

New Fiction from Matthew Cricchio: "War All the Time"

The Staff Sergeant shifted in his tight, class-A uniform and frowned. Phones rang and keyboards, the primary weapon of administrative Marines, clicked in the busy Personnel Support Detachment office. I said *please* a lot even though, if I hadn't lost my eye, I'd never beg a guy like that for a thing.

"Please, Staff Sar'nt. Who else can I talk to?"

"For what, Sergeant Bing?"

"So I can stay in the Marines. I want to do my job." I leaned in close so no one could hear me insisting, and pulled on the ragged border of my destroyed eye, the pink skin bubbling where the upper eye lid should've been. "I can still be a grunt."

"Yeah?" he said, holding his black government pen on my blind side. "Catch this." The falling pen disappeared into the darkness of my non-vision and he groaned as he bent over to pick it up from the floor. "The Med Board makes these decisions. Not me. But it's obvious you can't see out of that eye." He took one last look at my paperwork before putting it into a folder and handing it to me. "You barely have an eye."

"But they let wounded guys come back a lot. Last year in the Marine Corps Times they wrote about that Recon Gunny who went to Iraq with a fake leg." A line of Marines looking to sort out pay issues, Basic Housing Allowance disbursements, life insurance policies, built up behind me and the Staff Sergeant became anxious to move me along.

"Marine Corps says you gotta have two eyes for combat shooting."

I'd been to Iraq, two times, and Afghanistan. I had my Combat Action Ribbon. Even had a gold star device on the damn thing. This guy, whose uniform was too tight, whose hands were too soft when we shook, knew fuck all about shooting, let alone combat.

"All due respect, Staff Sergeant, your rifle range isn't the same as my deployments."

"I understand, Sergeant Bing. What I guess I'm saying is," he leaned down to his cluttered desk, grabbed the hefty wad of my medical record and pushed that into my chest too. "People come here every day wanting out. Faking injuries, getting arrested just so they can get kicked out. They want out bad. We process them quick so they can go back to whatever fucked up place they came from. But *you*," he came around his desk, put his arm over my shoulder and walked me out because I wasn't getting the point. "You'll be medically retired. Have free health-insurance until you die. Get a pension. The whole nine. This is your new life. You gotta embrace it." At the front door, he turned away and called the next person in line.

It only took walking those 20 feet and I wasn't a marine anymore.

*

I was in the Holding Company for another week before they finalized my medical retirement pay. Legally restricted from driving, I had to ask my parents to pick me up from the base. We rolled through the gate, past the marines in formation, in pairs, in dress blues, class- A's, and cammies and I felt like the kid who was embarrassed to have his friends see his mom pick him up after school. They were in. I was out.

We drove from Camp Lejeune to Virginia Beach in record time if they give records for being as slow as possible. My dad was against me living alone, so during the entire trip he was stalling at rest stops, barbeque restaurants, and those giant

road signs marking long destroyed historical sites.

“I’ve always wanted to read these things. Haven’t you?” he yelled over the scream of passing cars on the highway as he read the tiny, raised print. My mom was quiet and probably just very happy I wasn’t in the Marine Corps anymore. What none of us ever talked about was the fragments, from the bullet that hit me, lodged in my brain. My parents were honest, even blunt people, but these fragments, which could migrate and possibly kill me, were something they were never honest about. Instead, they just talked about all the reasons me living on my own was a terrible idea.

Every time my dad slowed the trip down, I told him, making sure to thrust the badge of my eye forward, that I was still an adult. We’d lived in Virginia Beach when I was a kid. I knew the area and might even run into a few old friends. All I needed to do was dry out for a minute, get settled, and then start regular school. Through the internet I’d already rented a small, terrible apartment. Seriously, I’d been in much worse. When we got there they helped move my three cardboard boxes inside, took me out to eat, and lingered for a half-an-hour wanting to ask me, or tell me, to come home before they finally left without mentioning a thing.

*

I took a job interview at a grocery store because I could walk there from my apartment.

The assistant night shift manager, an older lady who seemed afraid of me but masked it with a sample tray of rainbow cookies from the bakery she put as a barrier between us, asked me the standard questions.

“What’s your work experience?” “I’m a Marine.”

“Is that,” the assistant night shift manager touched her eye socket unconsciously, “what happened?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Oh, okay.” She marked something on her piece of paper. I had the job if I was willing to work first shift, ready to help open the store at 0600. That was easy. What was hard was the slow pace, old people in the morning, unemployed people before lunch, working people shopping with no time to be shopping when work let out. Every instruction was broken down Barney-style until even my dumbest co-workers could get tasks done with little supervision.

Other than being on time, I had no responsibilities. It didn't matter that I led a fire team in Ramadi or Musah Qaleh. No one cared that my platoon had captured six High Value Targets in Iraq. Or that we fought our way out of multiple ambushes in Afghanistan, including when I was wounded. I “didn't yet have the grocery experience to be a morning lead cashier.” Sitting back wasn't the way I had been raised to work so when I saw problems I addressed them at the lowest possible level. That went wrong too when they wrote me up for approaching a chronically late coworker:

“Listen, Robbie. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you have to be on time.” The kid rolled his eyes at me. I moved forward, touched apron to apron. His eyes were brown and dumber than a blood hound's. “Don't fucking roll your eyes at me.”

“Listen man, you ain't the boss.” He smoothed his short moustache, licked his lips and stared at me meanly.

I clenched his apron. I was strong. He was not. Lifting him off his feet was an inevitable result of the laws of physics. “It's everyone's job to do their part. Don't be a Blue Falcon. Don't be a Buddy Fucker.” He was embarrassed, which was good—embarrassment is the truest motivation—so I put him down.

“This ain't the damn military,” he said without looking me in the eye. He walked away before turning to add, “bitch.” I'd

confronted him in the small break room in the back of the store, to avoid attention, but they'd heard the scuffle and the room filled with the fat ladies that worked in the dairy cooler. It took four of them, wrapping their soft arms around me, to hold me back from finishing him. I was suspended from work for a week.

Once a month, my father took me to my appointments at the VA Hospital. It worked out, because when the doctor asked if I was maintaining a "social support network" I could fake it and point to my dad who sat there, never betraying my independence, rubbing his face. I had the same doctor every time, which was good, but it was always the same speech. My scar would become less prominent. There'd be less fluid leaking. The unspeakable fragments in my brain couldn't be removed and our only option was to keep watching for migration. When the appointments were done, my dad would take me out to eat, argue cheerfully with me about sports, and as he dropped me off ask me to move to northern Virginia so I was closer to my parents. I refused, every time, and he'd nod sadly before driving away.

At night, in my apartment, I'd pace. I would pace for hours and be unable to control the energy of my legs, feet, and hands. I had no idea what I should be doing other than pacing.

*

When I first used the Adult Services page on Craigslist it was because I wanted to do something dangerous again. Something with a pay-off.

I only looked at the ads with pictures. They didn't offer sex, explicitly, but an hour of companionship. It was something they had to write in order to keep it legal. I called a few of the listed numbers to see what would happen:

"Yeah?"

“Hey, I saw your ad on Craigslist and was interested.”

“Okay sweetie, what time did you wanna come see me?”

“Hold on a minute. What’re your rates?” Money wasn’t really an issue for me. My apartment was cheap, I sat on lawn furniture, slept on a twin mattress on the floor. I had no bills. I just wanted to keep her on the phone.

“Everything,” she covered the phone and violently coughed. “Oh, ‘scuse me. Everything is on my ad, sweetie. I don’t discuss anything over the phone.”

“Will you give me a blowjob?”

The silence bulked between us. “I don’t discuss anything over the phone,” she said again, then hung up.



