CHASING RABBITS: A CONTEMPORARY WAR NOVEL

by

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The history of the American war novel can be traced back the earliest conflicts that defined the United States. The novel has been an ideal genre for demonstrating the long process of war, the string of hardships it can place on a soldier, the sudden and cumulative changes it can make on a human being, and the specifics of location, climate, culture, and military technology that create the unique historical characteristics of each conflict.

Peter Aichinger defines the term war novel as “any long work of prose fiction in which the lives and actions of the characters are principally affected by warfare or the military establishment.” He includes E.E. Cummings’ *The Enormous Room*, in which the main characters are all civilians, as a war novel because war is the primordial fact dominating the lives of all the characters; Carson McCullers’s *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is not considered a war novel because although the protagonists are all in the army, the army is simply a social structure necessary for the working out of the plot, and another setting, say a Georgia plantation, would have served as well (Preface, x).

It should be mentioned here that some war fiction is pushed into subgenres of military fiction versus literary fiction, being consumed by the public mainly for entertainment purposes rather than reflection on war itself, which may or may not be the intent of the writers. The works of Tom Clancy or W.E.B. Griffin could be included. Griffin himself is a veteran of the Korean War.
Peter Jones recognizes several elements that are collectively evident in the war novel. He says “the books emphasize individual reconciliation to the ordeal of combat and adjustment to the general pressures of war, recording immediate responses and varieties of accommodation. Typically, the hero brings to his war experiences a set of apparently coherent and complete moral precepts, which finally prove inadequate. The subsequent revision and rationalization is often the true center of the book” (4).

There is an adjustment to strict regimentation and the deprivation of choice that an individual has to deal with, especially if he comes from a background where he had a great independence in decision-making. It usually begins with Basic Training or “Boot Camp” but can become more terrifying when an individual is ordered into danger or even near certain death against his greater instinct and logic to survive. Jones says: “Bureaucratic legalism, with its set of rules of conduct, clashes with the ideals of individuals who may possess and employ more subtle civilian distinctions, or who may not know or favor restraint” (4). “Military service may be the protagonist’s first exposure to a world beyond the familiar—perhaps his initial contact with a comprehensive and systematic code of conduct and discipline—often the first shock he undergoes” (4).

There is also the struggle for survival, either physically or morally. There are many opportunities when an individual has to make choices between duty and self-preservation. Certainly there are orders, and sometimes orders come with a threat of death if not followed, but other times they do not, and the individual has to weigh survival against principles such as honor, humiliation, and duty. Even in the execution of
duty, there are choices in how an individual follows orders, whether he engages in the least or the greatest violence against fellow humanity. Says Jones: “The war novel depicts men attempting to “seize the day” before death erases them, or struggling to articulate their own principles in a battle to retain rational integrity before the irrationality of death. … If Freud is correct, the conscious recognition that death may be near clashes with the inability of the unconscious to accept the idea of personal extinction, producing profound, sustained tensions within the individual” (4) – (Sigmund Freud, Reflections on War and Death, New York 1918, p.62).

American war novels can be traced back to the Revolutionary War from authors such as William Gilmore Simms and James Fenimore Cooper. Simms wrote a series of eight novels about the conflict from 1835 to 1867, with the most popular being the first, The Partisan. Cooper’s 1821 novel The Spy is often credited as one of the first war novels. Wayne Charles Miller, in his history of the American military novel, says that “not until the publication of James Fenimore Cooper’s The Spy does there appear an important piece of fiction that might be termed a military novel” (8). Critics in the early 1800s considered these types of novels to be historical novels, and Cooper is sometimes criticized for being more romantic than historical (9).

Miller points out that the Civil War is seen by many as the first “modern” war, or at least as a transition into it via the development of such things as the concept of total war (directed against the enemy’s entire economic and social structure, by any means), the mass production of war materials, and general conscription to field an army.
Advances in technology produced weapons greatly exceeding the capabilities of the Revolutionary War muskets and cannons, leading to death on a grander scale. Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is not only the most impressive fiction to come from this war, but is regarded among the best of any war. He, along with Ambrose Bierce and John William De Forest, are credited with bringing realism into the war literature and not holding back on the horror and dehumanization of war (53-61).

The 20th Century has been the most pervasive for the American war novel, with the cyclical nature of a major conflict with every generation. The Great War was only the beginning in terms of both the death tolls and the publications. Notable contributions from the United States include Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (1920), yet all are superseded in the coverage of the totality of war by German author Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). Jones credits Dos Passos with techniques revolutionary to the American war narrative: “Dos Passos introduced multiple protagonists, the theme of America as melting pot, and the pattern of following central figures from background phases in the United States to their final fates in war—all of which later became standard techniques in the war novel. He seized the machine motif and put it squarely in the psychological center, using chapter headings to focus attention on the effects of the great civilized war machine (a technique later used with sharp emphasis by Normal Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead*)” (6).
World War Two, the conflict in which the United States established itself as a world superpower, also saw its emergence as a producer of novels about the conflict: James Jones’ *The Thin Red Line* (1962), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961). Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), about the Spanish civil war, which precluded the larger conflict to come in the rest of Europe, can be roughly grouped together with these.

After this time period there is a shift in how war fiction is relayed. Relatively few novels about the Korean War were published, and none that received the popular or literary recognition as some of the above mentioned from World War Two. The most recognizable work from Korea is the book (by H Richard Hornberger, pseudonym Robert Hooker), movie, and subsequent television series *M*A*S*H* (1968, 1970, and 1972 respectively). Aichinger points out that the novels that were published about the Korean War generally express resentment from the soldiers drafted into service while the majority of the population is enjoying the new peacetime prosperity following the Second World War. As the country had usually done after wars, it quickly drew down the size of the military, in part putting faith in nuclear weapons to be a deterrent to our enemies and that these weapons would be employed against the country’s enemies to inflict maximal damage for minimal loss of American lives. The soldier in literature about Korea is more concerned about survival than about idealism or patriotism, as expressed through William Styron’s *The Long March* and James Michener’s *The Bridges at Toko-ri*. Also, some
literature is keen to the idea that America’s idea of the professional soldier would have to change and that a much larger standing military would have to be maintained (66-69).

Although great literature was generated about the Vietnam War, there does not seem to be the level of distinction granted from it or any recent conflict as great as was bestowed upon the literature of the two World Wars. One might surmise that there is a correlation between the number of novels about a conflict and its overall scale, since this means that the larger the war, the greater the number of participants who are going to be writers, or that the greater number of people in general will be directly touched by the war who might then produce a creative response to it. Some of the better known and awarded works from the Vietnam War include Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke* (2007), with O’Brien being the popular choice as the standard bearer for Vietnam literature.

After Vietnam there is a large gap in war fiction produced in the United States. This could be partly due to relative peace for a span of about two decades until the Gulf War, or Operation Desert Storm. This is not to say there was no war fiction, since Tom Clancy established himself on Cold War era speculative war fiction, but works based on actual conflicts declined. In the interval between its major conflicts, the U.S. was involved in several military interventions in the Western Hemisphere in Grenada, Haiti, and Nicaragua, but these small-scale conflicts have not produced any noteworthy literature, fiction or nonfiction, possibly because of their short duration and low casualty count. One of the few popular media releases about Grenada is the Clint Eastwood
movie *Heartbreak Ridge*. There are no widely known novels about any of these skirmishes and perhaps no more than a handful about Desert Storm. The writing being produced still focused on Vietnam.

The Gulf War is characterized not only by its quick build-up, execution, and draw-down but also the first time that large scale American wars had “Operation” names applied to them in the general public. Desert Storm was the first war to be covered by instant international television news, allowing audiences on the other side of the world to watch live as missiles were exchanged over Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Viewers were given bird’s eye views from cameras on combat aircraft and even implanted in the nose of guided missiles about to strike a target. Reporters and camera crews not only were embedded with military units but also broadcast from Baghdad, the heart of the “enemy.” The common citizen had instant access to a taste of war from the safety of the living room, and I believe the explosion of this nonfiction medium fueled the shift towards our society’s obsession with reality. After Desert Storm, the United States was involved in a U.N. police action in Somalia that involved several incidents of military miscalculation that became widely known in the nonfiction book *Black Hawk Down* (1999) by Mark Bowden, also made into one of the more popular recent war movies.

When it comes to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, also known as Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom respectively, a search for creative fiction has been a challenging one. Only within the past year has any title has received any large-scale attention as a war novel about the recent conflicts. Internet search engine
searches as well as keyword searches of library databases produces a short list of titles “associated” with the Iraq war. I say associated because some novels, such as *Dear John* or *The Lucky One* by Nicholas Sparks, use the war as a backdrop to a love story and not as a central theme or location. It is also keyword associated with one edition of the adventure/romance *High Risk* novel series by JoAnn Ross. There are graphic novels such as *Shooting War* by Anthony Lappe and Dan Goldman. In *The Last Day*, by James Landis, the character who is a returning veteran named Warren Peace (think War and Peace) takes a walk with Jesus. In terms of truer war novels there are several available: *Senator’s Son* by Luke S Larson, *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra, *Homefront* by Kristen Tsetsi, *Metal Heads: A Novel* by Tom Maremaa, *A Medic in Iraq* by Cole “Doc” Bolchoz, and *Last One In* by Nicholas Kulish. In 2012, two works were published as war novels which have received both public and critical recognition. *The Yellow Birds*, by Kevin Powers, was published in September and has been on some of publishing’s best seller lists. *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, by Ben Fountain, was published in May and received much praise from the community that follows war narratives. Both novels were finalists for the National Book Award.

The use of university library search media can at least garner rough numbers to show comparisons between fiction and nonfiction books published about Iraq. Using the WorldCat database and entering ‘Iraq War’ as the keyword, limited books within to the period of 2003 to 2013, the search returned 19,536 titles, whereas when the genre is limited to fiction for the same search only 255 titles are identified. I call these rough
estimates because upon examination some of the fiction titles could be excluded as war novels as we tried to define at the beginning of the discussion. The database identifies every entry in which Iraq War is listed, which might be in a character’s background or as the backdrop to time and place, and thus the lists returned such titles as Stephen King’s *Under the Dome* or Jane Smiley’s romance novel *Ten Days in the Hills*. A similar search with the same parameters on the Books in Print database returned a list of 2,433 nonfiction and 236 fiction titles. A redundancy spotted within this search is that the same book can be counted more than once if it is in circulation in more than one format. By selecting just one format, such as paperback, limits the returns to 1,009 nonfiction and 130 fiction titles identified. One can see though that the scales of what has been published are tipped heavily in favor of nonfiction.

To apply Aichinger’s definition to a novel of the Iraq War era, Nicholas Spark’s *Dear John* does not qualify as a war novel. As an author he is well known as a writer of romance novels, and in this work the war is a plot twist that pulls away the male protagonist from the female love interest, without being described in great detail and without forming lasting impressions on the characters.

