

New Nonfiction by Michael Jerome Plunkett: “Four Letter Words: A Meditation on Fuck”



The most versatile piece of equipment an infantryman carries is a four-letter word. It can be used in almost every conceivable situation. It's sharp, cuts smooth and clean. It can sever all manner of ties, emotional or professional or anything in between, in a single motion. Its shock-and-awe effect can rattle even the most linguistically tolerant. It can fly. It is a unit of measurement. It weighs nothing and takes up no space. It's a navigation tool. Just uttering the word can elicit an immediate reaction from your surrounding environment. Regardless of the context, say that crude four-letter word and you'll know exactly where you are just by the way those around you react. Say it right now. Out loud. Go ahead.

Fuck.

Nice. Felt good, right? Admit it.

The ways in which that little word can be modified and altered are almost endless. It is a verb. An adverb. An adjective. Even a noun. Its versatility is unmatched in the English language and there is no better way for it to reach its full potential than in the hands of an infantryman. There's something about the way those four letters fit together that appears intrinsically correct. Puzzle piece-like. And yet it's the only piece of equipment an infantryman is always completely out of.

I'm far from the first to pontificate on the significance of Fuck to the infantryman. In his memoir *Helmet For My Pillow*, Robert Leckie runs the gamut of all the ways Fuck shaped his experience serving as a machine gunner during the Second World War.

"Always there was that four-letter ugly sound that men in uniform have expanded into the single substance of the linguistic world. It was a handle, a hyphen, a hyperbole... It described food, fatigue, metaphysics. It stood for everything and meant nothing; an insulting word, it was never used to insult; crudely descriptive of the sexual act, it was never used to describe it; base, it meant the best; ugly, it modified beauty; it was the name and the nomenclature of the voice of emptiness, but one heard it from the chaplains and captains, from Pfc.'s and Ph.D.'s until, finally, one could only surmise that if a visitor unacquainted with English were to overhear our conversations he would, in the way of the Higher Criticisms, demonstrate by measurement and numerical incidence that this little word must assuredly be the thing for which we were fighting." [\[1\]](#)

Fuck you. Fuck me. Fuck this. Fuck that. Fuck it. Get fucked. Fuckwad. Fuckhead. Fuckass. Fucknugget. Fuckstick. Fuckhole.

Fuckup. Fuck Boy. Fuck Face. Unfuck. Motherfucker. Fuckin' A! Fuck your mother. Fuck my life. Fuck off. Fuckwit. Flying Fuck. Fuck-all. Fuckety-fuck. For Fuck's sake. Fuckery. Fucktangle. Fuckton. Fuckload. Fuck a duck. Give a fuck. Fuck Buddy. Buddy Fucker. Shut the fuck up. Holy Fuck. I don't give a fuck. Tired as fuck. Fuck around and find out. Fucking Hell. Bumfuck. Mindfucked. Zero fucks. McFuck. Dumb Fuck. Royally Fucked. Fucked up beyond all recognition.

It's not just the word itself but the way you say it.

Fuck. Short and sharp. A punch to the throat.

Or *Fuuuuuuck*. Drawn out and lingering in the valley of the second syllable with an elevation in volume the longer you draw it out.

FUCK. Belted out like a shotgun blast.

FAHK. Keep it in the sinuses.

Commandants change. Uniforms change. Regulations change. Missions change. Even the instantly recognizable Eagle, Globe, and Anchor emblem of the United States Marine Corps has been redesigned and modified several times over the history of the Corps. Fuck might be the only constant that the infantry has ever known.

At times, it is a crutch. Sure, it can be used to excess. Maybe some people feel that overuse can diminish the impact. But there are few words more powerful than a precisely placed Fuck. It packs just enough heat to elevate a simple complaint or concern into a higher registry of human emotion. Imagine: Your friend comes to you and unloads all their problems and finishes by saying, "My poor life." Do you really feel where they are coming from? I don't. "My poor life" drips with melodrama. Now, that same friend comes to you, unloads all of those same problems, and ends with a brisk "*fuck my life*." You know exactly what they are trying to say.

The f-bomb occupies a place all its own in the English language. A quick Google search pulls the top result from Oxford Languages which starts its entry with a bold-lettered, all-capital warning: **VULGAR SLANG**. Fuck means “to copulate.” Fuck means to “ruin or damage something.” At one point, “Fuck” meant to strike. According to several dictionaries, the word has Germanic origins, with the earliest known recordings appearing in Middle Dutch dialects sometime in the 1500s with the word Fokken which meant to breed cattle. The Comstock Laws banned it from print from the 1870s all the way up to the late 1950s. Merriam-Webster sees it as a “meaningless intensive” that is “usually obscene” while Sassy Sasha, a regular contributor on the website Urban Dictionary, defines it as “The only fucking word that can be put everyfuckingwhere and still fucking make fucking sense.”[\[ii\]](#)

In some ways, the connection seems obvious. The infantry is a profession that prides itself on brash ruggedness. To be infantry is to be vulgar. It is an obscene way of life. We carry the heaviest loads for the longest distances with nothing but our backs to bear the burden while we are told to pray for war and a chance to kill, and we are expected to smile and thank the gods for the privilege to do so. It’s about as far removed from the domestic sphere as one can get. Still, there are other interesting connections between the infantry and Fuck as well. A significant portion of an infantryman’s identity revolves around the ability to shock and awe those who are not part of this holy tribe. Fuck and all its varieties fit right in with this philosophy. At the same time, it’s also one of those words whose absence can actually have just as much, if not more, impact as its presence. A British veteran of the First World War recalled:

‘It became so common that an effective way for the soldier to express this emotion was to omit this word. Thus if a sergeant said, ‘Get your fucking rifles!’ it was understood as a matter of routine. But if he said ‘Get your rifles!’ there was an

immediate implication of urgency and danger.”[\[iii\]](#)

Fuck is the standard. It is expected, so commonplace that a grunt who resists its use can also stand out for all the wrong reasons. Your fellow infantrymen might see your clean mouth as a sign you think you’re better than everyone. You’re different. You’re special. Individualism of any kind is immediately (and I would argue rightfully) suspect in the profession of the infantry.

