New Review by Michael Gruber: “The Myth of the Clean Air War”

AIRPOWER IN LITERATURE

Interrogating the Clean War, 1915–2015

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A review of Kimberly K. Dougherty's *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*

One of war's most pernicious myths is that new technology will not only hasten its outcome but lessen its brutality. Paul Fussell describes this delusion in the first pages of his text *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, where he recounts American propaganda images from the 1940s showing "the newly invented jeep, an elegant, slim-barreled 37mm gun in tow, leaping over a hillock." Such "agility and delicacy," Fussell contends, conveyed the impression that "quickness, dexterity, and style, a certain skill in feinting and dodging, would suffice to defeat pure force" (1). Subsequently, as World War II began, "everyone hoped, and many believed, that the war would be fast-moving, mechanized, remote-controlled, and perhaps even rather easy" (1). The muck, grime, and hellish attrition of Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, the Hurtgen Forest, and Anzio testify to the contrary.

This myth is not merely restricted to land. Although the airplane has been deployed since the Great War, the enduring fable is that technology has advanced to such a degree that new airframes, because of their sophistication and speed and precision, will end wars quickly, cleanly, and with minimal loss. Such conceits show surprising longevity, being as old as the military use of the airplane itself, and have massive implications for aircrews, the bombed, and especially our beliefs about how modern wars are fought. In her text *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*, Kimberly K. Dougherty takes these beliefs to task. Her central aim is to contrast these beliefs with various portrayals of the so-called "clean air war" in war literature. In doing so, she puts forward a compelling argument that airpower is an enterprise that is not only slow, messy, and deadly, but has even greater unseen costs, and is spoken about in such ways that the true price of its deployment remains always cloaked

in euphemism.

Ironically, Dougherty's "interrogation" is effective for its precision. She makes many keen observations about these unseen costs, noting that during war, for example, the bodies of air crews are often "hidden" from view by virtue of their manner of death, being incinerated or blown out of the sky, rendering their remains unrecoverable. Sometimes, these same air crews are presented as "becoming one" with their aircraft, such that what flies are not aviators but a kind of Frankenstein's monster that is half man, half machine. Another insight is that in the numerical tally of an air war's casualties, it is the number of aircraft shot down that seem to be given primacy over human casualties. She notes the long history of airpower's description by military planners and strategists as being "above" the earth, in the domain of the sky, giving it a kind of omnipresence, and where it also gains omniscience, as aircraft can purportedly observe battlefields in ways unavailable to the mere mortals constrained to the ground. All these mythologies, says Dougherty, conspire together to present aerial warfare as "clean," powerful, godlike, and unencumbered by the grotesque violence and terrain of traditional warfare.

Dougherty also makes much of "discursive distancing," which originally refers to a kind of Foucauldian rhetorical analysis that assesses how subjects are allegedly dissociated from hegemonic social systems through discourse, despite ostensibly being benefactors of those same systems. Basically, her point is that the discourse surrounding the use of airpower contributes to its reckless mismanagement. Key to her exploration are two texts, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, which both provide "stunning portraits" of helicopters, "the machine perhaps most associated with the Vietnam War" (145). She notes that the helicopter enjoyed special intimacy with the troops they ferried, being close to the ground and slow, and as such "this

intimacy, perhaps, makes it all the more important to separate human from machine, as the borderlines becoming increasingly blurred" (145), and as such they merit a special kind of profile about how the rhetoric of airpower contributes to its inevitable misuse.

But it is Douhgerty's concern over this melding together of man and machine that is, in my opinion, the apex of the book, as it leads her to surmise that the rhetoric surrounding the deployment of airpower lends itself to certain beliefs about technology and its use in war. As Dougherty so capably demonstrates, the infatuation with "clean" airpower is naturally sourced in its innovativeness. The trajectory of this infatuation is an alleged "technological war prosecuted solely by machines, with no threat to one's own population" (145), where the human cost of war will have been supposedly entirely eliminated. This reflection becomes especially prescient when one considers the ongoing war in Ukraine, or the 2021 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the use of lethal drones have been notably effective. Additionally, so-called "drone swarms," theoretically composed of thousands of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, so designed to overwhelm enemy air defenses, have gained currency in the thought of future military planners, both in the West and with our foreign adversaries. While it is not hard to see how Dougherty's bone-chilling vision will manifest, given recent evidence, it is also not hard to see how her description of "clean" airpower's trajectory—that is, its culmination into a supposedly bloodless "technological war," fought primarily with machines—will be anything but another fable in the sprawling compendium of historical fables that have always surrounded how "the next war" will be fought. Propaganda will continue to assert the next war's supposed "cleanliness," highlighting how new technological innovations eliminate the need for the pointless suffering of those archaic and barbaric wars of decades past, only for the "on-the-ground" reality to offer different evidence—that is, the evidence of tens of

thousands of mangled corpses of 18, 19, and 20 year-old kids.

All being said, a natural rejoinder to this—which I admittedly found myself asking as I read this text—is "so what?" Is Dougherty's counterargument really that we should not substitute machine for man, given the capability? Or that Dresden or Tokyo should not have been bombed because the Allies unfairly privileged the lives of its own service members over unarmed civilians? Should a future defensive war fought by the United States not privilege its own service members over the unarmed civilians of belligerents, given such a tragic choice? It seems ludicrous to demand that wars only be fought by one side unilaterally leveraging itself into a potential disadvantage. The Second World War in particular was an existential struggle between mutually exclusive and competing visions for the world, the role of the state, societal organization, and how natural resources should be utilized to serve those ends. It's not hard to see how Dougherty's musings feel like a luxury good given this environment.

But I suspect such a rejoinder misses the point. Dougherty's point isn't to say such things are right or wrong merely—it's that wars are fought with elaborately constructed mythologies about the use of technology (such as airpower), and that military planners and service-members alike not only believe these mythologies, but sometimes even believe them despite knowing they are myths. The cost of believing in such myths is unimaginable brutality and the loss of life to millions of people, as various truths are obscured or unable to be recognized because of the political nature of the war. The geopolitical environment of the Second World War, for example, not only made realities like the humanity of the enemy impossible to recognize, but exaggerated their costs and contributed to immense suffering both among the bombed and the bombers. Such calamity is worth recognizing.

On the more pedantic side, I sometimes found Dougherty's

emphases and language distracting, if anything because she too strongly relies on the kind of intersectional analysis and related academic jargon that dominates contemporary humanities publications. In one section, she also provides a summary of the causes contributing to the Spanish Civil War that are laughably uncritical and overly generous to the Republicans and the Popular Front, which made me suspicious of her framing of other historical events. But these are rather nitpicky when her broader contributions are taken into consideration. Dougherty has ultimately produced a razor-sharp text that attacks the fictions we all too easily attach to the role of technology in warfare. In uncovering beliefs about airpower's "cleanliness," she has produced something worth celebrating.

New Nonfiction from MaxieJane Frazier: "A Military Liberal Education"

The scored green vinyl seat inside an Air Force Bluebird bus at the base of the "Bring Me Men" ramp at the U.S. Air Force Academy was slippery under my jeans. On this 1987 June afternoon, I was wearing my acid-washed Levis and the shortest haircut I'd ever had. The Naugahyde stink of the seats with the warm, nervous bodies made my already churning stomach a witch's brew. In some ways, these nerves felt like they were happening to someone else. I was a distant observer of a movie scene where military recruits were about to enter basic training. I felt my damp hands opening and closing as if forcing my body to move would prove to me that I was still myself.

To my right, I saw the glass and metal dormitory windows of Vandenberg Hall blindly reflecting the sun. A line of tables with boxes set up on the open concrete pad beneath the windows stood between us and cadets fiddling with folders. They were wearing green fatigue pants and tight white t-shirts with dark blue cuffs, their last names and USAFA screened onto the left-hand side of their chests. The ones near the bus folded their arms and their tight faces under their molded blue berets showed nothing. Not one person on the bus with me said a word under the idling rumble of the diesel engine.

The whoosh of opening doors made me whip my head forward. A muscular demon of spit and sound boarded the bus yelling "Basics, I am Cadet First Class …." but I wasn't hearing the details, only coming back into my body and noticing that every muscle there was vibrating. *It's starting*. A smile played around my quivering lips: nerves coming to the surface, that ingrained response to please that would become the bane of my existence. He growled "…if you have any doubts about this, *whatsoever,* do NOT get off this bus." When I stood, gripping my small bag with my pre-purchased and broken-in combat boots and my underclothes, a guy a few rows back from me stayed seated.

Under screams of "Go! Go! Go" we hustled off the bus and over

to the tables where other cadets handed us cards on strings to wear around our necks. With a checklist to complete, we snaked off in a single-file line through medical stations, unwittingly signing up for a life-time membership with the Association of Graduates, taking armloads of issued uniforms. We all received haircuts even if our hair was already cut; men were shaved bald and women had to have hair above their collars and less than one-inch thick. I misread that fact as less than an inch *long*, arriving with woefully short hair they still cut. We looped up and down hallways and through rooms that would become familiar in the coming years but were a blur without meaning on this first day.

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Thirteen years after I trailed in my brother's footsteps through a yellow jacket's nest outside our Oregon childhood home, I followed in his same footsteps to the U.S. Air Force Academy. The movie *Top Gun* was one year old by the time I stepped off the Bluebird bus, but my brother and his freshmen-year roommate visited our home the previous summer just as the movie came out, radiating that same cocky confidence that made the characters in that movie so enviable. I wanted that power, too, so I pursued their confidence all the way to the Air Force Academy. I didn't notice that Kelly McGillis's Charlie in *Top Gun*, was a civilian. That she never flew a plane or wore a uniform or served much purpose beyond being arm candy for Maverick. I just continued to believe that I could do anything my brother could do.

My beginning on this journey into the military was as an annoying little sister. I tried almost everything he did. And if trying the same stunts hurt me, I had to make sure he didn't see me cry. In fact, I just *didn't* cry by the time I was a teenager. I was his groupie, his cult follower, his worshiper. I learned that hiding my weakness was a badge of honor. That skill, at least, was great preparation for the Air Force Academy.