Before the two aforementioned novels by Powers and Fountain, the most acknowledged creative works on the Iraq War were the poetry collection, *Here, Bullet*, by soldier Brian Turner and the short story “Refresh Refresh” by Benjamin Percy. Turner’s work is the most heartfelt and thought provoking. Percy’s short story is a great
examination of the impact of a large number of a town’s men being deployed on the families left behind, more specifically its young men.

From the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, the writing about the war drifted into or was directed into the nonfiction genre. Some were simply historical summaries of the war, which at that time was simply the buildup to the invasion and the subsequent conquering of Iraq, while others were opinions on the justification of the war. Shortly after the completion of the first rotation of soldiers came the publication of the memoirs and biographies, and this is where the public’s interest in nonfiction deepened and broadened. The story of Jessica Lynch, a captured female mechanic from a doomed convoy, received much attention for the tragedy of the situation and also for the manner in which the media initially over-reported the events and gave her much greater credit in combat than was due. Then also came the biographies and autobiographies of the combat troops, which is what the general public usually craves. Initially this revolved around the invasion of Iraq, but as things soured in 2004 and body counts rose, readers continued to want to know what it was like to be trying to maintain the peace in a prolonged occupation. I would also speculate that there was not only an interest but a real concern about the course of the war from then on, and the public wanted insights into what was going so wrong and whether our country might actually lose the occupation after handily winning the war. There also was an explosion in the new internet medium known as the Blog. Soldiers were now able to use the internet to relay their experiences to the rest of the world in a near instantaneous manner. Whatever happened to just a letter home to
mom? Colby Buzzell is an example of a soldier who created a Blog during his deployment to more candidly share his experiences with family and friends instead of letters and email. It gained thousands of followers, but like other Blogs from soldiers, it was given the mandate to have his posts reviewed before publishing. This raised conflicting issues of freedom of speech against what is known in the military as Operational Security, the protection of information which could assist the watchful enemy. The result was a manner of filtering and approval of content by the military, at least for those Blogging soldiers who followed dictated procedures.

The area where fiction about the war has been most liberally nurtured is in the movie theater. Most of these movies were financial and critical disasters, such as Home of the Brave and Stop-Loss. Grace is Gone received some praise as an independent film. Brothers attained an average gross and notoriety, while The Hurt Locker won numerous Academy Awards. Narrative fiction was sprinkled with a few novels mentioned earlier, none of which received much attention, while nonfiction publishing on the war exploded and continued to thrive. As the years have passed since the war began, readers and educators have inquired as to where the novels of the modern wars have been.

Kevin Powers’ recent novel The Yellow Birds is one of the most poetic and lyrical I have ever read. It functions well to portray war in a way it has never been shown before, and to give the novel a unique feel. At times the writing does get in its own way when a simple image might be more powerful than trying to make everything a metaphor. Like many war stories it is about a young man, a boy really, struggling to understand his
war experience, specifically the death of his friend. There is the loss of innocence aspect. There are promises that the character at least thinks he broke, leaving him with a lot of guilt. The narrator writes from the perspective of the future. He has years of reflection to verbalize what he did not understand at the original time of the events, yet from this perspective the reader does not so much see the character working the problems out.

Because the point of view is first person, the reader doesn’t have any other choice than to be inside the narrator’s head. But his thoughts are not those of the moment but those of years of reflection on the events. Perhaps it is just the author’s interjections about the past that make it that way, that with doing this the reader gets the impression that all the thoughts are well distant from the actual time of their happening. With this, the reader can get a sense of detachment from the narration, a feeling that the story is being told rather than shown. The narrator’s despondent mood shadows all time lines then, and this certain fatality of the atmosphere draws away from any great development in the character/narrator. The loss of innocence as a common thread is lost because as far as the reader can tell there was no innocence to be lost, just eternal depression and a vague foresight into the tragic future. The plot revolves more around revealing what happened to his battle buddy. The ending, which I will not mention, does seem to draw a sense of closure and almost peace for the story.

*Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, written by Ben Fountain, presents a different take on the war novel. The point of view is third person limited, always centering around Billy and never delving into other character’s heads. Its strength is in the objective,
external presentation of the characters. All the reader knows is what he’s told. The drawback is the lack of development in the supplemental characters, who show definite personality yet no individual drives or motives, at least nothing identifiably different from Billy’s in the simple desire to make it through the war alive and perhaps make some money off a movie deal.

The tense is present instead of past, so the story is immediate and not filtered through conscience and reflection. The story also stays centered on the present instead of the past, so the actual attack that has made the soldiers famous is only mentioned by minor characters or skimmed over in memory. War is not shown to the reader.

It is also not so much a post-war story, as I consider mine to be, because the soldier characters are in the middle of the war, taking a mandatory public relations break, and have not truly finished the experience. Sure, they have experienced much combat and its rigors, but because they are returning to combat very shortly are not mentally or temporally in a post-traumatic state. Billy thinks a lot about his circumstances and reflects of his dead leader ‘Shroom,’ but he does not greatly demonstrate Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The greater theme of the novel is the perception of the war from the soldier versus the civilians, with the purpose to show the ignorance or naivety of the general populace. It is a statement about people’s beliefs in the war, and when held up to the criteria of what a war novel is, it could be debatable whether this book is or isn’t a war novel but does seem to fit Aichinger’s definition.
There are many factors that could be associated with the one-sided nature of recent war publishing favoring nonfiction. Many biographies are written by reporters or authors embedded within a military, who are able to observe, write, analyze, and revise as the deployment progresses, making for a manuscript that can be well on its way by the end of the deployment and thus brought to market much quicker. Soldiers working on autobiographies have grounded foundations in their journals and even in blogs they created. Literary critic Eric Cummings says that “a memoir-centric publishing industry has played the most instrumental role in stunting the growth of [Global War on Terrorism] fiction” and “the first draft of war literature tends to be memoir anyway—it happened during both world wars” (Gallagher). On his efforts to get his novel published, veteran and literary student Roy Scranton recalls “I was told that women buy novels and they aren’t interested in war novels, whereas memoirs have a wider appeal” (Gallagher).

When it comes to creating fiction though, I theorize that there is something that complicates or hinders the creative process. All veterans looking to become writers have many memories and emotions to sift through and process, and the time required to make sense of everything could be as short as days or as long as many years. Perhaps the nonfiction writers come to terms with their experiences quicker. Perhaps fiction writers are working to create characters, settings, and narratives different enough from what they experienced because there is not enough impact or “truth” in the people, places, and events they have seen. Ernest Hemingway, in a 1925 letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, said, “The emotional wells of war are as rich and vast as they are lethal, and such an
experience can take a while for a young person to sort through and subsequently channel into the creative process. “The Thin Red Line and Slaughterhouse-Five were not published until seventeen years and twenty-four years, respectively, after the end of World War Two, and The Things They Carried was published twenty years after the end of Tim O’Brien’s combat tour in Vietnam. Although the authors were producing other projects that were published in that period, there was a good delay until the monumental works arrived.

I would speculate this lag in fiction is also due in part to society’s current fascination with real life. Drama and interpersonal conflict are what sell and are pushed through the paper tabloids and television tabloid media, through tell-all books, and in reality television. Likewise with their war, the public wants “true” stories about “real” people who have sacrificed and come out scarred.

My project is to write a war novel of my own, and striving to include several key parts that I feel are important. The first element is a genuine feeling of a soldier’s experience. Tales of combat are not new at this stage of the war with as many autobiographers there are out, but a feeling of authenticity is necessary. Although Stephen Crane superbly pulled-off writing the war novel without experience, he recreated the feeling of war for the reader. It is also important that a novel should include those common elements of war that transcend time, technology, and society while at the same time addressing how those elements are unique to the conflict and what else makes it noteworthy.
Why am I trying to write a war novel for this project?

I have enjoyed writing for a long time, wanting to be a writer since high school. The experience of participating in a war has given me a subject to write about that I did not have before. Finding topics to write about is an issue for every writer, and I have found that as I have gotten older that I have more things from my own life that I can put into writing. If you have really lived your life, gone out into the world and experienced things that others have not, you will have material to write about. I personally think that if you have sat through your late childhood and early adulthood and watched life on TV that you have not felt life, and if you have not been moved by events which you experienced, you will not be as good a writer as you can be.

Why would I want to write about war then? There is in me an unexplainable need to say something, or to explain something. Partly it could be the feeling that I have experienced something unique and that I want to share that with people. Partly it could be the therapeutic effect of writing and relaying my experiences, the desire to be understood, an unloading for those around us veterans who don’t really know what to ask. Of course the writing process in and of itself is therapy, and I am self-aware that this is my way of turning things around and around in my head and trying to make sense of them.

Why fiction? Why a novel? First of all, not enough people would experience my nonfiction. I took a class on memoir shortly after coming back from my deployment, thinking it would be a good way to get my thoughts and my experiences together and
send them out into the world. As I compiled this, I sent manuscripts out to literary agents, hoping to be one of the first people telling their story of Iraq. From the feedback that I got, I received the encouragement that my writing itself was not the worst and bore some promise, and yet the agents thought that there was not enough there that a reading audience would be interested in. I guess there was not enough action, not enough controversy, not enough loss of life, limb, or mind to be marketable. My war experience was relatively dull, in other words. I decided to try the road less traveled then and attempt to fold my experiences into fiction, both short and long. I found that it gave me a greater freedom than what I had when I was trying to write what had really happened. I was able to create greater conflict by being able to use my imagination, and was able to amplify the effect of my experiences by being able to create the events surrounding a situation. Tim O’Brien writes in *The Things They Carried* of a difference between “story-truth” and “happening-truth,” and that “story-truth is sometimes truer than happening-truth.” I will say that by being released to explore the greater truth within story I have been able to explore areas previously limited by the reality of happening.

One thing I wish to present to the reader is the idea of a socially functional veteran, or at least one who is striving to function socially. A common characteristic of veterans in some novels is that they are completely distraught and appear to be listless and drifting in a sea of depression and anger. We are not all like that. I try to show that the other side is the people who try to blend in with everybody else, who are trying to appear normal and to do so are striving for a pattern or routine of normalcy. I compare it
to the idea of the functional alcoholic, the one who can operate among peers having no
hints that the person has a problem. It may not always work for this type of veteran, he
may falter and expose himself, but he is actively striving to blend, to jump back into
society somehow, and to utilize pre-occupation of the mind to mentally cope.

I wish to show the experience of the Reservist. Many times, in both fiction and
nonfiction, the experience of the active duty soldier is presented. With the two recent
wars and with the first Gulf War, a heavy contingent of National Guard and Reserve
troops were mobilized. These are people who were plucked from civilian jobs,
sometimes without much notice, and suddenly thrust not only into the full time life of
soldiering but also forced to deal with a separation from family which they were not
prepared for. When the combat tour is over, these people are thrust back into the civilian
work environment whereas an active duty soldier, unless being discharged, has both a
continuous job and an environment which because of its fraternal nature is more
protective. Sometimes there has been a lack of respect for the Reservist. Sometimes
these soldiers were not up to speed, and sometimes they outshined the active duty
counterparts because of their outside civilian skill sets and a work ethic from either being
self-employed or working a job from which you can actually be fired.