The Online Etymology Dictionary tracks the evolution of Fuck through a long, windy path of bastardized Latin and Middle English to its increased usage in common language at the start of the twentieth century.[\[iv\]](#) The verbal phrase “Fuck up” is “to ruin, spoil, destroy.” Likewise, the very doctrine of the Marine Corps rifle squad is written in similarly plain English. According to MCRP 3- 10A.4, “The mission of the rifle squad is to locate, close with, and *destroy* the enemy by fire and maneuver, or repel the enemy’s assault by fire and close combat.”[\[v\]](#) So, while Fuck might mean nearly anything in the civilian world, its most precise meaning in the infantry is “to kill.” In one of the more unsettling but poignant scenes in Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire*, an experienced soldier educates a younger recruit on the ecstasy of killing another man by comparing it to Fuck:

“Killing a man is like fucking, boy, only instead of giving life you take it. You experience the ecstasy of penetration as your warhead enters the enemy’s belly and the shaft follows. You see the whites of his eyes roll inside the sockets of his helmet. You feel his knees give way beneath him and the weight of his faltering flesh draw down the point of your spear. Are you picturing this?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Is your dick hard yet?”

“No, lord.”

“What? You’ve got your spear in a man’s guts and your dog isn’t stiff? What are you, a woman?”

At this point the Peers of the mess began rapping their knuckles upon the hardwood, an indication that Polynikes’ instruction was going too far. The runner ignored this.

“Now picture with me, boy. You feel the foe’s beating heart upon your iron and you rip it forth, twisting as you pull. A sensation of joy surges up the ash of your spear, through your hand and along your arm up into your heart. Are you enjoying this yet?” [\[vi\]](#)

The meaning is clear. Killing is fucking with the only difference being the creation versus destruction of life. The intimate knowledge of both elevates a soldier above his peers. The lord’s accusation that the young soldier might be a woman if he is not aroused by the mere thought of killing an enemy combatant is a telling moment that reveals gendered attitudes toward the act of killing as well as fucking. According to this portrayal (which has held an on and off again spot on the Commandant’s Reading List since 2000), in ancient Greek military culture, they are both considered the realm of men.

The writer Ocean Vuong views violence as an implicit piece of the American lexicon, especially when considering the way American men communicate with each other. Violence *is* their language. In his poem “Old Glory”, Vuong attempts to highlight this phenomenon by merely constructing a poem of common American phrases. The narrative that emerges is at once recognizable and progressively disturbing.

“Knock’em dead, big guy. Go in there

guns blazing, buddy. You crushed

at the show. No, it was a blowout. No,

a massacre. Total overkill. We tore

them a new one. My son's a beast. A lady
-killer. Straight shooter, he knocked
her up. A bombshell blonde. You'll blow
them away. Let's bag the broad. Let's spit-roast
the faggot. Let's fuck his brains out.
That girl's a grenade. It was like Nam
down there. I'd still slam it though.
I'd smash it good. I'm cracking up. It's hilarious.
You truly murdered. You had me dying over here.
Bro, for real though, I'm dead." [\[vii\]](#)

The physicality of the imagery is evident from the first line and continues to the last line with the projection of death as an achievement as well as the ambiguity of "I'm dead", a common phrase used to describe someone exhausted by humor. For Vuong, this type of violent communication is encouraged, even celebrated, and therefore internalized by American men from a very young age. While appearing as a guest on Late Night with Seth Myers in 2019, Vuong said, "'You're killing it,' you're making a killing,' 'smash them,' 'blow them up,' 'you went into that game guns blazing,' and I think it's worth it to ask the question what happens to our men and boys when the only way they can value themselves is through the lexicon of death and destruction?" In that same interview he went on to say, "I think when they see themselves as only worthwhile when they are capable of destroying things, it's inevitable that we arrive at a masculinity that is toxic." [\[viii\]](#)

The infantry is no exception to this dynamic. In fact, as an inherently violent profession, it should come as no surprise that language of destruction is not only in use and encouraged

but is also heightened in this environment. It is embedded in the identity of an infantryman, if not for vaunting then for survival. Still, it is worth considering the ramifications of internalized violence through language in wider society, and there is much to be gained by examining the ways we communicate with each other; the words we choose, where they come from, why we insist on resting upon violence as our chosen mode of meaning. Language matters. Our words matter.

But then, of course, sometimes fucking is just fucking.

The infantry is a life of necessity, a life largely spent in austere environments with whatever personal gear can fit in a pack. There is little if any room for creature comforts. Therefore, memories hold a higher value in the field. The mere recollection of a good Fuck can be enough to keep one warm through the bitter cold of a long field op. But there's no such thing as privacy in the infantry. Everything is shared, from the candy in the MREs to the most salacious sexual encounters. These stories are both whispered and shouted. They are almost always exaggerated and drawn out. Often, they're told in bold detail with knowing smiles and nods from listeners. Not everyone participates and there are usually some unspoken ground rules about who and what is exactly on or off limits. It's a way of relating to one another and, at times, especially if the story can be corroborated, a way of boosting one's social status within a platoon.

Twentynine Palms, California. July, 2017. Every day the temperature crept just north of 135°F. My company was taking part in a battalion-wide exercise, and we were running 16-18-hour days. I was a machine gunner in a CAAT (combined anti-armor team) platoon and at the end of every movement, I climbed down from my turret atop the up-armored Humvee with new sore spots, which quickly turned into sickly yellow and dark purple bruises. We grew accustomed to the weight of our flaks and the particular way they rubbed the salt and sand into our skin. We slept on our trucks under obsidian night

skies and the temperature dropped to about 85°F, which felt like zero after spending all day in the desert sun. We rose long before the sun and our drivers bore down on their accelerators, peering over their steering wheels through the thick, clouded Humvee windshields with the strange acute alertness that comes with being awake for several days. We barreled through shadow-cloaked valleys and over open desert plains strewn with thousands of discarded guidance wires from TOW missiles crisscrossed like dental floss in every direction. After the conclusion of one of the more strenuous training evolutions, my squad leader decided it was about time to round everyone up and have some quality platoon bonding time. Tensions had been running high and the strain was showing on morale. The best way to ease this dynamic? We were all going to tell the story of how we lost our virginities.

We circled up under a thin stretch of cammie netting just as the sun set, most of us perched on crushed MRE boxes, some seated right on the sand. At first, hot and exhausted, no one felt like talking. But after some prodding and cajoling, the group began to open up. What followed were some of the strangest and most bizarre stories I had ever heard. There wasn't a single virgin in the group nor a single story that resembled anything romantic. There were experiences involving teachers and friends' moms, back rooms in churches and public restrooms, names remembered and names completely forgotten.

