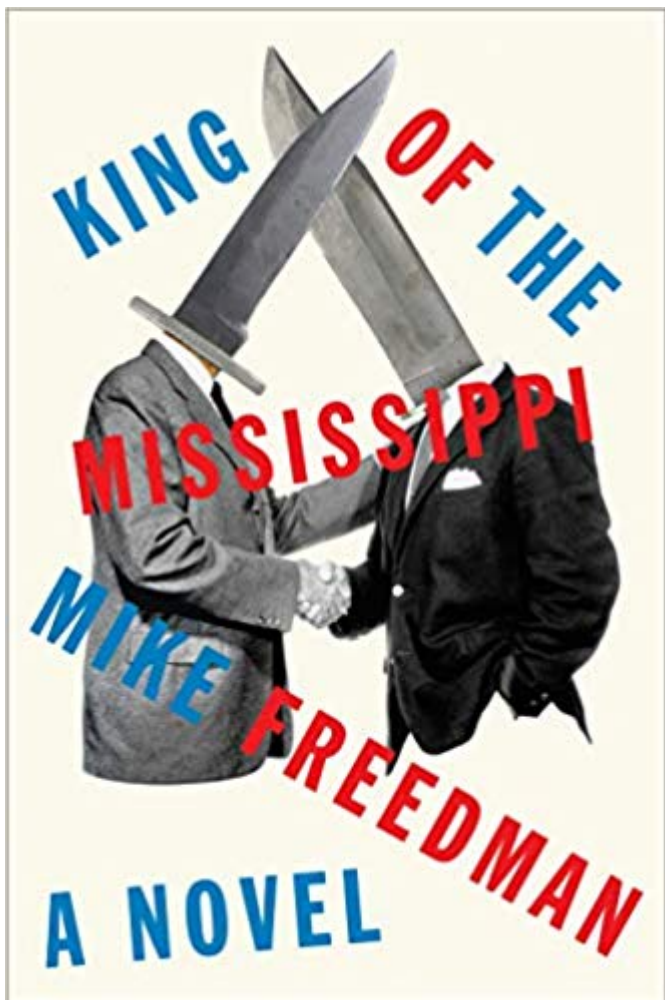


New Fiction from Mike Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton

seceded further from
the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of
September 2014. As
Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend
schedule to pencil in
sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid
eyes on breached
the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish,
sun-cooked man
appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out
in every
direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-
the-rack, navy
double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral
at a regatta that
Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams.
It was the sort
of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families
would ever
breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a
comic eagle nose
that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him
up in return,
Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too
absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him
to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the
window, Wharton
twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the
downtown skyline
was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that
he had been
tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around
in his chair to
regain the initiative. "Who—"

“You’re the man to beat?” A smile the size of the intruder’s face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of swollen red gums congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth, which, if not fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining of the other teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man’s mouth. A muddy five o’clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon closer inspection of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not shaving than some celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton’s office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his desk toward Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the mask of imperturbability he wished to project, “Who are you and what is the nature of your business in my office?”

“I’m Mike Fink,” the man said in a mysterious dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could only place as from the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by Fink. His flagrant confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew the name, if not the reputation. “I’m here for the leadership position.”

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no analysis. Wharton pulled his hand from Fink’s clasp and came around from his desk. “Be that as it

may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this misunderstanding in no time if you would please . . .” But Wharton trailed off, watching in horror as Fink plopped down unasked in the chair across from Wharton’s desk and wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This creature’s cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself slightly behind Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview.

Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as

he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to the savage's tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine's Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

"Oh, Brock, I'm so sorry. I guess you hadn't been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn't able to make it for the morning block of interviews."

She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. "Here's a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are."

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned

over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, "He's a Green Beret."



"I don't care if he's the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview," Wharton said truthfully, for despite his conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane

rah-rah

yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace between the jingoes, Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good about their participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink character was granted a CCG interview.

“Well,” Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on Carissa, “it appears I am to interview you. I’m going to take a minute to scan through your résumé.”

“Take your time,” the applicant advised the interviewer. “There’s a lot there.”

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience (unless ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor of arts in English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane University (a bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review applications from) the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink’s résumé was actually a mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact opposite looked back at you.

“An English literature major?” Wharton murmured, bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

“With a minor in theater. I read somewhere that English majors make the best consultants. Stands to reason.”

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces
bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview?
Special Forces
could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to
apprehend that he did
not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper
squandering his time, was
offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life
cultivating a résumé.
Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched
CCG; how had he
passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it
to be the most
heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the
oversized font or
alignment from section to section was consistent in what
amounted to only a
stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high
school senior
class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see
him fondling his
Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder
on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the
ball upside down on
its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted
in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the
triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last”
to describe the
still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn’t
forgotten was the
chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and
boosters who had once

ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. "Were you drafted as well after graduating college?"

"Drafted by our country," Fink said, startling Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high

suicide rates.

“Thank you for your service. Now why don’t you walk me through your academic accomplishments?” Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. “I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane.”

“Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you’re really telling a tale, you could round that to a three point zero.”

“CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?”

“The Special Forces Qualification Course.”

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. “I don’t think I follow,” Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton’s plan of wrestling back control of the interview. “Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?”

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead

chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning for a small part in a play?

"De Oppresso Liber," Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton's appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he knew full well what was expected of him in life's starring role. Finally, Wharton asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming

what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting, it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that—"

"Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement... A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent and promise."

– Kirkus, Starred Review

"I didn't ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree."

"I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up," Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

"Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—"

“Influence,” Wharton repeated. “You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?” Here was a hick who could not influence the next banjo number at a hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because they’re all related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought himself up to CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military applicants not being that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how everyone else was afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office and shooting up the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military candidates, but rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct them to their intellectual rung below dieticians. He did not doubt that they probably thought his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as such was part of the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In Wharton’s CCG class, there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had lasted a year out of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his pervasive logical staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around. He’d even had a gut.

“May I please just be allowed an opportunity—” But a knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network

around town at
all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday
school, stepped
inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He
apologized to
Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a
real pressure
cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink
said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew
backbone into an
erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to
Wharton. "Yet." Their
hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in
the kind of
kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace
coup plots. They
smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he
were a naked man
changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great,
Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name,
paraded as it was by
Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the
noxious fumes that
he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn
light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's
bird-of-prey
profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of
the hawk-nosed
dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high
on hash and his
mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on
the balls of his

feet. “Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were sparring about the value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought”—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—“regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part.”

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world

while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American exuberance.”

—Ha Jin, National Book Award winning author of Waiting and The Banished Immortal

“I like to win . . . in . . . life.”

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. “How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?”

“Forty thousand.”

“Come again?”

“Forty thousand.”

