New Fiction from Robert Alderman: “Shaved”

This is how the fight happened: earlier that morning, while waiting on reveille to bugle from the loudspeakers across the blacktop, Harvey forced it on the new kid, Private Gilmore, as the rest of us watched, some gruff comment about his curly, black ponytail—the barbers hadn’t shaved him yet. Only two days into OSUT, Ft. Benning’s one-stop infantry shop, and the poor kid couldn’t catch a break. I remember shaking my head as Harvey yelled out to all the knuckleheads huddled there in formation, “What the hell’s this faggot thinking enlisting without a haircut?” And right along with every other shivering private, he laughed and laughed.

Gilmore had arrived late the night before from Hortons Bay, up in Michigan, and right from the start of that cold January morning, Harvey Coates had it out for him.

“Bet that bitch has some nice pussy!” Harvey slapped his battle buddy, Wilkins, on the arm. “Hey, you think the Army issues jungle-green tampons?”

Gilmore muttered, “Shut the fuck up.”

Just what Harvey wanted. That Alabama redneck wasn’t exactly looking for a fair fight. He just needed a quick release, all pent-up from the barracks. “Boy better not mind me tugging on that cute little ponytail tonight,” he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “‘cause he’s gettin’ *fucked* up.”

And just then, Drill Sergeant Malone emerged from HQ and snapped the entire column to attention, stomping into the asphalt with the heel of his polished black boot. Two other drill sergeants followed close behind. When Malone spotted Gilmore, he let out a low whistle, advancing upon him slowly. “Well, ain’t you just the battalion beauty queen!”

Gilmore’s eyes glanced at Malone as he approached.

“Why your eyes flickering at me, private? You see something you like?” Then the drill sergeant leaned in to Gilmore’s left ear. “Oh, I think so, battle. I think this joker does see something he likes.” Malone’s voice got really low, then—I could only hear him because I was nearby. “Hey, private. Maybe, we can work something out, you and me. Maybe, I’ll slip in the barracks tonight, when everybody’s sleeping,” he whispered. “Maybe I’ll let you touch it. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, private?”

Sweating bullets, Gilmore said, “Drill sergeant, no, drill sergeant!”

“You don’t like my cock, private? What’s wrong with it?” Malone’s voice got louder and louder until he was screaming. “Why wouldn’t you want it in the palm of your hand? You think it’s ugly, private? Not big enough like you’re used to?”

That poor bastard didn’t know what to say. “No, I—uh, yes, drill sergeant?”

Malone threw his campaign hat at the ground and yelled down the rest of the line, “Hey, Bravo Company! Listen up!” Malone checked the kid’s name tag. “Private Gilmore here asked me to slip in the barracks tonight so he can rub my dick purple. That the kind of battle buddy ya’ll want in this Army? A special kind of ground pounder? Or is this joker just the typical slack-jawed fuck-face that makes up this training cycle?” He waited as the wind blew. “Answer me, faggots!”

Within five minutes, the drill sergeants forced Gilmore to wear his hair down around his shoulders. They dressed him up in a flamingo-striped civvy polo and then mix-matched it with a pair of regulation BDU bottoms. And that was just the beginning. By the end, Gilmore was bear crawling up and down the hallway, with his ass up in the air, yelling out, “I want a big, gay Viking to ride me! I want a big, gay Viking to ride

me!” Their fun lasted over an hour, turning Gilmore into a rock star, a company legend.

I didn’t get to see it all. And honestly, I’m glad I didn’t. Although my hair was a lot shorter than Gilmore’s and I’d cut it before heading to Georgia, it stuck out like a thick mane even by the laxest military standards. That was the thing. You didn’t want to be different from anybody else. And mine was just long enough to be different—ten minutes before that, while headed to the latrine for a shit, I’d seen Harvey smirking and pointing at me with Wilkins, who pretended to toss his hair like some Vidal Sassoon model. That’s probably why I kept so close to the Michigan kid. It was pack animal mentality: I knew they’d go after the longest hair first.

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Gilmore finally caught up to me a few hours later. “Lookit,” he mumbled with that Michigan accent. He nodded down the hallway at this other recruit who’d gotten singled out by the drill sergeants. “Elliott’s got the mannequin.” Probably out of his instinct to survive—by finding someone lower on the totem pole than he was in that moment—Gilmore’d pointed out another company pretender, Tommy Elliott, who’d already skipped PT for sick-call three times in a row. Well, now they had that fat fuck sliding his duffel bags along the cold vinyl flooring with this ridiculous dummy-soldier slung across his back. A traditional hawes carry.

