

Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul

In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally’s recent statement that she’d been raped by a senior officer, hadn’t reported the assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of sexual assault cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last thing that poet Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School in 1988. I didn’t know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast cancer she’d survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but homeopathic injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been keeping the tumors under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that time she seemed invincible.

Still, she never wasted time or words. If she spoke,

what she said mattered. One listened with respect, and remembered.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes: "Jerri," she said, "don't let the Navy steal your soul."

In the decades that followed, I often wondered if I'd honored my promise or if the culture of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces had stolen my soul. Like Senator McSally, who commissioned a few months before me, I was sexually assaulted on active duty. Like her, I did not report the assault. And like her—like almost every military woman of our generation, if we're being honest—I was complicit in a culture that enabled systemic misogyny and abuse.

Two: Assault

Unlike Senator McSally, I was not raped. My assailant was not senior to me. He was a foreign midshipman and I was a lieutenant, three paygrades senior to him.

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

I didn't report him. In the summer of 1994, the first women to be permanently assigned to American naval combatants

had just been ordered to their ships. I didn't want my experience to be used as an argument that women didn't belong at sea. The midshipman, like many of the men who harass and assault military women, was technically proficient and behaved professionally when he was sober. His entire career lay ahead of him, and he had potential to contribute to the defense of his nation and to our alliance. Most importantly, I didn't want to tarnish the success of a joint mission with an important ally, or diminish my own contribution to it. Like all good military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

And by the time I was assaulted, I'd been groomed to accept abuse and to remain silent about it.

Three: Grooming

Military culture grooms women in uniform for abuse like a perpetrator of domestic violence grooms a partner for victimization. Military women are too often isolated from each other, desensitized to sexual aggression, encouraged to accept abuse of power as the norm, rewarded for compliance, and then silenced if they dare to object. Commanders would consider those behaviors unacceptable and inexcusable if they occurred in any other criminal offense against another servicemember.

Military culture mixes rewards—camaraderie, a sense of belonging, the right to see oneself as successful and strong—with elements of abuse. The grooming process isn't linear. The techniques of desensitization vary, but they're familiar to anyone knowledgeable about domestic violence and sexual assault.

Grooming often begins in accession training.

I met my first military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in maneuvering board, a system of solving relative motion problems graphically and mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made no secret of his contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy; women's sole purpose was gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with him*, she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him*. He was still an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined

the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought me before a board to discuss whether I should repeat just the exam or the entire first eight weeks of training. I claimed that a relapse of bronchitis kept me up all night before the test, and showed them that I could estimate a target angle—a basic maneuvering board skill—using the photo of a destroyer on the wall. They allowed me to retake the exam. A different instructor proctored it; I passed easily.

I assumed that the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class didn't exactly approve of my presence, but none of them behaved unprofessionally. Listening to women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed to be reasonable strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to be my individual, personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples were in the barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't exist everywhere in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women from trusting each other and sharing information.

Several months

later, I attended the Intelligence Officer Basic Course in Dam Neck, Virginia.

The only other woman in my class of twenty had a girly-girl name and an open, friendly smile. She spent Friday and Saturday nights at the officers' club at Naval Air Station Oceana, home to hundreds of Navy fighter pilots.

Our male classmates told me, *She's always talking about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go, what they eat, and how much they spend on her. She's just in the Navy to find a husband. And if you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking every pilot at Oceana too. You're a professional, though, aren't you? You're one of the good ones.*

It didn't take long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and loathe it among women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to describe this phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to complain about gender differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

I wanted the men I worked with to consider me one of the *good ones*, even if it meant being judgmental about another woman's love life, isolated from other women, and often lonely. I stayed cool and distant around the other woman in my class. She showed even less interest in getting acquainted. I wonder now what our classmates told her about me.

In December 1989, I reported to my first duty station at the Antisubmarine Warfare Operations Center (ASWOC) at Lajes, a village on the island of Terceira in the Azores archipelago. I was one of two women naval officers in the command; both of us were young, junior in rank, and single. The command's mission, straight out of *The Hunt for Red October*, was to locate and track Soviet submarines transiting the central Atlantic using P-3C Orion aircraft.

In addition to serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I was to earn qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the aircraft in flight, and to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to intelligence and antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women from flying combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women in support roles for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and hostile toward women than the carrier aviation community.

The first person I met at the ASWOC was a Limited Duty Officer ensign, formerly a senior enlisted man. He shook my hand and asked, "Are you going to be like our last female intel officer, and sleep with the commanding officer of every squadron who comes through?"

By then I'd

learned the value of a snappy comeback. I batted my eyelashes at him and simpered. "Why—I don't know! Do you think that's a good idea?" Then I turned away and walked past him as if he didn't exist.

Later he and some of the other watch officers introduced me to that day's duty air crew. "I'm Lieutenant N-.," said a grinning pilot. "the plane commander for Crew Six. Are you like our intel officer? She only sleeps with O-4s and up."

I shook my head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy instructor who wants students to remember something important for an upcoming test.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I am not out here to get laid. I'm out here to catch Soviet submarines. When's the next mission?"

First assignments in the Navy are, as the saying goes, "like drinking from a fire hose." I told myself that I had no energy for sneaking around and no time to be lonely. And since the men I worked with apparently had the right to police my relationships, I decided that dating and sex were out of the question altogether for the next two years. I earned my qualifications as fast as I could, stood my watches, and learned to write intelligence reports and personnel evaluations. I dated one man, an Air Force logistics officer, in the last few

months of that assignment.



One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell's first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, "I'd have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they'd let me."

Women could fly

on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn't expected to drop torpedoes on an

enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations

officer, wanted me to fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment officer in charge assigned me to ride with a crew that always read the same excerpt from a fifty-cent book of pornography aloud after they completed the preflight checklist. While the plane commander chanted a graphic sex scene, I tried not to think about the implications of being locked in a flying tin can for the next ten hours with a dozen men who'd just gotten themselves all hot and bothered. I refused to look down, and attempted to make eye contact with every member of the crew. Some wouldn't meet my gaze. Others squirmed and looked away.