Instead of the infantry patrolling the streets and fighting house to house, I try to
show a lesser known role of the convoy escort. These soldiers daily took to the highways
of the country to ensure that supplies could be delivered to the Forward Operating Bases,
and in doing so exposed themselves to routes that were obvious to the enemy and which
could be rigged mostly at their discretion for attacks with improvised bombs or small arms fire. The job was to protect those who they were escorting, and within this role there was an imperative to continue moving the convoy safely instead of pursuing any attackers. Many times those being escorted were unarmed civilian contractors, people wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest and not allowed to carry a gun, which would leave anyone who knew he was a target with a great sense of vulnerability. Instead of being the aggressors on the prowl, the wolves per se, these soldiers were limited by their role to something akin to sheep waiting to be attacked, or at best to a feeling of being the sheep dog.

There are certain elements of war which are inescapable in any war stories: separation from loved ones; fear; regret over actions done or not done; questions of character and morality; the value of life; letters and care packages from loved ones and school kids; soldiers dealing with post-traumatic stress. These are included in mine, but there are also aspects that are unique to every war, including its distinctive environment, weaponry and types of combat, and the political circumstances surrounding the war. For Iraq, these include: the idea of a pre-emptive war; the military’s Stop Loss policy; the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) as the notorious yet simple weapon of an insurgency against a technologically superior force; the mild traumatic brain injury as the most common injury; the counter-IED jamming devices; the advancement of phone, email, and internet video-feeds for soldiers to communicate with home; the need to black-out these services when a death notification needs to be sent to a family; the comparison of this war
to Vietnam, Korea, and WWII; poor body and vehicle armor at the beginning; the influx of the civilian contractor; the minimal number of troops initially deployed (planning for an invasion, not an occupation); bad conditions at Walter Reed Hospital; a backlog within the Veterans Affairs medical clinics. Although no writer could adequately cover all of these issues within one written piece, there is plenty of material to be drawn from.

The narrative format I am using is a present-day timeline that moves forward chronologically with the main story arc, with flashback chapters mixed in to give backstory and character development. The flashback chapters are where the war and deployment are shown to the reader, and the present story arc is where the reader sees the main character dealing with adjustment back to civilian life and the post-traumatic issues. The flashbacks are not chronological, as I am trying to position information strategically within the narrative to try to keep the reader interested and slowly reveal details or behaviors left unexplained in the present-day story arc. Many war novels of the past, like *The Red Badge of Courage* or *The Thin Red Line*, used one straightforward story arc that moved from the beginning of a battle sequence to its end. In this manner the character was shown to have a gradual change from the war and the reader could see its effects accumulating on the character. I go to the after-effects on the character right away and then jump back to moments that led to the development of his current state. This method allows me to show how the character copes with everything he has been through, a facet that is often not talked about in the traditional war novel, either out of the limitation of a single story timeline or given that post-traumatic stress historically has been more of a
socially taboo topic. Upon reflection of that, perhaps what I am writing could also be called a post-war novel.

A straightforward chronological story arc could be doable but might be better suited to the large moving battlefronts of previous conflicts like the Civil War or World War Two. Those story arcs usually covered just one battle or campaign, and the closest thing that there was to a moving battlefront was the initial invasion of Iraq. After that it, as well as the war in Afghanistan, was more of a war of security and stability, of raids and convoys. The current conflicts more resemble Vietnam than World War Two or the Civil War. Catch-22 and The Yellow Birds demonstrated that a non-linear story arc can succeed. One of the few Iraq War novels out now, Senator’s Son, does use a chronological story arc about three lieutenants serving in Iraq, one of whom goes on to be a Senator in the frame of the story 30 years in the future and has to cast a key vote that could lead to war with China.

I use a third person point of view that is mostly limited to one character in each chapter, and that character of focus will not always be the main character. I am doing this to show the main character both externally and internally as well as to be able to run more than one narrative thread with the supporting characters. Sometimes I want the reader to be inside the main character’s head, and at other times he needs to be seen through the eyes of another character to give more of an observational objectivity. The main character soldier will be in almost every chapter, though sometimes he will be limited in scope and action and will be viewed or discussed by the other characters. In a
way I am modeling this after ways that Yossarian is portrayed in *Catch-22*: each chapter focuses on a different character, and there are a lot of them, but Yossarian is in each of them. This allows me to build up the supporting characters with stories of their own with minor story threads moving forward throughout the narrative to give the reader a small but tight community of characters to be interested in. If successful, this will give the reader an additional perspective of the main character and the break in his direct narrative can provide small or large amounts of back-story or character development to keep the reader wanting to return to the main narrative.

For the purpose of this thesis project, I am condensing the volume of manuscript accompanying this introduction to selected chapters from my novel. Although the completed novel is the end goal of the project, prudence is also required in keep the reading load manageable for thesis committee members. The selected chapters were chosen to highlight the post-deployment difficulties of the main character Adam, and also to show the events that have fed into his present-day situation and state of mind. Originality in both plot and format has been a constant goal. These chapters exemplify the loss of innocence or psychological adjustment a human must make to combat and the war zone, and the action is intended to show the unique qualities of combat in Iraq.
CHASING RABBITS

A Novel

(Selected Chapters)

By Dennis Haen
Clem was probably the nosiest person in Kingsburg, an addict of gossip who for many years had satisfied his need to know and the need to tell by running the one auto repair shop in town. There are several professionals almost all people must call on regularly: doctors, barbers, financial advisors, and car repairmen. Clem became a surgeon of automobiles, a man with a gift for diagnosing mechanical ailments with as simple as a touch of the hood while the motor was running, or a test drive around the block. He was a healer. Business was steady for thirty two years. Like a good doctor or barber, people gained a great deal of trust and confidence in Clem, and often spoke quite openly of what was going on in their lives, or more interestingly, what they had seen or overheard of their neighbors and townspeople. Once a person left the shop, Clem would often retell a story he’d just heard to the next customer while still fresh with his customary “Did you know…?” line.

Retirement had taken that social interaction away from Clem, and turned him into a television shut-in. He sat in his faded blue vinyl La-Z-Boy recliner as he always did, watching the television with the majority of his attention. This self-absorption usually withstood the attempts of his wife to carry on a conversation with him, even the ringing of the telephone or her summons that someone was calling and wanted to talk to him. In
antique communications terms, a string ran from his head to the television, with one can implanted firmly within his brain and the other within the screen of the entertainment device. But Clem’s perch also granted him an excellent view out of his front and side windows, allowing him to see not only across the street but both up and down most of the block on his side of the street. His eyes would dart up when movement was detected outside, from a vehicle or a person passing by, and track the visual trespasser until nearly out of his field of view. Clem’s eyes automatically reset on the television like a sentry snapping back into position.

A car had pulled up to the new neighbor’s house, a small blue Toyota hatchback, and parked along the curb. Clem’s eyes caught the movement as the car came down the street, and he turned his head from the game show Jeopardy to give the situation his full attention until it should prove no longer interesting.

“Nora, come here,” he called to his wife in the kitchen. “There’s some action at the new guy’s place.”

The new neighbor was a sandy-haired young man named Adam Banks. They knew very little about the kid who kept to himself, only knowing his name from asking the bow-legged mailman, Gimpy Pete. Pete had been reluctant to disclose it, protesting, “I can’t give that out, that’s personal information.” Clem countered, “You know I’ll walk over there and look at his mail, and I know you won’t say anything, so save me the trouble and just tell me his name.” Pete gave in. Yet the couple knew very little of Adam Banks besides what they observed. The guy spent a lot of time outside trying to
plant some flowers and vegetables, a mixture of bell pepper and tomato plants along with rose bushes, geraniums, lilies of valley and tiger lilies, daisies, and hostas. There was no planning in the arrangement of any of these, forming an amateur and eclectic arrangement. Adam worked barehanded, not even wearing gloves when pruning the thorny roses, and watered a lot. He was always watering, almost daily, even though it had rained several times a week this summer. Clem considered gardening to be a feminine task, separate from the true agricultural production of a farmer and beneath a man’s hobbies which should involve building something or killing an animal. Not the biggest man, the neighbor, but noticeably muscular under the loose fitting clothes he wore. Not loose like the dim-witted kids who shamelessly thought it fashionable to wear their jeans riding six inches below their hips, even with a belt, and drooping down to expose their boxer shorts beneath. Adam’s pants were at his hips, the belt he always wore cinched tight, and simple rock concert t-shirts tucked in. But the clothes always seemed one size larger than they needed to be, denying the observer a true look at his form beneath. Other peculiarities were evident too. Besides gardening, the man seemed to run a lot, and at odd times of the day. Clem would spot Adam in mesh shorts, sweaty t-shirt, and reflective belt returning from a run when he got up with the sunrise, or heading out for one just as he was going to bed. On at least two occasions Clem had seen him go running twice in the same day. Adam left lights on throughout his house all night, showing neither any concern for conserving energy nor the necessity for darkness
in order to sleep. Adam never went anywhere besides running and occasional grocery trips, so Clem assumed he was unemployed, and greatly lacking motivation.

Nora had finished drying the white CorningWare plate in her hand and shuffled over to the living room, her faded green frog slippers dragging across the brown living room carpet. She couldn’t afford to miss opportunities when Clem was freed from that blasted TV. He never used to watch it that much while he was working, not even much of the news shows during supper, so the two of them were able to carry on conversations quite frequently. Then Clem’s health started declining. His knees ached and were sorely in need of replacement, leaving him unable to bend and squat much. He was often out of breath from even minor exertion, caused by either his lungs (those blasted Marlboros), his heart, or both. So Clem retired and sold his auto repair business to a longtime employee, giving Clem faith that his customers would be well taken care of. But it had been hard for a former owner to watch a new one make changes. It hadn’t been discussed, but Clem had hoped his name would be left in “Clem’s Kingsburg Auto Repair” for posterity, and was saddened when it became “Kingsburg Repair: Auto, Cycle, and Watercraft.”

“Correct,” Jeopardy host Alex Trebeck stated to a contestant on TV as Nora entered the room. At least some of the game shows were better than the other programs that just rotted Clem’s brain, Nora thought. The fantasy ones like Star Trek: Voyager or The Twilight Zone reruns, or the detective show Law & Order spin-offs which seemed to be on one cable channel or another at any given time. She had lectured Clem too many
times about what a waste it was, how he was flushing away the fleeting time remaining in
his life. It made her sad sometimes to watch and to think about, but what could she do.
He just ignored her. Clem had no misconceptions about the appliance and its virtues; it
was there for his mindless entertainment. So many channels, and yet it provided so little
actual useful information. Even the science shows, which chronicled the great predatory
beasts of the planet or used enhanced computer generated special effects to make the
astronomy subjects seem more like science fiction movies, failed to add any value to his
intelligence or social conscience. He just sat and watched, shifting into a trancelike state
that blocked out everything.