My own story?

When I was seventeen, I met a girl on Myspace while I was trying to boost my punk band's online presence and we struck up a casual correspondence. She lived in England but she really liked our music, and our casual correspondence quickly took on a more intimate and intense flavor. At some point we exchanged phone numbers and began calling each other daily.

"Don't fuckin' tell me you got fuckin' catfished," a Sergeant interrupted. (At this moment whenever I tell this story, I

always take a second to point out that “Catfishing” wasn’t even a thing at that time and I, in fact, was way ahead of the game in the online dating world. Some might even say a trendsetter. But yes, I was about to discover my newfound companion wasn’t exactly who she said she was.)

I guess the guilt and dishonesty of claiming to be an honest-to-God Anglo-Saxon residing in the United Kingdom got to her enough that she just had to come clean. It turns out, she was not British nor was she living in England. She was American and called Joplin, Missouri home. I took this revelation surprisingly well. I believe I was just in shock at how easily I had been hoodwinked by this random stranger I had met on the internet. Of course, being a horny teenager may have obscured my vision as well.

“I knew it. I fuckin’ knew it,” said the Sergeant.

Her true identity revealed, our relationship not only continued but became somehow fiercer. Spring break was near and we both had a week off from school. She booked a plane ticket to New York. I booked a hotel room at the Red Roof Inn with my mom’s credit card.

“The fuckin’ Red Roof Inn, Plunkett? Are you fuckin’ kidding? Couldn’t spend the money on a Marriot you cheap fuck?”

The whole thing went smoothly. I picked her up at the airport and we spent the day together. At the end of the night, I took her to the hotel. The door closed. We turned off the lights and were consumed in darkness. I searched for warmth. The intensity of what followed was brief and strange but life-changing in the way those moments are. It felt like love. But the line between Love and Fuck is impossible to distinguish in the darkness of a bedroom. We fucked. We un-fucked. Pain. Pleasure. I just remember that it was important to make it, right there. Put it all into that moment. Just that exact moment. Nothing before nor later would matter. The

relationship didn't last, of course. Things unraveled fairly quickly after that week spent together. We graduated high school in our respective states and went off to different colleges. There was so much more to come. Even though we did not know it in that moment. We barely knew what fucking was. Or what it could be. It's never the act itself but the slivers of the moment that remain afterward. My memory of Fuck is an incongruous chain of these slivers from years past.

The way her eyes softened in the moment (*the* moment) and held my own and the earth might as well have stopped moving. And she looked like—and became—every woman I had ever known or would ever know. It was right there. In those soft eyes. For the rest of my life, I will remember her head illuminated, backlit by a halo of light, her hair pulsing from the whirring blades of a ceiling fan. The glow of ivory-white skin taught me the importance of warm light in a hotel room in Tribeca. How I briefly forgot my own name after a particularly passionate encounter and I just lay there for a few moments in complete nothingness. The pinpoint clarity that comes afterward.

There's that other four-letter word: Love. A word so much more difficult to define and yet just as closely linked to Fuck and maybe even Kill.

All these four-letter words. Each one leads back to the other. Fuck. Kill. Loss. Love. They are different but so close to the same.

There is a section titled "Love" in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* where Lieutenant Jimmy Cross feels such an intense longing for his one-time girlfriend Martha, that he takes a small pebble she sent him in a letter and places it in his mouth just to feel closer to her. He has a strong desire to "sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood." Lieutenant Cross longs to consume and be consumed. This longing is somewhat physical and sexual in nature but there's a desire

for some deeper connection he cannot have with her.[\[ix\]](#)

Late one night, after a particularly rough ruck march with my company in Camp Lejeune, I dropped my pack and felt my soul uncrumple itself, and the only thought that went through my mind, as strange and perplexing as it sounds, was that I just wanted to crawl inside my wife and be contained in her warmth and softness in a way that was not fucking but also not love. This thought hit me with such startling clarity, I had to pause a moment. The sky above was crude oil black and pocked with stars that glowed like incinerated diamonds. A soft breeze wrapped around me and swept up in the space between my soaking wet blouse and skivvy shirt, all the places where the straps dug into my shoulders, my waist. My skin turned to gooseflesh. My muscles, saturated with battery acid. Everything ached. A metallic taste coated my mouth. The stench of a hundred sweat-drenched, cortisol-dripping bodies consumed me and I looked skyward, trying to escape it. You will have moments like this in the infantry and you will not want to tell anyone about them. Instead, you say *fuck, that really fucking sucked* and you move on.

[\[i\]](#) Leckie, Robert. *Helmet For My Pillow*. New York, NY: Random House, 1957.

[\[ii\]](#) Sasha, Sassy. "Fuck." Urban Dictionary, February 18, 2018.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fuck>.

[\[iii\]](#) Brophy, John, and Eric Partridge. *Songs and Slang of the British soldier: 1914-1918*. London: Eric Partridge Ltd. at the Scholartis Press, 1931.

[\[iv\]](#) "Fuck." Etymonline. Accessed June 6, 2022. <https://www.etymonline.com/>.

[\[v\]](#) Gehris, Scott. "MCRP 3-10A.4." United States Marine Corps Flagship, August 7, 2020.

<https://www.marines.mil/News/Publications/MCPEL/Electronic-Library->

[Display/Article/2472229/mcrp-3-10a4/](#).

[[vi](#)] Pressfield, Steven. *Gates of Fire*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998.

[[vii](#)] Vuong, Ocean. *Time is a Mother*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2022.

[[viii](#)] Michaels, Lorne. Episode. *Late Night with Seth Meyers* Season 6, no. Ep. 111. New York, NY: NBC, June 12, 2019.

[[ix](#)] O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1991.

New Fiction by Dion Wright: “Your Land”



“Drone up,” said Lieutenant Levi.

Heads turned and eyes followed the drone’s swift ascent to the sequoia canopy 350 feet above. It briefly hovered there before slipping out of sight, free of the enclosing redwoods and the damp shadowed ground.