On the day I arrived at that steel and glass fortress for Basic Cadet Training, BCT or Beast, my brother was nowhere around. The large painted footsteps that taught basic cadets to stand in formation might as well have been made in his image. Somehow, I knew that this military college was small and that any failure on my part would be passed on to him. I'm sure I was feeling all of the emotions people around me were feeling: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, probably not in that order. I pushed them down so hard that I can't remember them.

Faking my way through the physical demands of Beast wasn't an option. My bravado was an act, and I wasn't sure about my ability to follow through in reality. Up to this point in my life, I set goals and I achieved them. Straight A's in high school? Bam. A four-year scholarship to Washington State University? Done. And that high school senior spring break, after visiting Cameron at his college, I decided I would apply there as well. Too late to be accepted to the Air Force Academy immediately after high school graduation, I took the scholarship to Washington State University for a year. When I applied to the Academy, I think I was expecting someone to finally tell me no. But they said yes.

Who leaves a nearly free ride at a state party school for a strict military college with payment in kind for military service when I finished? Apparently this girl.

The Bluebird bus was hours ago, now. At some point, after we dumped our pile of issued uniforms into our basic squadron dorm rooms and came out dressed in polyester tight shorts and white t-shirts with our last names scrawled in felt pen over the USAFA, I stood at attention studying *CONTRAILS*, the small book of knowledge we had to carry and memorize. An upperclass cadet woman leaned in and asked, "Do you have a brother?"

A smile ghosted my features as I said, "Yes, ma'am," one of seven basic responses I was allowed to give.

“Wipe that smile off your face, Basic,” she hissed. “What do you think this is, a tea party?”

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The next morning, the first real morning of Beast, bleary from a lack of sleep, I stumbled out into the brisk Colorado dawn making rows and columns with my peers, my arms locked at my sides, my feet in military-issue running shoes, splayed out duck fashion in my attempt to be at the position of attention. My hair was so short, the chilly, soft breeze didn’t lift it. Cadets only two years ahead of us, but every bit adults in our eyes, were yelling instructions. As a group, we learned the basics of marching the afternoon we arrived. I was a member of the award-winning Montesano High School marching band. I wasn’t worried about that part.

But almost everything else worried me. My alternately grinning and serious face gave no clear clues to my interior turmoil while my head spun with self-doubt. Could I make it through the physical training? Cameron joined me on a joint run and doing some push ups only a few days before I boarded a flight away from home for this challenge.

“You’re not going to make it,” he said with frank eye contact and raised eyebrows.

Now as I faced the test of the first morning, I could feel the pre-breakfast acid trickling through my stomach. Punch drunk on minimal sleep, terrified someone would see I didn’t belong, I clenched my hands to avoid shaking in the fresh, scentless air.

Even though we kept our eyes “caged” without looking around us, marching band taught me to sense my neighbor’s state of mind by the smallest of body movements. Every last one of us, even the cadet cadre training us, was exhausted by the “oh-dark-thirty” fire alarm that sent us all stumbling out of the dorms and waiting across the street.

Hunched against the night air, the gaggle of brand new recruits looked like hundreds of mental patients in our pale blue Air Force-issued pajamas, velvety dark blue robes, and slippers. Upperclass cadre wore civilian pajamas and did their best to herd us into accountability. I, for one, wondered if the sense-splitting shriek of the fire alarms was the usual wake up call. They took away our watches and, for all we knew, it was time to get up. I knew so little about this training, and what I did know had an air of the ridiculous. We never found out if that first night's alarm was a prank or a real alert, but we never woke up in Beast that way again. After what felt like an hour, we returned to our rooms to sleep until reveille. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who waited in bed, plank stiff and staring at the ceiling, ready for the real wake up that would kick off the six grueling weeks of training.

There were about 120 of us in my Basic Cadet Training Squadron, almost 1400 new freshmen in total spread evenly over ten squadrons. The Basic squadrons were named by letters and each combined four groups of freshmen divided into flights. I didn't realize, at first, that the people in my flight would be in my numbered squadron in the school year.

For morning runs, they sized us shortest to tallest to make sure the people with the shortest legs, mostly women, were setting the pace. I was surrounded by other C Squadron "Cobras" of the third Basic Cadet Squadron when we received the order to "forward march." As we stepped off into the chill air, I wondered for the first time why that order, when the commander shouted it, sounded like, "Forward, HARCH!" In another few steps we heard the call, "Forward at the double time…..HARCH!" In that pause before and during the final sharp directive we growled like animals showing our enthusiasm for the physical effort awaiting us.

We scuffed off across the pebbled-concrete Terrazzo, a square which connected the buildings of the campus. If I could have

been a falcon, the school mascot, that morning, flying at 10,000 feet, I would have seen the 10 basic cadet squadrons filling one side of the concrete, jogging beside Vandenberg Hall toward a massive ramp burnished with the metal words “Bring me Men” on the back side, just where we were dropped off by Bluebird buses the day before.

So far, our movement was flat or downhill. I could make it.

I learned that the Academy clusters in the foothills of the Rampart Range at an altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level… “far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis” we learned to say. Signs in the sports complex warned rival teams “The Air is Rare.” Viewed from the air, USAFA is unique with its sharp angles, shining metal, and glittering glass. The architect intended a wholly modern space to represent this new military branch.

The massive rectangular space was lined with Terrazzo-pebbled concrete and marble strips with a grass square east of the chapel and between the dorms. From a falcon’s height, the old fighter planes punctuating each corner of the grass became tiny models and the corner closest to the dining hall was a hill with the patently unbelievable myth that it covered the bones of the earliest cadets. Between that hill and Fairchild Hall, was the Air Gardens, with hatched terrazzo-style paths slicing the grass. Perfect, architect-model Honey Locust trees representing each graduate who died in the Vietnam War led our eyes to the Eagle and Fledglings statue facing the dining facility, Mitchell Hall, instructing on its brown marble front: “Man’s flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.”

When I felt the slope of the ramp dropping away under my feet that were slapping in time to our cadre’s rhythmic call “Left, left, left-right-left,” I heard a tall blond leader wail out the notes in cadence “C-130 rollin’ down the strip,” and I became part of a machine answering this call and response:

“C-130 rollin’ down the strip!” My breath was taken away in the enthusiasm of the music of this military jody—the song forming some military complaint that was to take our minds off the running and keep us breathing. As I began gasping in the effort to sing and jog, even downhill, I was swept up in the camaraderie and sheer military-ness of the moment. I was doing it.

“Airborne Daddy gonna take a little trip.”

“AIRBORNE DADDY GONNA TAKE A LITTLE TRIP!” our hundred-plus voices already knew that we needed to drown out the other 9 squadrons singing different jodys around us.

Later our required, rote freshman knowledge informed us that each of the USAFA building names belonged to a man famous in making the Air Force a distinct branch of the military or for his honorable and heroic service. In fact, my basic cadet summer marked the first year a woman showed up in our required memorization, even if there were still no massive structures honoring women’s achievement. This 1987 summer, only seven years after the first women graduated, we were supposed to memorize a quote by Amelia Earhart from our small *Contrails* book of information Air Force doolies carried on our person at all times. We memorized the book from cover to cover by the time the year was over. Back then, I didn’t bother to learn what Earhart said, already trying to inhabit these guys’ values: to devalue women who I was already seeing as “other.” I wouldn’t find any value in the wisdom that pioneering woman was meant to impart to us. What could a woman teach me?

During that freshman year when a faceless upperclassman yelled, “Give me Earhart’s quote,” we recited in a high-pitched wail, “Sir, Amelia Earhart’s quote is as follows: *I was lost when I wrote this*.” We were ridiculing a ground-breaking aviator’s disappearance. I recently rediscovered the intended words, and learned that Earhart, who was also a poet, wrote: “Courage is the price that life exacts for granting

peace.” Perhaps the eloquent, thoughtful words were too sophisticated for the juveniles meant to know them. If only I had memorized her words, held onto them as a form of rebellion instead of conforming to the older cadets’ blind misogyny. I wish I had known who I would become instead of trying to be like everyone else, mostly men.

We trotted down the Bring Me Men ramp and then across the short leg of the road north of Fairchild Hall. Straight and farther down another ramp, we leveled out on the Cadet Parade Field, soon to be named Stillman Field for the male first Commandant of Cadets. In the third of 10 squadrons, I ran in the squishy tracks of the columns in front of me, and they reeked like an overflowing toilet underfoot. Across from the bleachers, we formed up into position so that all 10 squadrons faced the empty seats. The leaders gave us an order that spaced us out for calisthenics, and we went through the paces of jumping jacks and stretches before finding ourselves prone in the mud doing leg lifts and pushups. So far, so good. I could do all the physical work. I felt my confidence boosted. Later, we learned that the stench was from the non-potable water used to water the grass, cold and leaching through our clothes. The stains never came out of our white t-shirts.

When we finished a series of body-weight exercises, we formed up for the run back up to the Terrazzo. We circled the parade field once and headed up the ramps.

That first morning, I kept right in step, laboring under the absence of oxygen at this altitude but relieved to discover I was up to the task. On other mornings, those short people up front proved that having shorter legs didn’t mean they weren’t fast. Sometimes sprinkler saturated ground meant the mud sucked at our shoes and hindered our strides. Probably about the second week of training, our leader growled and turned us away from the ramp after the first lap. Soon I didn’t always keep up with the formation. I also didn’t always drop out, but some mornings I just couldn’t get enough air.

Others dropped out of some runs, too, but I had no energy to notice their struggles. My ability to finish with the group, or not finish with them, still seems random to me. Some mornings I could keep up with the formation. Other times I was left gasping with my hands on my knees. Any time I dropped out of a run because I couldn’t breathe, I found that, once I caught my breath, I could run at the same pace as the squadron behind them. I could keep running at the squadron’s pace until we arrived back at the dorms at the top of the hills. This last trick infuriated the unfortunate cadre member staying back with me who hissed, “If you can run this fast now, Torrens, why can’t you make it with your classmates?”

“Sir, I do not know.” One of the seven basic responses I was allowed to give. And I was telling the truth.