“What is it?” Nora asked as she entered the living room. Her eyes followed his
gaze out the south side window to the car in front of the neighbor’s house. A thin,
athletic woman was getting out of the driver’s seat, flattening the bottom of her knee
length summer dress, and shutting the car door.

“What’s that guy’s name again?” he asked, pointed to the story and a half stucco
house next door. The neighbor had lived there for five weeks already and had never
come around to introduce himself, so how was Clem supposed to remember it.

“Adam something,” she said as she stood beside his chair. “Maybe Ford, I want
to say.” She had tried going over once to introduce herself, but no one came to the door,
despite the television being on in the living room. The TV always seemed to be on over
there, and although it looked like Adam had been home she never saw any movement to
answer the door.
“Might be his sister,” Clem said, disbelieving that the hermit might be receiving a female visitor.

“Oh, really?” Nora challenged. “When’s the last time your sister checked her hair in the reflection of a car window before coming to see you?”

Clem turned his head and gave her a glare. “Don’t mean a thing,” he shot back. “The guy’s on the funny side, always gardening. Might be queer.”

That assumption always reared its head when a man didn’t stack up to Clem’s old-fashioned male measuring stick. Any man not taking an interest in cars, sports, politics, or women could be suspect. Clem still believed that no gay people had yet moved into his small and conservative Wisconsin town. He had lived here for over 30 years and had fixed cars for just about everyone who lived here. Although he often had suspicions about people, Clem’s acute internal homosexual detecting senses had never flushed one from cover.

Nora looked down at Clem intently watching the woman walk up Adam’s sidewalk and ring the doorbell. It was the same intensity with which he watched TV, stone-faced and glassy-eyed. Was he engrossed in the whole situation that intently, or was Clem ogling the woman? It often seemed the television had killed those interests within him as well. He didn’t verbally respond to near-naked women on the shows anymore, or at least didn’t show it as he used to. Maybe that loss of vitality didn’t apply to real, live, young women. She had been that woman at one time, bouncy and perky and
carefree. She had checked her hair in a car window reflection at one time for Clem. Now she was just...tired.

“Again with that?” Nora said. “What says that he’s gay? Can’t a person not want to be bothered? How is it different to lose oneself in plants compared to television?”

Clem tore his eyes away momentarily to look up at Nora since the lady was still standing at the door, shifting her weight as she waited for an answer. He did not like where her line of logic was taking her, what he perceived he was being compared to.

“He’s too quiet,” Clem Said. “Guy hasn’t gone out of his way to talk to anyone on the block. In fact, (Clem pointed his index finger in emphasis) seems he goes out of his way not to talk to people. How many times have we walked up to the lot line while he was in the yard and waved?”

“Only once,” she answered.

“Well, numbers don’t matter,” Clem replied. “The guy waved back but didn’t come talk to us. Just went back to his flower garden like we weren’t there.”

Nora was getting irritated with Clem’s logic. “So how’s being anti-social make one queer? You watch enough shows to know queers are all chatty and talk about clothes. They’re like women.”

He started to look back to the window, then turned again for another point, again with the finger waving. “And that’s another thing- no straight man spends that much time on a flower garden.”

“Shhh,” Nora interjected, “she’s going in.”
A forest green exterior door swung open and the screen door swung out to allow the woman’s entry. The man at the door was in his mid-twenties, had wavy, golden brown-blonde hair, and a smile that curled to the right side of his face, dimpling the cheek. His lips moved and eyes coyly avoided the woman’s. The two spectators could not tell what was being said between Adam and his guest, though Clem always tried to lip read.

“He just told her, ‘You look hot.’”

Clem had talked like that to Nora at one time, long, long ago. Sure the comments were blunt and crude and sometimes just downright raunchy, but they had been compliments nonetheless, and had been delivered with a loving look in his eye and a devilish grin on his face. How long had it been? The devil had long died in his grin. In fact his grin had not been seen too often lately either.

“No, he didn’t say that,” said Nora, swatting his shoulder with the dish towel.

“Read his expressions, his gestures. He couldn’t look her in the eye for too long, so he wouldn’t say something that direct.”

There was about forty feet give or take between the two houses, and luckily the neighbor had his window blinds down up, allowing Clem and Nora a glimpse as he and his guest made their way from the front to the back the house. By the time they had crossed the bathroom window he led her in the direction of the kitchen, which was on the back side of the house that faced west. There was a dining room adjacent to it that Adam didn’t use yet. It had a window as well that Clem and Nora could look almost directly
through, seeing the kitchen sink and counter jutting out, as well as the corner of his table. The table had plain white plates and clear plastic cups, the fine china of a simple man. The man came back into view with a bottle of red wine, holding it up for her approval.

“Wanna get drunk?” was Clem’s commentary of it.

She must have approved of his selection, for he turned and held the bottle over the sink, twisting the wrapper off the top. He shimmied the cork back and forth and finally pried it off with a “pop,” only spilling a little into the sink and down the bottle label. He held the bottle up to show her his achievement, then poured two of the clear plastic cups half full. She took the one he offered in his right hand, and Nora noticed her hand touching his in the exchange; she sighed at the sight of young romance. The man set his down urgently and walked across the kitchen, out of sight for half a minute. When he came back he had a steaming metal pot in his oven-mitted hands, and cautiously poured it into the sink. Steam fumed as he slowly poured the water, and slightly overcooked pasta clumped into a plastic strainer.

“Spaghetti,” Clem noted. “The simple man’s fancy.” Clem couldn’t see that it was sticking together, nor did he speak of his bewilderment at a man trying to cook for a woman, which was unheard of in his day. Nora still cooked three meals a day for him. Ever since they were married he would come home for a lunch she had prepared for him, like a grilled sandwich on sourdough toast or a casserole with macaroni in it. Even things that did not need to be cooked she prepared for him. All he had to do was sit down for
breakfast and she poured his cereal into a bowl and poured the 2% milk over it. Normal men just didn’t cook for women.

Then something peculiar happened. The man set down the pot and turned towards the other side of the room, where he fixed his gaze for several minutes. His eyes gazed steady as a floodlight and seemed not to blink, and the pleasant look on his face became a blank sheet of white paper. Nora thought she recognized the look as the one Clem wore daily when he tuned the world out for the television, though she had never seen a facial reaction on Clem like what Adam now wore. The expression in his eyes could be read from far away, and though unmoving they appeared confused between sadness and anger. She didn’t know if there was a television on the other side of the room. The woman stood up and moved to a place that was blocked from their view. What was he watching over there? Was the neighbor watching the woman, or something else? Nora twisted her wrist to reveal a small tarnished watch that said the time was 5:40 p.m. Could it be the world network news? Jeopardy was no longer on Clem’s television, replaced by the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, muted, which was following up on the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal which had broke several months earlier. When Adam finally moved, it started with a slow shaking of his head, small at first, then progressively larger shakes. Never had a bobble head doll shook his head like so with such a disapproving glare. Again his lips moved, saying something, allowing for a response they could not see, repeating something, something stern, something
impassioned. He said it again and again and again. Was he even saying it aloud, or was he on mute as well?

The woman came back into view and made a comment to Adam.

Then Adam yelled something.

No need to read his wide jaw or tight face- Nora and Clem could hear his shout from their house, though unintelligible. Nora jumped; Clem just said, “Whoa.”

The young brunette woman said something back defensively then slammed her plastic glass of wine on the table, spilling a bit. She quickly exited the room and made for the front door. Adam followed her, mouthing what looked like an apologetic, “Wait.” She didn’t wait, and didn’t wait for him to open the door for her, instead flinging it open and bolting in quick shuffle for her car. He stopped at the front door, knowing the chase was pointless. She only looked back after she was in her car, then mouthed something herself, something like “flipping weirdo” as she sped off down the street.

Adam watched her drive away until the car squealed around the corner, not really stopping as the red sign had directed. Backing into his house, Adam closed the front door and let the screen door slowly slide shut, slipping closed as his evening slipped away from him.

Nora and Clem were silent as they watched him come to his kitchen again, put his hands on the counter by the brim of the sink, put his head down and close his eyes. Clem watched him for tears. If the guy cried, then Clem would know he was right and this guy at the very least was a sally. But no water came from his eyes, no saline leakage from the
young man, a sign that maybe there was hope from this generation that was raised to
spew their feelings and castrate themselves in emotions. Maybe there was hope for the
lad.

Adam’s right fist smashed down hard on the counter in a quick and unexpected
recoil of anger. Nora and Clem both jumped a little. Then both his hands smashed the
counter, shaking it a little bit, Clem noticed. Either his counters were a little shabby, or
he had a punch in him for a thin guy. He found a nearby pack of cigarettes and put one in
his mouth. Then he took it out, put it back in, took it out and put it back into the pack.
Adam looked up, out the back window and into his back yard. He stared at the plot,
which was empty except for the things he had implanted and the natural critters that
crossed its borders. There was the hole he’d begun for a small pond. A few birds skirted
about, a mix of sparrows, robins, blackbirds, and the occasional blue jay, cardinal, and
grosbeak. Some sat on his plastic patio furniture, while others came and went to the
wooden birdfeeder hanging from the red maple tree in the northwest corner of the yard.

The bird feeder.

Adam’s eyes again looked focused and angry, and he mouthed another
explicative. Nora and Clem sensed nothing wrong as they watched him watching his
yard, but to him the intrusion was all too obvious. The trespasser just sat there under the
bird feeder in broad daylight, without any stealth or concern over being seen. What
arrogance. Adam mouthed something, but they could not tell it was ‘How dare you?’
A small grey squirrel sat beneath the wooden bird feeder that hung from the lowest branch, eating the corn and sunflower seeds that the birds dropped. *That’s not for you!*, Adam mouthed.

For what appeared to be no reason to Nora and Clem, Adam picked up the pot that the pasta had been in and stormed to the back door. He flung it open, walked down the concrete steps and bee-lined towards the squirrel underneath the bird feeder. The animal sensed his approach, sitting higher on its haunches and tilting its head slightly to regard the approaching man. His ambush was gone, but that didn’t matter to Adam, and wouldn’t make a difference in the fate of the squirrel. The creature dropped the seeds in its mouth and tensed as the man continued to advance. Without stopping, he brought the metal pot up and back and flung it hard and fast at the stationary target, cursing it as he did. The squirrel easily jumped out of the way and onto the side of the tree, as the pot bounced off the ground and rolled wildly, striking a rock before jumping the small dip that formed the lot line to the rear neighbors and coming to a stop on their lawn. He advanced on the tree with the same brisk stride, and the squirrel shot around to the back of the tree and started to climb. When Adam got to the tree he went around the back, but the squirrel knew it and countered his move, keeping the trunk between them as it climbed. Adam continued to circle the trunk, chasing the squirrel around the tree as it climbed in a spiral motion. At the second branch the grey squirrel paused and looked down at him, momentarily safe, but still keeping its eyes locked on him.
Those eyes. Adam read eyes, and knew that the scared looked away, at least in humans. These eyes were locked on him, unblinking, staring him down.