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand

after factoring
in the four thousand meals for the international flights.
Wharton attempted to
salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate
that had always
stumped even the smartest business school students by an
incorrect margin of
at least ten thousand. "Would you care to illustrate how you
arrived at that
number?"

"For the reason that around forty thousand is the
right answer," Fink charitably clarified.

"I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but
your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten
minutes and watched
two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to
calculate how
many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three
runways total
and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five
passengers. Which you
multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from
midnight to four
in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And
that, of those
domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a
meal service."

"Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand
meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I
had one shot, one
kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don't mean
at an investment
banking desk job playing with myself and numbers."

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce

what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink's wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton's mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter's rights to Wharton's office? After Fink's barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity.

"You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad

minute of firing.

“Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible for fifteen

percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport

with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for

eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an

overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours,

enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five percent per meal.

The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen

million dollars over five years.” Fink’s pen lay untouched atop the paper.

“What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a

minute to structure your—”

“I’d pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client’s only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You’ve got to roll the dice to make money.”



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

“Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically

approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your

calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment.”

Fink held up his index finger

to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index

finger reappeared
two more times separated by three-minute intervals between
flashes. It took
all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its
third appearance and
break it.

“What do your numbers say?”
Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute
silence of his life.

“Profits of almost six million
dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan.
That’s before I
shave their fixed costs to trim them down.”

“I think you mean variable
costs,” Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such
amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top
piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the
illegible writing,
indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

“God only knows
where, but I’m afraid you have an extra zero or two in there
somewhere. I don’t

know where to begin helping you because I can’t make out a
single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this
as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation;
that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your
calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate
of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a

year over the next five years, and that it would take almost six years just to break even after the investment if they could withstand the initial losses.”

“I was shooting for long term, the big picture.”

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated this rationalization before he fired. “If you were thinking ‘long term’ and the ‘big picture,’ you would have noted they needed to increase their market share by marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would last longer and save the airlines money compared to the other products being offered by competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs. And that’s only after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would have recommended that they diversify with other products or at least expand their current market into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And that is exactly what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though the real company was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where’s your outline or structured strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom, the outline. "There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use," he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper: $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$, and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

" 'Always look at the revenue.' I don't even know what this means," Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to his desk. "This is your foundation?"

"Winning," Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. "Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wildcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—"

"I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting," Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink's clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton's hometown.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. "I've got nothing for you."

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

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New Fiction from Steven Kiernan: “All Your Base Are Belong to Us”



“Exposition La Commune de Paris à l’Hôtel de Ville de Paris,” 1871. Photographer unknown.

For the amputees of Walter Reed Army Hospital, Segways were the new fad. It had become common to see roving gangs of them, upright and speeding across campus and through the hospital, riding in elevators and waiting in line at the cafeteria or pharmacy, causing a flurry of complaints from doctors and staff. And when Doc Rodriguez looked up from his physical therapy mat and saw Anthony cruising down the hall on one, a

public affairs officer plastered against the wall as he sped by, Rodriguez couldn't help but smile.



Rodriguez had been feeling sluggish, unmotivated. Kristen, his therapist, had tried getting him to do some core work with a medicine ball, but he stopped as soon as her attention moved on to another patient. He was about to leave when, through the glass windows that made up the room's far wall, he saw Anthony. Anthony had gotten his Segway a few weeks prior from an organization that was donating them to wounded vets, and he hadn't gone anywhere without it since. Rodriguez had tried riding one, but it bucked him off like a horse when he awkwardly attempted to step up with his prosthetics, and that was enough for him. Anthony parked the Segway against a wall and then joined Rodriguez on the stretching mat.

"What's up, Rod?" Anthony asked.

Rodriguez shrugged.

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, we gotta hit up some Halo later. Gotta practice for the tourney next week. Can’t let Jeff and those army assholes beat us again.”

“For sure. Talk to Juan and the guys lately?”

“Nah, haven’t seen them online for like a week. Wonder what they’re up to?”

“Getting ready for another deployment, probably.”

Anthony paused.

“Miss those guys.”

They were silent for a while; Rodriguez picking at an ingrown hair on the stump of his left leg, Anthony brushing dandruff off his shoulder. There was a commotion in the hallway and Rodriguez looked up to see some officer striding towards the entrance with a gaggle of aides scurrying around him, one of whom broke off ahead and opened the door shouting, “Officer on deck!” to everyone in the PT room. When the officer, a colonel, entered he waved his hands saying, “At ease, at ease,” despite no one having gotten up to begin with.

“Must be the new base commander,” Anthony whispered. “Looks like an asshole.”

“That’s just how officers look,” Rodriguez said.

The colonel was now walking towards the center of the room, “Don’t mind me, gents. I’m Colonel Darby, new Commanding Officer of Walter Reed. I’m here to introduce myself and get the lay of the land, to see how the sausage is made, if you will.”

His aides, a group of lieutenants and captains, stood behind him, their hands on their hips.

“Definitely an asshole,” Anthony said.

The room then shifted back to its normal atmosphere. Patients returned to their workouts and conversations, therapists moved from mat to mat, treadmill to treadmill. Colonel Darby stalked around the room, asking questions about exercise machines and what unit people had served with, which they grudgingly put up with. His jovial attitude wore off slightly with each conversation. When he moved on, a captain appeared and handed the patients a heavy challenge coin with the Colonel's name on it. Eventually, he made his way to Rodriguez and Anthony.

"So, what are your names?" Darby asked, arms crossed tightly.

Time for another life story, Rodriguez thought. They had all been through these conversations before with every fucking VIP that came by. He was about to speak, but Anthony beat him to it.

"I'm Anthony and this here is Rod," Anthony cracked his knuckles, causing Darby to flinch. "We got blown up together, which is pretty cool. I think. We were both—"

"Do you have a rank?"

Rodriguez and Anthony exchanged glances. "Well, I'm a lance corporal."

"And you?" Darby nodded.

"HM2 Rodriguez."

"HM2? I'm not familiar with Navy ranks."

"It means I'm a petty officer, an E-5."

"Sir," Darby said.

"Hm?"

"You will address me as Sir, HM2 Rodriguez," Darby said, drawing out the syllables in Rodriguez's name and rank and

jabbing his finger into Rodriguez's shoulder.

The room was quiet again and he could feel a dozen pairs of eyes on him.

"I'm an E-5," Rodriguez repeated. He lowered his eyes to the floor, deflating his previous confidence, before adding, "Sir."

Darby smiled and leaned back.

"E-5. An NCO. Tell me, *petty* officer, how is it everyone here is so undisciplined? Going by first names, not respecting rank. Have you forgotten you're all still soldiers? Why are you not ordering them to wear authorized PT gear? Why do half the soldiers in here not have proper haircuts? I didn't want to believe the reports of poor morale around here, but now I completely understand." He was no longer speaking to Rodriguez but addressing the whole room. "There are going to be some changes around here. It's time you all started looking and acting like soldiers again instead of a bunch of moping civilians. You've lost your pride."