Officially, the dummy was known as Private Emanuel Ken—the drill sergeants always called him out during roll-call—but they told us he liked to go by “Manny” on the block. The top-half of a faded CPR dummy from the 70’s, the mannequin had been dressed up in old BDU’s to look like one of us. They’d built the lower half of his body by stuffing flimsy pillows into the leggings of an Army uniform strapped to the dummy’s waist, using olive-green utility rope and a spare pistol belt. A camouflaged patrol cap topped off his head. One of the

supply sergeants joked that they packed half a sand bag in his crotch to help Malone pick him apart from the rest of us.

“Private Ken!” Malone would yell across the barracks at the dummy, which was propped up against the wall to make him stand. “Sound off with your name, Manny Ken!” The drill sergeant charged past us right across the bay as if he were going to hit him. “Why don’t you ever sound the hell off?” Sometimes Malone yelled so loud at him, Manny’s legs would cave-in at the knees like a raptor, his entire body deflating under the drill sergeant’s shadow. “Since Private Ken ain’t enthusiastic today like the rest a-you dickheads, I’ll just have to make the whole company push!” And so, another smoke session would begin.

Wikipedia. “Drill Instructor at the Officer Candidate School.”

But the mannequin wasn’t just an excuse to regularly fuck us. The drill sergeants kept their eyes open for unattended TA-50.

They said we were accountable for every last piece of our issued gear, so to hammer that home, when a private left a Kevlar at the water cooler and turned his back to crack a joke with his buddy, they'd swoop in, and God help you if Malone got his hands on your sensitive equipment before you did. It could be taken that quick.

The punishment was always the same: Private Manny Ken. You'd get 24 hours of light duty honing your fireman's carry, that familiar dummy weighing across the length of your back, that sandbag pressing into it hard. Made a long day even longer. I remember Malone crooning over me the one time I earned it, "That's good training, private!" hands on his hips like a proud parent. "Damn fine training." The mannequin was heavy against my body, and a layer of sweat had started to form, but even so, I pulled it tighter.

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That afternoon, Malone marched our entire company to the PX, the Walmart of the Army. We'd get to buy phone cards there, and buzz cuts. As our feet loped along, out of step and undisciplined, the pine trees loomed along the road like an old frontier fort's paling. The January wind had died somewhat. Then the PX came into view—a low brick building with the words *Post Exchange* in thick, bold lettering. Our phone privileges lay inside. A gang of drill sergeants stood on the street corner across from there, shooting the shit, and after taking one good look at our marching column, they shook their heads.

Malone greeted them. "When I get these jokers down-range next week, ya'll gonna be happier than fags at a hot dog stand!"

"You sure right about that," one of the drill sergeants shouted back.

"It's just too easy, battle—too easy!" Malone pulled his belt up a little higher as he passed them on by and grinned.

The entire cluster of campaign hats doubled over, and they began talking fast to each other, just low enough so that we couldn’t hear them. I swear, even though they were laughing the entire time, they glared at us like a pack of hungry wolves tethered by invisible leashes, growling through rabid teeth.

To avoid mixing us with the rush of Army wives and old retirees, Malone filed the company into the PX through a side entrance, warning us: “You will all shut the fuck up and act respectful inside, is that understood? And you’d better not be cat-callin’ any teenage girls or officers’ wives. If I see or hear any of that shit, it’s gonna be a long fucking night, privates—a *long* fucking night! I don’t give a flying titty if you’ve got a PT test tomorrow. I will smoke you retarded, trackin’?”

“Drill sergeant, yes, drill sergeant!”

“All your fancy handbags are locked up in storage, so the Army’s gonna give you a monetary advance.” The drill sergeant pulled out a stack of what looked like black debit cards from his pocket. “Each of you gets a 200-dollar money card. That’ll get ya’ll through reception until them first paychecks hit at the end of the month. Since Mother Army don’t put out nothin’ for free if she ain’t gettin’ something back, your earnings statement will show this amount deducted.”

Good ol’ Mother Army.

Shops lined the exchange’s main corridor inside—a women’s salon, vitamin store, uniform tailor, travel rep office, food court, and barber shop. The main department store had its own double-wide entrance, flagged with shoplifting detectors. After a quick glance inside, I could see designer clothing racks, a shoe department, grocery aisles, shelves lined with Harlequin romance novels, and even a big sign for home decorating and gardening. Everything a man needed to get by.