New Memoir: Solitaire by Lauren Hough (Part II)

Part II of II

I should’ve been more concerned when someone fingered the words “Die Dike” into the dust on my rental car. I should’ve told someone.

I was a twenty-three year old Combat Rescue Controller in the Air Force. Sounds like a cool job. Makes you picture me jumping out of a helicopter, returning enemy fire, and saving a pilot. What I really did was read, play a lot of solitaire, and once a week, sit in the corner of the briefing room, clicking “next” on Power Point slides.

When I found that first threatening message, my unit was on an exercise in Egypt, a welcome trip away for our middle-of-nowhere base in South Carolina. An exercise is when you go somewhere else to play solitaire on your computer because

you’re not allowed to read at your desk—reading would look unprofessional. You spend your off hours pranking each other—gluing sleeping bags shut, dropping raw eggs into someone’s boots, duct taping people to cots with cardboard “free blow job” signs.

That first note, I wanted to believe someone just had a bad sense of humor. I rubbed the dust off the car, hoping no one had seen it. And I forgot about it because something else happened while I was in Egypt. I got orders to Araxos Air Base in Greece.

All I had to do was keep my mouth shut about the stupid prank that read like a threat. In two months, I’d leave my miserable base in South Carolina. I’d move to Greece. I’d swim in the sea. I’d drink ouzo. I’d play more solitaire. I’d be more careful about who I told I was gay. I’d become someone else—something I’d been doing as long as I can remember. New country. New town. New story.

After two years at Shaw Air Force Base, I’d been to plenty of exercises. But I’d never been to Egypt. I was thrilled to go. I saw the pyramids and the sphinx, all the images I’d studied in my picture Bible when I was a kid. Knowing I was headed to Greece next, that annoying threat was just that—annoying.

I returned to Shaw and hoped, nearly believed, I’d left that problem in Egypt. Maybe that problem hadn’t come from my base. Maybe one of the Marines from Camp Lejeune or a soldier from Fort Bragg who’d come to the exercise had left the threat on my car. Then I woke up one morning to four flat tires. This was not the kind of “prank” we played on each other – it looked like I wouldn’t be able to just forget about that first threat. I should’ve called the cops then. Should’ve saved the next note, the one on paper, stuck under my windshield wiper, the one that said I’d burn, or the one after that that said we’re going to kill you.

When my car burst into flames one night in early December, I knew things looked bad, but I still held onto some slight hope—I had my escape plan. I had received orders to move to Greece in January. They were signed. I'd been issued plane tickets. I just had to wait it out.

The night of the fire, I'd agreed to babysit for Sergeant Little because it meant spending a couple nights with HBO and without roommates arguing about who emptied the dishwasher last or what movie to watch. I liked Sergeant Little. He only hit on me once and only sulked about my rejection when he was drinking. I'd been in the Air Force long enough to know that's about as much as you can hope for in a military guy. I found they took rejection easier if I told them I was gay. Of course, they'd tell others. After two years at Shaw, most of my small unit knew about me. But other than some unfunny jokes, it hadn't been a problem. Anyway, I liked Little well enough, his kid wasn't too much of a pain, but mostly I liked his two german shepherds.

That night, I'd sent the kid to bed, popped EDtv into the VCR—because I was lesbian and required to watch every Ellen movie—and I settled in on the couch in the family room at the back of the house. Then I heard the windows rattle in their frames. Sergeant Little's dogs went nuts. I ran to the front window and saw my brand new car, my shiny black Acura Integra engulfed in flames.

The kid wandered into the hallway, half asleep in her pajamas. I told her to go out back. I didn't know if the house was on fire, but if it wasn't, it would be soon—I hadn't parked but two feet from the garage. I was trying to get a hold of the dogs when I saw the Little's idiot kid open the front door. I think she was twelve at the time. When I was twelve I was taking care of twelve younger kids. She couldn't figure out not to run towards the fire. Anyway, I got her turned around. I threw the dogs out back with her and ran back in for the phone, and a blanket so she wouldn't freeze. I called 911 and

watched a fireball shoot into the air high enough I could see it from the back of the house.

The firemen doused the flames, and called the sheriff. They told me the house was safe. I sent the kid to bed. I called Sergeant Little, and he said not to let anyone in the house. Little liked his guns and maybe they weren't all legal.

Sheriff Horton moseyed up to the front porch where I sat on the steps drying my hair with a towel. Didn't take much to dry it. I'd chopped off most of my hair that summer when the swamp that is South Carolina hit a hundred degrees with a hundred percent humidity and walking outside was like opening a dishwasher mid-cycle and climbing in.

He took his hat off, beat it against his thigh to shake off the water. I stood and realized he was shorter than me. I stepped back. I'm six feet tall, and guys don't like feeling short. I offered him my hand which he crushed in his own meaty palm. .

"Looks like arson," he said and stared at me like I was supposed to respond with something more than no shit.

So I said, "Yeah I can smell the gas." I mimicked his accent. Sometimes the mimicry's unintentional. The way someone talks is the fastest way to tell someone isn't like you. Come back from years overseas to West Texas, you learn the accent fast. If you sound different, people start asking you questions you don't want to answer, like "where are you from?" After a while, you mimic without even thinking about it. It's safer when people don't think you're different. And an accent is easy to change if you learned to change it when you were young.

I lit a Marlboro, something to do with my hands because I knew better than to put them in my pockets. Southern rules often follow military rules. You don't talk to an authority figure with your hands in your pockets.

I offered him a cigarette. He asked if I thought that was a good idea, nodded over to where my car sat, still steaming. The firemen were packing up their hoses, shouting and joking on the lawn. I said I doubted there was much risk of combusting. He asked if maybe we should go inside. I raised the cigarette like that was the reason we would not be going inside. He raised his eyebrows like that wasn't a good reason. I told him it wasn't my house. I couldn't give permission, because I thought that seemed reasonable. I don't know what he expected to find. A lighter?

He asked me if I knew who'd done it. I said it was probably the same person who'd been leaving me death threats. He pulled out his notepad and asked for names. I told him I didn't have any. He asked with a smirk on his face why someone would threaten me, but he already knew the answer.

I'm not always this cool and collected, not even usually. This is what happens when faced with an authority figure. I can't meet their eyes. But I wouldn't show fear, either. I know better. I'd been through this before. Not with the cops, but when I was growing up, interrogation was one of the adults' favorite pastimes. I knew the drill: Stay calm. See the question behind the question. Stick as close to the truth as possible. Don't give too much away or they'll think you're hiding something—liars always explain too much.

I took a drag off my cigarette to buy enough time to think of an answer. I told him someone thought I was gay. I didn't say I was gay. I wasn't all that clear on the rules but "I'm gay" was a pretty clear violation of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

He asked me if I was gay.

I said, "Hey, don't ask, don't tell, right?" The decade's favorite punchline.

Sheriff Horton didn't laugh. He said he didn't have a problem with gay people. He liked Ellen.

I told him, “I can’t answer that. You know I can’t answer that.” He asked me if anything was wrong with the car.

“Other than it’s smoldering in the driveway? No.” And I remembered what my brother, Mikey said when I last saw him at our grandfather’s funeral that August. I hadn’t owned the car a month. I’d been circling the restaurant parking lot where Mom and her sisters said to meet for dinner, searching for a spot my doors might be safe from other car doors. “Seriously,” he said. “I’m gonna get out and kick one of your doors in and you’ll thank me ‘cause you won’t have to worry about it anymore.”

I said, “The fuck you will.”

I think the sheriff caught my smile. One silver lining of being a cult baby is that you learn, if not to expect the worst, to not be surprised by the worst. I’ll cry in frustration when my internet’s out. But when someone torches my car, well, that seems about right.

Sheriff Horton took down some information on his notepad with a pen he held with four fingers: name, insurance company, number, address. There wasn’t much more to tell him. He tried to be my buddy then, like we’d go out for beers after. Asked me where I was from. That question. I never know how to answer. I’d been telling people I was from Boston. I said Texas because guys like Sheriff Horton aren’t too fond of yankees.

He asked how I liked South Carolina, the Air Force. I said it was alright. But I was going to Greece in January.

He said, “We’ll see about that.” And he snapped his notebook shut.

The firemen left. Another squad car pulled into the driveway. Sheriff Horton walked over to the car, met the new deputy. Gave orders. The new deputy, a skinny kid who looked like he’d

slept in his uniform, took some pictures, collected evidence in plastic bags.

I asked Sheriff Horton if I could get my things out of the trunk, see if anything survived—the chem warfare suit I'd been issued for Egypt that I still hadn't returned, souvenirs I'd bought in Egypt, a chess set for my dad, a painting on papyrus for my mom, a hookah for my brother, little trinkets for my sister's kids. He said I'd have to wait until they were done processing the car. Everything was evidence now. I watched from the porch but no one was talking to me. I told them to knock if they had any more questions. I went back inside. I gave the dogs a couple biscuits, sat on the couch, and waited for morning.

My buddy Sheriff Horton called my office a few days later. He said someone had seen a white car speeding away from the house. Asked if I knew who drove a white car. I couldn't think of anyone. Then he asked me take a polygraph. I'd watched enough television and read a few legal thrillers. I knew I was a suspect, so I called the base legal office. The base lawyer told me I shouldn't be too worried. I should stop talking to the cops. Tell them to talk to her. Don't talk to anyone. Call her back if anything changed.

I waited while the Air Force took over the investigation. I waited as the investigators asked every airman on base if they knew Senior Airman Hough was being harassed, if they knew Senior Airman Hough was gay. She's gay. I waited while investigators showed up at my grandma's door in Texas. But they didn't know she'd been an Air Force wife. They didn't even finish introducing themselves before she slammed the door in their faces and called me.

The investigation took another bad turn when they talked to my roommate. He said I was a liar. Sometimes when we watched a movie set in a place I'd been, I'd say, "Hey I've been there." I grew up all over the place—Japan, Switzerland, Argentina,

Chile, Texas. Sometimes I forget that some people never stray too far from home. Most people know where that is. But I didn’t understand why he thought I was a liar just because I said I’d been there, unless I’d slipped. Maybe I’d forgotten my backstory. Maybe I’d switched stories, told him I’d grown up everywhere, told someone within earshot I’d grown up in Texas. Maybe I shouldn’t have been drinking around people.