"Actually, some of us are Marines, sir," Anthony said.

Darby glared at him and then stormed out of the room, followed by his aides.

*

Every now and again, despite not having feet, Doc Rodriguez took the bus up Georgia Avenue to the Wheaton Mall and bought a pair of shoes. These were the only trips he took outside of Walter Reed since arriving from Iraq eight months ago, and so he liked to make the most of them. Months in a wheelchair had taught him how people tip-toed around him, afraid to make the slightest insult. It amused him to watch them squirm.

Col. Darby had been in command for over a week now and the hospital was beginning to feel even more suffocating than

usual. Every wounded warrior (a term Darby had grown fond of repeating) living in the barracks now had to attend 0700 accountability formations. Authorized PT gear was made the uniform of the day, no longer could they wear what they wanted or what was most comfortable. Wounded warriors had to check-in and out with the SNCOIC every time they went to an appointment, which was often multiple times per day. There was even talk of a curfew being put into effect. Rodriguez needed some kind of escape. So he went to the mall.

When he reached the shoe store, Rodriguez rolled straight to the athletic section. Two salesmen behind the counter exchanged looks of confusion with each other before pretending to be busy on the computer. No doubt hoping he would leave, Rodriguez thought. After a few minutes picking up shoes, checking the flexibility of the toes, comparing their weight, the younger of the sales reps, a lanky teen who hadn't yet filled out his overgrown frame, cautiously approached.

"Looking for a gift for someone?"

"Nope," Rodriguez inspected the tread of a running shoe.

"Well, that's a great runner right there," the rep said, rubbing his hands together and looking back at his comrade, who was still feigning interest in the computer screen.

"It's got great tread for cross-country and is very light weight. And the sides here allow your feet—" he paused, a hint of panic in his eyes. Rodriguez said nothing and waited for him to continue— "um, they allow your feet to breathe."

Rodriguez raised an eyebrow, wondering how long the kid could last before bursting into a frantic apology. But he'd had his fun, and instead asked if they had them in size ten; a good, solid size, he thought.

The sales rep made a quick glance towards Rodriguez's nonexistent feet. "Let me go check." He disappeared into the

back of the store, the other rep following close behind.

Rodriguez knew he was being an asshole. It made him feel good, normal, like he still had some control over his life. If that meant some ableds had to feel uncomfortable for a minute or two, then so be it, they could walk it off.

The lanky rep came back out, alone this time, and Rodriguez met him at the cash register. The rep removed the security tag and boxed up the shoes, asking Rodriguez how he would like to pay. He was relaxed now that he was making a sale. Rodriguez was about to respond when he was grasped around the neck. Whoever it was squeezed tightly. Rodriguez could feel their body pressing against his back and shoulders.

"Excuse me," Rodriguez said.

The arms gently released and he turned to see an old woman. She was somewhere in her sixties, seventies maybe, judging by her gray, dry hair and purple fanny pack. He could see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry I just couldn't help myself. I saw you and just had to come over and hug that poor soldier. I just can't imagine what you've been through."

"Sailor."

"What was that?"

"I'm a sailor," he said, pointing to his shirt which read "NAVY" in big block letters across his chest. "A Navy Corpsman."

"Oh, I apologize, I just assumed. What's a corpsman?"

Rodriguez sighed. Nobody ever knows what the fuck a corpsman is.

"A medic for Marines."

“That sounds wonderful, sweetie. A real hero! Please, let me buy these shoes for you.”

She had already pulled out her card from the fanny pack and was handing it over the counter before Rodriguez knew what was happening.

“No, ma’am, it’s really all right. I can—”

“Oh no, don’t you worry. It’s the least I could do to thank you for your service. You boys really have done so much for this country.”

“Thanks, but—”

She pulled him in for another hug, nearly yanking him out of his chair. When she was done, she kissed the top of his head, signed her receipt and left. What the fuck? The sales kid was stifling a laugh.

He sat at the bus stop, waiting to return to the hospital and hoping no one else would talk to him. Other than a few confused glances at his shoebox and the empty space where his legs used to be, no one bothered him. He wanted to shrink into his chair and disappear. When the bus arrived, he waited for everyone to board before moving to the door and asking the driver to lower the lift in the back.

“Didn’t notice you there,” the bus driver said. He was a big man and had to rock himself forward a few times to build enough momentum to get out of his chair, but once he was up the bus driver was surprisingly quick. “My apologies, folks. Gotta help get this young man get loaded up.”

He met Rodriguez at the back of the bus. “This’ll take no time,” he said, reaching for the lift controls, as if Rodriguez hadn’t done this a hundred times before, and didn’t in fact know that the lift was slow as hell. Rodriguez could see the other passengers watching through the windows, visibly

annoyed that their ride was being delayed. When the lift was finally lowered, he reached for his wheels, but the bus driver beat him to it, grabbing onto his chair and pushing and guiding him onto the ramp.

"Hey," Rodriguez said, "I got it."

"I just want to make sure you get on nice and straight. See?"

"Fine, whatever." He just wanted to get on board.

"Make sure you lock your wheels, I'd be all shook up if you rolled off backwards once this thing is up in the air."

"I'm good. I'm holding on to the rails."

The bus driver ignored him and locked the wheels himself.

Rodriguez wanted to scream at the man but didn't want to make this already ridiculous scene any bigger, and so he bit his lower lip instead. The other passengers were huffing and sighing, checking their watches and phones with annoyance. It was embarrassing to be such an inconvenience. When Rodriguez was finally aboard, the bus driver pulled out some hooks and straps, and used them to anchor the chair to the floor. Rodriguez again tried to protest, he hated the idea of being locked in place, unable to move until someone came and untied him, but the bus driver, all smiles and stupid jokes, ignored him again.

*

Back in his room, Rodriguez tossed the shoebox on top of the dresser and transferred from his chair to the bed, shoving a pile of clothes out of the way. He was tired, mentally drained. No, it went deeper than that, he thought. Spiritually drained, that was a better word for it, but not in the religious sense. Mentally, he could take anything, had taken everything, but this place was wearing him down in other ways. And now Darby. Rodriguez was still pissed about their first

encounter. *Address me as Sir*, he thought. *Act like soldiers*. Where the fuck did he think he was? Like we don't have more important shit to worry about than getting a fucking haircut every week. And that dumb grin. He should have just stuck to his guns.

He couldn't dwell on it, he thought. Negative emotions will just demoralize the patient, making their survival less certain. Always direct their attention elsewhere. He began to run through the procedure for bandaging a sucking chest wound: stop the bleeding, seal the wound with plastic, you don't want any air entering the chest cavity, place a bandage on top of the plastic and tie it around the chest for good pressure, roll the victim onto their injured side while awaiting evacuation, monitor for shock. When he was done with that, Rodriguez moved on to treating immersion foot, pitted keratolysis, where to place a tourniquet and for how long.