One asked quietly afterwards if their reading had bothered me. I smiled and said, "The bodice-rippers I read are hotter than your crew's shitty porn."

I didn't complain. If women wanted respect, we had to act tough and never, ever spoil the guys' fun. The crew's porn ritual, just words, didn't hurt me. Acting tough and depriving bullies of their fun generated a lovely dopamine rush. I refused to think too hard about the effects of accepting bully behavior as the norm.

On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron

duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

Looking the poster up and down slowly, I considered the options. If I complained, every man in the command would label me a "bitch" and a "whiner." If I ignored the behavior it might stop—or the aviators might choose to escalate the harassment in hopes of getting a reaction. If I pretended that the prank was no big deal or made a joke of it, I might convince them to think twice about messing with me. I might even win their approval.

I turned to the smirking lieutenants, shrugged, and pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the poster's focal point. "I think she dyes *that*, too."

When I left, I waved cheerily at the centerfold. We had something in common, but for years I didn't want to think about what it might be. Many of the strategies women use to access and retain some of the power men try to exercise over us and over our bodies become maladaptive. Even damaging.



When Bell commissioned, she had little idea that her career in the Navy would, at times, resemble a gauntlet of sexual advances by superiors, peers, and subordinates. In spite of this, she was able to maintain her faith in the United States, and confidence in her mission.

Over the

course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues

propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered, but not interested.* They accepted the

rejections with grace; I had no problems continuing to work with them.

I never told anyone about the propositions. Certainly not the married colleagues' wives, who already suspected me of sleeping with their husbands—or trying to—just because we worked and traveled together.

In a “he said, she said” situation, either the men or their wives might accuse me of having invited the propositions, or accused me of sleeping with a married man—conduct “prejudicial to good order and discipline” and a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I told myself that I had too much self-respect to hook up with guys who cheated, and that I deserved better. I allowed myself to feel morally superior to my colleagues, and to pity their wives.

But I never learned to feel comfortable with the old Navy adage about detached service, *What goes on det, stays on det*. Officers are supposed to follow a code of honor and report violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Every time I lied by omission, I felt like I'd ripped off another piece of my integrity and flushed it down the shitter.

For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference, held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured repeated badgering from the executive officer and my supervisor, the operations officer, about who our “significant others” would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a

local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn't satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

At the Friday night reception, the admin officer and I cornered the two admirals attending the conference. We explained the situation, and asked them to be our dates for the dining-out. One had to depart for a family emergency, but we picked up the other from the VIP Quarters, stuffed him into the admin officer's little two-cylinder hatchback for the drive out to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

We made a grand entrance on the admiral's arm and announced: "XO! OPSO! You ordered us to bring significant others to the dining-out. We're high achievers, so we brought the most *significant* other we could find. Will this one do, gentlemen?"

Everyone laughed but our supervisors, who turned bright red. They left our love lives alone after that.

The master's tools might not have brought down the master's house, but taking a whack with them from the inside and knocking down a little plaster afforded us the illusion of success.



Bell's solo campsite on the summit of Serra da Santa Barbara, Azores, July 1990, looking north across the caldera. Her military experience was not unpleasant, but it was, by necessity, more solitary than that of her many male peers.

In the summer

of 1990, a married pilot deployed to Lajes heard that I planned to go camping

on Serra de Santa Bárbara, the crest of Terceira's largest extinct volcano. He

invited himself to go with me. He insisted that he would join me even after I

told him several times that he wasn't welcome.

I didn't complain,

but my fellow watch officers overheard him and offered to straighten him out if

he was scaring me.

I thanked them,

but told them I could handle it. *If the*

pilot gets anywhere near the top of my volcano, I said, I'll just push him off the side of the mountain

and watch him die. With pleasure. I meant it literally.

I went camping
alone and kept watch on the one-lane road up the mountain
until sunset. Not
even a Navy pilot would risk the hairpin turns with no guard
rails, the
three-thousand-foot plunge to the sea. The pilot never showed.
I slept
fitfully.

I told my
colleagues that I'd managed the situation and enjoyed the
campout.

Not all
empowerment stories are true. Mine wasn't. But I told it so
many times that I
began to believe it. *Fake it 'til you
make it.*

A naval flight officer, a lieutenant commander known for
harassing women—especially enlisted women—returned to Lajes
for a second deployment.

Both the watch
officers and the enlisted sonar technicians assured the women
in the command
that they wouldn't leave any of us alone with him. The sonar
techs wouldn't
even go behind the sonar equipment racks if I sat at the
debriefing table with the
lieutenant commander.

During one
mission debrief, he put his hand over mine and leered at me.
Every enlisted man
in the room stopped working to glare at him.

I didn't smile. His hand, I moved firmly off my body and out of my personal space. Then, with eye contact and a facial expression, I indicated that he'd better not do it again. He shrugged and grinned: *Can't blame a guy for trying*. I didn't report him.

The next day, the operations officer—the supervisor who'd teased me about bringing a “significant other” to the dining-out—called me into his office. The sailors had told him about the handsy lieutenant commander. He asked why I hadn't reported it. He'd already arranged for the squadron's commanding officer to put the lieutenant commander on the first flight back to Rota. He insisted that he would never tolerate sexual harassment.

I pretended to see no irony in his statement. I considered myself lucky to work with men who were pranksters and occasionally bullies instead of rapists. I wondered what would happen to the women at the antisubmarine warfare operations center in Rota, and what might already have happened to the women in the deployed squadron. I didn't wonder too long: they weren't in my chain of command.

I'd completed the qualification process for “handling it.”

Four: Silence

In 1991, the same year I began congratulating myself for being tough enough to handle

military misogyny, Navy helicopter pilot Paula Coughlin reported sexual assault and misconduct at the naval aviation community's "Tailhook" professional conference. I admired her courage in speaking up, and saw her as a role model.

The Navy had one more lesson to teach.