I kept searching and found a girl who called herself Octavia in her ad. 95 roses. Roses was code for dollars. I called, this time skipping the part where I asked for a blowjob, and she told me her motel. I walked there and called her again from the parking lot for her room number. Short and thick in a red velour jump suit, she was not as pretty as her picture. She had a tattoo of the Columbian flag on her neck.

"Columbiana?" I said.

"Ya," she motioned for me to sit on one of the unmade beds in the dim room. "How'd you know?"

"Took a guess." I didn't know what to do next. I took out the 95 dollars and put it on the bed. She didn't look at my face, my eye. She looked at the money. Then she looked at my cock.

When it was over, I walked home slowly in the delicious quiet. I'd tempted risk and won. It was good, felt like the old days. That night, in my rat-fucked apartment, I paced the beaten brown carpet. I felt like myself again. If I'd turned out the lights I would've sparked through the darkness.

The next escort I saw was a brunette. She had a tattoo like the other girl, except on her tit, but I couldn't even tell what it was because it looked like she'd done it herself. It was gray and, in the dim motel breezeway, looked like scratches over her stretch marks. When I knocked she swung the door open all the way and stared at me with her hands on her hips.

"Hi."

"You da boy dat just call me?"

"Yeah." She didn't move out of the doorway and I couldn't see inside the room except for the reflection of street lights on a mirror.

"What happen' to ya face?" She crossed her arms over her chest and the tattoo swelled out of her low-cut shirt.

"I kinda got shot." My skin prickled. I looked over her and nervously scanned the dark shapes in the room.

"Oh f'real? Damn. You got ma money?" I nodded and she suddenly dropped her arms to her sides and jumped out of the door way, jamming tightly against the frame.

A huge man ran out from inside the dark motel room and punched me in my destroyed eye. I heard his boots squeaking then there was a flash of white light, searing pain and heat. I fell down and couldn't move. He stomped on my legs and ribs.

The girl was screaming, "take his shit! Take all his shit!" He lifted me up by my belt, almost ripping my pants off, taking my wallet and phone. He looked for car keys and, not finding any, kicked me harder. When he found the keys to my apartment he threw them down into the parking lot.

"Not even a fucking car!" The girl screamed.

The man dragged me to the stairwell at the end of the breezeway. He punched me again in the eye before he threw me down the steps. I never saw his face and I can't tell you what he was wearing. But I can still smell his dusty breath and feel the drip of his sweat on my face as he worked me over. No one came out to investigate the screaming at that cheap motel, though there were lights on in some of the rooms when I walked up. No one cared about me.

I was bleeding heavily from my face. Even my ears bled. I didn't try to find my keys. I limped as fast as I could through some woods to my apartment and kicked in the locked front door. I'd tell the complex manager to fix it in the morning.

The last time I'd been hurt this bad was when I'd gotten shot in Afghanistan. After I was hit, PFC Meno dragged me down a wadi for cover, treated me for shock and held my hand until the medevac helo arrived.

Inside my apartment I wet some towels in hot water and mopped the new wounds. That Admin Staff Sar'nt who processed me out was right: this was my life now. I had to embrace it. I was alone and nobody was coming to save me. I had to adapt or be killed. I'd continue doing this dangerous thing, because that's who I was, but I decided that something like this would

never happen to me again.

*

I developed selection methods to help pick the escorts I would meet. I bought multiple Trac phones and called the girls from those. I'd never use a personal phone again. I set up a Tactical Operations Center in my living room. Multiple dry-erase boards hung from the walls listing phone numbers, girls they belonged to, and the copy from their Craigslist ads. I searched ads by phone numbers in other cities and states to develop a pattern of life analysis on which girls shared phones, worked with each other, or how often they left town, where they went, and when they came back. I had huge maps of Virginia Beach with acetate overlays so I could mark in wax pencil their motels. There was a kill board too, if something happened again while I visited a girl and my parents came looking for me they would know where I was last.

I called multiple girls to ask for the rates and chose to engage only the politest. This was no indication of safety but it was a method and better than my previous efforts. I'd send them to the wrong address in my apartment complex and watch from my window what they did when they got here, who was in the car with them, who followed them in another car. If a girl came to my fake address with a man in the car I never called her again. If a man followed in a separate car I never called her again.

Another thing I did was sit counter-surveillance in restaurants near their motels.

Sometimes late at night I'd hide behind a dumpster in the motel's parking lot and blow an air horn to see who came out of their rooms. If, after I blew the air horn, she came out with another man I'd never call her again. I mitigated risk at all cost.

I was visiting one escort a week but stopped having sex with

them. It wasn't about that anymore. We'd talk for an hour and I'd pay them for that and leave. I really was paying for the company.

My focus returned at the grocery store and around the same time I got an award from management. We even had a ceremony like the ones in the marines. I was the most productive worker for January. Everyone forgot about the time I'd been written up.

Besides the first one, the only other escort I had sex with was blond and slightly taller than me. She called herself Starr. Her thighs were thick and she had a small belly. Her face was beautiful and her hair wasn't brittle like the others. It was long and full and it looked strong, bouncing in the pony tail high on her head. She'd been drinking wine and watching television when I knocked on the door. She hugged me after I said hello, told me to sit on the bed.

"You're in the military," she said. "Why do you say that?"

"They hurt you."

"That was a long time ago." The room was dim and the fine smell of cigarettes came up when we shifted on the bed. It was warm. "Believe it or not it used to look worse."

"Either way it's no good." She reached up and touched my cheek. "My cousin is a Marine."

"Really? No way. I'm a Marine," I said.

"Oh, *you* must be the hot guy in his unit he was always telling me I should call." We laughed. "Come on." She kissed me, which no other girl ever did. "Let's have some fun."

When we were done I paid her for the hour even though I didn't stay. She insisted I keep half of the money. "Really, it's no big deal," she told me.

I usually showered immediately after I came back from a motel but I could smell the wine, cigarettes, and the lived-in feeling of her room. I went to sleep with all my clothes on.

*

The Motel 8 was on Virginia Beach Boulevard. It was L-shaped with rooms that faced a large parking lot. Every room had two windows, four feet by two feet, on either side of the door. All the windows had red curtains except rooms 108 and 222's were blue. The doors had hinges that opened to the inside. The six-digit grid for the Motel 8 was: 18SVF657453. I wanted 10 digits, which would be accurate within 10 meters, but my civilian GPS couldn't do it.

The maids began cleaning the rooms without Do Not Disturb signs around 0730 and usually finished at 1000. There was one maintenance man, black, 45 to 55 years of age, 5'8 to 5'10, 165-175 pounds, athletic build, short salt and pepper hair, goatee, glasses, thin gold chain around his neck and left wrist, usually in a gray button up shirt and black pants. The name "Sam" was stitched in red thread over his left breast pocket. Noticing these types of details kept me safe and tactically proficient.

The escort I was meeting in that Motel 8 posted a Craigslist ad titled JuSt wHaT YoU nEeD J . She offered half hour incall sessions for 100 roses and hour outcalls for 175 roses. An incall was me coming to the Motel 8, outcall was her getting into a 2002 sea green Honda Accord, license plate WSJ-1463, and driving to my apartment.

I was watching the motel from the Denny's across the street, shifting uncomfortably in the booth from the taser in my waistband digging into my hip. I almost left it at my apartment because when I got beat up the guy didn't use weapons but I'd just bought it and it was cool. I grabbed it, figuring it was like the intelligence I gathered; just another

way to diminish the danger.

I finished the runny eggs from my Grand Slam and called the escort on my cellphone, scanning the motel windows for movement. It rang four times as I slid down the sticky green vinyl booth to avoid the constant hover of the waitress refilling my coffee cup.

"Hullah?" She answered softly in a lilting southern accent.