After several minutes his phone chirped with a text message: *get online bitch*. It was Juan, one of his old squad mates still down at Camp Lejeune. Rodriguez reached over to the nightstand for an Xbox controller and microphone and logged on.

"Hey, Doc, how's it goin, dude?"

"Same old shit, man," Rodriguez said, "It's good to hear from ya."

"Fuck yeah, man. Ain't nothin new here, just playing some Call of Duty while the boots do working parties."

"Ha ha, just like the old days."

Rodriguez wished he could be back there, dealing with all the bullshit, but these game sessions went a long way to make him still feel connected, still part of a unit. When he first arrived at Walter Reed, the doctors and therapists kept going on and on about his "new normal" and how once he got adjusted

he wouldn't feel different at all. A life of adventure awaited; wheelchair basketball, handcycling across the country, sit-skiing down Breckenridge, fucking hiking up Kilimanjaro, and all that other inspirational horseshit everyone expected them to be doing. *New normal*, he scoffed. Fuck all that. He just wanted to feel normal normal.

"Aint the same without you, Doc. These new corpsmen we got are boot as fuck. Could use you down here training 'em up." There was a commotion on the other end and Rodriguez had to pull the headphones off when the sound started banging around and scraping in his ear.

"Yo, Doc, you legless asshole." It was his old roommate, Benjamin, clearly drunk.

Rodriguez laughed. "Benji, what's up, brother?"

"Corporal Benji to you, you fucking squid."

They continued like that for a couple hours, shit talking back and forth, Rodriguez asking what training they were up to, if they got their next deployment orders yet. Afghanistan, Juan said, though he didn't know where exactly. They were heading out next week for mountain warfare training in California, they'd be gone for a few weeks. Even though he had hated combat, hated how afraid it made him, hated bandaging up his friends, had felt relief when he woke up in Germany with no legs, knowing he'd never have to do it again, Rodriguez had a sudden, deep longing to go with them, and when he logged off and turned out the light, he fell asleep fantasizing about not having been blown up, about getting drunk in the barracks, about training in California, about the mountains of Afghanistan.

*

The next day, after physical therapy, Anthony came over to Rodriguez's room to play some Halo. It was a usual routine for

them after PT and helped them relax after working out for two or three hours. Though Rodriguez would never admit it out loud, playing video games made him feel like his old self, back when he didn't need any kind of handicap or special equipment to play sports or any other activity. They were the one thing that made him feel like he was still equal and whole.

There was a knock at the door and Anthony got up to open it. It was Jeff, their Halo tourney rival. He pushed past Anthony and walked in.

"Yo, you trying to steal our strats or what?" Anthony said.

"Like I need to. You noobs can practice all you want but you'll never beat me and the LAN Warriors."

Rodriguez rolled his eyes. "You idiots still using that dumbass name?"

Jeff waved him off, "I'm not here to talk about that. Colonel Darby is doing room inspections. Just finished with the second floor."

"What, here?" Anthony said. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah I'm fucking serious. Asshole just burst into my room and chewed my ass out for leaving one of my arms on the bed and clothes on the floor."

The three of them surveyed the room. The "barracks" they lived in was actually a former hotel, converted for use as overflow patient housing when amputees began coming home in unexpectedly large numbers, and like most hotels was not an ideal long-term living solution. Every inch of floor space not necessary for wheelchair traffic was covered in luggage bags and spare limbs, a collection of t-shirts and knitted blankets lay in the corner, growing with every new tour of American Legion and VFW groups to come through. Clothes were

haphazardly piled on the guest bed and the small garbage can was overflowing with empty Red Bull cans and soda bottles. The bed sheets were open and scrunched to the side. A collection of magazines, pizza boxes, and orange pill bottles lay across the desk.

"Well, it smells all right," Anthony said.

The door swung open and in walked Col. Darby, who gave the room a quick once over and then stood in front of the TV.

"HM2 Rodriguez, why am I not surprised?"

"You tell m—"

"I'll tell you why, HM2 Rodriguez. I'm not surprised by the state of this," Darby scanned the space again, "*room* because every gosh darn room so far has looked exactly the same. Clothes every which way. Pizza boxes, spit bottles, pop cans," he hesitated, "pornography."

"And I'll tell you something else, HM2..."

Rodriguez could have sat there silently and taken the ass-chewing like he did earlier. Just stare and say a couple of "Yessirs," maybe squeeze in an "Aye Aye, sir" just to throw Darby off a bit, a slight stick of the needle so he could feel smug about it later. Then toss him some platitude like "I'll get right on it, sir" with no intention of actually following through, but offering just enough to make Darby feel like he had accomplished something so he could leave.

And that's exactly what Rodriguez did, Anthony and Jeff following his lead. But when Darby finally reached the end of his self-indulgent tirade he said something that caught Rodriguez off guard.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, HM2, that I'm tired of seeing all of these

Nintendos. I don't believe in coincidences and I believe there is a direct correlation to the lack of discipline around here and those darn machines."

Nintendos? he thought. "Do you mean video games, sir?"

"Don't correct me, HM2. Give me anymore attitude and I'll be speaking with...whoever it is in charge of you."

"Aren't you in charge of me, sir?" Rodriguez allowed himself a slight grin.

"You find this amusing, do you? Well, I think I've seen enough here. It's obvious what the problem is. Captain!" An aide appeared at Darby's side as if she had been there the whole time. "I want you to call IT and instruct them to shut off network access for all...video games." She nodded and pulled out a Blackberry.

"You can't do that," Anthony nearly shouted.

Darby regarded him, "It's my base, son."

"You can't mess with our personal time like that," Rodriguez countered. "We're," he searched for the right word, something Darby would understand, "off-duty!"

"You're never off-duty when you live on base."

"But, we're fucking hospital patients!"

"And that's exactly my point. You all need to get back in the right mindset. You're not hospital patients, you're soldiers! And soldiers don't play video games, they train. You should be working on PMEs for promotion boards or taking online college courses. There are plenty of more productive activities you could be doing. Believe me, I'm doing you a favor."

"But, sir," Rodriguez pleaded, all the resistance in him from a moment before had drained out, "I know it's hard to

understand, but this is important for us. All of us. It's how I keep in touch with the guys in my unit." He hoped that would be enough, that Darby could at least sympathize with that.

"You have a cell phone, don't you? Shut it down, captain."

She was still holding the phone to her ear but gave a thumbs up.

"Why don't you three spread the word."

