

New Fiction from Matt Jones: “The Fisherman”



“You coming to work, New Guy?” Sailor asks, and I snarl at my nickname. Dude gives me the creeps—somehow they stuffed a three-hundred-pound bear who never blinks into a uniform. When the plane landed in Kandahar last night a sergeant with bagpipe lungs paired us off. New blood was teamed with guys who’d been here for a while—I got saddled with Sailor. Ain’t no way some Navy goof is gonna push me around, even this missing-link motherfucker whose voice rumbles like grenade day on the range.

We leave the barracks and the Afghan sun kicks me square in the coin purse. Next thing I notice is the stink. Like when your little brother drops a deuce under your bed and, reaching for a sock, you grab it by mistake. “Hey Sailor,” I say, “Does

it always reek like this?"

"Yep." Deadpan. "Civilians wisely bury their shit to keep the stink at bay. Here in Kandahar we pool it in the poo pond. During hot days the shit heats up and particles attach to the dust. That's why you can taste it." Sailor leads me down the maze-like streets of the base, where twelve-foot concrete barriers offer a little shade. On top of each, coils of barbed wire scrawl like signatures. In fact, all I can see is concrete barriers and kill-wire, the world's largest rat maze. Not some lifeless anti-oasis: there are troops everywhere with assault rifles. I snicker at a dead bird getting torn apart by ants like a bitch.

He's right about the dust, goddamnit. Fucking everywhere. Within minutes of trudging through it, I could taste the poo pond and feel stones form in my nose. Next there's this wicked-loud sound from behind—European police sirens wailing or how the fuck should I know? Sailor grabs my shoulder with a beefy mitt and we're both face down in the ass-dust. "Rockets," he hisses. The alarm eases into a snobby British voice of God going, ROCKET ATTACK, ROCKET ATTACK. Holy fuck, man. I'm not going to say I'm scared or anything—last summer after Phase Three of infantry training (HUA) I got jumped by four bikers and broke their faces with a pool cue, fearless. Still, having someone shoot missiles at my ass made my palms a little sweaty, ya know? But then there's this huge W00F except the dog is loud as six dragons. Gravel rains all over us. Alright, fine—now I'm scared shitless. Meanwhile, Sailor has hauled me on top of the friendly Afghan cactus, whose hook-like barbs itch for human skin. "Wait another minute, and then we move to that bunker," Sailor rumbles, pointing with his never-blinking eyes to a concrete structure across the street.

"How am I gonna wank with my hands full of thorns?" Pretty sure I sounded tough despite my little squeak at the end. Sailor doesn't say shit anyway—we hustle toward the bunker. I've got that feeling another rocket's gonna burst before we

get there and fill my guts with shrapnel. WOOF WOOF WOOF go the dragons.

Sailor flops against the concrete. "We'll wait here until the siren sounds again, New Guy." I'm not a big fan of taking orders from some cumguzzler—Sailor doesn't give a fuck about my murder-gaze, and he seems to not get that I'm infantry, and Army, and therefore better. Sitting in the dirt, he rests his feet on the opposite wall and shuts his eyes. Sailor doesn't look scared, but man, he's about as tired as a Dad with forty-eight kids. I'm feeling safer since the bunker's got these thick-ass walls—we're talking three-foot-thick concrete. Almost underground except you can still see some sky through slits. Cloudless. Piercing. Blue.

Sailor catches my eye. "The Taliban pay locals to launch cheap rockets bought from the Russians. Fuck-all for accuracy, but as the base is big, there's a chance that someone will hit the death-lottery and blow up a mess hall." Dry laugh. "I don't even blame them. The locals, I mean. Someone offers you more money than you make in a year to fire a few rockets at foreign devils? I'd take that deal too." Sailor trails off and stares at that little patch of sky and the silence stretches. I'm thinking, fuck this guy.

"Sailor, you got a perverted way of looking at the Enemy. We're talking terrorists and suicide bombers, right? Osama Bin Ladens? Fanatics who want to make an orphanage for your kids? I'm supposed to feel bad for psychos just because they're poor? Listen, Navy, someone shoots a rocket at me they deserve to bleed out slow." Sailor snorts. He looks like he's gonna say something and maybe he'll confirm that I'm the shit or maybe I'll need to buttstroke the fucker, but that siren blares again and the British asshole is saying ALL CLEAR.