In her essay "Cassandra Among the Creeps," Rebecca Solnit describes concentric rings of silence, through which women who dare to speak up against powerful men descend. Navy women watched Paula Coughlin descend, and we learned.

Almost immediately, most Navy men—even the Naval Investigative Service personnel charged with investigating the allegations—either dismissed Coughlin's story or attempted to discredit it.

Then they began to discredit Coughlin herself. The Navy grounded her and questioned her mental health. Suddenly, everybody knew somebody who'd known her: in ROTC at Old Dominion, at flight school, in the squadron, on the staff. They said she was brash, foul-mouthed, promiscuous (why else would she have gone to Tailhook in the first place?), and a shitty pilot. Claiming that she hadn't earned the honor of being an admiral's aide, those same men reasoned that the job had been given to her at better pilots' expense because the Navy was pushing to integrate more women into naval aviation. That was the first year I heard the term "political correctness."

Speaking up in Coughlin's defense was a one-way ticket down to the next level of silence: bullying and intimidation. *Are you one of those feminazis like Pat Schroeder? It takes a special kind of man to be a Navy pilot—what happened at Tailhook's just the culture in naval aviation. Do you think this*

investigation will actually change anything? Coughlin's career is toast, whether or not she wins her case. And the witch hunt is ruining the careers of good aviators who cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars to train. Would you ruin a man's career over something like that? It's not like she was raped or anything.

I disagreed.

Aw, we thought you were one of the good ones, Lieutenant.

Lesson learned: no woman would be awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on the sexual assault grenade.

Coughlin resigned her commission in the Navy. I decided to stay, took another big gulp of the Kool-Aid, and jumped feet-first down to the bottom of the pit. The need for silence, I internalized as a personal survival strategy. I didn't speak up in support of Coughlin again. Women who challenged military bullies and predators risked criticism, ostracism, lower marks on performance evaluations, or trumped-up misconduct charges that could lead to discharge from the service—even dishonorable discharge. Few senior women were around to serve as role models or mentors; those who would discuss sexual harassment advised us to keep our heads down and pick our battles. We couldn't rely on women who agreed with us in private to stand with us in public. Men were even less likely to offer support.

In 2005, my graduate fiction advisor suggested that I write stories from the perspective of women in uniform. "Military women don't ever tell those stories," I replied. "That would just make things worse for every woman still serving." That had been my lived experience, and I believed every word when I said it. I didn't start writing about the Navy for almost another decade.

Five: Barriers

Senator McSally needed years to decide to break her silence about her assault. Many of us do. If you'd asked me when I retired in 2008 if I'd been sexually assaulted on active duty, I'd have said no: I'd handled the incident with the handsy midshipman and moved on. Senator McSally may have thought she'd handled her sexual assault, too.

An admission of complicity in the culture that permits and encourages gender and sexual violence in the armed forces, and the realization that there is no contradiction in being both the victim of abuse and an enabler of it, can take much longer. Responsibility for sexual harassment and assault in the military rests squarely and solely on the shoulders of the perpetrators; staying silent to survive, or to remain employed, in no way equals consent to being assaulted. But men and women who served and are still serving bear the responsibility for tolerating and perpetuating an abusive culture that creates conditions in which sexual assault can occur more frequently, in which victims who come forward are routinely silenced, and in which those who courageously insist on being heard are denied justice.

Complicity costs us a fortune in integrity. Worse, when we fail to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which we individually enable toxicity in the culture, we pass some of the cost on to other victims. Military sexual trauma factors significantly in

depression for many veterans, female and male. It's a risk factor for substance abuse and homelessness. It's almost certainly implicated in the suicide rate of women veterans (250 times the national average for women). Complicity allows the culture of gender and sexual violence in the armed forces to appropriate our souls—or to steal them outright.

Audre Lorde wrote in her final book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*: "While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future." Visions of an armed force in which gender and sexual violence is prevented to the extent possible, and properly addressed when it occurs, must begin with accurate perception. This begins with an understanding of how the culture of sexual harassment and sexual assault functions in the armed forces. It's a slippery slope that leads from inappropriate stressors in training, to the acceptance of gender-based harassment and sexual abuse as norms. Military leaders must also develop an accurate perception of how toleration of sexual harassment and assault, and silence about it, have for too long been the price of approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege in the armed forces, especially for women.

Senator McSally's task force will need to develop accurate perceptions of the systemic barriers to reducing gender and sexual violence in the armed forces. Department of Defense leaders resistant to change and jealous of their authority, and conservative pundits with an antiquated understanding of strength and of sexual violence, will likely attempt to reward the task force for tolerance of the status quo and continued

complicity in the culture of harassment and assault. Members of the task force, and Senator McSally, must refuse to allow their integrity to become the price for approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege. I wish Senator McSally and her task force all success in tackling the challenges of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces, and welcome her, with sadness and regret, to the circle of those who have finally found the courage to break our silence.

Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for O-Dark-Thirty, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS Mount Whitney and HMS Sheffield, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia. She also served in collateral assignments as a Navy Family Advocacy Program Officer, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program Officer, and sexual assault victim advocate. Her fiction has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her nonfiction has been published in newspapers, including the Washington Post and the Charleston Gazette-Mail; in journals; and on blogs. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.

New Fiction: “The List” by

Andria Williams



Author's note: I began this story in 2013, but eventually set it aside because I feared it would seem unrealistic, or possibly even quaint, to write a story about a Facebook group

formed to exploit female service members. This past year, for obvious reasons, I dug it up again.

*

Green cornstalks rolled into the distance under a heavy midsummer sky. From her metal seat, peering out the small window to her right, Captain Jessica Aras watched a lone white jet-trail make its way through amnesiac blue. Then the door to the squadron building clicked open, and she saw Airman Blakely slip in with a Big Gulp sloshing in his hand, which surely he had refilled four times already and would prompt him to make half-hourly trips to the little boy's room for the rest of the day.