Adam jumped up suddenly, reaching nowhere near the branch, but getting the squirrel climbing again. That was not enough though. The tree’s trunk was about eight inches in diameter, good and sturdy, but not thick enough to resist bowing in a strong wind. It would not withstand him. He grasped it in his hands and started to shake. The trunk itself did not sway much, but the thinner upper branches began to oscillate more, threatening to throw the squirrel as the tips moved more than the proximal end of the branch. It jumped to a power line and scurried towards the safety of the neighboring lot to the south. Adam followed along the ground, chasing it now as it ran on the wire, out of reach. He looked for a rock quickly to throw at it and knock the fleeing thief off its trapeze. He found one, but the squirrel was already in the next lot and jumping to a tall elm tree. He watched it go. It didn’t look back at him this time. “Fucking rodent,” he yelled.

When he turned he saw something he didn’t expect, an older man and woman in the neighboring house watching him. Actually, they were pressed up against the glass and craning their heads so they could witness the finale of the whole event. Their eyes were big. He paused and looked around in an uncomfortable caught-in-the-act manner, then lifted a quick and noncommittal wave and walked back to the house without looking at them again. The pot could sit until much, much later.
Nora and Clem leaned back from the window they had pressed against to get a
good view of the neighbor in his backyard. She looked down at her husband, hunched
over and resting on the window pane, expecting him to have an immediate comment. His
mouth was open in a slight gape. He realized this when he looked to her, and shut his
mouth. Still he could say nothing right away, his eyes blinking quickly and concisely, as
if he were flipping through thoughts in his head like pages.

Finally all Clem said was, “Strange.”

“Not normal,” Nora seconded.

“Never seen that.”

“Did anyone else see that?”

They both peered out the windows, craning up and down the street to see if others
had witnessed what they had. No other person moved about on the block, and there was
no sign of other faces in windows. Save for neighbors in back, no one else would have
had a view to the scene they had witnessed. Nora even walked back into their kitchen to
look at the back windows, but no one could be seen in back. She returned shaking her
head.

“Theories?” she asked.

Clem actually had to consider some for a second. “Alcoholic,” he finally said.

“Come on,” she countered. “Did he look drunk to you?”

“Drunks get very violent,” Clem replied, remembering his late uncle Al that was
said to have beaten the best man for his wedding at his bachelor party.
“But he wasn’t staggering,” she argued.

“Ever hear of a functional alcoholic?” Clem said, irritated. “What do you think then, detective?”

She was taken aback, not used to having to have an answer ready. After a moment she said, “He must be a pervert.”

“What?” blurted Clem.

“He’s some kind of sex deviant,” she said steadfastly, following her idea that had been a reach anyway but the only thing to come to mind, and she was determined to argue the point just for the sake of keeping the conversation going. “Must have been some kind of come on to the woman that got shot down, and his sexual frustrations got the best of him.”

“We didn’t even see her close to him,” Clem pointed out.

“It starts with the verbal sometimes,” she said, seeming uncomfortable. “She shot down his raunchy suggestions, split before he could try to rape her, and he took it out with the… by throwing the…”

“I don’t think so,” Clem said. He turned back to the window and spotted evidence. “Aha! Look!” The man was back in his kitchen, gulping down the wine from the glasses and moving right on to the open bottle. “Looks like a drinking problem to me.”
“Well I don’t think so.” Nora was sticking to her guns, though she thought Clem’s idea more plausible. “I’m going to call the city hall and see if we missed any notices about a sex offender moving into our neighborhood.”

Clem considered that for a moment, and how that might explain the new neighbor’s less than sociable behavior if he was on a sex offender watchlist. “You go right ahead.”

She looked at him. Clem was smiling back a competitive grin, then he picked up the remote control and started surfing the television channels since the news did not interest him. Nora grinned back as she was left, looking at the back of Clem’s head again. The neighbor’s tirade had given him back to her for about ten minutes. Nora knew she should be happy with every minute she got. Sometimes she felt she was waiting for an Alzheimer’s patient to have a moment of saliency.

The dishes needed to be finished, but Nora felt tired and slightly out of breathe then, and needed to sit down at the kitchen table for several minutes before going back to housework. The achiness and tightness would pass, just as it had before.
“You’ve been pretty quiet,” Philly said to her husband.

“Yeah,” Adam said meekly, looking up from his hands, where his eyes had been for nearly a minute.

“What’re you thinking?”

“What to say,” he replied. They had been sitting on the hard plastic airport bench for nearly a half hour, waiting for Adam’s flight to Chicago. Both the unyielding seats and the virtual silence had been uncomfortable on both of them. From Chicago he was to catch a connecting flight to Nashville, and from there a shuttle van that ran to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. This day was the culmination of a turbulent week, beginning with a phone call on Monday. Adam had been summoned from the Inactive Ready Reserve to active military duty: he was heading for war. It wasn’t exactly the lightning bolt out of the blue, not if one considers the bad feeling he’d had in his stomach that whole day any kind of warning. How did I know it was coming today? Animals can feel earthquakes far off, can smell fires far distant; did I feel someone in Washington picking my name from a list to fill vacancies in a military police unit preparing to deploy? Can I sense approaching danger?
Those thoughts came and went throughout the week just as his emotions shifted through the cycle of acceptance. Sometimes he was angry. Angry at himself for enlisting for college money, angry at Saddam Hussein, angry at the unseen hands that hold the puppet strings of every little soldier. Sometimes he was angry at Philly for being angry at him. Sometimes he was sad for everything he was going to miss at home in the coming year, or sad for what he knew Philly was going to have to endure at home without him. Sometimes he was scared of the unknown ahead, scared of dying, or scared of the thought of someone in dress uniform coming to tell her that he was dead. Scared of being Missing in Action, or of being beheaded over the internet like Daniel Pearle. And sometimes, at the strangest moments, he remained completely at peace.

So many tasks had needed to be done in an incredibly short amount of time that he usually didn’t have time for his mind to linger on such thoughts. The two of them created a power of attorney and he assigned Philly in control of all his financial matters. They refinanced their house in New Holstein since interest rates were good and he was available to sign the papers. He updated his military ID card at a local National Guard armory, and got a card for Philly as a dependent so that she could come visit him on military posts if she wanted. Then there was shopping for supplies, putting his student loans into deferment, taking the insurance off his car and putting it in storage…and so much more.

But after the running around to take care of paperwork and pack and say goodbye to a few people, this slow ending seemed anticlimactic. The second biggest thing he
hated about the situation was being dropped into a unit he did not know. The biggest thing was leaving Philly as abruptly as this.

“Something in my head tells me I should be talking your ear off, telling you all kinds of wisdom and reassurances, things that will make you brave and not worry while I’m gone.”

“I am brave,” she responded with a teasing smile, “but conversations with you usually make me dumber, not wiser.”

“Har, hardy, har.” Adam gave her a soft punch in the shoulder with the fake laugh. It was a good sign that she could not resist poking fun at him even now; that small moment of sentimentality he delivered was the hanging fastball down the middle that more often than not Philly could connect with and put out of the park. That was alright for Adam. She only teased people she liked, and she teased her husband a lot.

“You haven’t said much, either,” Adam noted. “I’m the one going away, but we’re both going to be separated from each other.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said, wiping a lock of her blonde bangs out of her eye. “I just have a lot on my mind as well.”

They’d had many talks over the five days since Adam had received the phone call notifying him of his military orders. Only five days to get ready. The harder he tried to slow those days down, the faster they went. Tears had been shed, mostly by Philly, but both had been riding an emotional roller coaster through some not-so-bad moments and through some torrents of words. And then there were the uncomfortable silences while
cuddling on the couch or the bed. Adam had tried to spend as much time as he could packing his duffle bags and staying busy, trying to keep his mind occupied. At first he had wanted to send Philly to work so she too would not be thinking about his imminent departure every moment of the day, but she protested and convinced him that she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, that he owed it to her to be with her around the clock until he left, just in case…

_Just in case…_

The possibility of the worst thing imaginable happening to Adam came up several times and had been discussed. People die in war. It is a fact that couldn’t just be avoided, that wouldn’t be avoided for two people such as themselves who think ahead on a great many things. The talk may have started by Adam saying he was going to increase his Servicemen’s Group Life Insurance to the maximum amount, $250,000, and that he was getting a spouse’s policy on her as well. Other life insurance policies usually had clauses that excluded acts of war, so SGLI was his only option. This led to them talking about darker subjects. About death, being captured, weapons of mass destruction. While holding hands and trying to maintain eye contact they had covered everything from the fear of dying to how Adam would want Philly to move on when she was ready, if something should happen to him. The insurance policy would pay off the house, the car, and all the other bills. But no matter how thoroughly they felt it had been covered, the topic lingered like a bad aftertaste.
There had been intimacy those last days, an awkward sex that felt forced for both of them. At first it was fast and frequent, a gorging while food was available, coming as oddly as when he thumbed through a small album of pictures. He was struck by a picture of her in red flannel in the fall with her hair drifting across her face, revealing just her right eye. Adam then just went silent and stared at her, and when she noticed after a minute she just set down the pictures she had been sorting, went to him, and kicked a clearing on the cluttered carpet. It was not out of animal desire but a need to cram a lifetime into several days, an urgency before a deadline, a ‘live like you’re dying’ mentality that got them to set aside the time to find a pilot near Milwaukee who would take them skydiving in winter. The temps jumped to an unusually high 48 degrees that day, which is still ridiculously cold in the air, but the fellow and his staff took it as their patriotic duty given the circumstances to make a jump work for the couple. When Adam walked out wearing the tight, hot pink skydiving jumpsuit Philly laughed and sobbed at the same time, and she snuck into the men’s changing room after the jump to peel that off him while her entire body pulsated with an adrenaline heartbeat and the thrill to be alive. As the time to leave got closer, their movements became slow and awkward like novices. There was a pressure to make the moments memorable, without any explanation of what emotion or memory that should be. Ecstasy seemed inappropriate, as if no pleasure were allowed anymore. It was a melancholy lovemaking, as if the world were ending. On Adam’s last night, as Philly moved very deliberately atop him, he put his hands to her hips to stop her. She obeyed, thinking he wanted to slow his escalation, but then watched
silently perplexed as he closed his eyes and slowly began to move his hands over her. He felt her pelvis and hips, the structures housing the femininity that he as a man longed after. He touched the base of her spine where it joined her sacrum and pelvis. He felt her relaxed buttocks resting upon his own hip bones. “What are you doing?” she had to ask quietly. He whispered back, “I’m taking a tactile picture. I’m trying to make my hands, my skin, remember how you feel.” He carried on, and she also closed her eyes and tried to become completely aware of herself. *Remember him like this.* Adam’s hands moved up to her breasts and paused in several positions, cupping them, then moving his thumbs in gentle circles to feel their reaction, and he also felt her reaction at the junction of their bodies. He brought his hands to her cheeks, and she also put her hands on his. As they kissed they both felt the spark of merging bodies across multiple points of contact, and Philly began to move her hips again. Slowly, then faster, keeping her eyes open and fixed on his until the moment they wanted and yet wished they could forestall. She saw Adam’s eyes dilate, felt his mouth gasp and almost bite her lip as he tried to continue kissing her, his fingers engulf her head to detain her in his mind, and every muscle of his body spasm as she hoped that he was also transferring a piece of his soul into her for permanent safekeeping.