We pile from the bunker and start heading toward the mess. Sailor says, "When we get to work later I'll introduce you to a friend of mine. He's called the Fisherman." He stares

through me again. Oh great. This Fisherman sounds like another goddamn Navy guy, another silverback pillow-biter dreaming of ways to touch my junk.

The mess is colored with the same shit-paint as every other building. Sailor flourishes his ID to a raghead behind a counter. It's like other messes I've been in back in Canada except there's a hundred people here and no laughter. Sailor wanders to a depleted salad bar and scoops cucumbers. No wonder he's grumpy—no fucking protein. I order the meatloaf, like a man, from a wizened dude behind a counter. Gandalf arches an eyebrow suspiciously, arms himself with a plastic glove, and tenderly places the loaf on the plate like it might explode. Not gonna lie, I've eaten some humble loaves in my day but that one could have moonlighted as the lung from the cigarette package. In the Army you choke down some weird shit and keep it down. I sit with Sailor and hack the rubbery mass with my plastic knife until it breaks at the hilt and Sailor hands me a spare. Finally get a chunk to my mouth. Never French kissed a corpse before but now I don't need to: "Just add Tabasco," I say, smiling.

After the meal we trudge down a street with big fuck-off tanks and trucks driving past. Tanks look different back home. These ones have sharp angles on the bottom and the turrets are belted with rebar. Distracted from the bubbles frothing up from the poo pond, and imagining what a swim would feel like on my naked skin, I lose situational awareness and follow Sailor blindly. Not that I'd ever admit it to him. I gotta get me a map of this place, man. There's no fucking street signs or anything. I could get lost as balls and end up devoured by ants.

Pretty soon we reach a twenty-foot-tall gate with razor wire looping along the top. Sailor teaches me the door code and we enter the Canadian compound. I plug a nostril and fire a rock out of the other, and it ricochets off a second door with a separate combo. Inside, air conditioning. "Welcome to the

Operations Centre, New Guy.” Sailor gestures at the room as if he’s pulling the curtain off a shitty masterpiece.

But what a fucking dump, man! There’s a couple of long tables covered with computers and wires which have a dozen grim-eyed dudes plugging away. At the far end of the room two large screens have words scrolling down them. Facebook chat for murder. There’s also a big television showing the news. Everything’s made out of knotty plywood, the cheap shit, except the computers and a well-stained coffee pot. “Time to meet the Fisherman,” Sailor says, guiding me to one of the screens at the front. No one looks up. “One of the things we do here is use drones to fire missiles at people putting bombs in the road. We watch them through our many screens, and when we catch them in a hostile act, we strike.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I say. “No fucking hidin’ in a bunker for me—reach out and destroy the Enemy.” I’ve heard about these videos: drone porn. This righteousness has spread all over the internet—assholes getting blown to bits. Sailor nods to someone and the video starts to play.

The screen shimmers into place over a dusty dirt road, lined with little ditches cracked with crotch rot. There’s this towelhead on the road, wearing pyjamas. He’s maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. The screen is gritty and the resolution sucks balls. Still, no cars, no humans, not even a fucking sheep, and the asshole is digging, no matter the afternoon sun.

“You killed this prick, right?” I ask Sailor.

He looks at me and for a second he’s a big fuckoff owl and I’m a mouse. He says, “We’d been tracking The Fisherman for a while, trying to make sure he was actually planting a bomb instead of working on the *wadis*. But here you can see a spool of wire and he’s connecting the wire to something in the hole he’s dug. We had the drones on site.”

As I'm watching the towelhead working on his bomb, the screen lights up in this flash. "Take that, you fucking raghead!" I cackle. There's a big cloud of dust where the missile struck next to the dude. I'm surprised more people aren't cheering. Killing towelheads gives me righteous wood, you know?