*

They gathered at the smoke pit in the courtyard. A few dozen soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in wheelchairs and on crutches. Some listened from their windows, their heads and arms dotting the walls of the hotel which surrounded the courtyard on three sides. They were angry. They were powerless. Who do we blame? The colonel? For most of them he only existed in the abstract; some liminal force both real and unreal, capable of controlling their lives, their actions, manipulating their fears and desires towards his own ends. Another authority free of accountability. And so they blamed each other. Arguments spread over who hadn't been keeping their room clean, who spent more time playing Xbox or Playstation, who didn't cut their hair, shave, bathe, didn't render a proper salute, act professionally, ate too much pizza or Chinese takeout-

"Enough!" Rodriguez shouted.

He made his way to the front of the group, wheelchairs parting to let him through. All eyes reluctantly turning to him.

"Are we really going to turn on each other? Over one asshole's stupidity?" That got him a few laughs. "An asshole who's been here all of a few days and already thinks he knows how to the run the place, who thinks he can barge into *our* rooms, *our* PT building whenever he pleases? Humiliate us?" Hell no, someone

shouted. Rodriguez pointed at Jeff, "How long have you been here?" Thirteen months, Jeff replied. He pointed at someone else, "How long have you been here?" Ten months. "And you," he pointed to his left, "how long have you been here?" Two years, was the answer. Rodriguez paused and let that sink in.

"Walter Reed exists for us. *We* are the reason for that state-of-the-art PT building. *We* are the reason celebrities and politicians come here, supplying *them*," he pointed towards the administrative buildings, "with good PR and propaganda. *We* are the reason their budget has been doubled." Hell yeah! Damn straight! The crowd was nodding and clapping in agreement. "I don't know about you all, but I'm tired." Real fuckin tired! A shout from the middle of the crowd. "Tired of people grabbing my chair without permission." Yeah! "Tired of having my therapy interrupted by some chicken hawk senator or b-list actor offering to take a picture with me." Fuck those douchebags! "Tired of being told about my 'new normal.'" Hear, hear! Hell, yeah! Speakin truth! "Tired of being forced to live up to everyone *else's* expectations of how we should think and act!" Furious applause. "And I'm fucking tired of thinking we have no control around here!" The crowd was wild, clapping and waving canes in the air, surging towards him. "WE run this place!" Rodriguez shouted over the noise. A chant began seemingly from everyone all at once, "No play, no work! No play, no work! No play, no work!"

Back inside the group gathered around Rodriguez. It had grown larger as more people came down from their rooms and into the open lobby.

"What are your orders, Doc?" Anthony asked.

"I'm not giving any orders. But we do need to organize. We'll need volunteers." Everyone raised their hand. "Good, strength in numbers. First off, we'll need some counter-intel. People who can make some posters for propaganda and psy ops."

"I can do that," Anna said. She was an air force staff sergeant who had lost her left arm in a rocket attack. She was fairly new, having only been here a few months. Normally, she kept to herself in her room, went to PT in the afternoon when fewer people were there. She wasn't timid, Rodriguez thought, just quiet. He nodded to her and she raised her one fist in acknowledgement and then left to gather more members for her team.

"Okay, hopefully we won't need it, but a direct-action team would be nice."

"That's got my name all over it, Doc," Jeff said.

"Focus on gathering stuff to use as barricades, we'll need to be ready to block the entrances and stairwells in case they try to force us out."

"Roger that." Jeff raised his fist.

"Everyone else should help out where needed. Prepare some defenses or gather up enough food and meds to last us a few days. We're not going to ANY appointments until we get our video games back. They can't punish us all if we stick together!"

Rodriguez turned to Anthony. "I've got a special mission for you."

Two days later they were still holding strong. That first night, Rodriguez had called Darby's office and stated their demands. He hung up before the colonel's aide could respond. Soon after, all internet access in their rooms was shut off. They'd heard nothing since. But morale among them had never been higher. With no instruction they had eagerly organized themselves into four-man fireteams, each responsible for a set of windows or hallways. A rotating guard shift was set up at every entrance and a direct-action team waited in the lobby ready for anything. The building custodial staff had given

them the keys to the building, raising their fists to Rodriguez when they handed them over, and now they had unlimited access to the cafeteria as well as the roof, where they posted lookouts. The staff had also donated a few sets of walkie talkies, which were distributed throughout the building. If Darby thought he could wait them out, Anna had said, he was mistaken.

"Man, we shoulda done this sooner," Jeff said. "I'm fuckin' pumped."

"It's nice to feel useful again," Anna replied.

"I'm just glad to be a burden on my own terms for once," Rodriguez said. The others nodded.

OP1 to HQ, movement on the northwest of the courtyard. Coming down the path, looks like Darby and some aides, over.

Anna clicked on her radio, *Roger that, OP1, out.* "Looks like he finally wants to talk."

"We'll see," Rodriguez said.

They waited for Darby to come closer, so he could see what they had left for him. All along the building, along all three sides of the courtyard, the windows were plastered with posters. NO PLAY, NO WORK was the most predominant, with others like FUCK THE POLICE and ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US interspersed throughout. A large pirate flag hung from a window. From behind the glass doors Rodriguez could see Darby carefully scanning each sign, his disgust evident by the ever-growing scowl on his face. His aides stood nervously behind him. Rodriguez instructed the guard to unlock the door and then rolled out to meet him.

"This little insurrection of yours ends right now!" Darby said as soon as Rodriguez was out of the building. "If it doesn't, I'll have every last one of you charged and court martialed!"

Rodriguez snorted, "Good luck with that."

"Listen here, Aitch. Em. Two, this facility will not be held hostage and I will not negotiate with insurrectionists. This insubordination will end—"

"I'm sorry but we don't really care what you *think* is going to happen."

"How dare you, you—"

"And we don't much care for your indignant attitude." A round of banging echoed across the courtyard as those watching from the windows drummed their canes on the window frames. "It's time you recognized who holds the power around here. Us. You're here to serve us, to make sure we're getting the proper care we need. We're through with being treated as if we were children on timeout. Now, turn the internet back on and restore our video game access and we'll gladly return to our duties." More drumming. The aides took cautious steps back.

"I will not be ordered around by some enlisted man, a petty officer! I'm in command here and you will shut this, this, this charade down!"

"I think we'd prefer not to." Rodriguez smiled and crossed his arms.

"Fine. Seize him!"

Darby's aides hesitated a moment, and then rushed forward. A lieutenant grabbed his left arm and Rodriguez punched him in face. The lieutenant let out a sharp squeal that even had Rodriguez feeling embarrassed for him and crumpled to the ground. Before Rodriguez could reposition himself two captains clutched his arms from behind and tried to pull him out his chair.

"CHARGE!"

The captains paused and turned back to the building entrance. Out from the building burst Anthony on his Segway wearing a Che Guevara shirt followed by two others on Segways. They were wearing helmets and elbow pads, and wielding canes. Anthony pointed his cane forward like he was Patton galloping towards the enemy upon his steed.