"Hey, I called you earlier about meeting up." The blue curtain, room 222, second floor, north side, moved. That's where I had guessed she was staying. "Yep. I'm pulling up to the parking lot, just like you told me." She scanned the parking lot from her window. "What room should I come to?"

"222. The door's open, just come in."

"Be up in a minute," I said. I waited for her to close the curtain, took a last bite of a burnt sausage link, threw down twenty dollars and left the Denny's to go to her room.

Climbing the stairs to room 222, I unzipped my jacket. I wore the taser on the right side of my body, streamlined, low profile, and accessible. It was barely noticeable and I needed the extra seconds it would've taken to unzip a jacket in case something happened.

When I knocked she cracked the door and stared at me.

"Are you Krystal?"

"Maybe, are you James?"

"Yessum," I said. "My name is James Webb."

"Come on in, James." She smiled, opened the door and motioned me inside. Petite, her brown hair was teased into an obnoxious wave and held in a pink, ruffled hair tie. She looked *exactly* like her picture, which'd never happened before. The beds were

made like they hadn't been slept in. There were no suitcases in the room. I immediately didn't like the situation.

"Well, shit ya don't mind if ah smoke, d'ya?" I said, faking an accent. The room smelled like it had been scoured with chemicals.

"Honey, this isn't a smoking room." I knew something was wrong. I hadn't met an escort yet that didn't smoke. She went over to the bed and patted the cheap, magenta comforter. "Come over here, James. Right next to me. You got the money?"

The hair on my neck went stiff. My balls tightened into a knot. "Money for what?" I scanned the room. The bathroom door was closed. There was a door in the wall beside the two twin beds that led to the adjacent motel room. The chain lock was unlatched.

"We need money if we're going to fuck." She rubbed her face nervously. "Come on, take off your jacket."

"No. You take off your shirt, Krystal." I took a step back toward the front door.

"No, no, no, James. Not without money. You did come to this motel room to pay me to fuck, right?"

I started to breathe heavy. My hands clenched and unclenched. I threw my jacket open a little and it caught on the taser under my shirt. "Take your shirt off, Krystal."

"What's under that jacket, James?"

"My cellphone. See ya later." I reached for the door knob.

She quickly stood up from the bed, walking backwards to the door that joined the two rooms. "*Brisket.*"

"What the fuck." I drew my jacket completely open.

"*Brisket,*" she said again and the connecting door exploded

inward as a tall, fat, bald guy pushed it until it was completely open. Another man was behind him. He had a blonde handle bar moustache and a jean shirt. They both pointed pistols at me.

When you're in an ambush, particularly a near ambush, the only way to survive is to rush that ambush. I crouched and combat-glided toward her pimps, reaching for the taser.

When I was an E-2 or E-3 and deploying to Iraq for the first time, a psychologist gave us a lecture on something called Cooper's Scale. It's a color-coded scale of mental states in stressful situations. It started with white, which was being completely in la-la land and progressed to yellow which was having your head on a swivel. Next was red, when you focused in on one thing to the slight detriment of other events around you. You usually went red when you were engaging the enemy in combat but it was best to be there for just a moment and quickly peel back to yellow. The spectrum ended with black. Black was pure dumb instinct. If you went black you had no recollection of what you did. Go white or black in a fire fight and you will die. Yellow and red are fucking fun. When that connecting door opened and I saw those guys with guns I went pure yellow, like the color of melted butter.

"He's going for something!" The big, bald guy screamed. He was in Weaver stance with his gun on me at center mass. That's when I knew they weren't pimps. Pimps aren't tactical.

The two cops cleared the corners and moved down the wall just like they were supposed to. The girl was gone. I dropped the taser and raised my hands. I'd seen enough movies to know what to do next.

"I hate to break it to you fellas," I lifted my shirt above my chest to show them I didn't have anything else. "But this isn't the first time people've put guns in my face." That wasn't the truth. I hardly ever saw the people who'd shot at

me. It just sounded badass.

Do you see how war works? You train to fight an enemy by transforming yourself through pain into whatever it is you need to be to win against that particular foe. But, when you have worthy adversaries, there's always something else waiting to surprise you. I assumed I'd get beat up and robbed again. Getting arrested never even crossed my mind.

I was cuffed after they punched me a couple of times for scaring the shit out of them.

*

Later, the big, bald cop interrogated me in a barren room at the police station. "Your name's Rod Bing, right?"

"Yep."

"Not James Webb."

"No, but it was clever wasn't it?"

The bald cop snorted like a bull. "Do you regularly see prostitutes?"

"Maybe."

"Do you pay them?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you see a lot of prostitutes in this area?" "Possibly."

He slapped the table forcefully. "I can't help you if you don't help me, Rod." "Help with what?"

"You seem like a smart guy. In shape, good looking."

"Damn straight."

"Why would you do something like this? Don't you have friends?"

Girlfriends?" "I was trying to figure out my next move before I got around to that."

"Tell me what's going on. So I can help you."

"Sure," I said. "But you're not going to get a narrative response out of me by asking leading questions. That's amateur shit. Didn't they teach you how to interrogate?" I threw up my cuffed hands and smirked.

"Okay, maybe you don't want me to help you." He looked around like he was searching for something that had just been in his hand. The room was as tight as a broom closet and the cinderblock walls were sweating with condensation. "You smoke cigarettes, Rod?"

"No."

"You want a soda?"

"Never."

"What the fuck do you do other than meet prostitutes?" He slammed his hand again but not to scare me. He was genuinely frustrated.

"There you go! An interrogative! *What* do I do? Look at me, I'm a beast."

"So you like to work out? Okay. What're your favorite supplements?"

"Fuck that," I said. "If it had a face, soul, and a mother I eat it. If it grows out of the ground or you can pick it from a tree I eat it." I smirked again. "All that other shit'll kill you."

"You like music?"

"Sure."

"What type?"

"I'll be that asshole and just say I listen to everything. That's what everyone else says, right?"

"You look like a rock guy."

"Uh." I shrugged. "Okay."

"Who you like?"

"I don't know, man. Okay? I like fucking music."

"You were in the Marine Corps, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm in the Army Reserves. I've been to Afghanistan twice. You deploy anywhere?"

"Iraq twice, Afghanistan once. Marine Corps Infantry, man. You see? *That's* what I'm really supposed to be doing. Not this prostitute shit." I leaned across the narrow table. "You know what a Pashtun is?"

"They're the people in southern Afghanistan, right?" "You got it. What about the Popalzai?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what those are."

"The Popalzai are a Pashtun tribe. See, that's what I do. I try to be the best at my job. So I studied Afghanistan harder than my officers because knowing everything would keep my marines alive. I was good at my job because I put in the work. That's who I am." I placed my cuffed hands on the table, pushing them toward his scribbled note pad. "The Pashtun tribal structure is tight because it's really what they all have in the end. Without your tribe you don't exist. If you're a Pashtun that gets kicked out of your tribe, you might as well be dead. It's like being shit out." I licked my dry lips. "Do you know what it feels like to be *shit out*?"

"No," he said.

Of course he didn't. But I did.

*

"Turn here," I told my dad. He hadn't said a word since he picked me up from the police station. "You want to get something to eat?"

"Nope."

"Yeah, you're right. I was only in jail for 36 hours with no food." I stretched in my seat. "But then again I'd rather be a skinny dog in the streets than a fat dog on a leash." He was mad so he was giving me the dramatic silent treatment. Typical for my dad. "It's just a misdemeanor."

He accelerated to a red light and stuck the brakes hard. "How are you going to keep your job?"

"The grocery store? Fuck that job." Turning into the parking lot of my apartment complex, he found a spot and threw the gear violently into park. "Look, I know it took you awhile to get over me being hurt," I said. "You were mad I even joined the Marines. But being in the Marine Corps was good for me. Really good."