Malone snaked us around the entrance of the barber shop in long, orderly rectangles, packing us in elbow-to-elbow and nut-to-butt. When a few of us caught glimpses of the younger wives or the older daughters moving past, we kind of puffed up and all, being that we were dressed for the first time in our Army uniforms. “Move aside for them shoppers, privates. Eyes front. Mouths shut.” His inside voice was considerably lower than the one he used on the blacktop. The drill sergeant pointed at the main department store. “When ya’ll finished getting a haircut, head straight to them workers up front and buy a shaving kit.” He hesitated, then rolled his eyes. “You can get phone cards, too.”

“Holy shit,” Elliott cried.

“We’re really getting phone cards!” Gilmore said.

Our first chance to call back home. A collective sigh issued from the entire company as we grinned with excitement—all in agreement, for once.

Suddenly, Malone was up in Elliott and Gilmore’s face, whispering loud enough so we could all hear: “Have you two dirty dick-beaters lost your damn mind? If you two don’t shut the fuck up this instant, I’m gonna stick my foot up both your asses and wear you around like a pair of autistic flip-flops!” The drill sergeant looked the rest of us up and down, watching us squirm like kindergartners about to start recess as a pair of grannies shuffled by. He nodded his campaign hat at them politely. “Afternoon, ladies,” which made them blush. When they were far enough away, he added, “And *no fucking candy*, privates. It’s contraband. Makes your dick small.”

The first recruits rushed into the barber shop as soon as Malone gave the word, and the old men inside directed them to the row of black leather chairs on the righthand wall, reserving the left side for non-recruits. This portly grandma wearing thick glasses waved me over after ten minutes of

waiting. She was the only lady barber. “Get over here, son.” My turn to get shaved and soldiered, I guessed.

I sat down and said, “A number one on the sides and a taper near the top—”

“Boy, you gettin’ a monkey cut!” She palmed my head with her hand and flicked the razor on. It buzzed like a wasp as she brought it close to my ears. I felt it press against my sideburn and shave up my temple, a rush of cool air on my open skin. Clumps of hair didn’t fall like I thought they would—the razor had this vacuuming device built into it that sucked the loose debris down a thick tube. As she mowed up and down the back of my neck and head, the barber yelled over the razor’s noise, “You got a lotta moles on your head, boy.” I watched her in the mirror as she ran her tongue across the front of her teeth. “That’s a sign of good luck.”

I felt special. Then I felt a sharp pain.

“Oh. Sorry about that.” She’d cut one of my lucky moles. A thin stream of blood ran down the smooth grooves on my scalp. “Just nicked you some. You’ll be all right.” She only slowed her handiwork to slop a hot, dripping wash cloth on my skin, rubbing it over the wound. “It’ll heal.” When she’d finished my hair, the barber spun me around to give me a good look in the mirror, holding a smaller one up behind me so I could see the back of my head’s reflection.

I looked like a leukemia patient. My eyebrows were longer than what was left atop my head. She might as well have shaved them off, too! If there was one thing I’d taken pride in as a civilian, it’d been my thick, dirty blonde hair, all styled and gelled. Ma always said I’d never go bald. Apparently, a sliver of Cherokee blood ran in her family.

The barber slapped a cotton ball against the cut and fastened it down with white electric tape. “That’s the only band aid I got, kid. Clean it tonight in the shower.”

Next, I had to get my Private E-2 rank sewn on my uniform at the tailor shop. Because I was a university drop-out with over thirty college credits, the Army decided to promote me to a higher starting rank than the kids out of high school, but that meant I needed the E-2 patch sewn onto my BDU collars and my field patrol cap. This Korean lady behind the shop counter steadily worked at the needle and thread with her lined and thin hands. She seemed to know that I was in a hurry, but took her sweet-assed time. There was a moment, when she was about halfway done with her delicate work, that the patch just hung there flimsy off my uniform as I watched. A single chevron rested on it. It made me wonder about the Asian ladies—swarms of them worked as grocery baggers, wives, and tailors on most military installations. They came from countries our soldiers had conquered. Now they labored to provide.

When she finished, I paid her the four-dollar fee and moved on to the main department store to get my shaving kit and phone cards, like Malone ordered.

Gilmore—still rubbing at his own landscaped head—nudged my arm when we'd finished shopping and formed back up outside. "Bro, you might wanna get back in there and buy some Selsun Blue," he said. "Your head's ate up with mad dandruff."