“Eyeballs on the treeline,” ordered Captain Sophie Bencker. She stood next to the prisoner in the midst of the small circle of Rangers in the clearing. Good soldiers, special forces and Marines. But they’d been out here three weeks. *Too long*, she thought, and searched for Cat. It was a game to see if she could spot its nano-camouflage. *There!* Some thirty yards away by the northeast treeline, just beyond the unit’s defensive EM bubble. Still and sphinx-like, Cat was peering into the trees, perpetually ready. A hybrid predator of nano/biotech and huge male cougar, its luminescent red eyes

gave troopers the shits.

Snowbird-North Fork CS Zone was an immense glory of primeval forest. In the early 2040s the UN had renamed all world forests, temperate and tropical, as Carbon-Scrubber Zones. An attempt to save our planetary lungs from incessant pillaging, it also made for good PR. Yet Snowbird had rare earth mines—and hydrothermals—which added up to very big bucks. Particularly for the Consortia, unholy alliances between defence, mining and tech-media, which sponsored most public ventures.

In the clearing, Janssen, Fernandez and Kelly were fastening their HOTS, Hostile Terrain Suits.

“I’m sick of pissing in my suit. Three weeks out, it stinks,” said Fernandez.

“Yeah, you stink like a bear,” said Kelly, activating her own suit. “But gotta recycle those meds.”

They urinated on the march to recycle their precious mix of bio-protection and performance-enhancing drugs, triple-A approved, and a vital advantage in the Games.

Once Taiwan was off the table, the superpowers had seen the futility of endless confrontation. They could still dominate the show and make gestures to eco-stewardship while keeping a tight rein on their own populace. The business of war had become too risky for those in power and far less rewarding. Also in trouble were the bloated dope-ridden Olympics, tame sports for fractional achievements. Already losing their appeal for fragile societies ridden with eco-guilt, suicide bombers at the 2036 Mumbai Games put the nail in their coffin. Sensing an unprecedented opportunity, the Consortia and their shadowy financiers had created the New Reality Games.

Its players were veterans and loner-chancers of all nationalities; its stars were ex-special forces. For these

near-redundant military, the Games meant good money, playing with new if untested tech, and rules of engagement that were... flexible. Survival odds were equally variable, and players needed any edge they could get. The HOTSuit was nano-metamaterial and piezoelectrical-responsive, sealed head-to-toe, and designed by Hugo Boss, to boot.

“Hey Kelly, your tits really that shape or is it just the suit?” asked Fernandez.

“You’re never gonna find out,” Kelly countered with a smile.

“These suits really protect us?” asked Koch, the newbie on his first deep patrol.

“They’ll take a hit from light fire, shield your body heat against infra-red detection, and bend light to give basic camouflage” said Janssen who really got off on this stuff. “Temporary protection against biochems, and limited EM defence”

“Can’t wait to see if that’s true,” muttered Kelly. Looking at Fernandez she added: “If the Enclavers or Smugglers get hold of you, they’ll strip it off. And dump what’s in it.”

“You’re kidding, right?” asked Fernandez. Kelly just turned away.

The New Reality Games offered a spectacle of lethal conflict at human scale in a choice of environments “protected” by a bankrupt UN. Governments bought in. The Global South ravaged by floodwaters, firestorms, and epidemics saw lands emptied by violence and migration become newly lucrative. In the First World, rulers eschewed the thankless business of governance in favour of full-on entertaining of their consumer-citizens, those purposeless slaves to the social media mainstream as they curated their stories and imbibed podcasts. Gamers&Gamblers Anonymous briefly became the flagship 12-step recovery programme until outlawed.

“Just stay on mission, stay alive, and bank the friggin paycheck,” said Kelly wearily.

Protected forests needed protectors, and Bencker’s Rangers were among the best. They were owned by PC—the Pacific Consortium of Afrikaan Mines, AppleMeta, LevantSolar, Nike, Russian SiberNex, Vatican Zurich Holdings, and X-Disney. The PC yellow-flash-on-blue logo adorned their uniforms, along with its slogan *We fight For Trees*, which was unwise to dispute.

This particular, early Spring mission of Bencker’s Rangers was a deep sweep into Snowbird to check on the principal mining operations and tolerated human activities, read tree monitors, gather intel on strange reports filtering in from deep country, deal with any bad guys, and generally strut their stuff.

“The HOTS will keep you safe, Fernandez,” Janssen put in helpfully, exchanging a look with Kelly.

The Games were invisible to those on the ground. Airtime was not live—financially and politically way too risky—but edited and sold for online VR/AR products showcased at Moondance, the annual games fest where the world came to shop for some dynamic oblivion.

All of which made the Captiva, their new prisoner, very valuable. They’d stumbled upon her just before dawn. Strange. She was one of the forest dwellers, rarely seen. In Snowbird a deep patrol could come up against armed groups either from the fortified Enclaves of wealthy religious wackos or from Vancouver smugglers using stealthcraft to run in food, Sinopioids, weapons—oh the bosses *loved* a brush with those guys. There were also survivalist Treeboys looking for redemption or whatever, and these Captivas, who just goddam lived here. Then there were the weird rumours, stuff that bounced around a campfire at night. *Keep the lid on that shit*

thought Bencker.

The Captiva. She was compact and muscular, Asian-looking with black pony tail and a crest of grey like a warning, and eyes that missed and betrayed nothing. She sat on the ground, her hands bound behind her. Lieutenant Levi's SCAR 7.62 mm had the safety off and its barrel was in her face, and she held his gaze. Captain Bencker entered the small circle of troopers.

"Lower your weapon," she ordered in even tone.

A spasm played across Levi's well-shaven jaw; troopers watching the treeline glanced over.

"Sir, the Rules say prisoners are without rights," countered Levi. "She's probably been raped, anyway." Trooper Fernandez, down on one knee and eyes on a small navscreen, shook his head.

"Not by us," said Bencker quietly. "The weapon, Lieutenant."

Bencker never pulled rank and the quietness of her voice spoke of something coiled. Those within earshot tensed. This had been brewing awhile: a shaven-headed female commander with a reputation even outside the Rangers, and a marine hunk with a gilded tech-and-sports education and son of a Consortium bigwheel. And now this prisoner, *who likely doesn't know shit about the Games. Levi wants to waste her, WTF?*

Cat had locked its red eyes on Levi. Neurolinked to the commander, Cat received Bencker's biofeed and instructions and sent back images and recon sense-data. Levi didn't have to look at Cat, just felt the eyes. Slowly he turned from the prisoner and cradling his weapon, sauntered to the perimeter with a fuck-you roll in the shoulders. The Captiva's eyes followed him, then went to Bencker who spoke for everybody to hear.