"Shut up, Rod." He sat back and exhaled loud. It was all fucking drama. "You're being a stress monster, dad."

"Yeah, really? What'd I tell you would happen if you lived on your own? Look at this place." He motioned through the windshield at my rundown apartment complex. "You can't live here. You need to come back with me."

"Fine, whatever." I pulled the handle on the car door. "Not much left for me here anyway."

"Rod," he whispered. Still all theater. "You're not well."

I opened the door and swung my feet out, back turned. "You need to understand that I'm only coming to live with you because I don't want to live here anymore. Not because you're asking me to."

"Rod, you're in a lot of trouble."

"And you're more drama than Shakespeare." I got out of his car. "Come inside and help me with my stuff."

My dad lost his mind when I opened the door to my apartment.

"Holy shit, Rod. This is bad." He spun in place, taking in the entire living room, the maps, the kill board, the six digit geocords of motels on white boards, the picture printouts.

"This is bad bad bad." He walked over to the comms gear on the sagging card table. "How many phones is this? You got a dozen cell phones?" He picked two up, raising them over his head, and turned toward me.

"Trac phones," I said. "Throw-aways. The primary communication method of drug dealers, insurgents and terrorists at large. And this guy." I smiled at him, his shock, but also at the order and symmetry of my work. He dropped the phones, their backs blowing open and lithium batteries spilling on the carpet. I stooped to the ground. "Come on, these are fragile."

"-Is this a HAM radio? Is it? What is this for?" His mouth hung open in surprise. I put the reassembled trac phones on the card table and took hold of his wrists before he broke something else. He let me move him, like a tired child, toward the single nylon lawn chair in the middle of the room. Seated, I placed the HAM radio on his lap.

"I bought it on E-Bay for like 20 bucks. It's fucking useless. Just looks badass." I sat at his feet, cross-legged on the brown and dirty carpet, looking up at his face for something more than terrified shock.

“Rod, son.” He placed the radio at his feet and looked away from what he must of thought was a terrible sight. “Not good. None of this.”

I laughed when he said that to convince him that this wasn't a problem. It was cool. This stuff, this way of life, was cool. “Look.” I swept my hand across the space. “You're getting a glimpse into what I did for 6 years. Welcome to my TOC.”

He stood from the lawn chair, stared at me. His eyes were lined with tears and he tilted his head back to keep them from spilling out. “Come here. Stand up,” he said. I grabbed his hand and he took my shoulders for a moment before pulling me against his body. “This is not the only thing you have to be.” He pushed me away to see my face and held my head on the wounded side. My dad rubbed my scar softly. “You can be something else.”

I slapped his hand away impulsively then grabbed it again, pushing it into the thick bands of my scar. The tear ducts in my wounded eye were gone but I cried from the other. “But I didn't want to be anything else, Dad. This is what I wanted to be.”

“Come home with me. We'll figure it out.”

Just like mom, my dad had never wanted me to become a Marine. He didn't get it, never had any desire to do it himself, hadn't ever even known anyone in the military except for my grandfather who was in World War II but never talked about it—like *everyone else's* fucking grandpa—and had spent his life wearing a collared shirt and some khaki pants hanging out in an office and drinking coffee with co-workers he called friends but never came over to our house for birthdays or holidays or even a summer party, let alone hide him in a wadi and keep him alive as bullets screamed over their heads. And he was convinced I would get PTSD, probably because he'd watched too many sad Vietnam movies. I couldn't explain to

him that machine guns had made me excited the same way footballs and baseball bats or SAT prep had for other kids. And sometimes I wish I hadn't been their only kid, had an older brother or sister that joined just so I could blame it on them and make it easy.

But when I graduated boot camp, and *especially* when I started to deploy, my dad became prouder than anyone I knew. He bought a Marine Dad hat at Parris Island and a t-shirt too, put my goofy looking boot camp photo on his desk at work. My mom once told me that he faced it toward the opening of his cubicle just so people could see it when they walked by and would ask him about me.

Later, when I was wounded, my dad barely came into my hospital room in Germany, and when he did, he'd spend five minutes there, never sitting, looking out the window before leaving again. I thought he was an asshole. Really, he just couldn't stand seeing me hurt.

Standing together in the living room, my dad asked me what I wanted to pack, but I was crying so hard I could barely talk. He took my clothes and we left as soon as he was done stuffing them in my sea bag. I never went back to that apartment in Virginia Beach. We went to my parent's house in Fredericksburg and they set me up in the newly finished room over the garage.

That first night I slept well and in the morning I could hear him downstairs talking to my mom before they went to work. It was the first morning in eight months I hadn't woken up alone.

Both him and my mom eventually went back to Virginia Beach and cleaned out my apartment, throwing out all of the TOC gear and bringing what was left home. There were boxes full of uniforms. The three boxes labeled *Afghanistan* had frayed, dirty cammies I'd worn for five months straight.

When my parents were at work I put one of the cammie blouses on, pulled a pair of the trousers up to my waist. In front of

the bathroom mirror I almost looked like myself. There was my wounded face and the muscle I'd lost but I was almost myself. It was the uniform that was wrong. On the chest there was the left name tape with my last name, BING, and another on the right that read US MARINES. I found my pig sticker knife in the same Afghanistan box and used it to cut off the US MARINES. I pulled the rest of the uniforms from the box and cut US MARINES off them too. I went back to the bathroom mirror. With just my last name the uniform looked much better.

I looked like who I was. I was good to go.

New Fiction from Roz Wiggins: “Lucky”



I.

Under a ceiling topped by swirling fans and surrounded by walls whose windows had no glass, the Private lay on the bed like a slab of stone as hands went about the routine tasks that evidenced that, despite all probability, he was still alive, even if no longer whole. The hands stuck a thermometer in the Private's mouth, which opened instinctively, and fastened a cuff around his bicep, then inflated it with a *whoosh, whoosh*. The hands searched his wrist for a pulse, and paused a while when it found one. They patted and tugged at the bandages that covered his pelvis and thighs, not in an intruding manner but with inquiry, before retrieving the thermometer from between his lips.

The hands were soft and delicate with smooth short fingers and nails that occasionally scraped the Private's skin. Sometimes, before leaving him, one of the hands would rest gently for a few minutes on the mound of bandages that encased the Private's face. Then the soft hand would seek out that small

square of his cheek that had been left uncovered like a forlorn orphan. The fingers would stroke the Private's cheek as if to convey to him that they knew he still existed, that he still was there, somewhere under the mountain of gauze and adhesive and plaster.

Several times a week there were other hands, meaty and calloused, that would grasp the Private and roll and lift him on and off a bedpan. Other times they would lift him onto a gurney and set him aside while they changed the bedsheets stained with the blood and slime that oozed from his wounds or and with urine and shit when he had gone without the pan being under him. The strong hands would wipe along the exposed parts of his body with deliberation and efficiency, but with no more tenderness than if he was a tub that needed scrubbing. While he was set aside, they would change the sheets and then lift him roughly and return him, like an item being restocked, to his place in the middle of a bed smelling of bleach.

These things were happening to the Private in the dark silent space that he had come to inhabit ever since the day he had been on a hill in Kaesong with Randall. One minute they were trudging up the slope same as any other day, then there was a click—just a low barely audible sound, like snapping with butter on your fingers—and he had been thrown into the dark silent void.

Sleep came and went for the Private in the dark space, but there was no rest. Sometimes in the void, the Private smelled his Momma's buttermilk biscuits baking in the oven or his Pops' corncob pipe rich with his special blend of tobacco that he made from the first leaves of the harvest, which he reserved for himself and cured with slices of apple or pear until it had a sweet intoxicating aroma. And when the void seemed too deep and so dark that the Private was sure he might never leave, the musky scent of sweat that rose from Marren's cleavage just after she came held him from the abyss. All through basic training at Fort Jackson, all during the long

trip to Kaesong, and the stops at places with names he could hardly pronounce or remember, and then, even into the darkness, he had remembered lying beside Marren after they'd gone at it like a couple of rabbits in heat. He would close his eyes and suddenly he would be beside her watching her ample chest heave and inhaling her special scent.