The truth is, I am a liar. If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. But those lies, people believe. I’m better at lying than I am at the truth because the lies don’t make me nervous. It’s the truth, the thought of telling it that triggers my nervous laugh and my sweating palms, makes me not want to look you in the eye. I know I won’t like what I’ll see.

I moved back into the dorms on base that I’d been so eager to leave a year earlier. Senior Airmen were allowed to move off-base where most of us shared the rent on run-down trailers to save money. Off-base, there were no dorm inspections, no First Sergeants trolling the common areas for rule-breakers. I liked thinking I had some privacy, but I’d been wrong. I’d let my guard down, trusted the wrong people with little bits of information like, I’ve been there. So now, at least on base, I wouldn’t have roommates.

2000

It hadn’t been a year since Barry Winchell, an Army private, had been beaten to death with a baseball bat in a barracks hallway at an Army post in Kentucky because he was gay. I was scared before. But the worst I feared was getting kicked out of the Air Force. Even the act of torching my car seemed like a far leap from murder, a beat-down seemed more likely. That is, until June, when I got the next note: “Gun knife or bat I

can’t decide which one.” And of course, I thought of Winchell. And I was terrified.

The note clarified my priorities. I’d been happy over the past few months that it seemed whomever torched my car was finished with me. I thought they’d leave me alone now that I was being investigated, afraid to show themselves. Maybe they’d transferred to another base.

The investigation had stalled. My insurance company, frustrated with the lack of an outcome, sent their own investigator. He looked at the evidence the cops had, interviewed me and a few people on base, called Sheriff Horton some names, and cleared me of wrong-doing in two days. I figured the Air Force investigators had given up trying to pin the arson on me when I got new orders to Greece. Maybe they’d let me go this time, if only to wash their hands of the problem.

But now, with this new note, getting kicked out of the Air Force was no longer my biggest fear or the most likely outcome. I called the Air Force investigators. They asked me if I’d touched the note. They took me over to their office, led me down a hallway, into a room, told me to sit there in an office chair, and they sat across from me.

Campbell was built like a linebacker, all shoulders and forehead. He was wearing a navy suit in mid-July. I wondered how many times the FBI had turned down his application before he took this job, Air Force Office of Special Investigations, OSI. He’d be playing bad cop. Maldonado was pregnant and her legs didn’t reach the floor. Campbell waited while she tried to adjust the office chair—the paddle that lowered the seat wasn’t working. They switched chairs. This didn’t look much like an interrogation room. No mirror on the wall. No metal chairs. Just a government issue gray desk and three blue office chairs.

I stared at the gold cross that had slipped out of Maldonado's blouse during the fight with the chair. She'd be playing good cop but she'd push for execution if she could. She tucked the necklace back in, cleared her throat, opened a folder. I half expected her first words to be, "should we pray?" That's how this used to happen. But they just sat there looking at me like it was a game to see who'd speak first. I looked at my hands. I asked for a lawyer. Maldonado said I wasn't a suspect. I shouldn't need a lawyer. Not a very convincing good cop.

"When did you find the note? Who left the note? Is this the first time this has happened?"

"I want a lawyer. The base lawyer told me not to answer questions."

"You're not a suspect. This isn't about your car. This is about the threats. We're trying to help you."

And the tears filled my eyes and I wiped them with the back of my hand. I wasn't crying. My eyes were leaking. There is in fact a difference. The leaking happens when I'm frustrated.

Maldonado asked me, "Why are you so upset if you didn't do anything?"

I wanted to shout at them. I wanted to tell them I grew up in a cult. That they used to pull me out of bed late at night and make me confess to things I didn't understand. I told them I wanted a lawyer.

They gave up after a while. Wrote some notes down in the folder. Maldonado said she had to eat something. Campbell took me to another room where another agent, a lab rat with dandruff and a yellow collar, spread ink on my hands and arms and took impressions. He pulled hair from random spots on my head for a DNA test.

I knew then they weren’t looking for who sent me death threats. They didn’t believe me. Maybe they thought I didn’t want the investigation to stall, didn’t want to go to Greece. They were still convinced I’d torched my own car.

They wanted my DNA because a rag had been stuffed in the gas tank. The rag never ignited. Whoever did torch my car filled it with gas and lit it that way after trying to light a rag in the pouring rain. The cops had found a hair on the rag. Campbell had mentioned it earlier, hoping for a reaction.

And they let me go. I walked across the street, back to the legal office and sat down to wait for a lawyer because I wasn’t in a cult anymore, and a lawyer could make them stop asking me questions I couldn’t answer. The lawyer said to stop talking to the investigators. He couldn’t represent me because he’d just moved over from the prosecuting side and had worked on my case. If there was to be a court martial, they’d have to send a defense attorney from another base. I hadn’t considered there would be a court martial, at least not with me as the defendant. Up until that conversation, I assumed they’d either figure out who did it or drop the investigation, because I hadn’t done anything. But I had bigger worries than a court martial.

I’d always slept with a knife by my bed—too many nights when some drunk airman tried my doorknob. I replaced the knife with a little snub-nosed .38 I bought at one of the ten pawn shops between the base and Sumter, the nearest town.

I drove out of town and practiced a few shots on a row of beer bottles. The bottles remained intact. I’d barely qualified with a rifle back in basic training. I wouldn’t have qualified with a 9mm, if the good ol’ boy major beside me at the range hadn’t pitied my piss-poor shooting, said, Aw shit, and blown a few more holes in my target. His target had a single hole through dead center, where every one of his bullets had passed. And, if I had to shoot, I’d be shooting without my

glasses at night. I hoped I wouldn't need the gun. I'd end up killing my television or someone across the hall.

They told me I couldn't work in my office anymore. My security clearance was suspended because of the investigation. They moved me to the gym where I traded IDs for towels, where no one looked me in the eye.

I only had two friends before all this. We used to drive up to the gay club together in Columbia every weekend which was better than the bar in Florence by virtue of having more than ten customers. We'd try to forget we were in the military, try to forget we might be seen by some airman who liked the music and the drugs, who'd get popped on a piss test one day and sell us out to save his ass. Now they couldn't risk being seen around me. They'd be gay by association. I didn't blame them. Even as a kid, being my friend had been a risk.

So I spent my evenings in my dorm room reading through the slim pickings available at the base library. I was used to being lonely. But I'd see groups of friends in the dining hall, at the gym, at the weekend keg parties in the courtyard between dorm buildings, and mostly, I just wanted the distraction of hearing someone talk.

One morning in August, I was told to report to my commander's office. I called base legal. They said they'd assign me a lawyer now that I was going to be court martialed. Don't say a word. You'll have to sign the charge sheet. Call us back.

I stood at attention as my commander, Colonel Young read the charges: Arson with intent to defraud. And something about conduct unbecoming but I hear they always add that. If there's a crime becoming of a US Airman, I'm guessing they wouldn't charge anyone for it.

I signed the charge sheet, headed over to base legal, locked myself in the bathroom and cried. I was going to have to call my parents.

The legal office let me use a desk and a phone. I called my mom first because I didn't know how to reach my dad. When I'd told her about the car back when it happened, she said, "Oh Jesus, Lauren. This gay thing. I don't know about it. You're running with the wrong crowd."

I wasn't running with any crowd. I was sneaking off on occasion to a gay bar. Sometimes I'd go home with someone. Sometimes I'd go home with the same person more than once which is basically marriage if you're a lesbian. But I didn't know how to have a relationship or what that word even meant. And I barely had friends much less a crowd.

I was worried she'd tell me more about how this lesbian thing wasn't a good idea, "you can't have kids, it's just hedonism, Lauren." Hedonism would require some degree of happiness.

Mom hadn't had much time to get used to what she called this lesbian thing. When I told her a couple years ago, she'd said she hoped I'd change my mind. Since those first arguments, when it seemed like all she did was cry on the phone, and I'd cry after we hung up, we'd agreed to a sort of don't ask, don't tell policy of our own.

She said she'd pray for me. She said she'd come to the trial. She asked me if I needed money for a lawyer. I told her the Air Force was providing one.

"I'll be okay. I need a number for Dad." She said to ask Valerie, my sister. She might know.

Valerie was still at work when I called. So I tried to call my brother. We didn't talk much, not since I left home and joined the Air Force. He was in college, still living with our stepdad, Gabe, even after the divorce, after Mom had moved to Massachusetts.

I hadn't talked to Gabe in years. I called the house and Gabe answered. I didn't get the words out, can I talk to Mikey,

before he hung up. I wasn't sure until that moment that I would call my dad. But somewhere between the click of the line going dead, and my setting the phone back into its cradle, I knew I would call him. I walked back to my dorm room and waited for my sister to call. She gave me the number for a commune in Sweden where she thought Dad might be.

We were never sure where he was, because Dad was still in the Family. Cults like that word—family. I didn't know if he'd ever leave. He'd visited a couple times since we'd left the cult when I was fifteen. But the joy of each visit had dissolved into heated words and tears as he defended them. His eyes damp, he'd say, "Let's just agree to disagree." And I'd tell him, "They told you to say that." Because they had. I'd read the memo. But sometimes his love for me broke through the fog of a cult member's brain. When I'd told him I was gay, he didn't condemn me as I knew he was supposed to. Instead all he said was, "Oh, honey, that must be so hard on you." I hoped I could break through again.

I called the home. I never concerned myself with time zones. I didn't care about who I woke up. They'd never been all that concerned with respecting my sleep. The guy who answered the phone pretended he didn't speak English at first. Said he didn't understand. That line, "I don't understand," is the sum total of my Swedish. I said I'm was looking for my dad, tall guy, American. I think he's going by Stefan. Married to a woman who probably goes by Esther.

He said, "Oh he's not here?" Something close to an American accent. Hard consonants, gratingly positive inflection. "Listen. Can you call back in a few hours?"

I asked, "Is he not there right now, or he doesn't live there?" I had to be careful. If this guy hung up the phone, there would be no way to reach my dad.