"The Captiva might have intel, and knows how to survive here."

Play with what you've got. Her own weapon was slung across her back, her preferred Heckler & Koch MP5 upgrade.

"Hope daddy Levi don't spot that little scene," Kossowski said quietly to Janssen, who nodded.

* *

Something had now opened inside the unit. An opening could be as sharp and haphazard as an incoming shell or as drawn-out as nursing a cold beer while stoned under a hot shower after a patrol in bad bush. It was all SAR, Situational Awareness and Readiness, what nerves fed on in the field to make each moment full and keep you alive. Regardless of all the think-positive shit or meticulous PPTs in a pre-op briefing, out here in deep Snowbird the mind was veined with uncertainty. *How does this Captiva survive?* wondered Bencker, moving away to sit against a small rock.

* *

Janssen finished cleaning his Glock automatic, an uncle's hand-me-down; he loved the heft of it. He looked over at Cooper sitting on the ground with his plants. "Cooper, what you got for us today?"

A trained botanist and mycologist, Cooper could spot a mushroom at 30 yards. "The usual, some buttons, ink caps, oysters, chanterelles. And a shroom," holding it up. "*Psilocybe semilanceata*. This little beauty will open your mind and mess with your brain. If you have one."

"Fuck you," said Janssen, and Kelly smiled, then noticed the Captiva looking at them.

"What's your problem?" asked Kelly. "Hungry? You want some?" as if teasing a child.

"Shut it, Kelly," said Cooper, squatting in front of the prisoner and holding out the mushroom with a questioning look.

He waited; they all waited.

"If she won't speak, maybe Levi had the right idea," said Kelly.

"Maybe she's scared of you," said Janssen.

"Not this one," replied Kelly. "But she might hate us. And she doesn't like us picking her mushrooms."

"Sacred."

The word fell from the Captiva and drew eyes to her, and nobody spoke. Again Cooper held out the mushroom: "Sacred, how?" he asked quietly.

Bencker had put down her book and was looking at the group.

"We talk to the dead," and her eyes travelled over them, "to our ancestors." Cooper nodded, his brows knitted together, and backed away.

"Now *that* is intel," he said, mostly to himself.

Kelly breathed out audibly. "Friggin ancestors done shit for me. I don't even know my parents."

"Hey, straight up, Cooper," said Janssen, whose social skills were what you'd expect from someone on the spectrum. "What you reckon's out there?"

"No friggin clue," said Cooper. "And hope it stays that way. Anything could stay hidden in this."

"C'mon, what aren't they telling us?" insisted Janssen.

"It's probably the mines," answered Cooper slowly. "Rare earths and heavy metals discharged into ponds and streams, then leaking into the aquifers. And the mines are just the stuff we know about." Silence.

Bush fever. Bencker couldn't let that get into her unit.

"Trooper Nurri, activate Exemption," she ordered loudly. Nurri stopped scoping the treeline through his gunsight and touched his suitPad. He was the only one Bencker could bounce ideas off of—the price of being a woman in the ancient profession of arms commanding men, some of them smart... some, well, less than smart. Nurri was self-contained and ruthless, with a devilish sense of humour and piercings in strange places.

"Snowboard CSZ is unoccupied, Captain," commented Nurri, and Bencker gave him a pointed look.

Exemption protects us but also reveals our position, I know.

"Exemption activated," quickly confirmed Nurri, knowing better than to give her attitude.

Regardless of popular misconceptions and Consortium hype, big data-assisted AI had only amplified the uncertainty of warfare for those on the ground. Sure, troopers humped hi-tech weaponry and sweated in HOTSuits, but they were up against odds they could never fathom. Game rules forbade calling in fire-support or medical evacuation. You went in and you came out. Or you didn't. Shareholders and spectators of the Games would always be the winners, so finish the mission and stay alive. Troopers functioned more or less strung out in their private meds-enhanced SAR-cloud; some of these Rangers were also stoned a lot of the time, thanks to Cooper.

"Another morning in paradise," said Kossowski, sitting on the ground and spooning rations into her mouth. "Friggin mist, it's always shifting, things appear and disappear, can't tell what I'm seeing." She licked the spoon carefully and began packing her gear.

"And drip drip drip all friggin night," added Koch, bloodying a Tiger mosquito on his arm; dengue was rife here but the meds should handle that.

Fernandez took a last look at the photo of a lady, his, and their child, slid it inside his suit and stood.

* *

Bencker took meds; she also had Cat to bounce off. But her refuge was a tattered copy of the *Odyssey*. Where it spoke of creatures that lure ships onto rocks she'd noted: "the Sirens speak to each sailor only about himself. Like algorithms." *Damn this Captiva.*

Bencker went to the prisoner, knelt and held out the black carbon neck-bracelet. "Put it on."

The woman stared at it, expressionless, stared at her and down at the large dagger in Bencker's belt. The *Captiva* took the bracelet and slowly put it around her neck, clicking it to lock. She now belonged to their SecurNet—in fact, to Cat. She could try and run but... bad idea.

Bencker moved back to the rock and the *Odyssey*. Her father had also been a reader and his old copy of the *Iliad* was on her desk back at base, his photo tucked inside. It had ridden in her pack until she'd discovered the *Odyssey*, the first tale of a lost wanderer

Her father the Colonel had been a decorated warrior of the conflicts that had seen the rise of the consortia. He'd died in an infamous op at MB7, a mining-base in northeast Africa, when everything had gone fatally wrong for the unit... and unexpectedly well for its sponsors.

Twenty years later, situations were even more "fluid," even for the Games. Slick Powerpoint assumptions broke as soon as a boot touched the drop zone—even *because* it touched the ground, in this quantum fuck-up of a world. Bencker had become an elite soldier because her loneliness and rage could only be soothed in battle and its liminal moments, where knowing and caring were fused in pure awareness of death, of its

imminence. Her personnel file was a mix of medical reports and censorial black ink, and troopers either avoided her in the mess or vied for a place on her team.

Resting on the ground against the rock, Bencker read her *Odyssey*. Kelly and Janssen, sitting nearby, exchanged looks.

"Any answers in there, Captain?" ventured Janssen carefully.