The Private hoped that maybe one day he would have enough strength to leave the dark void. He was willing to go to Hell and back just so he could bury his soul in Marren's plump soft breasts until the light came again.

*

One day the Private heard a woman's voice singing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound," and it was like the voice of an angel because it had been a very long time since he had heard anything at all.

And then there were other voices—the fast, accented repartee that went along with the meaty calloused hands that lifted the Private on and off a pan several times a day and instructed him to piss or shit, which the Private sometimes did, and sometimes didn't. When he didn't, the meaty calloused hands were accompanied by foreign curses.

Most of the time what filtered through the Private's dark void was a general chattering and a low dirge of constant moaning. But from time to time, he would hear a car horn or a scratchy radio station, and all too often a nightmarish wail. Nighttime in the ward brought the low hum of the man who mopped down the floors with a strong ammonia odor that whipped across the Private's nose when the man splashed the mop under his bed. Then, the man's melodic self-serenade floated over to the Private like a jazz riff demanding to be heard.

Less frequently, other voices came; deep and authoritative, they invariably sounded irritated as big words flowed out. These voices were accompanied by the ruffle of papers,

unanswered inquiries put to the Private, hurried questions to the singing voice, a few pokes and prods and occasionally the splat of a dropped metal chart.

“Now keep your eyes closed,” one of the deep voices said one day as it unwound the bandage that had been tight around the Private’s head and eyes. “The glare may hurt at first, but you will get used to it. You won’t notice at first that the one is not there but eventually you will realize that you have a restricted view.”

The Private struggled to open his eye lids against the crusty muck that had built up across them and the tears that flowed without effort. He finally succeeded with the help of a warm cloth pressed to his face. After a minute, he saw a midget of a man with very hairy eyebrows looking back at him. The doctor stretched to shine a small flashlight into Private’s remaining eye and squinted through another instrument causing his eyebrows to move like fuzzy caterpillars.

“How’s it look, Private?” said the doctor. “Looks pretty good to me.”

The Private didn’t say anything because he didn’t know what to say. Didn’t the doctor know that at that moment anything, everything, *looked* good to him?

“There’s some shrapnel in your eye, but it’s too risky to try and remove it. You’re lucky that it’s not worse. Over time your vision may worsen as it moves around. Can’t say how long before you notice a difference. Could be years, could be a decade. But it’s just too risky to try and get at it.”

The midget doctor continued with his detailed explanation. He was an animated fellow and his face and caterpillar eyebrows bounced up and down as he looked at the chart then back at the Private throwing out words that pained the Private’s still recovering ears.

In response, the Private looked all around the ward trying to figure out just what he could see, and what he could no longer see, now that he was a one-eyed jack. The room's lights cast an irritating glare that stung like a lightning bolt. It caused him to keep closing his eye even though that was the last thing he wanted to do.

The Private heard the singing voice approach and turned to face a petite woman the color of toast, not Negro Colored like him, but different with a generous length of wavy black hair that fell down her back like a fine mule's tail and almond shaped eyes, very pretty.

"Good to have you back among the seeing, Private," the singing nurse said patting him gently on the arm. The Private looked down and saw the smooth delicate fingers that he had previously only felt.

"Maybe now, we can get you to say something too?" the nurse teased.

The Private watched the nurse with the singing voice as she cleaned up the spent bandages and scissors and returned the metal chart to the foot of his bed. She arranged his sheets and fluffed his pillows. Pausing by the head of the Private's bed when she'd finished, she smiled down at him. The smooth square of his cheek that had not been covered by bandages now lay in what would have passed more for a plate of raw hamburger than a face; red and craterous.

"I guess you'll just talk when you're good and ready, and not before," she said squeezing gently his hand that swallowed hers.

Once the singing nurse had left, the Private raised himself up the little bit he could; and saw what he had before only felt, the bulkiness of a cast that started under his armpits and ran down the length of his torso. He gingerly lifted the sheet and saw other bandages, great white mounds that were fitted

uncomfortably around him like a diaper (but open in the middle), and which spread down his right leg, devouring his knee but not his calf. His breath quickened at the sight and he hurriedly dropped the sheet letting it hide the mess he had become.

Later, when the Private felt that he had to pee, he wasn't on the pan and the men with the calloused hands were long gone. They had told him someone would come if he called. But he didn't. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe he was so messed up from the torrent of drugs that they were giving him to dull the incessant pain that he didn't know what he was doing. But some part of his brain told him that a man did not piss lying down flat on his back. So, he was determined to try.

The Private struggled out of the bed and onto his feet. It was rough going because the body cast did not allow him to bend. But he managed to get his feet to the floor and to grab hold of a chair that they had planted beside his bed. Placing all his weight on to it, he proceeded slowly like a bruised leviathan, stopping every few feet as he crept towards the light that signaled the bathroom.

At the bathroom door the Private stopped to heave breath into his lungs, exhausted. His atrophied muscles were overwhelmed by the effort and the weight of the cast. He almost hadn't made it the twenty feet. He backed into the bathroom pushing the door with his ample body weight. He reeled and almost lost his footing from the harsh storm of whiteness that assaulted him. Glare from the fluorescent lights bounced off the white tile that covered the floor and crawled up the walls, where it met white paint. Along one wall were a long porcelain trough and a row of sinks, all white and shiny. The Private turned the other way, towards the stalls, barely seeing through his half closed eye. It was not the manliest approach, but he needed to sit. Suddenly, a blurry image in one of the mirrors above the sinks caught his attention. He had thought he was

alone. Out of instinct, despite the pressure in his bladder, he shuffled closer to it and as he did, the image multiplied into the neighboring mirrors. He rested a hand on the sink below him and leaned into meet the image, trying to make sense of it, and gasped. Then he lost his grip on the sink, and then the chair started to slide away from him. In the next instant, just as he lost his footing, and right before the floor became stained with his urine, his consciousness also fled as he realized that the horrific one-eyed monstrosity squinting back at him from the mirrors was, of course, him.

II.

It had been a crisp sunny day when the Private and Randall had started on the recon mission shoulder to shoulder, slowly winding their way up a craggily path on the side of a foothill that had been used by local farmers and their goats for centuries. The hill ringed their main target, the Hook, the bigger mountain in the distance outside Kaesong where the Communists were taking a stand even though they had heard solid rumors that a ceasefire would happen any day. where Movement on the backside of the hillock had been reported and the Private and Randall were just going up to scout the area. It was to be just a quick reconnoiter mission and back down to report. They hadn't even been told to expect mines.

About half-way up the path narrowed, and Randall took the lead. A few minutes later, the Private bent to tie his boot and Randall got ahead of him. When the Private heard the click, he instinctively looked up and reached out to Randall, but only grabbed air. Randall turn towards him as if in slow motion and mouthed the words, "Oh Shit!" Then, the Private saw Randall explode, his arms and legs flying in different directions, a bloody burnt hole where his chest used to be. In the next instant he saw that Randall had no more mouth, no more head; there was no more Randall. There was just a mass of

bloody slime where he had been and then the Private felt that bloody slime all over his face and body and felt it choking him, and felt a thousand pieces of shrapnel and rocks cut into him like a storm of bees. He flailed about and screamed trying to escape but it propelled him to the ground and then into the dark space where he couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't think or move.