He said, "Doesn't live here."

“Well, I can’t call back. I have to find him. It’s an emergency.”

He said, “Okay. Call back in a half hour? I need to ask someone. God bless you.”

I could hear a party gearing up in a room down the hall, loud voices, Limp Bizkit—Friday night in the dorms.

I called the number again. Three rings. Four. I was afraid he wouldn’t answer. I was afraid they’d pack up the home and leave because of a phone call. But on the seventh ring, he picked up. “Hello?” he said.

“Were you able to find anyone?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “I’m not sure, of course. This is the number of a home in Moscow, but you’ll have to look up the country code? He might be there. If not, ask for Swiss Aaron. He might know.”

Moscow. The OSI was going to open and entirely new investigation into my phone bill. But I couldn’t worry about that. Swiss Aaron passed me on to someone else who passed me on to someone else. Another home in another country. In all, I went through five numbers before I called a different home in Sweden, and Dad answered. Even in Swedish, I knew his voice. I said hi.

He said, “Shatzi!” He always calls me that, it’s something like a German version of “sweetie.” “Hey, kiddo. How are you?” I’d done the math by this point. It was five am and this was how excited my dad was to hear from me. I wanted to cry. I wanted to ask him if he’d been fishing lately, anything but what I had to tell him.

“I’m in trouble, Dad.”

“What? No. What’s the matter?” he said.

I told him everything—started with the death threats, moved on to the car, the investigation. “Anyway, there’s going to be a court martial,” I said. I knew he might be fuzzy on what that meant. “It’s like a trial, Dad. It is a trial. And if they say I’m guilty, I’m going to jail. The max is ten years.”

“But you didn’t do anything,” he said. “So there’s no need to worry?” At least he didn’t didn’t offer to pray with me.

I told him, “No. It looks really bad. I’m the only suspect because they never looked for who did it. And they’re saying I didn’t want to go to Greece.”

He interrupted me then, “Why wouldn’t you want to go to Greece? That’s so stupid.”

I said, “Fuck if I know, Dad. But they’re saying I couldn’t afford the car and didn’t want to go to Greece so I torched it. I don’t know. It looks bad.”

He asked for my number. He said he’d call me back. I figured he’d wake up the shepherds, whoever was in charge of the home. They’d pray about it and decide it wasn’t in the Lord’s will for my Dad to care about what happened to me—Story of my life. I wondered if he’d call me back at all.

My phone rang. “Hey, so when is this happening?” he asked. I gave him the dates. He said he was coming. I couldn’t believe it. My dad who hated that I’d even joined the military. Who I hadn’t seen but a couple times since my parents divorced when I was seven. Who stayed in the Family long after we’d left. My dad was coming to my trial. I’d fought against letting myself hope. He said he’d called his brother, a lawyer, who told him I needed a civilian lawyer. Said his mom had left him some money and he’d pay for a lawyer.

And so my Dad gave me a lawyer named Gary Myers who said I could pick an Air Force lawyer from a different base, and should. Gary would run the defense, but an Air Force lawyer

was free. I might as well have both. The Air Force gave me a captain from a base in Oklahoma. I named him The Apostle because he asked if I was a Christian. When I said I'm not anymore, he wanted to pray with me. I wanted him to defend me. But if he just wanted to pray, I had Gary Myers who was exactly as big a prick as you want defending you.

I'm serious. He yelled at me on the phone for talking to Sheriff Horton and the investigators on base. I said, "I didn't know any better. I talked to legal and didn't talk to him after that."

He said, "Well maybe you're not a complete fucking idiot. Alright. Keep your mouth shut."

My court martial was held in October of 2000. The trial lasted four days. Mom and Dad shared a rental car from the airport and stayed in the same hotel. They showed up every morning and sat outside the courtroom. They couldn't come in, in case they were called as witnesses. And I needed Mom as a witness.

The prosecution started. (All these words—prosecution, jury, trial—are called something different in the military. But we'll skip the lesson in military law.) They said I was a liar, bought a car I couldn't afford. I didn't tell anyone about the death threats.

Sergeant Little said, "Those dogs always bark at anything on the street, even if they're dead asleep." I thought we should all drive over to his house, play a game of touch football on his lawn to prove his dogs wouldn't bark unless someone rang the doorbell.

I wasn't surprised he'd turned on me. You may think you have friends who'll help you bury a body. But when the cops show up and flash their badges, your friends will point to bodies you've never seen to keep the cops from looking their way. There are only two sides, and when it comes down to it, even those with nothing to hide will side with those who have the

power.
They put my old roommate, Eric on the stand. He said, “She always locked her car.”

If I always locked my car, no one could have filled it full of gas without setting off the alarm. What he didn’t mention was that soon after I’d had the alarm installed, I’d regretted the money I’d wasted on it. The fighter jets set off every car alarm on base every time they buzzed over. We’d talked about it. He said I should have the alarm sensor recalibrated. Instead, I stopped locking my car, to keep it from going off.

He said, “Her CDs weren’t in the car when it burned.”

If my CDs weren’t in the car, obviously I’d removed them before lighting the car on fire. Or I’d brought them into the house to listen to something, or reorganize my CDs, a favorite hobby of anyone with two books full of CDs. Maybe by mood this time. I don’t actually remember and I didn’t then either. I just remember the exasperation I felt as he said it. “A few days later, I saw her CD case in the house.” And the prosecutor looked at the jury like he’d found the smoking match.

Eric said, “She didn’t want to go to Greece.”

As my dad said, that’s just stupid. I hoped my lawyers would have an argument because all I could think of was, that’s stupid.

He said, “She borrowed my gas can a few weeks before.”

Okay, that did look bad. Really bad. And my explanation after the fact wouldn’t help much. The last time I’d driven through Alabama, before borrowing the gas can, I’d been jumped coming out of a gas station bathroom because a high-schooler told her boyfriend and his buddies, “that’s the pervert was usin’ the ladies’.” I was only spared serious injury when a trucker named Jimmy T saw my uniform and stepped in about the time I

hit the ground. Jimmy T told me as he helped me back to my car that he didn't much care for my "lifestyle and such. But that uniform means somethin.'" And "you can't come back to Jesus if yer already dead." Guess he wasn't a "once saved, always saved" sort of Christian.

To avoid a repeat of the experience this Thanksgiving, I was planning to only stop at busy truck stops if I could. Just in case, I borrowed Eric's gas can. But on the way back I'd given it to someone who came up to me and said he was out of gas—I figured it'd do him more good than giving him money. And then they'd found the molten remains of a gas can in my car.

This was the prosecution's big moment. And they played it up, and Eric was happy to play along. He wanted to be a state trooper when he got out and moved home to Ohio. His brother was a trooper and told Eric his association with a known felon wouldn't look good on his application.

He said, "She joked about the whole thing. She didn't seem scared at all." We'll ignore that assessment of my fear level because he didn't know. I did joke about it. That's true. And that, my outward reaction to the entire affair didn't fit what everyone seemed to think should have been my reaction. Seemed like they'd have believed me if I'd cried in front of them. But they didn't grow up the Family. They didn't grow up in constant fear. They hadn't learned sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.

Sheriff Horton took the stand, after a small commotion caused when he walked into the courtroom wearing his gun, and the Air Force police had to take it from him. He corroborated Eric's opinion of my unlikely affect. He said I was too calm when I talked to him. Most people, he said, "They're crying or foaming a the mouth to kill the bastard who did it. She laughed about it." See what I mean?

Gary asked him if he'd tried to find the white car the

neighbor had seen speeding away, if he'd looked at anyone else.

Horton shifted in his seat and said, "Well, no. But she wouldn't take the polygraph." (If you're shouting "inadmissible," Gary said you're wrong. "Damage done," he said. "No reason to put a neon light around it.")

"It's all circumstantial," Gary said. "This is what happens. You'll even start to believe you're guilty. Just hang tough until it's our turn." He didn't seem the type to play cheerleader. Leading up to the trial, he'd been all business. How I was holding up wasn't any of his concern. Now he was trying to comfort me and that scared me. I knew I wasn't guilty. But guilt or innocence had never mattered all that much in my experience. And I was learning my experience in the Family wasn't as unique as I'd believed it to be when we left. I was sure I was going to prison.

In between testimony, Gary paced the hall and talked to himself. The Apostle prayed with Mom—turns out he was useful after all. Dad sat in a chair and looked dazed. I stood outside and smoked. And I thought about going to prison.

I knew I couldn't do it again. I'd been locked in rooms before. The last time, when I was fourteen, I broke down after only two days. The walls closed in and I couldn't breathe and the world got dark. It changes you each time. You go through the first few hours in silence. Then you start talking to yourself. You time your pulse. You pick at split ends, scabs, and ingrown hairs. You sleep. And when you wake up, the room is smaller. You have to get out. Your chest tightens. You need space. Just a little breeze. You have to see the sky. One star. You tell yourself it'll be okay, they'll let you out. But you don't believe your own words. The harder you try to control your breath, the worse it gets. You start to really panic then, and you've lost. Once the panic starts, it doesn't end. You can learn to ride the waves, but every single wave is

a fight for survival. And you don't come out stronger. You lose something each time. You lose faith in yourself. I wasn't doing it again.

The prosecution rested and my lawyer, Gary took over. My new sergeant, the guy who replaced Little, said, "Every airman on base is driving a car they can't afford. That's what idiot kids who've never had any money do."

A couple airmen from my squadron said, "Everyone knows she's gay and some people have a big problem with it." They'd seen the first message in Egypt, the one in the dust on my car. Shouldn't have been a surprise. The car had been parked right where everyone smoked outside the operations center. But I'd been too busy hoping no one had seen the writing to ask if anyone had.

My friend who'd given me a ride when my tires were slashed told them all about that morning. Another roommate said, "She never always locked anything. She's a slob. Sometimes her CDs are in the house because she never sleeps and she listens to music late at night. All she ever talked about was leaving this base. Do you know how much it sucks here?"

The lab guy said, "The DNA test on the hair they found on the rag was inconclusive."

Gary said, "The results I have here say it's not a match."