"No," said Bencker. *No answers; acceptance, maybe.* She resumed: "Three thousand years ago wars were short and small-scale, close-to and savage, sometimes honourable," said Bencker, echoing her father. She turned her head, suddenly aware that the Captiva was looking at her and the book.

"Men fought like animals, some saw themselves as half-gods," she added.

"No shit," said Janssen, nodding. "No shit."

"Uh, and the space thing that the Colonel—" began Janssen.

"The Space, his notion of leadership, Trooper," Bencker said with finality, putting away the book.

"And the women?" asked Kelly.

"They washed bodies and mourned, or waited for their men," replied Bencker. "If on the losing side they were sold, or..." she stopped, remembering the Captiva and Levi and what he'd said. Kelly and Janssen looked at the Captiva then away and began scoping the trees through their gunsights.

"Move out in ten," said Bencker. "Lifting the Bubble."

Gloved fingers checked safety locks, flipped off screens, patted pouches, stoppered canteens, felt to ensure a knife was to hand, adjusted straps, all before catching the eye of another trooper for a long second.

For Captain Sophie Bencker, the Space was her Rangers and this

forest, was achieving the mission and bringing everybody home. The troopers' HOTS were now sending in their KVIs (key vital indicators) which flitted across Bencker's visor, confirming their biochems were stable: *the Space rebalances itself*.

Suddenly she was aware how quiet it had grown. Cat?

"Check for Sweepers," she ordered. These autonomous weaponised droids were the delight of west coast EcoPuritans and ZenBuddies, each with a self-righteous agenda and no time for human messiness. Sweepers protected the forest and had the legal right to kill interlopers who didn't signal an Exemption.

"Movement, one click northeast," said Kossowski, and troopers turned and looked at her. Kossowski was on point, a comms role that demanded one's visor-SAR to be always active and attention at 100%. Point was a prime target for snipers. On the edge of Bencker's mind a wind blew down the neurolink as chunks of data fed in from Cat already speeding towards the unidentified threat.

"Moving erratically... in our direction," said Kossowski.

"Could be a Sweeper, Captain," said Nurri, frowning, and with reason.

Their Exemption was active so there should be no problem. But the briefing had said the area was empty of Sweepers and likely hostiles.

"The drone?" asked Bencker, looking around for Levi. She had just touched her sleeve panel to raise the collective EM defence bubble again when suddenly she gasped as if hit in the gut, feeling her feet begin to slide. Koch had raised his rifle toward the northeast but was already crumpling to his knees. In the same instant Bencker's own suit-bubble was activated—Cat's doing—as she pivoted to throw herself on top of the Captiva and everything went dark.

* *

Seated in PC Command outside Eureka, northern California, Operations Controller Ellis squinted at the big wallscreen. "Bencker's unit?" He'd never gotten used to the Consortium's obligatory "team."

"Offline, Sir. And we're trying to confirm a sonic pulse."

"Sonic? Out there?"

"Trying to identify but interference is heavy." An understatement, given canopy density and high hydrothermal humidity.

"Find them," said Ellis as calmly as he could manage.

Sonics were not standard on Sweepers, so that should rule out a rogue droid, or so he hoped. He had maybe 30 minutes before this "situation" leaked to the Consortium's ears-and-eyes and his red desk telephone went berserk. Turning his head from side to side to ease his neck muscles, he walked oh so casually out of the Ops Room to his office. Closing the door he activated the bugscan: all clear. Carefully he punched a code into his private phone. After a lapse, another phone buzzed far away.

"Marvin." Ellis heard his codename with relief despite its nerdy ring. "What a pleasant surprise," said a rough, careful female voice.

"Aunty," he replied in what he hoped was a neutral tone: This cloak-and-dagger stuff was not his game. He paused, then: "The lady. She's disappeared on mission in Snowbird. Her unit is down, no movement." Silence. "We're waiting confirmation on a rogue sonic pulse."

"And Cat?" asked the woman after a beat.

"Active, was active for nearly an hour after the incident,

then nothing.”

Ellis heard the slight seeping of breath from ex-Lieutenant M’Gele, officially KIA. She’d served under Sophie Bencker’s father and her *Shibriya* dagger would reply to any who dared speak a word against the Colonel. After MB7 her missing body was just one of the strange things that had happened that day. She had survived, and only Sophie and Ellis knew this, which suited M’Gele just fine.

“If Cat is moving then the lady is too. If you have no indications of further attack then we can assume she decided to go dark.” Just like that day years ago at MB7 with her colonel in their last battle. The entire squad, an ambush—though by whom had not been clear.

“Keep me informed, please.” She hung up. Ranger Sophie Bencker, with the blue-eyes of her father and a ferocity all her own, was going to hunt. “Be without mercy and find your song, little leopard,” M’Gele said to the shadows. She touched the red garnet at her throat, remembering the promise she’d made to her Colonel as the light had left his eyes: I will protect your daughter.

Ellis sat, not moving. He too was back to that day at MB7, as the young Watcher in Rome EuroCommand following Colonel Bencker’s unit, seeing events unfold on screen, recalling the carnage found later at the mining base. Taking a deep breath he slowly let it out. Tonight would normally be an at-home with his wife Paula and their two little girls, for pizza and TV. But not this night.

* *

“Dad.” Captain Sophie Bencker flashed back in cinematic microseconds. “Dad dad dad.”

If only she could have known him as one soldier to another. Would he approve of her tatoos, and her shaven head, devoid of

the golden locks he'd so loved? He might balk at CAT and its neurolinks; he used to look at their dog Mifty and just grunt, and it had seemed to work between them.

Her father's image wobbled; the eyes changing to red and Cat looking down at her. Clarity flowed along their link. *But never make assumptions*: "Identify!" She said with difficulty, and felt its purring of approval. *Bagheera* entered her mind, the private name she'd given Cat, taken from a story dad used to read to her. Then down came *Breathe*, and Cat's own deep breathing began to pace and calm her own.

"I'm good." SAR was re-establishing itself.