She could understand how a person might drift away from the base on lunch break and have a hard time coming back, especially if that person were a nineteen-year-old male on his first stateside tour of duty after 180 days in Afghanistan. But as he approached her side of the room, the door shutting behind him, he took a leisurely, gurgling sip through his straw, and the ice cubes clattered all at once against their plastic silo. This sound was the death rattle of Jessica's patience. Just because a tour in southern Illinois lacked urgency did not mean that someone could glide off and install himself for two hours at the mall's food court. Three times this week Blakely had come in late from lunch, and as she saw her other enlisted folks glance up, she felt a flare of irritation. She was his Captain, and his tardiness seemed a show of public disrespect.

Even though her better judgment told her to take him aside in private, she couldn't stop herself from standing and calling after him. "Airman Blakely," she said, "your break ended 45 minutes ago."

He pulled up mid-slurp and stared at her in startled silence. The straw twitched between his lips. When he lifted his head,

the straw came up with it and he held it there as if unsure which would be less polite, to remove it with his fingers or to just let it dangle.

Everyone watched over the tops of their gray cubicles.

“Are we having a misunderstanding, Blakely?” Jessica asked, crossing her arms over the thick fabric of her cammies. He continued to stare, and she blurted, “Were you under the impression that lunch break was a free afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese’s?”

It was a stupid thing to say; it hardly made sense. Their local mall did contain a Chuck E. Cheese’s, but no one called it “*the* Chuck E. Cheese’s,” “the” tacked like a small fart onto the front of the name. She glared up at him, this gangly kid almost a decade younger and a foot taller than herself, who a month ago had been pulling military police duty in some village in Afghanistan and now stood before her, red-faced, a florid pimple blooming beneath one nostril, the straw projecting from his mouth like a sprig of wheat, the ice shifting once more, loudly, in his drink.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Blakely said. “It won’t happen again.”

And it did not. But in retrospect, this was probably how she first got on the List.

*

Jessica drove home every day with First Lieutenant Steve Hayes, her neighbor and a fellow officer. They both lived in town about fifteen minutes from the base. A coworker once accused them of being too good for standardized housing, and maybe they did think they were; they shared an unspoken aesthetic, she thought, preferring older, quality homes to the base’s sea of new beige construction. Of course, Jessica and her husband Halil liked the larger-than-base-housing backyard for their eighteen-month-old son, Omar, and Halil had a thing

for crown molding and pocket doors. Jessica privately thought all these Victorian details were somewhat wasted on bachelor Hayes, whom she imagined hardly noticed them behind the flickering glare of his 78-inch TV and all his weight equipment, but perhaps he liked this side of town for its convenience to St. Louis, where he'd gone to college. He was in an MMA gym there, and he liked the comedy clubs.

Their tours at Bagram had overlapped by a couple of months, so she and Hayes had already known each other when they were assigned to the same security forces squadron in southern Illinois. He was blond, blue-eyed, and corn-fed, and Jessica had kept her distance when she'd first met him in Afghanistan, incorrectly assuming he was a frat-boy type. But he was more self-deprecating than she'd expected, and soon they were watching movies in groups on their off-nights and chowing on more Cinnabon than their perfunctory PT runs could comfortably support. Now that they were stationed here in Illinois, and neighbors, he'd suggested that they carpool together, alternating weeks—this week was her turn to drive. She found she rather looked forward to it. Hayes was single and had no kids, so he'd kept a lot of personal interests and hobbies and did smart things like watch "Meet the Press." He also had a wise-ass streak she enjoyed.

So here he was, fiddling with her automatic windows and rummaging in his pocket for a toothpick which he popped between his teeth. He'd quit smoking since his return from Bagram, and there was always something in his mouth: gum, a toothpick, hard candy.

She wondered what he'd say about the incident with Airman Blakely: that her irritation was justified, but she should have spoken with the kid alone. Still, she feared that he might say something else, something like, *Actually, you were a little bit of a bitch.*

Instead, he said, "Did you hear there's a new food truck

opening in town?"

"Yeah?" she said, relieved.

"Rico's Tacos," he said, spinning the toothpick between his teeth. "We getting some culture here in town, maybe?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," she said. She enjoyed their shared yearning for "culture," also a frequent point of commiseration for her and Halil.

He chuckled and sat in thought for a moment. "Oh, hey, did you remember?"

"Remember what?" Jessica slowed the car as the rural highway became the main road into town and cornfields gave way to gas stations, strip malls, a high school.

"Taco Tuesday at work tomorrow." His blue eyes grinned.

"Oh God, I always forget," she groaned. "Is it poor form if I just bring in a can of black olives?"

"You did that last week, Captain." He spun the toothpick between his front teeth. "Lead by example. Anyway, the enlisted like them."

"The olives?"

"The lunches." He examined the frayed toothpick, chucked it back through the open window, and pulled a clean one from his pocket. "Aw Christ, now here's the band."

The high school band ventured out into neighborhoods every summer to prepare for parade season, and here they were now, marching through the crosswalk to the measured rim-clicks of the snare drums. Their red-faced major, sweating continents into his T-shirt, held his hand to their windshield with grim, flushed solemnity, as if only this gesture kept Jessica from plowing into them all.

While the band crossed, Jessica prodded the bobby pins in her oiled bun, eager to get home and let it down. Her sunlit reflection in the car window showed the flat, rippled waves of hair across the top and sides of her head, like a shower cap made of satin and Kevlar. She liked her hair, its unique monochrome to her light brown skin, and wished it were the first thing people noticed about her. In reality, though, people probably noticed the broad, massed patterns of freckles across her nose and down her cheekbones, just one shade darker than her skin, like shadows through a screen above. She had nothing of her mother's smooth darkness or her father's peely ginger flush; and in fact, though she supposed they'd done their best despite their propensity for arguments and alcohol, she did not feel she was much like either of her parents in any way. After state school in Massachusetts she had joined the Air Force, and only her mother was left now, back in Boston near her Cape Verdean relatives, paranoid about "Arabs and Mexicans," smoking a pack a day.

Jessica said, "I love the band."

"Really?" said Hayes. "Why?" He squinted at the last of the kids as they marched past the windshield. "Don't worry," he shouted out the window at the drum major, "we aren't gonna run over your goats."