“Go for their legs!” He shouted and soon they were upon the aides and slashing down on them. They rode circles around them, smacking and beating their thighs and calves. Projectiles were now reigning down from the windows; shoes, challenge coins, tomatoes; someone was firing BBs from a slingshot.

“Retreat!” Darby ordered. “Fall back!” The officers, laying in the fetal position, scrambled and stumbled to their feet. They sprinted shamelessly, trying to catch up with the colonel.

“NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK.” The chant grew louder as they shouted from their windows. The officers ran faster. Anthony and his team escorted Rodriguez back inside where the direct-action team prepared for a possible counterattack.

“Lock it down!” Rodriguez shouted.

Jeff reached for his radio and gave the signal, *Turtle up!*
Turtle up!

A flurry of activity ensued as they locked the doors. Empty wheelchairs and spare limbs and unused furniture that had been kept off to the side were now piled against the entrances. Fireteams on each floor pushed more wheelchairs down the stairwells. Every lookout and post were doubled up as they went to 100% security. Food and water were evenly distributed. Their time had come.

*

Over the next thirty-six hours, the base MPs made several

probing attacks. The colonel's goons first tried to get in through the front entrance, rather than attempt another courtyard gauntlet, but found the way blocked by a lifted, yellow H2 Hummer and a black Mercedes Benz AMG (both courtesy of the government's tax-free \$50k/per limb compensation to each amputee). They then attempted a night raid through the courtyard, thinking the resistance would be asleep. They were beaten back by a combination of million-candle-power flashlights and water balloons filled with urine. Jeff was particularly proud of that idea. Then, on the fifth day, the real assault began.

They heard it first. The unmistakable sound of boots on pavement, marching. The lookouts on the roof confirmed what the others already knew, this was no probe. *I count at least 50 headed towards the courtyard, over.* It took ten minutes for the MPs to file in, riot shields over their heads, boots clomping in a methodical rhythm, but the resistance held their fire. They formed up five troops wide, all that could fit through the doors at one time. Rodriguez, Anthony, Jeff, Anna and two dozen of Jeff's direct-action team stood ready to face them at ground level, a mountain of twisting metal and rubber separating the two sides.

Panic seized Rodriguez for a moment as he considered what was about to happen and all he had done to bring it about. He may not have forced his comrades into mutiny, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for the real danger they all now faced. Had he been right? Were these actions justified? Was their cause doomed? He began to cycle through a dozen similar questions he hadn't contemplated before and the weight of it all nearly sent him to grab the nearest white flag, until Anthony placed an arm around his shoulders.

"If we could only see us now," Anthony said, smiling.

Rodriguez looked up and down the line and saw the same determination in every face. His panic passed. Doomed or not.

Right or wrong. They were together.

It happened all at once. The MPs rushed forward, quickly smashing through the glass doors. The window teams opened fire with an assortment of heavy and disgusting objects. The MPs responded with pepper spray, but their range was limited and could only reach up to the second floor. Both sides dragged away their wounded. The front rows of MPs were grabbing and tossing all the debris in the blockade aside, passing it over their heads to be carried back and out of the way. "Hit em with the balloons!" Jeff barked. They crashed and broke against the barricade, spraying the MPs with all their contents. The front row disappeared as they retreated out of the line of fire but were quickly replaced by those behind them. The two sides repeated the cycle for several minutes, but the MPs were removing the debris far quicker than the resistance could deplete their ranks, and eventually the MPs broke through.

"LAN Warriors, charge!" Jeff sprinted towards the breach. Rodriguez nearly choked laughing, but he and the others followed right behind. The next moments were a blur of canes and batons being swung back and forth. Two men, one in a chair, the other on crutches, fell to the floor, blood spilling down their faces. They were quickly dragged off. Rodriguez and the others were slowly being pushed back by the MPs, lacking the leg power needed to hold their ground. The MPs had given up on pepper spray now that they were in close quarters, switching to their tasers instead. Two more amputees on the left flank went down, bloodied, forcing the remaining men on that side to fall back and cede ground. The MPs quickly took advantage and Rodriguez and Jeff found themselves surrounded, batons coming in from all sides. Rodriguez fought back with all he had, swinging his cane like a baseball bat, chopping down like an axe. He smashed one MP in the nose, sending a gush of blood spraying out. Jeff knocked another out cold, he had lost his cane and was now punching any uniform he

could reach. An intense pain surged through Rodriguez and he lost control of himself as his body seized up. He fell out of his chair and was convulsing on the ground as two MPs tried to drag him off.

He heard a scream from somewhere in the mass of bodies and he couldn't tell if it was one of his or one theirs, but then Anna burst from the crowd and threw herself at the MPs dragging him. "Get Doc outta here!" There were new hands on him now, dragging him away from the fight, further inside the building. Anthony screeched by on his Segway and drove straight into the mass of uniforms, disappearing as he flew over the handle bars. The last glimpse he got of Anna before the MPs surrounded her was of her swinging her prosthetic arm like a club.

*

Now in the casualty collection point, Rodriguez had time to think again. He was badly bruised and sore from where his muscles had tensed themselves up into knots after being electrocuted but looking around it was clear he had gotten off easy. Nearly two dozen people lay about the floor in different states of shock and injury. Most had blood leaking from gashes in their heads, some lay unconscious, others had their arms in slings. A group in the far corner were busy pouring milk over their faces and sitting in front of large fans. A man Rodriguez didn't recognize lay next to him, struggling to wipe the blood from his eyes with the stubs of his arms. Rodriguez leaned over and pulled a bandage from his pocket. He did his best to wipe the blood from the man's face and then applied the bandage to the wound on his forehead.

"Thanks, Doc," the man said before groggily closing his eyes.

It was all too much for him now as the panic crept its way back into his chest. How many had new concussions? Rodriguez thought. How many broken bones? How long would their recovery

now be delayed because of these new injuries? He began to shake and he lost the strength in his arms, and fell back against the wall. He took another look around the room and nearly burst into tears. "I thought I was done with this," he said to himself. He could still hear the sounds of battle going on in the lobby. The banging, the shouting. He tried to cover his ears but the sounds were too loud and slipped past his fingers. There was only one thing he could do. He pushed himself back up and crawled from patient to patient, tending to their wounds.

The fight went on for thirty more minutes until the MPs retreated. A second direct-action team had arrived as Rodriguez was being pulled away and managed to hold the lobby. Jeff found Rodriguez and gave him the quick AAR: half of their resistance was injured, and of those, half could still fight. Several members were missing, including Anna and Anthony, and were presumed captured. They'd depleted all their water balloons and most of the projectiles. But, Jeff said, we still own this place. No MPs got past the lobby.

Rodriguez was quiet. Anna. Anthony. Everybody. They sacrificed themselves, for me, for my dumb plan, he finally said.

"No. They did it for themselves," Jeff answered. "Look around, man. Even with blood and pepper spray in their faces, they're laughing."