"Nurri?" Nothing. "Levi? Kossowski? Cooper?... Janssen? Kelly, Fernandez?" *Cat, Sitrep!*

Down the neurolink came images of troopers scattered on the ground, none moving, and: Levi has gone. There was no signal from the drone. *What the hell happened?*

Swift activation of her HOTSuit had saved her and the Captiva. *Need to move*, she thought-sent. Cat replied with an image of the woman and a warning. Bencker flashed back: *she comes with us. Intel, survival.*

With a growl Bagheera bounded off, his sense-data flitting across her visor. Bencker nodded to the woman who sprung off fast, following Cat with ease. Bencker could see that this was her land. *Levi. WTF?*

* *

The team's drone had returned, its control now overridden by CSZ Command. It hovered over the clearing and the scattered troopers of Bencker's unit, then descended over each body. Away in the Ops Room, all eyes were riveted to the big wallscreen. As each face came into close-up the trooper's name appeared in a side column. They looked peaceful, thought

Ellis. A message came onscreen: two MIA, Captain Bencker and Lieutenant Levi.

“Can we get a fix on them?” asked Ellis. “And what about the Cat?”

“Negative, for the moment. Damage, or environmental interference,” said a young operator.

Ellis glanced at the red phone. “Levi,” he said quietly. An inevitable shitstorm was heading his way once Levi Sr in corporate HQ came looking for an explanation of a lost team that included his son—and for just a few seconds of footage. Heads would roll. He recalled a saying of Colonel Bencker’s: “When playing poker, remember it’s always serious, even when they say it isn’t.” As a rookie Watcher listening to the Colonel over a beer and totally overawed, Ellis had thought this unbelievably cool. Now he was beginning to see what it could mean, and didn’t like it.

“Keep looking, see what Narciss comes up with,” Ellis ordered. Narciss, their mighty AI sitting on photonic quantum hardware, was there to facilitate decision-making. But in the particularly fluid “fog of war” they had to confront nowadays it was of little use. “Beware of geeks bearing gifts,” he said under his breath, adding: “Keep safe, Captain Sophie Bencker.”

“We have one alive!” All eyes in the Ops room flew to the wallscreen. There was an arm slowly rising. Ellis felt sick.

“Trooper Nurri, sir,” said the operator.

Ellis nodded. Nurri, tough bastard. And the Games don’t do immediate evac so I have to leave him, at least until Editorial decide how they can use him. He just has to survive the next few hours.

* *

The two women had stopped by a pool. The one with the black

ponytail approached the small waterfall, and slipped behind the curtain of water. Bencker followed into the cave.

"We are undetectable here, the water and the rock," said the Captiva, then: "Take this off," touching the neck bracelet. *Those eyes. Without you I'll probably die here.* Bencker removed the bracelet. The woman gently rubbed her throat; "I will prepare some food," she said.

* *

They were sitting by a small fire. "It's good," said Bencker, carefully spooning the hot plant stew from a bowl in her lap.

"You will piss out the meds. Your body needs to rebalance to survive here." Bencker paused in eating. "And you will take off the suit."

My HOTS? "No friggin way!" Bencker's eyes flashed. "I need to be in contact for my unit. They--"

"They are probably dead." Then, matter-of-factly: "You would have heard something by now." She waited, watching Bencker. "You must cut all comms to your base. And you cannot jog for long in the suit," she said with finality. Rummaging in a wooden box, she handed Bencker a shirt, trousers, and top like her own, in a rough grey-green fabric. "Keep your link to the..." nodding towards the mouth of the cave, "but cut its comms to your base."

Outside a shadow moved and a growl came down the link. *Cat, cool it! This woman knows her shit.*

"Also you smell wrong. Swim, wash." *She is used to giving orders,* Sophie saw, but still didn't move. The woman looked at her: "You stopped the soldier killing me. You covered me in the attack. Now I protect you." She had brought out thick blankets, "At night it gets cold."

* *

Later, the fire down to embers. Under blankets they were close for warmth, semi-naked.

“What is your name?” Bencker asked. The woman didn’t answer, but stretched her hand to touch the leather-bound *Odyssey* lying between Bencker’s breasts.

“I do not know you yet,” said the woman, looking frankly at Bencker’s body. “What is this book?”

I asked dad the same question. “Stories of ancient warriors.” Remembering his words, she added, “They were mighty as trees.” The woman nodded, and for the first time, smiled.

“My father said those times were violent, men were violent, a few were godlike. They fought knowing that any moment could bring the terror of gods in blinding light, and all a warrior could do was pray, ‘may the gods be on my side.’”

“Your stories are of people and the desire to be like gods. They could have chosen to be like trees, to be great without making the gods jealous.”

“Trees are dying, they get cut down,” replied Bencker too quickly.

The woman looked her full in the face. “We talk to our dead.”

Uh huh, mushrooms. Bencker was beginning to feel lost.

They stared into the fire. “I think your father is proud of you,” offered the woman. Bencker turned away from the fire, her gaze dropping to the dagger, her fingers resting on the scabbard.

“He gave me this *Shibriya*, a Christmas present. A week later came the funeral-drone carrying his ashes.”

It had been a clumsy, New Year’s Day media attempt to turn the Colonel into a posthumous legend as a prelude to the first

Consortium Games. But by raising her teenage middle finger to the drone's camera and the world, Sophie Bencker had become the angel of self-contained, traumatized anger, perfect for social media and its self-elected obsessiveness. Then she'd gone off-grid (keeping the details vague), eventually reappearing as a trained soldier hardened by pain. Now Consortium eyes and various nutters tracked the maverick Captain Bencker, Ranger. She was top dollar, with her tanned features and the sapphire eyes of her dad.

"I am sorry," said the woman, putting out her hand gently to touch a shoulder. Bencker turned back, their eyes found each other. On the cave wall the dying fire threw their shapes which moved as if borne on the soft evening wind.

* *

It was first light and cold outside and they dressed quickly, then sat to eat in silence. Cupping her hands around a steaming mug the woman said, "You will know my name when I am sure of you." Then added in a quieter voice: "I do not want the loss of you."

WTF? Bencker's gut churned. She knew about loss, her father, and now her squad.

"Do you know what happened to my troopers?" she asked.

"I was tracking you for a week."

Bencker stared at her. "A week! But when we captured you—"

"I let myself be captured." The words hung in the air. "We can talk later. Now we have to move. This is not a game, there are dangers."

All clear came over the neurolink. Cat was blended into the forest shades, hard to see. All was still.