The drum major stood stoically, resisting the urge to make eye contact, as if he were guarding Buckingham Palace.

Jessica clicked her tongue, chuckling. "Leave the kid alone."

"Speaking of kids," He glanced at her, cleared his throat. "You sure ripped that Jiminy Dipshit a new one today."

"You mean Airman Blakely? Did I?" she said, distressed. "No, I didn't. I said what needed to be said. He was coming in late every single day."

"Yeah..." Hayes waited for her to continue.

"He's only been stateside a few weeks. He was way out at some combat outpost, you know."

"The hell was he doing out there?"

"Beats me." Jessica chewed her lower lip. "Do you think he's having redeployment issues?"

"Maybe he's just bored."

"That, too." Jessica sighed, steering one-handed, her right arm across her lap.

"Those were good times," Hayes said, meaning when they were in Bagram. She suspected that not all of his times had been good—he'd been tasked to drive convoys for a provincial reconstruction team and admitted once that it scared him—but people chose what to remember. Her own security job had been so boring it felt like psychological torture. She'd pined bitterly for her son Omar, who'd been a year old when she left; cried over videos of him shoving one cereal puff after another into his mouth until his cheeks bulged while Halil and his saint of a mother, who'd spent that year living with them through each of their deployments, laughed.

Jessica pulled up at Hayes's house and saw the ecstatic face of his terrier jumping again and again in the front window.

"Someone's happy to see you," she said, and smiled. He opened the car door, waved, and headed up the walk.

*

"Anybody home?" Jessica called in a singsong, minutes later, through her own front door, because this always made Omar squeal. "Oh, I guess no one's home. I'll just go back to work, then."

Omar tore around the corner at a toddler's breakneck speed, his legs kicking forward with a sweet, jerky, duckfooted

motion as if not all their joints communicated with each other yet. Jessica picked him up, kissed his dark blond curls, brushed cracker crumbs from his cheeks.

The television was on in the large, mostly empty front room, still stacked with cardboard boxes in one corner, and toys tossed about as if one of those boxes had lightly exploded. She glimpsed the green of a baseball field on the screen, tiny figures running and diving, before it switched to a raucous commercial.

"Hello," Halil said from the couch. "We were just watching baseball and eating Ritz."

She set Omar down. "How was day care? Was there a good report?"

Halil made room for her. She perched lightly, still in her uniform and combat boots, with a long to-do list ahead of her before she could relax. "He had a good day," Halil said, and Jessica felt a smile spread across her face, "but he did not finish his lunch." Halil added, sounding almost sorrowful about it: "He never eats the oranges."

"Oh, I don't care," Jessica said. "How was your day?"

"Not too unusual. I briefed the Colonel," he said. Halil was on an Intel watch floor, which meant twelve-hour shifts. His eyes looked tired and heavy-lidded.

"Were you nervous?"

"Not too. I don't really get nervous anymore."

"Do you feel like people are taking you seriously at work?"

He looked at her curiously. "I think so. Does that surprise you?" He gave a quiet laugh. "I don't think they say, 'Oh God, there goes that clown, Halil.'"

“I know. That’s not what I meant. It was more about myself.”

He frowned. “You think people don’t take you seriously?”

“No, I think they do, it’s just” – Omar was climbing her legs now. She swung them up and down while he clung to her shins, and he laughed.

“Well, you scare the living daylights out of me,” Halil joked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jessica swatted him, unwound Omar from her calves, got up, and headed for the upstairs bedroom to change. Her laced boots felt ridiculously heavy and assertive, out of context, on the carpeted stairs. Omar followed her, wailing. Now that she was home, it was Mama or no one. She handed him her phone to play with while she changed: pried her feet from the hot boots, pulled bobby pins from her hair one by one. Her head was tender from insistent pinning. She rubbed her scalp, pulled her hair through a band, and carried Omar downstairs. He still clutched her phone possessively, so she let him keep it. Halil had tipped his head back on the couch and was dozing. As she gathered ingredients for dinner her phone buzzed, and she pried it from Omar’s hands just long enough to see a message from Hayes. “Don’t let us down, Captain!” it said, with four taco emojis trotting along behind. “Go big or go home!,” and then three American flags. Jessica chuckled and wrote herself a note so she wouldn’t miss it in the morning.

*

The next day at noon, she set a long rectangular tray on the buffet table and peeled back its foil blanket, steam swirling up as if she were performing a magic trick.

Her airmen inched around the table. Rows of warm, gently folded corn tortillas spooned each other beside shredded lettuce cheerful as Easter grass. There was a mound of shimmering ground beef and a lake of thick, grayish beans, sprinkled with authentic-looking cheese. Jessica felt a glow

of satisfaction. She had single-handedly taken Taco Tuesday up a notch. She stepped back, clapped her hands lightly together, and said, "Dig in!"

"Goddamn, I love Taco Tuesday!" someone behind her said. "You're the best, Captain!" She realized it was Hayes and ignored him.

Murmured thanks came from her crew as they filed into line. "I love this place," Airman O'Donnell said, and because he was not a wiseass like Hayes, she felt nearly dazzled by his effusiveness until she realized that he meant the chain restaurant from which she'd bought the tacos, and not their cinder-block building with its belabored air conditioning and sagging motivational posters. Still, the spread was an accomplishment. It sure beat the previous weeks' limp tortillas and bags of shredded cheese. People heaped their plates, poured fizzing cups of pop. Someone turned on the stereo.

Airman Mackenzie Stahl, with her severe bottle-black hair and thin overplucked eyebrows, was one of the few who did not seem pleased. Stahl was somewhere around twenty. She always seemed to have such a chip on her shoulder. It had almost startled Jessica when she'd once seen Stahl out with friends at the movie theater on a Sunday afternoon, laughing and carefree in a Loony Tunes sweatshirt and pin-thin jeans. Stahl possessed none of that lightness now. She thunked a jar of watery salsa onto the far end of the table and stalked past Jessica as if the lunch were not an act of generosity but some kind of pitiable dog-and-pony show, as if Jessica were performing an office striptease. From the other side of the room someone muttered, "Where are the olives? We always have olives."