*Just in case...*

Adam had noticed a cycle in Philly’s reactions after he broke the news to her, a pattern very much like the grieving process people go through when a loved one has died. In many ways he would be almost dead from her life, as close as could be except for the
clumps of letters he would write home and the sporadic and unexpected phone calls. Otherwise, all she’d have left of him would be photographs and mementos, like a deceased relative. There had been denial at first. She was convinced that they must have gotten the wrong Adam Banks, that the right one was a gung-ho fighter who would be eager to clear up the mixed up names and who wanted to be sent off to the Middle East. The anger phase was directed at many people randomly, starting with God (you cruel being), then George W. Bush (stupid, arrogant cowboy), then Saddam Hussein (you evil tyrant, you greedy dick), the United Nations (what a useless and corrupt bureaucracy), and finally Adam himself. Why on Earth did you sign up for the Army? What were you thinking? The pleading stage brought Philly back to God. She asked him in secret prayers first for forgiveness for her anger and secondly for a change of mind, that Adam wasn’t going to be needed to defeat Iraq. Finally, about three days and several sobbing relapses later, there was acceptance, capped by her helping Adam brainstorm about what supplies he would need to bring with him. She could not change the course of the world, nor could she, as good of a convincer as she was, change Adam’s need to answer this summons and fulfill its destiny. She had even suggested going across the border, to which Adam had dryly deflected with “Without a draft, it’s unfashionable to run to Canada anymore.”

A female voice over the intercom announced second call for Flight 637 to Chicago O’Hare. Adam looked at Philly again. No matter how much he wanted to just sit there, even in silence, he knew he had to get moving. He still had to get through
security screening, which could take a bit. When he’d checked his bags earlier at the airline desk he was almost made to empty his duffel bags as part of a random luggage search. The clerk wasn’t too thrilled when he asked her, ‘Are you shitting me?’ Adam had stuffed his two green duffel bags to the gills, and needed to have Philly push down on the contents while he struggled to get the clasp through the loop of each. There was no way anything more was going to be crammed into those bags with his tightly rolled clothes and Rubbermaid containers of writing supplies, small tools like his Gerber, over-the-counter medications, toilet paper, and other small miscellaneous items. If security opened his bags, there was no way he could get it all back in before his flight left. Luckily a supervisor had arrived before a search could be done and she released Adam from this because of his military orders.

Adam stood up, and Philly reluctantly did as well. Her eyes were starting to water again. If there was anything Adam wished he could change or arrange, he wished she wouldn’t be sad or scared for him. He even tried to revive a long dormant relationship with God and asked Him to give her strength.

“Time for me to go,” he said.

“I know.”

Adam looked down at the gold wedding band he had worn on his finger for two and a half years. It was laser engraved with a wavy crisscrossing pattern that made the etching look black inside. This was the one Philly had picked out, had demanded that she get to choose what kind of ring he would wear since Adam had chosen the engagement
ring he had surprised her with on her birthday. It was only fair, and as always she had
chosen brilliantly. Adam slid that ring off his slightly swollen finger with a little bit of
twisting. Philly unclasped the gold necklace she was wearing, and Adam held the ring as
she ran the chain through the band. She replaced the necklace around her neck, and
Adam’s wedding ring hung just above her bosom. Adam dug his hand into his right jean
pocket and pulled out a plain silver band. It had cost $15 at a jewelry kiosk at the Fox
River Mall two days ago, and was what Adam wanted to wear during his deployment.
He handed it to Philly, who slide it on his left ring finger as she had at their wedding.
This ring was enough to symbolize their marriage, yet was expendable and not as
sentimental as the actual ring. Adam feared damaging his wedding ring while overseas,
but more than that did not want it getting stolen or looted off his body should he be killed
or captured. No dirty Iraqi would be giving it to his whore, or melting it down to fill a
tooth.

_Just in case…_

They hugged. Philly squeezed Adam very tight, and sniffled into his shoulder.
They pulled apart. Philly saw a trail of water down Adam’s cheek, and wiped it away.
His face was clean-shaven and smooth, the way she liked it to run her hand over. Adam
hated shaving, and usually wore a three-day stubble. She would take that stubble now if
he would be able to stay.

“What’s this?” she teased. “Real soldiers don’t cry.”

“Really?” Adam asked. “I’ll remember that when I meet one.”
She smiled. She never would have fallen in love with a man who hadn’t been able to take her crap, and had gone through a half dozen boyfriends with oversensitive egos before running into Adam at the laundromat. He had been emptying a dryer of a load of whites, and although not a novice at doing his own wash had still let a new red shirt slip into the load. She knew there was something about him when he held up a pair of formerly white briefs and asked her if wearing pink underwear made him secure in his masculinity, and therefore sexier to women. *No,* she’d replied with a smile, *just incompetent, and that wasn’t sexy at all.* His reply may have been what first won her over: *Oh, but I’m very secure in my incompetence.*

“I don’t like goodbyes,” she said, cupping his cheek with the hand she still held to his face. She had no siblings, and was very close to her parents, Leo and Marilynn, who had eventually welcomed Adam as a son after much scrutiny. There were maybe only two close friends for her to lean on, so they would be her support.

“Nobody does,” Adam said, “so let’s just make it a *see ya later.*”

“Much later.”

“You’re worth the wait.”

She gave him one last hug, wanting to make it last as long as possible; they were to become physically separated for over a year, maybe a year and a half.

“I’ll call you as soon as I get situated, and let you know a writing address when I get one.” Adam did not want to call her right away that night, even if he had the time. She needed to start building up a tolerance for being alone so much. In a sense he had to
wean her off him, get her accustomed to periods with no communication from him and only have the ability to receive calls from him, not to place them. It would only be harder for her later on if he called her every night from Fort Campbell.

Adam pulled her in for a kiss. It was deep but not incredibly long. He was cutting himself off from her as well. The embrace broke, and he slid his hand down to hers as he picked up his carry-on bag with the other hand. He looked over at the TSA screeners who had been aware of their presence and situation but who had been trying to discreetly look away. Adam still had to clear their gauntlet before getting on the plane.

“See you,” he said, squeezing her hand before letting it go.

“Bye. Don’t forget the promise.”

“I won’t,” he replied. “I love you.”

Adam slowly walked to the first of the TSA screeners and handed the woman his boarding pass. She scanned it with a bar code reader, and the computer emitted an electronic beep. Adam looked to her as to what it meant and the woman blushed with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said apologetically, “you’ve been selected for the random personal search.”

Adam looked back at Philly. She had begun to cry a little, but was both laughing and crying when she saw what he was going through. He just shrugged.

Adam was taken to the side and had to take off his shoes. One officer waved the magnetic wand over him while another inspected his worn grey Nike running shoes. His
carry-on backpack wasn’t only x-rayed but was opened, inspected, and probed for secret pockets. He was patted down and even asked to open his mouth. Listening to his better judgement, he held back from asking if he should drop his drawers for a cavity search, least they oblige him or hold him up further for being a smart ass.

The whole process took almost ten minutes, and by the time it was completed the aircraft was ready to disembark and was waiting on him. He hurriedly slipped his shoes on without tying them and threw his jacket back on, then looked back across the security checkpoint to where Philly was watching him. He wanted to give her one last hug, one last kiss, but they were now separated by the great security chasm. He resented this separation forced upon them, not being able to say goodbye to her at the plane’s door like other departing soldiers had been able to for generations before. *The terrorists took this from me,* he thought to himself. *By hijacking those planes and killing all those people they have succeeded in stealing from me the freedom to walk to the plane with my wife. I hope those cocksuckers are in hell.*

Adam raised his right hand and formed it into the sign language symbol for *I love you,* extending his pinky and index fingers as well as his thumb and turning the palm towards Philly. Way back in his childhood he had seen Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka give the sign to his fans when he used to enter professional wrestling arenas. Philly signed back to him. At this he turned and walked down the long tunnel to get to the plane quickly. As he glimpsed her disappear from sight around the corner, he asked God for this to not be the last time he saw her.
Although it was an international airport, Austin Straubel was small. At the end of the descending tunnel Adam had to walk through an exterior door and go outside to board the plane. It was about one hundred feet to the mobile stairway that led to the Boeing 727’s forward passenger door. Hustling up the steps, he was ushered to his seat by an impatient flight attendant, cold from standing by the open hatch door. He had a window seat, but could only see the exterior of the building, not into any of the large windows. The plane taxied, paused only to get setup on the runway, and took off with a heave.

Once airborne and nearly level, when the fasten seatbelt light turned off, Adam went to the bathroom and cried. He was glad that the lavatory was in the rear of the aircraft and his sobs would be inaudible against the sounds of the engines. Part of it was a release of the tension of the past week, the composure he had struggled to maintain to grant strength to Philly during this period. Thoughts of his deceased parents came to mind, memories of when he had left for boot camp years ago and the dire predictions his mother had made then. What if they came true? And if he should die over in Iraq, would Philly be able to put herself back together? His mother’s demise came to mind in situations like these. The tears came freely for the last time. He cried for the hardship of the past; he cried for the uncertainty of the future.

When he got back to his seat, Adam pulled out his loose-leaf notebook, the one that would become his journal of this experience, and began writing his wife the letter he hoped she would never get.
Dear Philadelphia,

If you are getting this letter, something has happened to me. I’m sure the soldiers in dress uniform have talked to you at least once already, and will probably be in contact more to go over whatever little benefits you get from the government now for this.

Let me start by saying I am sorry I broke my promise.

The promise.

Any such pact under that term seemed like a terrible thing to break, but this one seemed to be worse than most. Adam’s father had drilled it into him early the importance of not lying and not breaking one’s word, and Adam had managed to achieve that most of his life. Sure, he had lied to that one girl in college when he’d said he would call her in the morning, and had lied two or three times about the whereabouts of his friend Jimmy Robinson to cover for him, but those were minor violations. How could he apologize for the wrongdoing he would be guilty of if he couldn’t deliver on this to Philly?

Adam remained stuck on that sentence for the rest of the flight, and could not finish the letter for almost three weeks, when the imminent flight overseas scared him into bringing the note to a close.