"Well, yeah," the guy said. "That's what I said."

Mom took the stand and told them how many countries I'd lived in and maybe I wasn't a liar when I said I've been there. She said, "When things go really wrong, Lauren gets quiet or tries to make it a joke. If she needed money, she would've asked me. She knows she can."

It was strange watching my mom on the witness stand. She didn't look at me. But she was defending me. And I wondered

then why she hadn’t before, when I was younger, when I needed her to protect me. I flashed through all the times I’d been in trouble, with Gabe, with the shepherds. And I couldn’t remember a single time she’d spoken up, told them to stop. But mostly, she wasn’t even there. And I wanted to know why. But I’d been asking for years. I was starting to wonder if she even knew.

I liked that Mom and Dad were going to dinner together every night during the trial. They weren’t fighting.

I’ve never seen Parent Trap but I think most kids nurse a fantasy their parents will get back together. I was no different. After Dad, Mom had married my stepdad and my stepdad was an asshole. My dad was nice. Seemed like Mom would realize that, as though maybe she hadn’t known, and they’d realize with all this time spent together they were still in love. And I was glad they’d have each other because I wasn’t going to prison.

The military makes you shop for prison, even before you get the verdict. You have to box up your belongings for storage. You’re given a list of what you’re required to take: five white t-shirts, five black t-shirts, one white towel, five pairs of socks, five white sports bras, one bar of soap, and so on. So after I packed up my room, I borrowed Dad’s rental car and drove to Walmart where I bought what I needed off the list. I stopped in sporting goods and looked at the knives. That wouldn’t work—too slow. The base hospital was a five minute walk from the courtroom.

I dropped the car at the base hotel, gave Dad the keys and a hug. He wanted me to stay there. Just have a beer at least, he said. “Your mom wants you to call her.” I didn’t stay for a beer and I didn’t call. I knew she’d convince me to sleep in her room.

Back in my dorm room, I wrote them each a note. I didn’t say

much. Just told them not to blame themselves. Told them I was sorry. I hid the note behind a painting I left on the wall because my brother painted that and I wanted to look at it some more. Everything else I owned was boxed and labeled for storage. I put on my blues, made sure my ribbon rack was straight, and shoved the gun under my service jacket, under my belt at the small of my back. I checked the mirror. You couldn't tell. I took it out again and sat down to wait for the morning.

I sat there on my bare mattress all night, and all night, I tried to talk myself out of it. It was only ten years. Maybe I wouldn't get the full ten. They'd offered me two but I would've had to say I did it. I couldn't do it in front of Mom, how do you make your mom watch you die? But what if they cuffed me right away? Dad would be there and maybe he or someone else would know and cover her eyes. I'd have to be fast. The sentence was only ten years, and I could take ten years. I'd be thirty-three when I got out. That wasn't so old. I stared at the painting and wanted to call my brother who I knew wouldn't try to talk me out of it. He'd know what to say without trying, and I wouldn't want to die more than I wanted to live in a cell.

When they said not guilty and Mom started crying, I cried too. And then I started laughing. I knew people were looking at me, the jurors were questioning their verdict. Who laughs? Who goes through a trial and then fucking laughs. Cult babies laugh. Of course, they didn't know that. But I laughed. Maybe it was just how the tension fell out of me, maybe because I'd get to live, because that one time, maybe the only time in my life, my parents stood up for me, and I won.

The finest restaurant in Sumter, the town near the base, was Outback Steakhouse. So that's where we went to celebrate. I sat across from my parents. We placed our drink orders and Dad looked around the room. He said, "You know, there are a lot of black people here. I'll bet we could find some good barbecue."

Mom, said, “Jesus. Ethan. You can’t say things like that. Lauren, do you have a cigarette?” I passed her one and held out the lighter. She looked around, “How long does it take to pour a glass of wine?”

Dad said, “Why can’t you say that?” He left the States when he was nineteen and hasn’t spent more than six months here since. “Do you both have to smoke?”

“Yes,” we answered in unison and Mom caught my eye and winked at me. The waiter came back for our orders Dad forgot what he’d wanted so Mom and I ordered while Dad searched the menu again. We finished and the waiter looked impatient so Mom ordered Dad a steak.

“Shit,” he said. And scooted out of the booth, nearly ran out of the restaurant.

I looked at Mom. “Probably left the lights on,” she said. “Sorry we were late. He left his wallet, went back in for his wallet, and then left his phone. Did you know he left Valerie behind in Berlin when we moved? I took the train the day before with you and Ann. You were only one, and I was still pregnant with Mikey.”

The wine arrived. Still no sign of Dad but Mom said, “We’ll just toast when he gets back.” We clinked glasses. “Anyway,” she said. “He was driving the car, it was a little Mini, no room for all of us and our stuff. He just had Valerie. And he left her at the flat. He didn’t realize it until he got to the checkpoint to leave West Berlin and saw he had both passports. Valerie was just sitting there at the door to the flat waiting for him for nearly an hour. She was only four.”

Dad scooted back into the booth. “What are you laughing about?” he asked.

I said, “Nothing, Dad. Taken care of?”

“What? Oh yes. So. We should toast, yes?” Sometimes he doesn’t sound American anymore. I watched them together. Dad changed subjects mid-sentence. Mom grew impatient and snapped at him. Dad tried to tell jokes to cut the tension but the jokes fell flat.

The fun thing about being a child of divorce is, you’re half of both parents. And both sides of you are tired of the other’s shit. And I watched them then and saw it. Dad needed an adult in his life to make sure he left the house wearing clothes. Mom wanted him to be an adult, back when she wanted anything from him at all.

I didn’t want to let go of the fantasy they’d get back together but at this point it would’ve been as silly as believing the Antichrist was on his way over to join us for dinner. The older you get, the easier it is to burn chapters in the book of fairytales in your head. I ordered another beer.

Once I let go, dropped the childish idea, it was easier then. I saw them then as separate people and I could laugh when Dad changed subjects mid-sentence. And I was glad I’d gotten my sense of humor from my mom because there are only so many variations of “A rabbi and a priest walk into a bar…” and none of them are funny. But I was glad my dad was that nice guy, who can’t remember his wallet but remembers every detail about you, every word you’ve ever said. And he helped my mom into her jacket, and turned up the radio in the car when Bruce Springsteen came on, because she loves Bruce.

The next week, I didn’t expect to go right back to my desk. I had “won,” but I knew I’d lost even the small place I’d carved out for myself at Shaw. They’d already replaced me since I was supposed to be in Greece. Besides, there was the issue of my security clearance. They gave me a new job that still wasn’t my old job, but at least I wasn’t handing out towels at the gym. My new job was supervising the new airmen, just out of

training, who'd been assigned to maintain the dorms—changing lightbulbs, cleaning day rooms, mowing lawns. At first it was fine. I drove around in a golf cart and made sure everything got done. But soon it became apparent how much damage the OSI had done with their little investigation—Do you know Hough's gay?

Everyone on base knew who I was, and what I was, and it didn't take long for word to spread to the baby airmen I was supervising. Mostly it was just jokes. Where've you guys been? You're two hours late. Hey, don't ask, don't tell, right? But a few of them stopped listening to me altogether. I'd assign them to clean a dayroom, they'd tell me I shouldn't be wearing a uniform much less stripes and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about it.

A month passed and orders came again, to Greece again. But I only got a day to celebrate before the orders were cancelled. The Greece assignment required something like an add-on security clearance called the Personnel Reliability Program. The PRP is supposed to ensure only qualified people have access to nuclear weapons. Mine was denied because I had a food allergy. I guess you never know when someone will bring guacamole into the office and bam, my avocado allergy sends me into a gauc-fueled rage and I hit the launch button. You just can't take that sort of risk. I knew then they were never going to welcome me back. My career was over. And that's when I heard from Mikey.

Because we couldn't talk on the phone much, this was long before everyone had a cell phone, we used to send books. I sent him "The Fountainhead" because I thought Rand had some great ideas. (I was nineteen.) He responded with "Of Human Bondage." I sent "Slaughterhouse Five." Mikey sent "Catch 22." I sent "Trainspotting." A few months later, he sent me "Fight Club." We'd underline passages we liked, sometimes write notes in the margins. And we'd been doing this ever since I left home. So when I opened my mailbox and saw his blocky

handwriting on a package, I didn't open it in the mailroom. I waited until the end of the day, and all day, tried to guess what he'd sent me. When I got back to my dorm room and tore open the brown paper, I sat down and laughed—Oscar Wilde. I flipped through the book and found the passage he'd circled.

Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

My little brother had been with me through it all. We grew up together in the Family, slept in the same bed for years, had the same stepdad who would never think we were good enough to love. Mikey had seen the worst in me and still loved me because it was never a question—He was my brother. And he knew what I wanted, maybe understood more than I did why I joined the Air Force. I thought I'd find something in the military. I'd wear the same uniform as everyone else. They'd have to accept me because I was one of them. I'd find what every book I read, every movie I watched told me I'd find, friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.

But all I'd done was join another cult. And they didn't want me any more than the last one had. And there was my brother, telling me what I knew but hadn't been able to admit. I'd never belong. But maybe that was okay. I stayed up all night reading. And I knew what I had to do. I wrote a letter.