Truth be told, Jessica felt she'd never quite struck the balance between authority and generosity. The female officers who made the best leaders, who stayed in twenty years or more, seemed to err on the side of toughness and they were often,

she hated to admit, the more mannish women. They had odd, inappropriate senses of humor and short, dry laughs; they were overly attached to horses or dogs. Maybe Jessica was finding her own way, a middle ground where she could be both boss and friend, man and woman. Then she overheard airmen Blakely and Stahl at the front of the line.

Stahl asked, "You hear we're getting a Rico's taco truck?"

Jessica was about to pipe up Yes! She had heard that! It was the talk of the town!, but Airman Blakely, pouring neon-orange queso from a jar all over the delicate flavors of the more-authentic takeout Jessica had brought, spoke up first.

"What'd you say? Pink tacos?" he asked, grinning.

"Shut up," Stahl said, laughing.

It was obvious Blakely was trying to be immature. Sure, it was uncouth, but Jessica was in the mood to let things slide. She wouldn't have given it a second thought if it were not for what followed.

Blakeley widened his eyes at Stahl in mock surprise and whispered in a breathy, innocent falsetto: "What? You mean this isn't an afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese's?"

Stahl pushed him playfully and hissed, "Oh, take it easy, Cocoa Puff!"

At this, several airmen turned toward Jessica and then quickly looked away again. She wondered what this had to do with her.

"Shit," someone muttered.

And then Jessica realized—her face burning, tears sparking in her eyes—it was a nickname, their nickname for her.

Stahl turned and spotted Jessica, and her whole countenance changed. She ducked her head and, though there was only one

tortilla on her plate, made a beeline for her cubicle. Blakely, his face red, did the same.

Jessica felt her body turn hot from her head to her toes. She poked at the pins in her hair, her eyes stinging. It's okay, she told herself, a habit under stress. It's okay, this is okay. It's normal to gripe about your boss behind his or her back. She would not cry over whatever stupid crap some kids from podunk towns said about her when they thought she wasn't listening. Maybe it meant her group had good camaraderie. But Cocoa Puff, Jesus. There was an edge to it she couldn't make herself think about. Her stomach turned.

Hayes, oblivious, wandered up with his own plate refilled and gave her a smile. "Hey, kiddo," he said. "This whole thing is a hit."

For a split second she wanted to grab his arm and demand of him: *Is this really what they call me behind my back? What else do they say about me? And please do not call your Captain "kiddo" in front of the airmen!* Instead she stood silently, relieved that, at least, her distress was not noticeable to anyone else.

"You gonna eat anything yourself?" Hayes asked, landing a curved, beef-filled chip on his tongue and crunching loudly.

"Of course," Jessica said, though she could not imagine actually choking down anything. She turned back to the table full of food: pale-green lettuce dropped here and there, the beef leaking orange-colored oil, her spectacular, now-picked-over tray.

*

For the next few days, there were no incidents. Airman Blakely was nearly tripping over himself to be punctual, returning from lunch with minutes to spare and often with a quarter of a sandwich in hand, as if putting his concern for promptness on

display. "Nice touch," Hayes whispered to Jessica with a smirk. "The sandwich."

Then the Major called her out of the blue for a meeting. He wanted her to meet him not at his own cubicle, but in one of the small conference rooms at the end of the building, which could not be good. She knew this would be about one of the airmen. At two o'clock she tapped baby Omar's sweet round nose in the framed photo on her desk, pushed back her chair and walked past the dark, reflective windows, pressing her bun into place.

When she opened the door Major Alvarez was already there, a dewy Diet Coke in one hand. He set it aside, stood to accept her salute, and apologized for interrupting her workday, as if Jessica had been doing something fascinating and totally unrelated to his instructions. Then he said, "We've got a little bit of an issue here with some of your men."

Her heart sank: more than one?

He asked, "Are you familiar with something called 'the List?'"

Jessica paused, mentally running through what might fit this name: a game show, a movie. Hadn't there been a self-help book of that name recently, some Christian thing? "No, sir," she said.

Alvarez sat down and Jessica did also. He said, "One of your airmen came forward yesterday. He said there's a, a game going around between a couple of the offices."

"Okay," Jessica said.

Alvarez cleared his throat. He was a fit man with salt-and-pepper hair who often bicycled to work wearing the sort of giant, iridescent sunglasses favored by those who took both sports and eye health seriously. He linked his fingers on his lap and Jessica saw the ropy tendons in his arms, his

remarkably clean fingernails, white moons, the beds a pristine grayish-pink.

“They’re keeping a list of the females in the offices, things they”—he paused delicately—“notice about the females, ideas of what the females might do.”

Jessica could feel her heart accelerate as he explained: The men in question had started a Facebook group, which they joined under decoy names. The site was “organized around sexual requests and gossip,” Alvarez said, “and inappropriate speculation.” Worse, however, the group was linked to another site where service members were apparently posting nude pictures of women—some obviously posed for, but others seeming to have been taken without their knowledge.

She couldn’t help but feel indignant on behalf of her men, in part for the absurd reason that the other squadron involved with whatever this idiotic game was had a much nicer, newer building with perfect air conditioning and sparkling, unchipped bathrooms. The airmen in the other building enjoyed such creature comforts all the time; what excuse did they have to idle their days away, dreaming up lewd nicknames and distasteful scenarios?

“It probably started as blowing off steam,” he said, “but it’s become something more.”

“All right,” Jessica said. She felt almost dizzy and cleared her throat. “Well, what do we do?”

“Airman Wallace, the one who came forward, will allow us to use his account for the next couple of days so we can figure out exactly who is taking part in this.” He scribbled something on a piece of paper and then handed it to her. “Here’s Wallace’s information so you can access the account.”

“His account name is ‘SexualChocolate?’” Jessica snorted, picturing Wallace’s eggy white head, the way he seemed to

stroke it into a point when he was thinking.