*

The Private had liked Kirby Randall, a gangly white boy from Minneapolis, Minnesota with enough height, at six foot five, to look him in the eye when most other men of any age or persuasion couldn't . Randall would hang out with the Colored soldiers, drinking beers and listening to their special brand of foolishness that was so new to him. None of the other white boys hung out with them in Mr. Truman's newly-integrated army.

Before Randall, no white boy had ever walked right up to the Private and offered him his hand like he too was white as rice, not in his whole seventeen years of living. But that's just what Randall had done when he had first entered the barracks in Fort Jackson and saw the Private rearranging his army-issued supplies in his footlocker next to the only open bunk on account that there was sure to be an inspection that afternoon. Even though they were in South Carolina where folks just didn't do that kind of thing, Randall had done so like he didn't know no better. Right then, the Private had said to himself□ maybe this army gig was going to be all right after all, if he could just manage to stay alive.

After a few weeks, the Private had come to believe that the real reason Randall acted like no other white man he had ever met was that Randall just didn't much care for the south's special brand of divisiveness. He hadn't known any Colored folk in Minneapolis, but his parents had been committed Lutherans who taught him to honor the dignity of all men since they were all God's creatures. So, much to the chagrin of most

of the other white soldiers, Randall treated the Private and the other Colored soldiers like they too were human and like he might one day soon need to rely on one of them to save his neck.

III.

The Army patched the Private up. The eye doctor returned bearing a replacement made of glass that filled the caved-in socket on the right side of the Private's face. They sent another doctor for his hearing who shouted that there was not much that could be done there. Likewise, for the discolored blur resembling raw hamburger that now was the right side of his face. They said that it would just take time. Shrapnel was like a million little red hot daggers; it makes a mess. In time they would know how much more they might be able to do for him.

The next doctor was the one who carved patches of skin from the Private's buttocks and thighs and grafted them onto his torso to close up deep rips in his skin the exploding mine had left. He chatted away at the Private like he was a tailor who routinely applying patches to the elbow of a coat.

And then the Army sent a doctor who removed the Private's diaper bandage and pronounced that he was still a man after all.

"It could've been worse", said the doctor while casually tapping the Private's thigh with the little metal instrument that he had used to lift his penis and examine the underside while straddling a small wheeled stool in front of the examination table. The room was cold and the Private felt colder down there without the bandage diaper.

"You're a lucky boy. You are," the doctor went on. "We've seen much worse."

The Private didn't respond as the doctor lifted his Johnson, moved him about, and then scribbled notes on his chart. Instead, he ignored this doctor whose teeth flared out like a mule's and were way too close to where they were never supposed to be. He focused his one eye on the rows of bottles filled with colorful pills inside the cabinet on the wall behind the doctor. The doctor scooted back his wheeled stool and stood up, checking his notes and nodding in that way that indicated that he was satisfied with the job he had done.

"Here's the deal, Private," he said while loudly snapping off his rubber gloves. "You took a bad hit down there, lucky to still have it, you are. But there was lots of shrapnel. We did the best we could. Had to take one of your testicles; it was just shredded, a damned mess. But we managed to save the other one. The swelling and discoloration you see, that should go away over time."

The doctor paused and waited for the Private's response but the Private was trying to ignore the chill on his Johnson and was desperately taking inventory of how many bottles in the cabinet on the far wall held the all green capsules and how many held the half-orange, half-blue ones. He wondered what they were for and just how many of each, separately, or in combination, he would have to take to die.

"Private, I know this is hard," the doctor continued. He moved closer and laid a hand on the Private's shoulder and the Private realized that the mule teeth came with sour breath. "But you need to understand what's what, so I'm going to give it to you straight," the doctor continued "It could've been a lot worse."

Maybe, the Private thought, if he just swallowed a handful of each color, that would be enough. It would be a coward's way to die, the way a woman would take her life. He wished he had his pistol. One shot to the head and all this talk about whether he was or was not a man would end. But they must have

taken his pistol so here he was contemplating the pussy way out. He'd just take the whole bottle, that should be enough to do the job.

"Once the swelling goes away, you should be able to go at it. Even with just one testicle, you should be able to get an erection and ejaculate," the mule teeth and sour breath droned on. "It might take a while for you to get your confidence back, that happens, the body has to remember. But physically you should be OK. Remember that... I gotta be honest though, son, your sperm count, it's just not there. . . But you never know, Private, these things sometimes work themselves out. You have fun trying. With your luck, you just might be OK. It could've been a lot worse."

*

They said the same thing again and again at every hospital over the next two years. The Private came to believe that it was something doctors were taught to say no matter how bad the injury—Tell the patient it could have been worse. The Private wondered—How? Lose two eyes. Have half his face blown completely away instead of being roasted and riddled by a storm of red hot shrapnel? Lose a leg? An arm? One of each? Loose both testicles and end up a total freak? How could it have mattered anymore?

They said it to him in Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco, Kentucky and Virginia—"You're a lucky boy. You are. We've seen much worse."

The Private had never believed them. Their words had never held one ounce of comfort for him. He had never reconciled to this luck that everyone spoke of. He was nineteen. He'd been in the Army just eight months and in country only thirty three days, and just days before the whole damned shebang was over, his life had been torn apart. Some fucking luck!

IV.

The Army sent him home, back to the tobacco farm he loved and loathed because it was home and because his family had worked it for a white man for generations, something he'd vowed never to do, which was why he had enlisted in the damned Army in the first place. His ten younger brothers and sisters acted skittish around him, even though his mother, who had given him his stature, kept telling everyone to stop being foolish. She insisted that he was the same boy who had gone away; the same giant manchild who could wring a chicken's neck by the time he was seven, hand as many rows of tobacco as she by thirteen, and consume half a dozen of her buttermilk biscuits nonstop. She would not admit the truth to herself, even as she slathered fatback on his mottled patched skin and calmed her littlest ones when his screams in the night woke them.

But his father did. And this small man, from whom the Private got his redbone coloring and his fierce wanting for more, this man with a frame made smaller from years of bending to the tobacco plants and hands grizzled from tussling with the red earth and wrenching a life from pure adversity, he knew immediately that his first-born had left a great deal on that hill in Ko-re-a. He would load his giant of a son onto a wagon hitched to a tractor or a mule and drive him out to the backfield where the constant acres of cash crop finally broke and a kitchen garden bloomed.

In these alone moments, the Private's father would roll cigarettes with his special tobacco and they'd take long drags as the cicadas sang their forlorn song and the bees violated one flower after another with impunity. In the shade provided by the full leafy crowns of the clustered trees, with the air swathed in the sweet aroma of the tobacco, the father would go to work.

"Son," his pops would say, " You got to talk about it sometime. You got to get it out of you." He'd pull a long drag

on his cigarette before continuing. "I'm not saying you can make the memories go away. Cain't no amount of talking make something like that go away. But you needs to talk about it, to get some of it out, or it will just become a big pile of rot inside of you. It will rot *you* if you don't get it out."

The father would let his words sit with his son as he wandered back among the garden rows to find the perfect melon. He would quarter the cantaloupe, scoop out the web of seeds and hand the fleshy orange quarter-moon to his son. Under the cool of the elms, away from the blazing sun and everyone, they would slurp mouthfuls of the delicate fruit with gusto, wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. And eventually, the father would listen while the Private poured out some of the horror that was inside him. Then the father would hold his son as he shook with the dry crying that men do only when they can no longer stand the pain. It was his father who convinced the Private that life, though different, could still be worth living.

*

V.

The first time the Private rode to town with his father, children started to cry at the sight of him and even adults shrank away. It didn't matter one bit that he was a war hero who'd been awarded a Purple Heart, that he had been injured fighting back the Communist hordes, protecting the American way of life and keeping the world, their world, safe for Democracy. After that, the Private shrank into himself a little more and when his Momma hid his pills that kept the pain at bay, he tried to drown out the world with bourbon.