Elliott laughed. "He's right! Red patches all over your scalp."

"Sons of bitches," I muttered. That was the other reason I loved having a thick head of hair—they hid my skin flakes.

But there wasn't any time for that. Malone had returned. "Fall in!" The company formed up too slowly, and it made our drill sergeant grit his teeth. But something kept his anger in check. "Hurry up," he shouted at a few stragglers. When the company was ready, he looked us over. "I tell you what," Malone said, before ordering *column-right march*. "A company of fresh-bald privates'll make even the most grizzled old first

sergeant weep. Goddamn beautiful."

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"Phone calls!" Malone came storming into the bay. "You shit-birds get fifteen minutes, the whole damn company!"

Our entire bay of recruits dropped what they were doing and scrambled for their phone cards, stashed away in wallets and duffle bags, even their shaving kits. We pressed out the bay doors to a series of metal booths with black pay phones under white artificial lights. We still wanted our mothers to save us. Each recruit jockeyed for position. "Every man gets three minutes!" Malone yelled. "That includes dialing time." Then our fearless leader signaled the phone calls to begin, even as privates were already dialing home.

I was about halfway back in the third line. Gilmore stood in front of me, his face impatient and eager. "It's pot roast night," he said aloud to everybody and nobody. "Momma makes the best damn pot roast—I hope to God I can smell it."

Elliott was huddled against his booth one line over, trying to hide the fact that he was crying. Some of the more respectful privates just turned away, pretending not to notice. It seemed the right thing to do. But a few made sure to rub it in good.

"Be gentle with her," Harvey was saying to Wilkins. "She just needs a little something in the bay tonight to make her feel better."

I hated that motherfucker.

"Twelve minutes!" Malone shouted.

Gilmore was up. I've never seen someone dial a phone number so fast. You woulda swore he called 911. That got me thinking about who I'd call on my turn so I could dial it just as quick. My girl needed a phone call, for sure, but I hadn't told my parents that I'd enlisted yet. They still thought I

was back home.

“Nine minutes!”

Gilmore’s back got animated. He was talking too low for me to hear, but I just knew he’d gotten his mom on the phone. Whatever he was saying sounded really happy. Family does that for you. No matter how many times you hurt each other, you can always push all that aside. Just be there for each other. I rubbed at the palm of my hand. The artificial lights hummed above, and for the first time, it dawned on me how quiet Ft. Benning was. Above the still pine trees and the freshly mowed grass, the American flag, towering above our complex and wider than several cars, hung limp from its metal post.

“Hurry, man. Time’s up.”

Gilmore turned and gave me a dirty look.

“Six minutes!”

“You’re done, Michigan.” I inched forward to the booth, trying to be as close to that damn phone as possible so I could get a dialing head start.

“Back the fuck up,” he mouthed to me, pissed. “I’m talking to my momma!”

“We all gotta momma.” I flashed him my phone card, as if to reason.

Gilmore shook his head and turned back into the booth. “I gotta go,” he said. “Tell Charley and Liz I miss and love them. You need any money, mom? I’m gonna send you my first check.” He listened for a few seconds. “Nah, I’ll be fine. It’s going straight into your account. Just keep your eyes open for it soon—I know, I know. But I gotta go.” He let out a deep breath. “Love you, too.”

I heard her tell him, “My big strong young man! I’m so proud

of you.”

Then I pounced on that damn phone. Gilmore started throwing sass my way, but I was too busy reading the dang instructions on the phone card. It took me over a minute just to get through to the other side.

And then she picked up.

“Hello?” Her voice sharp and suspicious—it *was* after eight o’clock. I could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen sink.

“Ma.”

The sink faucet got quieter. “Danny? Is that you? Why are you calling from a strange number? You’re lucky I didn’t hang up.”

“Look Ma, I can’t talk long. There’s a line behind me.”

“A line? Did you drop your phone and break it again?”

“No, Ma. I didn’t drop it—”

“Well, no wonder you didn’t answer your phone last night. I tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. We can meet tomorrow at the mall and I can get you a new one—”

“Ma, *listen*. I’m a hundred miles away from there. Is Dad around?”

“You didn’t go on another one of those EMD road trips, did you?”

“It’s E-D-M, Ma: electronic dance music.”

“Oh, God, you’re at a pay phone and you’ve lost all your money again! Last time you lost your wallet I had to wire money into your account just to—”

“Jeez, it’s not *that*. I’ve got all my money, for cryin’ out

loud!” My grip squeezed the edge of the phone booth. “I joined the Army.”