"Where are we going?" *Gotta keep my head straight.*

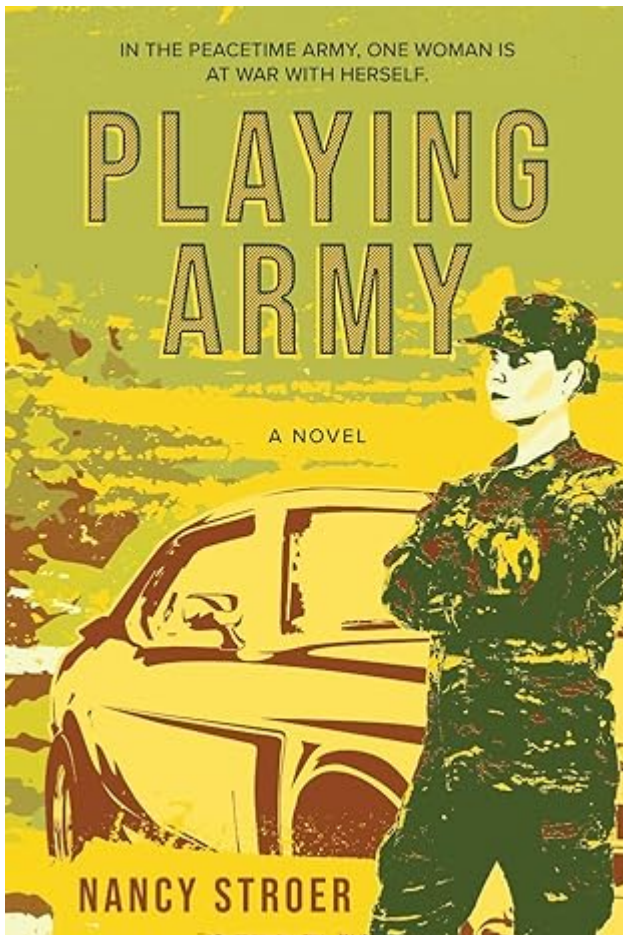
“Into the deep woods.” Bencker opened her mouth to ask another question but was cut off: “Now.”

Captain Sophie Bencker realized that she was going to have to trust the woman with her life. She already did so with Cat. For a soldier such trust was normal; it bound comrades to each other and to each waking day and each long night; trust defined them in a way that was absolute. But this woman was not a comrade in arms. Nor was she a stranger anymore. Bencker had unveiled herself to this woman, and with an intimacy she never showed. They were also bound together by danger. From now, uncertainty and danger would vie in her life with her capacity to trust, and this tension would be her Space. One hand resting on the hilt of her *Shibriya*, she looked up at the canopy far above and smiled.

“Ready?” asked the woman. Bencker nodded.

The woman set off at a jog through the shadows and mist among the trees. Her strong fluid gait reminded Bencker of another, many years ago: Lieutenant M’Gele. *This land is their land.* Now for Ranger Captain Sophie Bencker, the song of her hunt had begun.

**New Review by Maggie
Gamberton: Nancy Stroer’s
Playing Army**



A Game of Soldiers – A Review of [Playing Army](#) by Nancy Stroer

LT Minerva Mills is a hot mess. Literally. We meet her with 'sweat pooling in her waistband' as her mother rams through a terminally inappropriate 'Pink Tea' at Minerva's first assumption of command ceremony at Fort Stewart, aka 'Camp Swampy,' Georgia, on a hot summer day in the mid-1990s. Mrs. Mills has fallen out of step with the times, the people, the weather, Army tradition, and her daughter's need to project authority in a time and a place where Minerva had inherited none.

As the daughter of a Viet Nam MIA, Minerva has been an outsider to the 'Army Family' her whole life. She makes an unlikely protagonist – she eats too much, she drinks too much, she weighs too much, she struggles to control both herself and the people in her command. In other words, she's totally relatable. She struggles to assemble the self-protective camouflage needed to help her straddle the insider/outsider

divide which she must overcome if she is to succeed in command and in achieving her grail quest – understanding what happened to her father. Expert at Army field navigation, Minerva struggles with navigating human interaction among her superiors, her subordinates, and her equals. The novel takes us through physical and psychological terrain which challenges Minerva at every step.

It is rare to find women who write knowledgeably and skillfully about the US Army, and even more rare to find women as active military protagonists in gendered narratives of war outside the extensive military romance industry. In our current historical moment of mythical, *Playing Army* provides a welcome examination of the interior life of warrior women. Military women survive in the dominant masculine military culture by playing their cards very close to their chests. Those who have mastered the art of saying little and observing others closely rarely come out from behind their impassive masks to reveal the thoughts that they've learned to hide so well.

The clear, dry, acerbic interior voices of women who crave power, who search for meaning, who seek service tell their stories here. Their stories adeptly illustrate the uses of silence as a weapon and a defence among women in the US military. The novel also charts the Venn diagram of personal commitment and resistance which embroils all participants in closed systems such as the US military, but particularly those at the intersections of marginalisation. In addition to LT Mills, the novel explores briefly the interior worlds of two competitor peers – LT Logan, the golden child of a US soldier and a Vietnamese mother, and First Sergeant St. John, black, lean, an exemplar of Army ethos. These warrior women are observed and drawn with precision and clarity, a deep sympathy for their situations, and a generous acknowledgement of their significant strengths.

Playing Army explores the structure of power through the

micro-aggressions in a hierarchy founded on the management of violence. The neglected military narrative field of logistics, maintenance, and personnel takes center ground, mapping the tails that wag the dog. The change of focus from stereotypical US military blood combat narratives is both welcome and overdue. The keenly observed ground truths of the unglorious majority challenges the myth of that the 'real' Army exists only in and for combat. This optic brings into focus the dark play and unglorious realities of the 'real' Army for the majority of Army personnel.

Playing Army is skillfully crafted, satisfying in its resolution of LT Mill's journey learning to be serve well as an Army officer, and tantalising, in that it leaves us with unresolved questions. The child of a soldier father who neither knew nor wanted her, why was she named 'Minerva' by her mother? Why has clear-sighted Minerva chosen to 'Min'imise herself? The vignettes centered on LT Logan and First Sergeant St. John are both compelling and brief, inviting follow-on novels.

I hope Nancy takes them up on their offers of further stories to be told. Having hosted these complicated women with compelling narratives in my reading room, I find myself hoping to be invited inside their lives and thoughts again.

New Poetry by Shawn McCann: "All I Can Do Is Watch" and "No Way To Fight Back"

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New Poetry by Kathleen Hellen: “People Boats” and “Pretending There Is A Garden In The Spring, Paradise In Time”

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