The weather was a sunny 50 degrees when he arrived in Nashville, perfect for a Wisconsin boy in February, but thereafter it rained or snowed on Fort Campbell every
day until he left at the end of March. Then it rained heavily the first night he arrived in Kuwait, the last rain he saw for six months.
FOUR

September 2, 2004

Kingsburg, WI

Adam showered after cutting the lawn, feeling invigorated from working first thing in the morning. It was the only thing he could really do at that time. His body had awoken at 5:30, the internal alarm clock running efficiently and as it was accustomed. He had not been able to change it for a year and a half, and it would be difficult now to reset it so that he could sleep late. Sleeping in to him was 7:00, and that was after staying up most of the night watching TV. Drinking didn’t help him much to sleep any later; on the contrary he could sleep hard for several hours but still wake up at the usual time, and then he was left feeling hung over, tired, and cranky for the rest of the day.

Some woman had yelled something at him from her car as he was finishing up the mowing, but he didn’t care. He didn’t even turn to look at her. It may have been the new woman that moved in across the street a month ago. The lawn was the one chore that needed to be done the most, and Adam needed something to stay occupied, both physically and mentally. He couldn’t watch TV. All that was on was news shows that were still preoccupied with the war. With the occupation, as he sometimes wanted to correct people- the war had ended last year. It was semantics, but Adam liked the situation clarified. Perhaps it was even better to say with the offensive. The invasion was over quickly. Now our forces were on the defensive. Although his curiosity wanted to
know the latest update, he convinced himself that he would have lots of time later in the
day to watch Fox News or CNN on cable. *Start by shutting out the news*, he said to
himself. *They talk, but they don’t know.* So he put himself to work on the yard. The
physical labor always did the trick, focusing his mind on a task, even a simple gardening
task, and putting his muscles to work.

He also noticed he slept easier and better when he was tired, so he pushed himself
to exhaustion. If there wasn’t enough work then he sometimes went for a long run, either
in the morning or the evening. On some days he ran twice. Even then though, he
couldn’t shake those dreams that didn’t make sense, the ones that jolted him awake in the
middle of the night. Last night he had a third person’s view of a large dinosaur, maybe a
Tyrannosaurus Rex, which was watching his former residence, hiding behind another
large two story brick house next door. It bent down to stay out of sight, occasionally
sticking the top of its head over the roof just enough for an eye to peer over. Finally what
it had been waiting for happened—his wife Philly came out the front door to take a walk,
turning in the opposite direction, her back to where the beast was hiding. Her hair was
pulled back in a ponytail and she had a CD player and headphones that blocked out
surrounding noise. She would usually listen to a popular country singer like Alan
Jackson, George Straight, or Martina McBride, but in this dream it was Hank Williams,
and *A Tear in My Beer* was audible. In actuality, Philly loathed old country music. With
a stealth that wasn’t possible for a large beast, it silently stepped from its cover and began
to follow her. Its feet padded more like a cheetah than six tons—no noise, no shaking of
the ground. It knocked over a light post, crumpling it like a dandelion yet emitting no sound, and Philly still walked on obliviously at a fast, rhythmic pace. The beast started to trot, closing the gap silently, closing, closing, coming up behind her. Adam felt like he was right there, almost running beside it, but he wasn’t there, he was just a spectator watching a muted TV, except for Hank’s singing. It was running in big steps now, bending down, tilting its head to the side and opening its jaws wide, encircling her body like a hand around a pop bottle, yet not touching her yet, its teeth still inches away from her body. In her moment of realization Philly called out, “Adam!?!...”

That’s when Adam had snapped awake, entangled in a miry sheet.

He took off his grass stained shoes at the door, drank a large plastic cup of water, then went to the bathroom and stripped. He felt awake now from the work, the pumping blood energizing him. The hot water ran from the faucet as he shaved, the razor only nicking his face once on the bony curve underneath his chin. Adam turned on the cold water to rinse the shaving cream off his face, its coolness feeling good splashing against his skin. It was already approaching 80 degrees and humid outside, so it wasn’t going to be a comfortable autumn day in Wisconsin. He barely noticed the heat- this was by no means hot to him. He laughed to himself when he heard people talk now about the heat and the heat index. 100 heat index- so what? Ever try 130? It was the humidity that he didn’t like, clinging to him like an old skin that he just couldn’t shed. He’d slept many nights in 90 degree heat, the curve of the cot allowing sweat to pool beneath one’s back.
Nocturnal wakings were not to relieve the bladder but for consuming water so as not to seriously dehydrate through the night.

The shower removed the layer of salt and dirt from Adam, cooling and cleansing him, and he lingered under the water for a half hour. His knee was sore. Although a warm shower would have felt the best on that, he kept the water cool for the rest of his body. He’d have to ice the knee later, when he had time. The sound of the running water reminded him of rain. Why couldn’t it rain all the time? Speaking of the time- he checked the black Ironman watch he never removed. Seven-thirty. His interview wasn’t until nine, so he had time to fix a bowl of cereal and some juice.

He set the bowl atop a stack of dishes mounding in the sink and gathered his job hunting materials. His teaching portfolio was the largest item, full of projects and pictures of students in his class from his student teaching semester. In one section he had his resume and references, the teachers he’d worked under who would vouch for his preparation and training. The transcripts stated an unimpressive yet solid 3.25 grade point average at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in a physical education/health major with a minor in history. The history minor was more out of his love of reading books about the past, everything from the early civilizations of the Mesopotamians and the Aztecs through every war ever fought. Late night reruns of the black and white series Victory at Sea had drawn him in as a child and led him to do a lot of reading, particularly about World War II. The concept of war inexplicably intrigued him. War played the largest role in shaping the course of world history, more than government, more than
science, more than anything religion. It was a plague of our own nature, a self-generated, cureless blight. War was a human constant. The cliché goes that those who don’t understand history are doomed to repeat it. Adam always thought a better one was that those who don’t understand war are doomed to be wiped out from it.

For the interview Adam selected a pair of relaxed-fit khaki pants, brown leather shoes and belt, a long sleeve white cotton shirt, and a conservative solid black tie. Unlike many men, he did not wear a t-shirt or “wife-beater” under his dress clothes. He wasn’t a heavy sweater, and figured those extra layers only made him warmer, and who needs that when already nervous. Perhaps he was better acclimated to long sleeves from wearing them and multiple layers of clothes and body armor in worse climates. The shirt had been pressed by a dry cleaner, since ironing was one thing Adam wasn’t good at, and no matter how he tried he always got a little fold in the knot of his tie that ruined its perfection. Still, a clip-on was out of the question.

By eight Adam was ready, physically at least, and left so he could be early for his interview. He liked having the cushion of time incase something went wrong, which had made up for bad traffic on more than one occasion. Like his wakeup routine, punctuality had been drilled into him: if you’re not early, you’re late! He backed his Chevy Metro out of his drive, pausing in the street to glance if the woman down the block, the one that yelled at him, was back yet. No sign of her car, but it looked like a light or a TV was on inside. He had seen her only from afar and wondered what she looked like up close. He
now regretted not turning around when she had yelled at him, but he wasn’t feeling at his most charming at that moment.

It would be about a half hour drive to get to Houdini Academy, a private kindergarten through eighth grade school just a block from Appleton West High School, Appleton’s oldest public high school. The Academy was just ten years old, in a new brick building with compact fluorescent light reflecting off glossy white walls. There was another two acres of property for sports fields and play equipment. The nine grades combined for an enrollment of around 125 students. Along with the typical core of classes, the students received a heavier emphasis at an early age in music, art, technology, writing, public speaking, and foreign languages. Satellite-linked classes could deliver lessons from distant teachers in Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, American Sign Language, and even Hindi. This investment in technology and staff made the Houdini Academy more expensive than any other private school in Wisconsin, even the parochial schools. To Adam’s benefit, physical education had recently been identified by the school’s principal and the country’s President as a deficiency in American school children, which led to the creation of this position he was interviewing for even though classes were already beginning.

Adam rolled down his front windows a crack since his Metro was a basic model without air conditioning, a car shopping decision he often regretted. He noticed his gas was at a quarter tank, so he decided to fill up at the Kwik Trip station as he headed out of Kingsburg on highway MM, which was called “M & M” like the candy by many local
children instead of “Double M.” Adam got uneasy when his gas level dropped under half a tank and knew it came from being drilled to always have a mission-capable vehicle. It would take a conscientious effort to undo that programming now, at a time when the routine felt more comfortable retaining. Letting the fuel get as low as it was made him a little mad at himself.

After topping off his tank with unleaded regular, Adam walked in to the store to pay. He was just getting back into the habit of paying for his own gas after a year of limitless fuel provided by the government. Once he had gotten into his car and almost drove off. The only other vehicle at the Kwik Trip, presumably the store attendant’s, was a rusty brown Chevy S-10 pickup covered with pro-military and pro-Republican stickers over the back bumper and tailgate. He found the election year stickers amusing, especially those making fun of Democratic candidate John Kerry. He just didn’t like something about the guy, who despite making an effort to be a voice against the war always came across as being more against the entire armed services. Upon entering the store he found a pale man in his mid-forties leaning on the counter on his elbows, playing with a toothpick in his mouth as he looked at some scratch-off lottery cards. Upon seeing Adam, the man stood up with interest.

“G’morning,” he said, pulling the toothpick out of his mouth. As he did this, Adam noticed a blue ink tattoo of an anchor, globe, and eagle on his right bicep as his shirt sleeve slid down. His breath stank terribly of cigarettes, a repugnant smell that stirred a mad craving in Adam.
“Hey,” Adam replied, nodding as he pulled out his wallet.

The man pushed a button on the cash register, glanced back up at Adam, then pushed another.

“That’ll be $21.53,” the man said. The employee badge pinned to his blue cotton short sleeved shirt said his name was Kyle.

“Man,” Adam said, shaking his head as he pulled out a twenty and a five dollar bill. “The price just keeps going up.

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed, taking Adam’s money, pushing several more buttons on the cash register, and beginning to make change from the cash drawer. The nails of his fingers were jagged and ugly, bitten and torn back beyond the tips of his fingers. Hangnails were bitten at as well.

“So, how long you been home?” Kyle asked as he fished out the right coins to give back to Adam.

“Excuse me?” Adam replied, understanding the question perfectly but not knowing if it was what the asker had intended. This unexpected exposure felt like someone had pulled his pants down in public. How had he been identifiable? Adam just wanted to blend, to not be pointed out and talked to by strangers, or thanked for his service by people who really didn’t know how well he had served or not. Was there some scarlet letter marking him, or some behavior that Adam had not realized was out of the ordinary?
Kyle clutched his hands around Adam’s change, the bills in his right hand and the coins in the left, and leaned forward over the counter closer to Adam.

“You’ve been there,” he said softly, looking Adam in the face. The man had thin skin that was getting leathery from smoking too much, and Adam didn’t like the darting nature of his eyes. “Over there, doing the dirty work. I can see that you’ve seen things.”