Alvarez denied himself the chuckle. "We'll go through it and identify who we can, and compare notes tomorrow," he said. "But wait until you get home."

Her protectiveness was replaced by a seeping disgust. "How many of my men are involved, sir? And what will the disciplinary action be?"

He counted in his head. "Right now I know of ten from your unit, plus fourteen from the other. There will be the typical non-judicial committee and appropriate punishment. And they aren't all men," he said, his eyes darting to her and away again as he stood and she did also. "Wallace says at least two of the participants are women."

*

It was Hayes's afternoon to drive. Jessica followed him out of the building and across the parking lot, which wavered black in the midday heat. His royal blue Mustang, brand-spanking-new the month before, was waiting. It was more car than anyone needed, with all the bells and whistles, but that was not something she would ever say. Besides, being a grown man with no dependents, he could do what he liked.

"Another day bites the dust," he said, smiling faintly as they glided through the security gate, waving to Vargas and Swenson on duty. He glanced back in the mirror and switched lanes, his blue eyes light and sun-strained.

Jessica found it hard to keep up conversation, given the day's revelation. Alvarez had asked her not to speak of it before he took the issue higher up. She wondered if Hayes knew, if he'd heard anything from the enlisted guys. She wondered, yet again, if he knew what they called her behind her back.

"Going into the city Friday night," Hayes was saying. "Seeing

the Cards game with some friends.”

Jessica managed to ask who they were playing. The Reds, he said. Cabrera was coming back in off the injured list, but he wasn't worried. She saw his eyes in the rearview mirror again, just a flicker, and he drifted back into the left lane.

“Well,” she said, feeling exhausted, “that sounds like fun.” Then she touched his arm. “You're driving serpentine,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. Old habit.” He shook himself, moved back into the right lane as if out of superstition, forced himself to stay there. The effort made him twitch.

She nodded, looked out the window. There were the cornfields, a half-vacant strip mall with a tanning booth and a Verizon Wireless, a pro-life billboard with a baby in a denim jacket and sunglasses. Sometimes Hayes would joke, “I've been wearing this jacket since four days after conception!!!,” which made her laugh.

“I know it's just a habit,” she said. “But you don't have to do it here.”

*

Later that night Jessica sat in the green glare of her computer, her heart pounding. She was doing what Alvarez had asked her to: scrolling through the List, jotting down the names of contributors she recognized. None of this was what she wanted to see, and yet it was impossible to look away. She felt as if her mind were unfurling.

There was plenty of tamely inappropriate stuff, shots of service women at BBQs in low-cut shirts, holding beer. Two female airmen Jessica recognized, tonguing for the camera, par for the course. Individual shots of women apparently oblivious to the commentary they'd inspired: *She a real ho*

slept with half the MPs. This one likes it up the ass. Bitch gives the best head in Illinois!!!

She scanned through the page for links to specific pictures, trying to match her people with their aliases. Airman Rick Swenson called himself "Ron Swanson," she put that together pretty easily. There was Spaceballs, JFK, Matt Holliday. All these losers, she comforted herself, who would be found out, one by one. All she needed to see was there.

Airman Stahl was, optimistically, "Gisele." And it turned out she was quite active on the site, posting pathetic photos of herself in only lacy black panties, her scant breasts squashed together with her elbows in an uncomfortable contortion. Stahl posted these pictures even though the commentary was sometimes harsh – *You look like B-grade Victorias Secret, girl!*—or maybe because it was occasionally positive (*Super hot, keep 'em comin sweetheart!*). Then again, maybe she was getting money for them.

Jessica learned, too, that Airman Vargas had a real chip on his shoulder about an ex-girlfriend, a former servicewoman he referred to as "the evil bitch" so insistently that anyone wanting to see a picture of her called her that as well. Vargas had uploaded nearly all of the evil bitch's Instagram account to the web site before she could shut it down. Jessica lingered far longer than she needed to there, riveted in a way that felt both vapid and inevitable. She scanned backwards through the evil bitch's life, through her parties and posing with girlfriends at clubs (and yes there was a lot of cleavage and her skirt was far too tight, but this was on the evil bitch's own time and Jessica would have had no jurisdiction); she scrolled past the evil bitch cuddling with a large pit bull, the evil bitch posing with a nephew. The evil bitch dolled up, the evil bitch fresh-faced on a lawn chair. Jessica felt startled when Vargas himself reappeared in this reverse-timeline—she'd almost forgotten he was involved at all, and wanted to shout, *Look out, don't you know that's the evil*

bitch?!—he was oblivious, his arm suddenly around the evil bitch’s slim shoulders as if they were on cloud nine.

She thinks she has privacy, Vargas wrote, but joke’s on her! She blocked me from her Instagram means she basically WANTS a war now. Fine evil bitch, you want it you got it! P.S. \$\$\$\$ I got noodles on a film camera, will scan. \$\$\$\$

BIG MONEY, sonny!

Aw yiss , came the replies.

There was plenty more, things Jessica did not want to see. She found herself scrolling with a sense of distance, seeing all this from the outside. She tried to forget these were her people, that she had failed, that she had allowed such a germ to grow right under her nose—instead this was some unknown airman’s strained, blurry dick before her eyes, some other unit’s men who had paid one of their own to ejaculate on a hooker’s face. There was no way these could be the people she worked with day after day. *Good morning, how are you, so-and-so* made fresh coffee, there’s softball on Friday—

She had a strange memory of Hayes talking to her one afternoon in the car, something he had seen on Bill Maher, saying—*A dick, if you ask me, does not translate well to film. Anyone who thinks otherwise is kidding himself.* And Jessica chuckling awkwardly at this non-sequitur, thinking, *Where did that come from?* But so far, to her relief, Hayes was nowhere to be seen on the List.

And here was Gisele, Airman Stahl, again. A post from a couple of weeks ago: *“Cocoa Puff’s Nipples – Black or Pink?!!!”*

Jessica felt the blood drain from her face.

Oh please no, she thought.