I figured he'd be evaporated, pink mist—get the mop—but no. When the dust clears the towelhead is on his knees and his turban is bobbing up and down like he's praying. Wouldn't it be a shame if the raghead pulled through? Maybe the missile missed? As the drone circles, the camera angle changes. I start thinking maybe he's not praying after all. From the side, he looks like he's fishing for something. Like he's reeling in a bigass fish and he's working his balls off to get that sucker in the boat.

I'm still trying to figure out what's happening when Sailor says, "Praying and fishing, New Guy. Praying and fishing. My parents were born in Newfoundland in a little coastal village. Praying and fishing were all they had." I see that the Fisherman's not reeling in a fishing line at all. He's got his guts smashed open, man. He's got guts snaked out all over the fucking place. He's just trying to piece himself together, grabbing handfuls of intestines and cramming them back inside. I can't hear anything since we're watching through a drone but the Fisherman's got his mouth open in this noiseless scream. The meatloaf backflips in my stomach.

"New Guy, this is a Battle Damage Assessment, or BDA. We conduct a BDA after every strike to watch for a mob forming, to make sure the dropped weapons aren't reclaimed, and to make sure the dead are truly dead." The Fisherman writhes. He's attracted a big swarm of flies, glittering grey pixels, trying to lay eggs inside him. He's still cramming in his guts, but he's losing speed. There's so much fucking dirt and dust on his insides that there's no way he's gonna make it. "Normally when we strike and the victim is this injured we'd send a helicopter and get him to a hospital. But some zones are too

dangerous, protected by RPG.”

We watch in silence. The Fisherman is still going. He’s getting slower and weaker, but he’s hanging in there. I get this awful feeling. My chest is made of cloth and it’s tearing. Some fabric I didn’t know I had, ripping apart slowly. You don’t know you have it until it tears.

Fuck this, man. Just gotta find the numb place. Just gotta get warm and comfortable and numb. I look over at Sailor and his face is as hard and cold and lonely as a mountain. I guess after a year of this shit, there ain’t no fabric left. Just rubble.

I don’t want to admit watching a towelhead snuff it bothers me, but after fifteen minutes I blurt, “Alright, Sailor, thanks. I fucking get it. It’s awful, alright? How long are we gonna watch this guy die, you sick asshole?”

Sailor fixes me with a stare. “This isn’t a television program where you can just change the channel. You talked shit earlier about how the Enemy deserves to be killed, and how the Enemy doesn’t deserve our sympathy. Well here’s something you don’t learn in your training. The skin colour is different but the guts are the same, aren’t they?” Now that Sailor has mentioned the guts I’m taking a closer look and they do look grey and slimy, even through the drone feed. The Fisherman is still twitching and I’m begging, actually begging in my head, *Die, man. Just die already, alright?*

I’m sure he only has a few twitches left when Sailor goes on, “Lot of people back home will want to know what Afghanistan is all about but you can’t explain the Fisherman to anybody. You just carry him wherever you go.” And as Sailor says this a dozen human shapes scurry down the road—I’m sure they’re scorching in those burkas. As they come closer I pick up details, you know? Like a few are wringing the shit out of their hands, a few have baskets and they’re collecting parts.

One woman gets right next to the Fisherman and takes his hand and you can see her wailing wailing wailing. I think of my own mother back home and how she'd feel watching me die like this and that cloth in my chest tears from shoulder to waist.

Sailor's voice is soft. "When you strike, you don't just wound a person. You wound a whole community. Just because your job is to drop bombs on people doesn't mean you have to be a monster." He goes quiet and I see his eyes shut down and he's a mountain again.

Fuck this shit, man. Killing from an office? Killing with compassion? I didn't train for this—I trained to be a warrior. Give me a C7 rifle and send me out past the barbed wire. I wanna be in the shit, with the other killers. I wanna sleep on a big pile of dead Afghans at night...

Movement on the screen: the Fisherman is still alive. He's sprawled all over the grass with blood bubbles popping out. His lips are moving like he's whispering to his mother. I catch myself leaning towards the screen, trying to listen, hoping he'll say whatever he's gotta say and then he'll finally slump down dead.

But the Fisherman will live forever.