A few days later, I walked into my commander, Colonel Young's, office. I handed him the letter I wrote. I didn't trust myself to speak. The letter said, "I'm gay. Please process my discharge." And on January 12th, 2001, I was given an

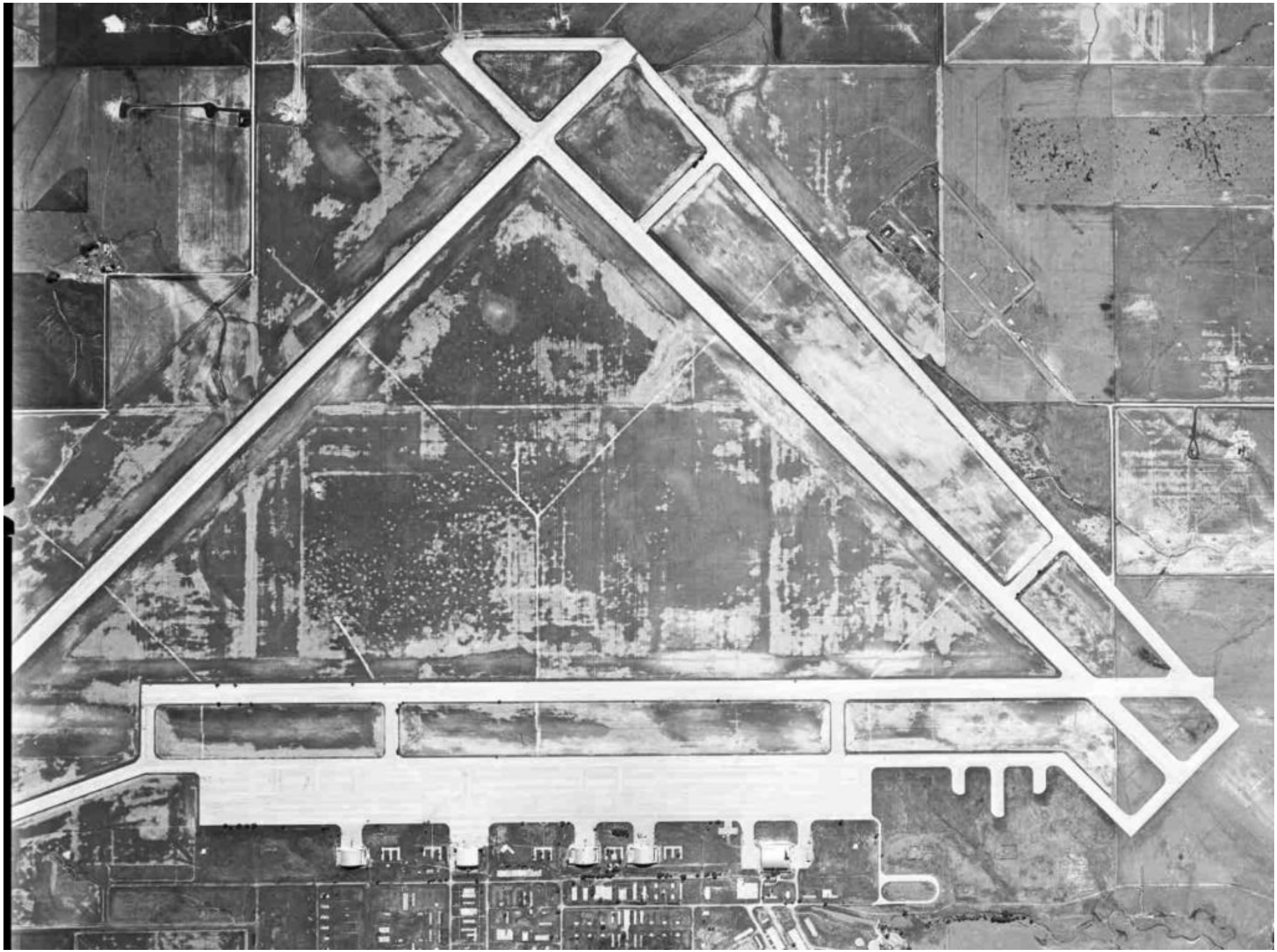
honorable discharge, and forty-eight hours to leave the base. My discharge papers say, “homosexual admission.” They don’t say the other part, that the Air Force was never going to let me leave Shaw Air Force Base, that they didn’t care who’d been threatening me, who’d torched my car, or what that person might do next. The paperwork doesn’t say that they would never accept me, that they gave me no choice.

I’d thought of exactly one way out of Amarillo, one thing I could do with my life. I didn’t have a backup plan. So I did what I’d been trained to do my entire childhood when we could fit everything we owned in a suitcase, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. I packed what I needed, and tossed what I could do without. A yard sale might’ve helped with the gas money. But they only gave me forty-eight hours. And no one had heard of craigslist in Sumter, in early 2001. I drove the little Ford Aspire my mom paid for with her credit card to Washington, DC, the farthest north I could reach on a couple tanks of gas.

I lived in my car a couple months. Some things are easier for cult babies who’ve practiced showering in a cup of water. I sold my car and rented a room not much bigger, and got a job as a bouncer at a gay bar. And I tried to come up with a new plan for my life.

Read Part I here.

New Memoir: Solitaire by Lauren Hough (Part I)



Part I of II

My first time at the closest gay bar to Shaw Air Force Base, the bouncer asked me if I had a membership. I wasn't expecting that question. But South Carolina blue laws only allowed private clubs to serve liquor on Sundays. So every bar in South Carolina called itself a private club. I was expecting to have to show my driver's license. It was my twenty-first birthday. And I didn't want anyone to notice, least of all this bouncer with bad skin and frosted tips that made him look like a youth minister.

I told him I was not a member. "Well, you gotta sign up here. Fill this out." The bouncer handed me a card. Name. Address. Driver's License number.

"I can't fill that out," I said. "I'm military. I can't be on a list at a gay bar." My paranoia wasn't unfounded. This was 1997 and Don't Ask, Don't Tell was the law. I'd heard rumors of witch hunts at other bases. Though so far, it seemed no one suspected me.

There's an oft-repeated maxim about women in the military—you're either a whore a dyke. You hear it first from your recruiter, as a warning. You hear it thereafter as an accusation, sometimes it's meant to be a joke. But even so, if there's a useful side-effect to homophobia, it's that most people who find gays abhorrent, find it rude to assume someone's gay, despite all obvious signs. Which is why any gay person could have told you Ricky Martin was as queer as eight guys fucking nine guys. And yet people were shocked. It's not gaydar. It's the ability to see reality without the constraints of judgment.

Still, I knew I had to be careful. All it took was one person, the wrong person, the wrong grudge, the wrong rumor, and my career was over. The criminal investigation arms of the military would find one gay whose roommate or ex turned him

in. They'd use that one person, his emails, phone calls, confession, to root out as many homosexuals as they could. For the most part, they'd just kick the gays out. But some went to prison for violating the UCMJ, the military code of law. I was determined to keep my secret.

My pen hovered above the line. I hated that I couldn't just write my name without thinking of all the ways this could hurt me. Fear is, above all else, exhausting. And the frustration of my indecision made me want to cry. The bouncer leaned toward me. "Honey, I don't care what you write on the card," he said. His voice sounded like he'd smoked a pack of road flares. "You put a name down there, and when you come in next time, that name will be on this list." He held up a clipboard with a list of names and coughed. "You point to what you wrote. And I put a little check mark by it. I don't give a shit if it's the name your mama gave you." He coughed again. Swallowed something large. "Look babe," he said and pointed to the list. "We got Mary Jane, Trent Reznor, Anita Dick, Cherilyn Sarkisian, Sam Iam, and that's just the obvious ones. You sure as shit ain't the first military we got."

I stood there trying to make up my mind. Trying not to ask if Cherilyn was Cher's real name, afraid he'd laugh at me. Part of me wanted to run back to my car, drive back to base, and forget about gay bars. I'd sat in my car listening to the radio for a good ten minutes just trying to build up the courage to walk in the door. I'd been waiting three months, for my birthday, just to come here.

But even if I gave up now and turned around, it's not like I felt any more at ease on base. On base, at Shaw, I worked in an office building, the headquarters of CENTAF, the part of the Air Force that worries about the Mideast. To say I worked is a lie. I showed up every morning at eight, jiggled the mouse to wake my computer, and read news for an hour or so.

Sometime around ten, Major Coffindaffer would hand me the

half-filled-in crossword from the USA Today he bought on the way to work. He'd switch his radio from the John Boy and Billy show to the right wing AM channel.

The guys in my office loved John Boy and Billy. There was this clip they'd play for anyone who hadn't heard it. My supervisor, a big cornfed looking guy called Sergeant Ewing, played the clip for me my first day—some guy from the radio show, their serious news guy, reading what was supposedly a news story about queers and a gerbil. I got grossed out and laughed, asked which desk was mine. But Ewing blocked my path and said, "no, wait this is the best part." I'll spare you the "best part" (there was a fireball). The guys were all looking at me, waiting for a reaction. I smiled and tried to force a laugh. I wasn't angry. I was just sad. It's easy to hate what you don't understand. But I'd never be able to explain how stupid it was to believe gay men played with gerbils, without the inevitable follow-up, "How do you know?" They're like kids, really, guys in the military. They never get tired of gross-out jokes, trying to make the girl gag, and suspecting anyone who doesn't get the joke of being different.

All day long, I'd listen to Rush Limbaugh and friends debate the President's treasonous blow job, and gay scout leaders, and gays in the military. Major Coffindaffer would mutter about how we should just go ahead and hold public hangings like back in the good ol' days. And I'd fill in the crossword. Sometimes I'd read at my desk, what Major Coffindaffer called "book report books."

I couldn't see myself spending two years in that office. I'd been there two weeks when I heard this guy who worked in my building complaining one day at the smoke pit. He'd received orders for a four-month stint in Saudi. His wife was pregnant. They didn't have a car. I told him I'd go for him if he could get permission to switch.

He tried to argue with me. I didn't blame him. I can relate to

a suspicion of altruism. But I wasn't motivated by altruism. He said, "You can't drink there. Seriously. Not even beer."

"I'm twenty. If I keep drinking here, I'm gonna get caught. And I don't need an Article 15."

"There's nothing to do."

"There's nothing to do here."

"You'll really do it? I mean, if I go ask my sergeant and then he asks you, you won't

change your mind?"

"I'm totally serious, man. What's your job? I mean, what do you do in Saudi?"

"I'm a one-charlie-three. Same as you." Meaning we'd both been trained to answer phones and follow checklists in a command post—the nucleus of a military base. As there's only one command post on each base, the rest of the command post techs get assigned to command units like CENTAF, where we were, to fill desks at operation centers—larger command posts. We were basically phone operators with really high security clearances.

He said, "But there, we only do the briefing. You just need the clearance to be in the Op Center. We take the sortie numbers and build the slide for the daily briefing."

"I can probably figure out a power point slide. I don't have to stand out on the runway and count planes as they take off for sorties do I?"