It sounded like a glass casserole dish struck the sides of her stainless-steel kitchen sink. “You did *what*?”

“They sent me to Ft. Benning.” I wrapped my finger around the telephone cord. “Same as Dad.” As I waited for her answer, I noticed that the metal phone booth had a clean look to it, like it had been wiped down recently by recruits that looked too bored when Malone waltzed by. Those little smear marks you always see after.

It reminded me of this one time, back in high school, when my mother had called my little brother into the driveway to help Dad carry this heavy couch she had ordered from La-Z-Boy. She came into my bedroom right before and told me to Windex the front bay window, so I took the paper towels and went into the living room like I was told, spraying that blue shit all over the glass panes. Wiping and wiping at them. When I started working the double-hung on each side, I saw my Dad and brother out there, struggling to heave that big-assed piece of furniture up the sidewalk and through the front door. Even though he was in his late fifties, Dad kept up his old PT routine, hitting the gym pretty regularly. My brother sometimes lifted weights with him, too. Ma stood outside watching them, hands on her hips, the three of them out there working. I guess I really never liked the gym anyways. As I finished my chore, I went to set the Windex bottle on the dining room table, but just then, Ma came inside and took it from me, tucking it into the shadows of a kitchen cabinet as I watched.

“Three minutes!”

“Look, I gotta go. We only get a few minutes to call.”

“But—wait, Danny! When did you—? What does this mean?”

“Hey, get off, rawhide. I need my phone call, too.” Wilkins behind me.

I raised my elbow at him to fuck off and give me another minute. “It means—” I uncoiled my finger from the cord. “It just means I ain’t got no choice, Ma.”

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Later that night, Harvey finally hit him. It was about a minute or two into personal hygiene. Gilmore had walked up to his own bed and laid his uniforms on top of it, and as he adjusted the bags and tried to figure out how he’d store the things—maybe under his bunk, he’d said aloud—and as he talked with Elliott, who was sleeping on the mattress above him with that damned mannequin by his side, about how all the girls in the hick town he was from were easy to sleep with if you knew how to hunt or fish, Harvey rounded the aisle with a small, patriotic wall of eager recruits, their heads gleaming under the LED lights. Every last one of them savaging for a good fight. He locked eyes on poor Gilmore, that scarred eyebrow tightening on his skull as he picked up speed, and leaning forward, swung hard at the Michigan kid’s baldness. Harvey’s forearm bulged as Gilmore’s head snapped back. The poor bastard slid along the polished floor until his body stopped. Gilmore lay there a moment, a puffy redness around his right eye that immediately began swelling. He palmed blindly at the metal bunk rails nearby.

“Get up, muthafucker,” Harvey shouted. “You think I was playin’?” He reached down and grabbed Gilmore by the shirt and yanked him up, landing his rough, beefy knuckles on the Michigan boy’s nose. Blood slung through the warm barracks air. “I ain’t no liar—I said I’d fuck you up this morning, that’s what I meant!” Harvey hit him again and Gilmore’s skull whipped up and down like a fishing bob in the water. The poor bastard’s mouth hung open in shock, his eyes wide with fear.

“Please—stop, Harvey!” he begged, panting heavy. “I don’t want to—”

“The fuck you don’t.” He hit him one more time and Gilmore crumpled to the floor. Then Harvey hocked up a huge wad of spit. The phlegm shot from the roughneck’s lips onto the naked scalp at his feet, and then, his face red and his blood pumping, he stomped on the poor kid’s stomach. Gilmore heaved and whimpered and fell again to the floor. After finishing, Harvey shook his head with disgust and barreled through the crowd, storming away to his side of the barracks.

The Michigan boy just laid there, crying.

We all stood around and looked at him for a while, waiting for him to get up. I went over finally and put my hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Someone muttered *man, he fucked him up* and then the crowd began to disperse, in ones and threes, until only me and Elliott stood around him. He helped me pull Gilmore off the ground and we tucked him in bed. I wrapped the sheets over his shivering form. Turning away to my own bunk one aisle over, I stripped off my uniform, piece by piece, covering myself in a thin towel. Then the shower heads in the latrine fired up, and listening to them, like a faraway rain, I drifted through the barracks until I stood underneath one, its hot lines of water tracing my exposed body and face. The thick steam roiled across the checkered tile flooring, and as the other privates lined the showers—saying little—their collective sigh rose above the running water. It came up heavy and joined the showers’ mists.