He waited for Marren to come see about him.

She was the only girl that the Private had stayed with for more than a couple of months after she'd let him go all the way. Even at sixteen she had a way of making a man believe

that Heaven lay right between her size 38D breasts and plump but sturdy legs.

The Private had hooked up with her at the beginning of his junior year of high school and spent the Fall driving her around in his pick-up truck, which was a hideous green color and rusted around both front fenders. But that didn't matter to the Private. He had bought it for only one hundred dollars with the money that he made the prior summer washing dishes at a beachfront hotel in New Jersey with his cousin Ray-Ray. The Private had brought Marren RC Colas for months before she finally gave up her stuff after the Christmas social at the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church.

By the next summer, when he left for the Army, the Private had made up his mind (but had not told Marren) that he would marry her when he got back. He thought that maybe they'd move north where his cousin Ray-Ray said he could get them even better jobs working indoors wearing uniforms and waiting tables; they could make tips in addition to a wage. But he'd grown impatient waiting for Ray-Ray to send word to him and joined the Army instead.

Marren didn't write to the Private while he was away. She wasn't good at words or writing, but that he forgave. The other stuff he could not.

He knew that Marren knew he was back as soon as he arrived. Everyone knew; it was a small, tight, community that prided itself on caring for (and gossiping about) one another fervently. About a week after his return she had sent word to his house that she was sick, then, that she had to tend to her sick mother, and then, that she had to watch over her sick brother. Well over a month passed before the Private had his brother Odell, who was just fourteen months younger and whom folk often mistook for his twin, drove him over to her place because he just couldn't believe what he already knew to be true.

By then, the Private's face no longer looked like raw hamburger, but it didn't exactly look like a face either. The chickens scattered as Odell brought the truck to a stop under a crooked old oak tree whose long branches spread majestically to overhang the front porch thankfully shading most of the dusty yard. It had been scorching hot for the past few days and everybody was craving any little piece of shade.

Odell climbed down first and went around to help his brother out of the truck, but the Private gently pushed him off even though he had to stop every few minutes to steady himself, holding tightly to and leaning on the Moses-like staff his father had fashioned for him. He hobbled to the house and made the Herculean effort of climbing the two squat steps onto the porch, pausing to catch his breath before moving to the screen door that had seen better days and which was clearly losing the battle to the flies and mosquitoes that snuck through its many rips. He banged on the screen door, too loudly and too urgently because of the tremor in this hand, which he fought to control even as he desperately grasped his staff in the other.

"What y'all banging on my door like that for?" Marren said sashaying towards the door full on like he remembered her. She was wiping her hands on a dish towel head down as she came but paused midsentence when she looked up and saw him. She finished wiping her hands deliberately before tossing the towel aside and closing the distance between them.

"Heyyyy TJ, I heard you was back, " she cooed smiling brashly from behind the screen door. She didn't rush to give her big teddy bear baby a welcome back hug and kiss and press her soft body into his as had been their usual greeting when they'd spent any time apart.

"Been back over a month," he mumbled. "Thought I'd a seen you before now."

"Oh, you know how it is, folks getting sick. I've got to take care of them, she protested. "I didn't want to come over there and bring all kinda germs on top of all that you got going on." She narrowed her gaze and took a step backwards before looking him up and down, as if she could see just by looking at him all that he had going on. Satisfied, or unable to reach a conclusion, she started to fan herself with her hand. "Sure is hot today."

"All that I got going on," he replied with a half-hearted chuckle, "ain't none of your germs going to make a difference." He shifted his weight from one side to the other trying to keep the staff out of her view.

He saw that she'd put on a few pounds, which only made her curves more curvy. She wore a thin cotton dress, a slight, sleeveless number in a muted yellow with tiny red flowers all over. The dress had a deep "V" held together by four small white buttons that looked totally inadequate to the task of containing her glistening cleavage. It fell over her body perfectly, across her flat stomach and broad hips, ending at her calves.

"You look good Marren," he said with as much of a smile as he could muster considering the scarred skin of his face, which at that moment felt like there were maggots crawling all over it. "How you been?"

"You know, been fine. I'm fine, about the same. This my last year; graduating in the spring. Class of 19-55!" She did a quick twirl and raised her arms in celebration, before coming back to face him full of giggles.

"Yeah, that's great. I knew you'd make it," he said with a sigh. "Kind of wished I'd stayed and graduated."

"Don't you tell that lie, TJ," she said sucking her teeth. "You been places, done things. You always wanted to go somewhere, and you did. TJ You've seen the world! Not many

folks round here been to New Jersey and Ko-rea.”

She fanned her face and let out a few deep breaths. Then she rested her arms on top of her head. “It sure is hot as hell today.”

It was a habit of hers, unusual for a colored girl. They were usually so finicky about their hair, especially after pressing it with a hot comb. But Marren had just enough Cherokee on her father’s side, and enough gumption of her own, to make her auburn hair loose enough so that she didn’t bother with that. She stood winding her fingers in her thick braids and shifting her weight from one trunk-like leg to the other. The Private couldn’t help noticing that her arms had been bronzed a deep chestnut color by the sun and now gleamed with perspiration. He loved how the sun just kissed her all over glorifying her even more.

Each of her armpits sprouted a tuft of curly auburn hair and every time she lifted her arms they flashed a torturous musky scent at the Private. Every time she took a breath, her glistening cleavage threatened to pop the tiny buttons that barely contained it. Her nipples pushed at the thin cotton as if desperate to escape.

Without warning, she lowered her arms and leaned against the door-jamb. For the first time, she looked him full in the face and in the eye, “What was it like?”

He looked down at her and tried not to be too obvious about sucking the sweltering air. For a long minute he couldn’t bring himself to answer as the sweat ran down his temples and beaded up in his crotch and armpits. A bee buzzed at the screen door agitated that it couldn’t find one of the tears to enter through and finally moved away.

As he stood there, the Private admitted to himself that he had never looked at Marren’s eyes much before, but now he did. They were a warm brown, large and doe-like, surrounded by

thick lashes and set deep in her beautiful dark face with its slightly broad nose and full lips. He saw genuine curiosity there in her eyes, but he was hoping for so much more.

He shifted his weight from one side to the other and then back again, and opened and closed his right hand to calm the tremor before speaking.

“It was war,” he finally responded flatly, not wanting for a minute to sully her with even the slightest hint of what he had done and witnessed. “War is hell. Don’t let nobody tell you different.” He inhaled deeply, stopping himself from saying more and fighting the ache that was beginning to burn in his right side.

Marren crunched up her nose at his confession and twisted her mouth around as if tasting his words and considering what to make of them. “That’s all?”

“I thought about you every day, every minute of the day,” he blurted out. “I just wanted to stay alive to get back here to you. You kept me alive, Marren.”

He poured out his heart to her, blabbering on through the screen. He stood there like an idiot and clutched his staff as if for dear life, no longer able to obscure its presence. He tried not to show how badly he hurt just standing there mustering every ounce of muscle strength to stay on his feet and still the tremor, so he didn’t appear a spastic moron.

He knew he was losing the battle as he reached up with his trembling hand to wipe the sweat from his face. “I came back for you, I did.” Spent, he lowered his head and took a few deep breaths inhaling her scent as she fidgeted and played in her hair. She bit her lip and started to speak a couple of times but managed nothing but fidgeting.

He waited, wishing for the courage to reach out, yank open the door and pull her towards him. He so wanted to sink to his

knees and bury his face, scarred and mutilated as it was, in the sweat of her cleavage for one last time for one fresh memory of the feel of her to go along with the memories that had sustained him through those cold wet mountains in Korea and then the dark silent void of a dozen hospital beds.