It was a popular post. People were making guesses. “Black,” “pink,” “vagina-colored,” they speculated, some obviously

pleased with their own cleverness. One asked, *"Do you think she has splotches all over her WHOLE BODY TOO?"*

Jessica felt tears spark in her eyes. Her face burned.

But then Gisele/Stahl reappeared and put the guessing game to rest with a heavily cropped photo. It was blurry, taken with a cell phone Stahl had apparently set in her locker, but Jessica could see that the series of three photos were of herself.

The first was taken from behind and was unimaginably awkward: a surprisingly pale figure stepping forward into her PT shorts, the ass a sloping ramp, pocked with minor cellulite. Then it got worse: two frontal shots, the moment before she grabbed a towel, in which Jessica's torso seemed to make a haunting, disapproving face at the camera. She wished the body had been mercifully headless but there was the lower half of her face, unmistakable, caught in what looked like a moment of mild strain. Her breasts hung dead center in the picture, like two startled, spacey eyes, while her unguarded stomach made its slack and gentle descent towards her crotch. For a moment she could not breathe. It was the worst way to be caught, in that wet, gravid moment between shower and towel, the moment you rushed through because it was so ugly; and there she was, frozen in time, evaluated by countless eyes, judged for the horrors of her normal body. She felt captured. She felt lynched.

PokerFace—OMG this makes me so hot I need to jack off and then kill myself

Holler Uncle —At the Chuck E. Cheese's?

*JFK—KILL ****ME***** FIRST!!*

Spaceballs—oh God, I can't unsee it

PokerFace—Ladies and Gentlemen, you have seen the face of terror.

This, from a particular wordsmith– *the existance of the allusive Locker Room Sasquatch has now been prove. Approach with extreme caution!!!!!!! If it comes near you, throw food to it then back away. LMFAO*

Yet another–*How can she do this to us?????*

The responses ranged from that sort of prudish hysteria–as if the images had been thrust upon them from the outside, by a calculating third party, the pervert in the movie theater or the creep on the bus, and not sought out and encouraged by themselves – to a chuckling, jaded cruelty, a voice that was calm and sexually wise, somehow above the other banter. Jessica didn't know which was worse, and she couldn't bear it anymore anyway. She needed to get out of there.

She clicked back to the Facebook page and was about to close out when a new post caught her eye. Unrelated to the main content on the page, it was just a casual conversation between two members. But a sudden suspicion made her read on.

Spaceballs–Hey Matt Holliday you got those tickets for Friday?

Matt Holliday–yeah

Spaceballs– 8 of us right?

Matt Holliday– yup

Spaceballs– What, you didn't invite Cocoa Puff on the way home? LOL When you gonna bag that?

Matt Holliday– Shut up. You're an ass

Spaceballs– She's into you, you know it

Matt Holliday– proolly

This conversation had ended half an hour before. Jessica waited a few more minutes, but nothing else came up. She recalled seeing "Matt Holliday" elsewhere on this page; it was

the name of a star Cardinals player and, she now knew beyond a doubt, that it was Hayes's moniker as well. She began scanning the list frantically for Matt Holliday's other posts. They were infrequent and rather passive, in occasional response to others. He had not commented on the more illicit items, including the naked pictures of herself. But he had seen them. He'd known about this for some time.

She resolved to click out once and for all, but the cursor in the top bar blinked like a challenge, a dare. *SexualChocolate, how are you feeling?* it asked, with all the saccharine remoteness of a non-human.

SexualChocolate—YOU ARE ALL FUCKING ASSHOLES she wrote, and closed out of the computer at once.

*

There was no way that she could sleep. She sat up with a glass of wine and tried to calm herself: the List would be shut down the next day. She'd watched it from the outside with a superior glow of knowledge, seen its deathbed tremor. Those boys thought they were so clever, thought they could keep their fun little club on life-support, but it had only a few hours to live. And she had snuck in among them and deceived them, too.

Why had she expected Hayes to snitch on the others, anyway? She and Hayes carpooled to and from work because they lived a block apart; she'd been stupid to think they were *friends*. They did not get together on weekends or BBQ in her backyard or hang out in bars. But they talked, and something about the way their conversations bookended the day made her feel that these chats were significant; they checked in with each other because being in the military, in their squadron, having done a tour in Afghanistan, was like being in your own little country, a specific world that made you somehow equal. They were the yolk of an egg, she'd once thought, and the white of

the egg was all the diffuse civilian-ness around them, the tanning booths and the Dairy Queen and the high school band and all that shit the military made possible for their indulged, beloved, oblivious citizenry to enjoy.

But right now, she hated him. She hated him more than she had hated anyone in her life.

Their service didn't make them equal. She'd always known that perfectly well, and just sometimes forgot. He'd sat by while people joked about her, while nude pictures of her scrolled before his blue, blue, American, baseball-loving eyes, as if what she didn't know could not possibly hurt her. But that was the *thing*, she thought tearfully, feeling bitterness rise up through her body. That was the thing about being a woman: what you didn't know did hurt you, over and over.

She tried to imagine how things would go from here: The List would be shut down, effective immediately. The transgression would be discussed at work in endless conferences and reprimanding e-mails, and everyone would be very, very serious. They would hold a non-judicial disciplinary committee, and there would be docks in pay, maybe even someone getting held back in rank for a few years. For Hayes, as an officer, the punishment could be severe.

But these were her people, also, and there was a chance she would be punished as well. She was supposed to be in charge of them, to know what they were doing. She'd helped create a culture. Hadn't she?

*

She didn't sleep. Hours later she stood by the back door and watched the sun rise in a pink smudge from the direction of the base. A distant cargo plane climbed into the warm, heavy sky. Beneath it swayed the drying cornfields, waving their crinkled arms as if to remind everything above them that they were there.

Halil would be home in a few minutes from his night on the watch floor. When Omar woke up, Halil would toast him a frozen waffle for breakfast and take him to day care before falling finally into bed to sleep the day away.

By then, Jessica would already be at work. Hayes was coming by to pick her up soon, and he was always on time.

Photo Credit: United States Air Force