Word had spread of the MP's retreat and the mood in the room had shifted to an exhilaration not unlike that after a firefight. The exhilaration of fear and of being alive. Of having fought and won. It became clear to Rodriguez that the outcome of this mutiny no longer mattered, had probably never mattered. He climbed back into his chair and he and Jeff headed to the lobby.

A voice from a bullhorn echoed in the courtyard.

"HM2 Rodriguez. I think we've all had enough of this and are

ready to come to an agreement." It was Darby. "Unless you'd rather I throw your friends in the brig."

Rodriguez and Jeff approached the window. Darby stood in the courtyard with a team of MPs in SWAT gear. Anna and Anthony sat handcuffed and bandaged at his feet.

"That motherfucker," Jeff said.

"I'm willing to restore full internet access and grant everyone immunity if you end this rebellion now," Darby continued, "Well, not everyone. HM2 Rodriguez will have to face punishment. Someone has to, after all this destruction."

"Fuck that, Doc. If anyone needs to be punished it's that asshole."

"No. We've won," Rodriguez said. "We did it."

"But you can't just turn yourself—"

"I don't want anyone else hurt over this." Rodriguez looked over his shoulder at the guards by the doors, still defiant despite bandages on their heads and torn shirts, one of them raised his fist. "We got what we needed."

Jeff nodded reluctantly and clapped his hand on Rodriguez's shoulder.

*

It was silent when he rolled out to Darby. The grin and arrogance from Darby's face was gone. It was clear he hadn't slept at all for the past five days and looked as though he had lost twenty pounds, his uniform hanging off his shoulders and arms. Rodriguez raised his fist at Anna and Anthony and they both smiled in return. Darby said nothing to him, didn't even look at him, just signaled for the MPs who came and handcuffed Rodriguez's arms behind his back. They took hold of his chair and began pushing him towards a patrol car on the

far side of the courtyard.

They were halfway down the courtyard when a single voice shouted from the windows, "NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Others joined in and the chant quickly spread around the courtyard.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK."

A prosthetic leg came sailing out from a third-floor window. Another came from the second floor across the way. Then an arm, a foot. More and more came tumbling out of the windows in a cascade of limbs all around the courtyard. The chant got louder and built up to a thunderous echo, bouncing off the walls and the trees, rising, rising, rising above the buildings and out across the street and into Rock Creek Park, down Georgia Ave and downtown and into the Capitol, the National Mall, the White House.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Rodriguez laughed and laughed, tears streaming from his eyes, as he was wheeled down the path and out of sight.

New Poetry from John Milas



Ford Ice Cream Truck

Parade the Beef

*"I declare this meat tasty and fit for human consumption."
– President of the Mess,
CLR-27, Landing Support Company,
Camp Lejeune, 2009*

we charge our wineglasses to toast the dead
marines of the eighteenth century the nineteenth twentieth
twenty-first century their immaculate ghosts seated in
the empty chair at the tiny table draped in
black cloth in a candlelit corner of the ballroom they fork
ghoststeak through their lips it piles
on paisley carpet centuries of steak piling
while I can't figure out how to light a cigar
the smoking lamp is lit the floor open for fines
Sergeant Steele wears the wrong colored shirt

beneath his midnight blue coat Sergeant Steele
say it ain't so that's erroneous drink from the grog
we're too young to drink the spiked grog but
the staff NCOs don't stop us Lance Corporal
Butler's gold PFC chevrons gleam without crossed rifles

say it ain't so Lance Corporal Stapleton
passes out in the woodchips under the playground
swings before we march back in after
shedding a tear for Lord Admiral Nelson Sergeant
Newman grips my white belt to balance drunk

we drop back in our chairs before
Sergeant Newman falls out slobbering
in my face saying he'll fight anyone for me he's
got my back forever he's always
had my back because he says I'll always have

his even though that motherfucker put me on
an extra hour of barracks duty he's right then
his fingers slip off the edge of my shoulder

Salt peter

Our Kill Hat shreds his vocal cords while
we wait outside the chow hall for dinner,
his sweat-soaked charlies a shade darker
now than when he first suited up in the
DI hut. He screams *□Chain of Command*
and we scream into the San Diego sky:
The President of the United States, the
Honorable Mr. Bush! Vice President of
the United States, the Honorable Mr.
Cheney! Secretary of Defense, the
Honorable Mr. Rumsfeld! □And so on
and so forth. On November 5, the Kill

Hat wakes us up to tell us what happened the night before: *“Obama is our president now, you understand me?”* We understand because we will be punished for not understanding a single thing he says. The Kill Hat screams to repeat the chain of command with these new changes before breakfast. Simple enough, because nothing has changed. We are still the rejects of America, as he reminds us. We shit across from each other in doorless bathroom stalls and piss three bodies to a single urinal, sometimes four. None of us have had an erection in weeks. Rumor has it they put something in the eggs.

Episode of Hate Channeled Near Ice Cream Truck at Mojave Viper

Donatello's green head severed at the neck on a wooden stick, two white orbs embedded in that purple mask, eyes they've trained us to gouge, to tear out with our fingers, bloody. I let my rifle hang by the sling and hold the face in front of me, jamming my free fingers into the turtle face. In my head, *“Execute.”* From my mouth, *“Kill.”* *“Kill.”* The gumball eye pops free, cords of rectus and oblique muscle pouring from its ragged orbit. Frozen gunk drips from my nailbeds, ants trailing to the sugar at my boots. I gouge out the other eye and suck frozen brains from his skull, as they've trained us. Then I drop what's left on the ground and scream my throat raw at it and smash it with my M16 buttstock and roll around in

ants and dust and if there weren't more marines waiting behind me the terrified ice cream man would probably slam his window shut.

New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: "Special Operations World"

No more than 10 percent of the United States military was special operations when I got out. Being in special operations or "specops" as it was known at the time was something to be proud of. There were Rangers and Special Forces and Marine Special Operations and Force Recon and the SEALs like me, and the boat guys who did infiltration aka infil operations for the SEALs, and the different task forces, and CAG (I'm sorry I don't know what the acronym stands for) otherwise known as Delta Force. Then there were the pilots for helicopters and planes and who knows what else all. There was a lot of special operations, is my point, but that amounted to about (again) 10 percent of the military, maximum. Special operations meant something. It was special.

Now, man, whew. The number's closer to eighty percent. No joke. Eighty percent of the military is special operations.



I had to join again, is how I found out. When I left the military to get an education and pursue a career—back when I had dreams like that—it never would have occurred to me that one day the military would be people wearing different colored berets and taking part in top secret missions to countries I'd never heard of. But the education I got outside didn't amount to much. And the career, working for some jackknife-grinning moke named Carl doing financial spreadsheets didn't go anywhere either. I guess I'm just unlucky that way.

