

New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: "Triple X"

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.



“Turn that shit down. NOW!”

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder, and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I’m not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren't already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Keep it down now."

"Yes, Sergeant."

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled '*thank yous*' that drift to me through the anonymous dark don't lessen the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they've left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won't allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don't know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.