But the strength eluded him as did the courage. What if he toppled over when he went to reach for the door? What if the door was latched? Which almost nobody did, but he couldn't be sure what all had changed in the three years that he'd been away. If he reached for the door he could miss and punch through the flimsy screen. And even if he did open the unlocked door and reach for her, would she recoil from him as so many did?

"I'm sorry," Marren said finally. She peeled herself from the door jamb with an audible sigh and began shifting her weight from one leg to the other, which he saw were just as bronzed as her arms, and which ended in bare feet whose stubby toes were painted a harlot's red.

"I missed you too, TJ. I really did, " she purred benevolently. "You was my first and some of the best loving I ever had." She closed her eyes for just a moment, and he saw her tongue slide absently across her full lips before she looked at him again. "Not that I got whorish since you left," she quickly added. "But I've grown up. I'm graduating. I'm a woman now, and I got to think of my future. . . .I just needs me a whole man."

The words, coming out of her succulent lips, out of that beautiful dark face that he knew so well and loved with all his being, cut into him like the storm of shrapnel that had attacked him on that hill in Kaesong. For a minute, he stopped breathing. Then he started coughing and he desperately, jerkily, fought to regain his breath while fighting not to lose his footing. After a moment that seemed like an eternity, some instinct of self-preservation gave him back his breath

and compelled him to retreat. The color of auburn and the smell of seduction painfully blended into one and chased after him like a taunting demon.

The Private lumbered down the stairs like the rejected, defective soul that he was, tilting heavily. Odell rescued him as he started to shuffle across the dirt yard. He had waited just five minutes as their momma had instructed him before getting out of the truck and standing at the ready. Equal in stature, he caught his older brother's weight, and this time the Private did not resist as he bore him the remaining yards to the truck. As Odell reached for the truck's door handle, they heard the screen door screech open and slam shut. Looking back, they saw that Marren had now dared to venture beyond her threshold and was standing at the edge of the porch.

"You lucky, you know," she called after him, as if tossing a stray dog a bone. "You could've died over there. Don't know what yo Mama would've done if you'da died over there."

VI.

The encounter with Marren chilled the Private for a long time and almost knocked him back to the dark void. It made him remember the stink of human flesh exploding and suffocating him on a hill in Korea and hospital beds that he knew only by their feel. It made him struggle with the taste of a revolver, steel mixed with bourbon and self-loathing. It made his momma order his ten siblings, from Odell down to three-year old Little Bit, to never leave him alone. And Little Bit, who had fearlessly taken to chasing the chickens around the dirt yard like a demon as soon as she could walk, took her instruction extremely seriously. She became her brother's anchor and his shadow. When he woke up, she would be perched on the edge of his bed staring at him. When he ate, she ate. When he headed

out to the outhouse, he had to convince her that no, she could not come into the little shed, but had to wait outside until he returned.

Over time, the Private somehow managed to push the haunting thoughts that plagued him back to a far corner of his being. He knew he needed to stay out of the dark silent void. He knew with certainty, without knowing how he knew, that the next time he went there, it would be his coffin.

Eventually, he began to tell himself what his parents had been saying all along, that he wasn't dead. He could hear most things. He could see out of his one eye. Thanks to the Army plastic surgeons, his face looked less like raw hamburger as time passed. He didn't yet know if he could get a woman, but at least he still had most of his equipment so maybe he could, and maybe one day it would work properly again.

Little by little, day by day, the Private went on living. He limped around leaning heavily on his staff with Little Bit skipping beside him. And then he hobbled along without it. And then one day, after Marren and the Class of 19-55 had made their ceremonial walk down Shiloh's center aisle, with the whole community, except him, cheering, he shuffled down to his old school and asked the teacher to help him study for his diploma.

Mrs. Ruby Dee Jackson had received him with perturbation and reticence, rather than sympathy and enthusiasm. She had chastised him about going into the army in the first place. She had even driven out to the farm to try to convince his parents to forbid him from enlisting.

"He should at least wait until he graduates," she had plead. "A high school diploma is a valuable asset, especially for a Negro. TJ is a smart boy. He could make something of himself, if he applied himself."

But he hadn't listened, and his parents had backed his

decision.

Now, he spent hours listening to Mrs. Jackson, who had a face as plain as a paper sack but a mind as full as an encyclopedia, read him his lessons. She had graduated from Howard University in Washington D. C., and when she read to him the books and problems that he was to figure, her voice sounded like a news broadcast on the radio. His eye tired easily as he struggled to make out the words on a paper held an inch from his face and his damaged hearing was challenged to grasp the words as they tumbled out of her thin flat lips that she always colored in cherry red lipstick. But he persisted.

They spent months with her patiently repeating a passage or stopping to explain a word that produced in the Private (who despite her high opinion of him had never been more than the most average student) only a blank look of confusion or a frustrated pounding on the desk. But over time, he absorbed enough, and he finally became a high school graduate years after he had become a disabled veteran.

The day after he received his diploma, the Private counted his discharge pay and the money the Army had been sending him. It wasn't much in the big scheme of things, certainly not enough to compensate for all he had lost, maybe not much to somebody else, but it was something to him. The Private used some of the money to buy his parents the first Frigidaire they ever owned. And to show his gratitude, he bought Mrs. Jackson a handkerchief on which he had her initials embroidered and a hat with a real ostrich feather sticking out of it that he sent for all the way from Raleigh. Mrs. Jackson burst out in laughter when he presented the hat to her and she caused quite a storm when she boldly stepped into the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church with it perched on her head.

Mrs. Jackson told the Private about the G.I. Bill and how this time they were even letting Colored soldiers benefit

too. She said that it could pay for him to go to college. He hooted at the thought, remembering the long painstaking hours it had taken for him to earn his diploma. "Don't tell me you want to spend your whole life reading my lessons to me."

Mrs. Jackson assured him that as much as she liked him, she had other plans for her life. But she also told him that he could get a job with the Veteran's Administration and a loan to buy a house. That got the Private's attention.

"Now you talking," he exclaimed, with one of his still infrequent grins. Since he was going to go on living, he would need a job. "Hell, that's why I joined up in the first place. So, I wouldn't have to hand tobacco for some white man all my life. Any job with the VA got to be better than that."

And why shouldn't he take advantage of all the VA could offer him, after all that he had been through? And as for the house, he hadn't thought much about it. But when he did, he wasn't thinking to live with his parents all his life. As far as he knew, none of his kin had ever owned any property; if there was a way that he could be the first, he might just have to do that too.

In the following months, as Mrs. Jackson and he worked through all the required forms and applications, the Private would often whisper to himself *-I'm alive. I'm going to go on living.* He said it to fix it in his mind and to firm up his resolve.

But there were moments, despite his new-found prospects, when waves of despair would bulldoze him. Some new insult from someone in town would compel him to go out to the back field to sit alone and eat cantaloupe fresh off the vine, his body and soul aching so much that he often vomited. Or he would masturbate for what seemed like an eternity, until his flaccid penis was raw, without relief, which even a river of bourbon could not provide. At such times, the Private's thoughts

would roam back to that hill in Kaesong and to that day that had changed everything. He knew in his mind he was lucky to be alive; but often he didn't *feel* lucky. He could walk, but now his journey through life was an obstacle course paved with hot coals and barbs he had to navigate barefoot, scarred, half-blind and half-hearing, maybe always alone. He didn't even know if he was truly still a man.

At moments such as these, the Private would think that maybe Kirby Randall from Minneapolis, Minnesota was the lucky one. Randall, who was crazy about his mother and his Labrador Spike and who carried pictures of both in his fatigues, whom the Private had called friend and seen become a flying mess of bloody body parts the instant before his life changed forever, who had been granted the dignity of a body bag and a closed coffin in lieu of the best medical care the U.S. Army could provide—maybe Randall had been the lucky one.

Maybe.