So I slunk back down to the Army recruiter's office one cloudy Tuesday on my lunch break. I'd been posting on Facebook about how well things were going with my life and the job, but in reality it had been a mess. The beard and tattoo photos, the birthdays with kids, a promotion—sure, they'd happened, and online they probably seemed impressive to everyone who wasn't there, but living those moments had been stuffing my mouth full of ash. I needed back in "the game," as we special operators call it, but was so embarrassed that my former buddies would see me and find out that I couldn't make it on the outside. I asked the recruiter what openings they had.

"Anything except special operations," I said, certain that they'd open the book for me.

The recruiter, a former sniper in the Ranger Reconnaissance, looked over my resume, and then laughed. "Buddy you want to go into the Regular Army? What are you going to do, water logistician?"

"Yeah," I'd told him. "That sounds good."

He'd jumped out of his chair. "The fuck do you think you are, squid, walking in here and asking to be a *water logistician*." His face was all snarl, but I wasn't afraid of him. Ranger Recon Sniper infiltration teams were tough, sure, but we special operations folks knew that the Rangers barked harder than they bit. I stood my ground.

"That's right pal. Hook a trident up."

"Look around. You notice anything?"

I scanned the room using my SEAL powers of observation, and realized something odd. Everyone was a Ranger or a Special Forces Green Beret, or a CAG sniper from Delta.

"What'd I walk into, special operations recruiting command?" I quipped.

I had, which made it all the more appalling how few options were open. There was a 10-year waiting list for water logisticians, and a bunch of other lousy jobs in the Army. They were the most coveted positions around, according to the recruiter.

I leaned over the desk and grabbed the Ranger by his lapels. "Listen, I don't have time for your b.s. Are you telling me

that *everyone in the military is special operations?*”

He gritted his teeth. “Geddoffa me, you bum,” he said through clenched teeth. It was good special operations talk, strict, macho, and I appreciated it, so I let him go and dusted off his shoulders.

“Sorry, don’t mean to be sore. I’ve been out for a while, this seems really different from the military I was in before,” I explained, hoping to assuage his anger. It worked: he calmed down.

“Let me see what I can do,” he said. “I’ve seen your record. You did a lot of good work sniping terrorists when you were in. Saved a lot of special operators. And that still means something to us.” He tapped my file meaningfully. “We stand by our own here.”

He sat down in his beaten swivel chair, purchased by the limitless dark cash swilling about the special operations community (which to remind you here was basically the whole military at this point!!) and punched up the employment system only us JSOC / SOCOM folks had access to (again—literally eighty percent of the military). He scanned through the job listings for a minute, then turned to face me, his chin resting contemplatively on a pyramid made by his fingers and thumbs.

“How does this sound. Human waste disposal specialist. Fort Polk, Louisiana.”

His offer was not suitable, and I told him so.

“Let me hit you with this then, cowboy—more appropriate for

your skill set as a SEAL. Are you ready? Okay. Chaplain's aide. Comes with a two-year stabilization incentive. Fort Irwin, Kansas."

That wasn't it, either. I would've asked for things like infantry or armor, even artillery, but those jobs were long gone. The Germans and Poles handled those duties, now, and some Ukrainians. The professions I could've fit into were no longer available and hadn't been for years. "Got anything in communications? Signal, public affairs, anything like that?"

He laughed, a harsh and insulting laugh, the more so for its apparent sincerity. "Look," he said, wiping tears away, "I got one more opening. Veterinarian. You go around putting meds up the ass of sheep, donkeys, that sort of thing. Think you can handle that, hotshot?"

Now, normally, I'd have walked right out. But I could see what was what. If it was between cleaning actual human shit all my waking hours, having to sexually service some randy old clergyman (that's what chaplain's aides did and do, it's a fact, look it up) and slathering up sick animals with medicine to keep them walking, well, dang. I might not've made it in the real world, I might've been just another financial stock-whatever day-trading bro with a 29-year-old shift manager named Carl who was a cousin of Eric Trump or something screaming at me as though I was a child, and all of my SEAL skills might have come to naught, but dad didn't raise no fool.

"I'll do option number three," I said. And that's how I got back into the military, and learned how few people were outside special operations any more. It wasn't what I expected, but it wasn't

all bad, either.

The only thing I wish were different (apart from everything about my job) was

that there were fewer generals. I think the exact number is 19.8%, 19.8% of the

Army is generals. And I, dear reader... I am not one of them.

Stuck

Ozzy

stuck pennies in Huey's door, wedging it shut, and we all stood in the hallway

and laughed as he tried to get out. Serinson and Crater built a wall of beer

cans and set it outside Gregg's door so he crashed into it on his way to the

shower the next morning. Butthead and No-neck tied a rope to the handle of two

doors across the hallway from each other so no one in either room could get

out, and I have to say I found the shouts amusing, quizzical and comical at

first, growing increasingly angry, until the entire dorm was filled with the

word fuck.



On Sundays Simpson wandered the perimeter of the tennis courts collecting lost balls; late Sunday night, from his third floor window, he and I aimed them at the cars below us in the lot, setting off the alarms, shattering the one night of stillness on campus. Devins threw Skoal packets in the washers and dryers in the community laundry, and Jenkins filled the soap dispensers with mayonnaise. Every night someone flooded the sinks, and every morning some new witticism like "Here I sit broken-hearted" had been scrawled on the toilet stalls.

When Pace passed out we drew a penis on his face. When Stevenson slept we shaved him, then short-sheeted his bed. Davids we ducted-taped his wrists and ankles together, and the only thing that kept us from taping shut his mouth was we were afraid he might choke on his own vomit, drunk as we all were.

What

we didn't do was go to class. I'll say it was because we were too tired from

constantly watching our backs, or maybe it's that we only have so much creativity inside us, and when we use it coming up with ways to attack others, we forget to expand ourselves. It's also possible we had given up. Or were so busy trying to lock someone else in that we shut ourselves out, too busy attacking to protect.

That first semester we had all been friends. It was only in the winter, when the First Gulf War began, that we tried to hurt each other. This was after watching the news every night: the bombs over Baghdad, the Tomahawk missiles flying in from the Red Sea. We didn't know then how war would loom over our adult lives, how we'd move from one war to another without even realizing we'd moved. No wonder we were too tired to go to class, or care. No wonder we built so many walls, shut so many doors. It would be years before I quit sabotaging others, and still more before I realized there's no end to the creativity we can control, it's only that there's a limit to how much emotion we can handle. I'll prove it to you now. Tell me, when's the last time you remembered we were still at war?

Paul Crenshaw is a writer and essayist. His essay collection "This One Will Hurt You" was published by The Ohio State University Press in spring 2019. Other work has appeared in Best American Essays, Best American Nonrequired Reading, The Pushcart Prize, anthologies by Houghton Mifflin and W.W. Norton, Oxford American, Tin House, Brevity, North American Review, and Glimmer Train, among others.