"Shit. You don't even have to make the slide. We just switch the numbers out every day. And then you hang out in case the numbers change. It's boring as fuck. You'll really go to Saudi?"

“I’ll go anywhere that isn’t Shaw. I’m bored out of my skull here. Can’t be worse.” The truth was, I was itching to leave the country. No one joins the Air Force because they’re dying to see more of South Carolina. I wanted to travel, even if that meant Saudi Arabia. But more than that, I needed a place like Saudi to keep me out of trouble. My problem wasn’t the drinking. Though, had I been caught, the penalty would’ve ruined my career. I was gay and didn’t know what to do about it. I needed time. It’s not that I’d put much thought into going to Saudi. But, determined to avoid the problem I couldn’t solve, I saw four months in Saudi as the perfect way to buy time.

We shook on it. And I went to Saudi. I left him my car keys while I was gone. I preferred Saudi Arabia to Shaw. I preferred being locked on a base that we only got to leave twice, and only in full-body abayas with the hijab. At least in Saudi, I’d had something to do. And because we were all locked on base, I’d had something of a social life. I’d go to the base bar where they served near-beer and play cards with all the others who had nothing better to do.

When I got back from Saudi, nothing had changed. I was still gay and still in the military. Still stationed in South Carolina. Still sitting next to guys who I was sure, any day, would look at me and recognize what they hated.

This fear never left my mind, but day-to-day, the good thing about the little office where I worked was that the officers like Coffindaffer mostly ignored me. The NCOs, like Sergeant Ewing, were busy sending out resumes to government contractors where they’d double their pay once their enlistments were up. So that Friday, no one knew or cared that it was my birthday. No one had to know I was going to check out a gay bar.

Now I was standing outside the bar and worse, people were

noticing me. I'd told myself *just walk in, don't be obvious, get a drink, look around. Then you can go home*. I wondered if I'd worn the right clothes. I could see inside, just over the bouncer's head. Gays. And all I knew was I was gay and these were supposed to be my people, my community.

Someone came up behind me, and asked what was going on. I turned around. He was about my age. Just a kid. Military haircut, the unmistakable ill-advised mustache that, following military regulation, always rests one shaving mishap away from Hitler-lip. He lived in the same dorms I did. Not my floor or I'd know his name. But I'd seen him in the laundry room. I felt better seeing him, until I realized this meant I might see others from the base. They might see me. I hadn't considered this. I'd driven thirty miles to have a drink where no one would see me. I told him I didn't want to put my name on a list.

"Why? I'm on the list," he said. The bouncer handed him the clipboard. "Right here, Truvy Jones."

"Steel Magnolias," I said. He clapped like I'd learned to roll over. And I realized then he had just as much to lose as I did. But he didn't seem at all scared. I put down Ouiser Boudroux on the card, filled out the address for the local carpet company with the annoying radio jingle, and Papa John's phone number on the line for driver's license.

I sat at the bar waiting for the bartender to finish wrestling with the little airplane bottle of Jack—another oddity of South Carolina's liquor laws. And I watched the room through the mirror behind the glasses. Truvy was nowhere to be seen. I'd hoped he'd come get a drink. We'd talk about Steel Magnolias. He'd be impressed with my vast knowledge of Dolly Parton trivia. We'd bond and maybe become friends. I wouldn't feel so obvious sitting there alone.

Seemed like everyone at the bar knew everyone else. Everyone

was divided into factions. The younger lesbians owned the pool table; the older lesbians occupied the tables outside. As I walked by, they all stared like I'd walked into their private house party and changed the music. A few older gay men took turns on the poker machines. The younger gay boys held the dance floor. I didn't belong here. That I was used to the feeling didn't make it any more comfortable.

I found a payphone in the alcove for the bathroom. I dug my calling card out of my wallet, hoped I had minutes left on it. And I called my brother, Mikey. He answered. "Where are you?" he asked. "Is that Prince?"

"Yeah. I'm in a gay bar. I don't think the lesbians are in charge of the music," I said.

"That's a relief. But still, gross," he said. "Not gross that you're in a gay bar. Obviously."

"Obviously. There's a mirror ball over the dance floor. Your bedroom is bigger than the dance floor."

"Jesus. You spent a year in San Fran."

Right out of basic training, I spent a year in Monterey, two hours south of San Francisco. And I'd had a fake ID. But I was too scared to drive to San Francisco on weekends and hang out in the Castro. Of course, if I'd known I'd be sent to South Carolina, I might've worked a little harder at accelerating my coming out.

"Monterey isn't San Fran," I corrected him.

"Okay. But you're still dumb. What's a gay bar like in South Carolina? Are you counting mullets? Oh, dude, you should find the butchest woman there and bring her home for Thanksgiving," he said. Then added, "Gabe wouldn't let you in the house." I'm sure he was picturing the scene. But even alone, Gabe wouldn't let me into the house if it were burning.

“I don’t think I’m coming home,” I said. And it occurred to me I wasn’t sure when I’d see my brother since I was no longer welcome there. He was nineteen but still living at home. I thought about buying him a ticket to come visit. “Oh, there are three. And that’s not counting the almost mullets. I think they want to fight me,” I said.

“If you knew karate, you’d probably live,” he said. “I was thinking it would be cool to have a gay brother. He’d run off to New York and starve a couple years. But then I’d get to move into his shitty studio and paint. And he’d introduce me to all the rich guys who’d buy my paintings ‘cause I’d be the hot brother of a gay guy.”

A skinny kid with what I thought was a bad cold because I’d never been around a coke problem came out of the men’s room. I flattened myself against the wall so he could pass. But he just stood there across from me and sniffled and stared. You could’ve fit three of him into his jeans.

“Sorry,” I said. “I know this is tough on you.” This was not tough on him. I’d officially sealed my brother’s role as favorite child by being gay. He’d recently been caught smoking pot. Gabe, the stepfather most likely to call the cops on his stepchildren, laughed about it.

“You should be. I can’t hear you though. I’m gonna get off the phone. Gabe’s coming home soon.” The skinny kid was staring now. Assuming he wanted the phone, I held up a finger to show I’d be done in a minute. But he shook his head and sat down on the wet tile floor. I turned around.

“Are you not allowed to talk to me?” I asked. “Last time I called to talk to Mom, he just hung up on me.”

“No, but he thinks this is something you’re doing to him. Like, on purpose to piss him off. It’s just weird now. I think they’re getting a divorce,” he said.

“Well, fingers crossed.” I didn’t believe my mother would ever leave Gabe.

“Shit. Happy birthday,” he said. “I’m gonna send you a book. I’m almost done with it.” I wasn’t offended he’d forgotten. He forgets his own. But the reminder didn’t help my mood.

Maybe it was weird to call my brother from a payphone in my first gay bar. But I’d always had him with me in these situations, when I didn’t belong, when everyone else knew each other, knew the rules, and the language, the dress code, knew who and what to avoid.

My brother and I grew up overseas, in one of those cults that sprang up in the late sixties. Ever since we came back to the States, after we left the cult, I’d tried to feel like an American, like I belonged. Funny thing is, I felt more American in the cult than I ever did out of it. Back in the cult, being American was part of my identity. I had what the other kids told me was an American accent. I had an American passport. My grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins lived in America. My parents were American. And so, from the time we landed back in Texas when I was fifteen, desperate for any identity, I tried to be what I thought was American, the way I understood it, which was not at all. I said the pledge of allegiance in school. I listened to country music. I ate junk food and drank more soda and milk than water. I smoked Marlboros. I tried to love football and pretend I found soccer painfully boring. I joined the military and took an oath to defend the constitution. I actually read the constitution. I hung an American flag on my wall. I considered buying a gun. I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I’d watched and books I read. None of it worked. I felt nothing. And I couldn’t understand what I was supposed to feel.

I walked back to the bar but couldn’t get the bartender’s attention. So I drove home alone. When I was a kid, I never

thought I'd live to be twenty-one. The Antichrist was supposed to show up around the time I turned sixteen. Even if I survived the wars and the persecution of Christians, the world would end soon afterwards. By the time I realized all that was a lie, I didn't have much time to plan a future. The Air Force recruiter was very helpful with that.

There's this day in Air Force basic training where they try to make you feel like you're really in the military. They keep you up most of the night before working in the kitchen. At dawn, you march a few miles carrying your duffle bag, singing jodies to keep cadence. You shoot the M16 for a couple hours. You sit in the dirt and pick through MREs for lunch. Airman Eudy who watched all the right movies tells everyone else to avoid the Lucky Charms—they're bad luck. And because you've never eaten an MRE, you enjoy the plastic food. Then they march you back, into an auditorium.

You file in without speaking because you've been in basic training six weeks now, and no one has to tell you not to speak. The lights go out and there, on the stage, a single spotlight pops on to show a guy, one of the instructors, tied to a chair. The bad guy enters, stage right. You know he's the bad guy because he's wearing a towel on his head. The bad guy slaps the good airman around a little. But the good airman won't give up the mission plan. Just name, rank, serial number—which is really your social security number, but I didn't write his down. The bad guy pulls a gun. Shoots the airman dead. And the lights go out. Then, I shit you not, you hear Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" kick on.

At that point, I looked around. Everyone was crying, shouting the words. Some of the kids fell back on their evangelical upbringings and waved their hands in the air to the music. I knew I was supposed to feel something. And I did. I felt revulsion. Because I'd been through this before. All of it.

The sleep-deprivation, the fun outdoors preparing for war, the play-acting interrogation by the bad guys, and the singing. Always the singing.

When I got back to the base, I sat on the hood of my car facing the highway. Just past the highway stood the fence surrounding the base, and just past that, the runway. The runway lights never went out, but no one was flying tonight. I leaned back against my windshield to see the sky. I'd always searched the sky when I felt alone. I'd look for the constellations my mom taught us when we were little. I don't remember the stories she told about Cassiopeia or Andromeda. I only remember how to find them. But here, in the South Carolina lowlands, there were no stars. The damp air was too thick and glowed a sickly yellow from the lights on the runway and the sodium lights on the highway. I could see the moon, but barely.