I think has caused my "problem." I tell him in bare words I'm in the process of applying for conscientious objector status. He glances up from the folder to give me a quick glare before glancing back down. I stare at my shoes against the brown carpet as they lay paralyzed. "You want out of the Navy?" he asks bluntly.

"I don't think the Navy is what's best for me," I say.

"You're clearly not fit for duty," he says gruffly. "It doesn't take a doctor to see that."

I don't respond.

"Well," he says, as he takes his pen to a paper in my folder, "I'm going to recommend you be discharged administratively. The medical route would take too long." Then without looking up he tells me, "You can go now."

It's all I can do not to jump up and yell and scream and slap and kiss the old man's face and throw his piles of other people's problems and unreliable test results off the desk and into the air, dancing in circles as they fall. The news anchors me to the ground, the first real taste of certainty in months, the finest words I've ever heard, the voice of a mother waking a newborn from dark dreams.

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A couple months after returning home, I take the highway down

from Memphis to Holly Springs to visit Trey. The disassociation, the fogged trances I lived with for so long have dispersed. The darkness has lifted for the most part and I'm wading through possibility as a new acquaintance. Some days I just drive without destination. Some days I sit reading for hours in the park in midtown. Some days I do nothing but lie in bed, content with simply being my own once more. As I wheel the car onto the gravel drive, I stop at the gate where I'm met with aggressive barking and snarling from several pit bulls. My attempts at calming them accomplish nothing, but moments later I see the familiar swaggered gait of Trey making his way to me. "Okay, okay," he says, speaking lovingly to the dogs. "That's my good boys. That's my good boys," he praises them before looking toward me.

We sit on his porch steps in the golden light of the late afternoon sun, the clatter of the summer insects spilling out from the trees and thick underbrush as the heat lays upon our shoulders. Trey no longer wears the shining metal halo and he looks fully recovered but for the fact that he can't quite turn his head more than 45 degrees to the left. I sit on his right. "Just had a new litter of chicks hatch last week," he tells me, rubbing one of his dogs between the ears. "And the tomatoes are growing like crazy, man. So much to do," he says, "I can barely keep it together."

"Sounds like you're doing well."

He nods. "Neck hurts sometimes. But I'm okay."

"You ever see the kid anymore?" I ask him.

"I do," he says. "Got him working for me. Just too damn much to do on my own. Started when I was still in the halo. Showed up one day and asked what he could do, so I showed him how to tend to the garden, how to handle the horses. Ain't bad, but got lots left to learn. Still acts like a dumb kid most the time."

I watch as he fingers a tick stuck to his dog's ear. It's deeply embedded and the dog whimpers as Trey plucks it off. A thin ribbon of blood drips down the fur of his neck from the wound. Trey takes a lighter from his pocket and holds the flame to it between his fingers. I hear the parasite singe and then pop.

"Trey," I suddenly blurt out, "that kid didn't come over that night, did he?"

Trey tosses the spent body of the tick into the dirt before continuing to search for another on the dog's other ear.

I watch his fingers pass through the dog's fur as he smiles faintly, nodding.

I immediately turn away as my eyes fill with tears.

"Thank you, Trey," I tell him, the words falling from my mouth between breaths.

"Don't mention it, Cuz," he says, removing another tick from his dog. "Couldn't have you cuttin' out early on me, now could I?"