Adam took a step back from the counter. Kyle saw Adam’s discomfort, and also leaned back. They looked at each other for half a minute.

“You talk too much,” Adam said, not just commenting on the moment but generalizing about him.

“And you probably don’t talk enough,” the attendant counter-scrutinized, playing with the toothpick in his mouth. “Pardon my frankness,” he said finally. He dumped the coins from his left hand into his right, then held the right hand out to offer Adam his money.

Adam stepped forward and held his right hand under Kyle’s. After the money fell into his palm, Adam balled his fist and tucked the money into his front pants pocket. He backed up three steps and turned for the exit. At the door Adam paused but did not look back as he spoke.

“Well. Since April.”

Adam paused there for a moment without knowing why, then he heard a reply behind him.

“November, 1983.”
1983? What was that- Beirut?

He went out the door and held it for two fellows coming in, one tall and lanky, the other of average height and build. The average guy had black, stringy hair and a large head, while the tall fellow had wispy bangs which pulled across his face from right to left, and could probably touch his nose if allowed to fall. He slouched forward with a rounded back from his height, producing what looked like a hump, and the hair on his unshaven face resembled fur. Adam could not decide what type of animal the guy resembled. The two were bickering in high pitched voices and it seemed the hairy one was losing.

Adam drove off without looking back, and only avoided a speeding ticket because he did not encounter a cop on the roads. He was not late, just felt the need to outrun something he couldn’t see or identify, something now watching him and following him. It was like trying to evade his own shadow. As he arrived at Houdini Academy, Adam parked in the farthest visitor stall and sat in the silent Metro for several minutes. He had begun to hyperventilate as his drive progressed, and his hands had been shaking on the wheel. He willed them to stop, but the tremors and his wheezing would not obey. Adam closed his eyes and focused on slowing his breathing. He inhaled deep and exhaled long. In deep, out long, keep your eyes closed. In, out long. Adam felt his control returning to him. He continued for another minute, then opened his eyes. Luckily no one had seen him sitting in his car for so long. He held his hand out in front of himself, and it remained rigid.
In the school office, Adam announced his appointment and took a seat across from the secretary in a hard plastic chair. She was in her late forties, with hair that was much too black to be her natural color, and too much blue eye shadow. A young boy sat next to Adam with his head leaning on his hands and a scowl on his face. Adam considered the lad for a second, remembering his past. “What did you do?” he finally asked the boy.

The boy was startled out of his daydreaming by the question, then regarded the questioner for a moment before answering. Could any adult wearing a tie be trusted? He decided Adam didn’t look like any of the teachers he knew, and spilled his offense. “The kid behind me is always kicking my seat. I turned around and got sent here for talking. Again”

“Tell him to stop?”

“Yeah, but that don’t work. I still get it when the teacher isn’t looking, plus at recess.”

“Parental involvement not an option?”

The boy gave him a ‘what, are you stupid look’ and simply answered, “No.”

“Bigger than you?”

“Yep.”

Adam thought for a moment. “You seem like a quiet kid. You might need to confront this guy in a loud manner. Scream at him that you’re not going to take it. Find that inner nastiness that every person has and make him push it to blows. And even if you
go down, always get up and come back for more- that’ll gain some respect even if you lose.”

The boy nodded, seeing some merits in the plan, then frowned. “Only one problem.”

“What’s that?” Adam said.

“He is a she.”

Adam laughed and patted the boy on the knee. “Sorry, my man, I can’t help you. I’m still only dating at a third grade level myself.”

The principal, John Marsh, came out of his office door and gave Adam a nod when he saw him, then looked to the boy. “Jeremy, why don’t you come into my office.” The kid sighed, and slowly walked past the principal and into the office. “Adam, I’ll be with you in ten minutes.”

“No problem,” he replied as Mr. Marsh went back into his office and shut the door. Adam gazed out the window at the school yard. There was a paved area that had several basketball hoops, with metallic chains instead of cloth nets so the nets wouldn’t rot away every year. A thick, immaculate sod carpeted the grassy area for phy ed and recess, showing the school was not only new but probably not cheap. Did a school like this believe in recess? They must have, for there were kids of every age outside on the grass. Some older boys, probably a mixture from several upper grade school classes, were playing a football game. The girls seemed more split between some working on volleyball skills and some just standing around talking and looking at each other’s cell
phones. Adam wondered what the kids at such a small school did for organized athletics since every grade would have a struggle fielding a full athletic team, even for basketball. It would be great to have those fields for his classes, to play soccer and kickball and softball on. Beyond these two fields was the playground equipment. Stained wood framed the jungle gym, rings, and monkey bars. Mainly the younger kids played on these, scurrying up and down them, trying to get across the bars without falling off, or trying to climb up the fireman’s pole. There just was an innocence in the children of these ages when they played, something that reminded him of birds gathered at a bath—perhaps the silly head gestures or chasing each other. Or did the birds remind him of children? No matter. It was heartwarming to watch either.

Something caught his eye then, on the other side of the equipment. A group of older kids, high schoolers probably skipping class, were gathered in a circle there, looking in. A dark haired child in a blue shirt was in the middle of them, looking down and probably trying not to talk to them. They put their hands on his shoulders to encourage him to walk with them, and when he wouldn’t move voluntarily they slid their hands under his arms and began to carry him off the property, toward a tall stained wood fence of a house next to the school. The kid couldn’t break free or outrun them if he tried. Adam looked to the secretary’s desk, but she had left. There was an adult out on the playground, a middle-aged man in blue jeans and a black dress shirt, but he was talking to a group of 2nd grade girls in dresses. Adam stood up. Hey asshole, pay attention, he wanted to yell. The window did not open. The kid’s legs were flailing as he
was being carried. He had been all alone at the far end of the field, left to be ignored by
the other kids, so no one saw what was unfolding. Adam set his portfolio on the chair
and left the office for the back door.

When Mr. Marsh came out of his office shortly with the young boy, he found the
room empty and quiet. He wasn’t surprised that the secretary was gone- she often
wandered off and got talking to people in the hall, leaving the office unattended. But he
was surprised that his interview candidate had just up and left. References from the
assistant principal from Bear Creek, an old friend, were good, as well as from the guy’s
supervising teacher. There was a two year break in his work history between student
teaching and now due to a military deployment, but otherwise Adam’s resume and work
history looked like he could fill the phy ed position. With no other candidates, he was a
shoe-in for the job. Marsh saw Adam’s portfolio sitting on the chair, and thought now
that he had gone to the bathroom. He started to head for the hallway to look for the
secretary when he glanced out the window and noticed Adam walking across the grassy
yard. What was this guy doing out among the kids by himself? He was taking quick
strides, walking purposefully, and cut through the middle of the infield of the 7th graders
playing kickball. When they saw the intent look of the man’s face each decided not to
object, but rather to let the guy pass and report it later. Marsh wondered where the hell
he was going. The beeline pointed to the far edge of the property, to the monkey bars
area, where he caught the end glance of a group of large high school students taking a
small boy around the fence of an adjacent property.
“Crap!” was all Marsh could say as he dashed out of the office, checking his pants pocket for his cell phone in case he needed it. He passed the secretary in the hall, talking to the 4th grade teacher, and yelled “Watch the office!” as he ran past and out the school’s back door. She broke her conversation indignantly and strolled back to the office.

They were high school kids from Appleton West, and they had their backs turned to the school, oblivious to the man closing in on them. Josh Harkens and Leroy Kent, a pair of 11th graders, stood on either side Brad Leech, a thick necked linebacker who had an ‘optional’ attitude about attending classes. As long as he could play football he didn’t care. He was good, one of the best the school had seen in a long time, and he knew it. He knew that it never hurt a school or a program to be able to boast about a division I football scholarship, and that they would bend over backwards for him. He knew by having an assistant coach and an assistant athletic director as two of his teachers that his attendance would not be strictly enforced in those classes, and he felt the need to get away from the room full of freshman in the physical science class so he could have a smoke. Playing college ball would be sweet, a dream, but the pressures of sitting through those stupid classes were making him jittery, and a Camel would settle him down. What Brad wanted, Brad got, at least when there were no authority figures around.

The other two boys liked being feared, liked being in Brad’s sphere of influence, though were not always proud of Brad’s actions. Josh, shaggy haired and thin, laughed as Brad held the kindergartner by one ankle, raising and lowering him so his face almost touched the grass. Leroy, athletic and average height, had a cousin the same age as this
kid and was disgusted by it, but was too scared of the social repercussions to speak up against Brad. This little kid had been off by himself, all alone, when Brad spotted him. He hated everything about Houdini Academy, thought any kid going there was a snotty, rich-kid type that looks down on him and the other public school kids. Their smoking spot was right behind Houdini in the backyard of a house that had been foreclosed on and sat vacant for almost a year. He watched those kids and imagined them as kids who had everything handed to them, who didn’t have to do chores or anything that involved prolonged sweating, kids who were being groomed to become musicians or professors or state legislators. He just hated everything he thought he knew about that school, and relished the idea of ruining those kids, of bringing them down to his level. “Look,” Brad had said with a grin. When they walked up to the kid, who was sitting cross legged on the grass with a deck of cartoon gaming cards out, they blocked out the sun as they stood over him.

“What ya doing, kid?” Brad asked with a sneer.

The small, dark haired boy didn’t answer at first, but looked down at his cards, then back up at them. The boy’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

“I said, what you doing kid?” Brad repeated louder. Again no noise came from the boy, who had turned ghostly white. Brad put his foot on a handful of cards. The boy reached for them out of reflex, then froze his hand in mid-motion, not wanting to touch the behemoth nor the cards now. Brad grabbed the outstretched arm and hauled the silent
kid to his feet. Lifting him up by both arms, Brad raised the shaking boy up to eye level.

“I know you wouldn’t just be blowing me off kid.”

“Hey Brad,” Josh chimed in, “maybe he’s deaf or something, and can’t understand.”

“Ha,” Brad laughed, elbowing Leroy on the other side of him. “Good point.” He set the kid down so he could flick his hands in mock sign language. “You deaf?”

The kid looked down again, avoiding eye contact and trying to huddle within himself. Leroy thought of his little cousin and squirmed uncomfortably. “Brad, maybe we should leave the little guy…”

“Shut up, Roy,” Brad cut him off. “This kid needs a new friend,” Brad said with a smirk. “Take an arm, Josh.” Josh grabbed the kid under the armpit and the two of them carried Spencer around the fence to the yard that was their smoking grounds. They set him down and Brad got out another cigarette. Brad lit it, inhaled to get it started, and knelt down on one knee to look Spencer in the face.

“Take it, kid.”

Spencer shook his head.

“Come on, kid. You need some respect. You want friends, then you need to impress somebody.”

Spencer shook his head vehemently. Brad tried to put the cigarette to his lips but he turned away and closed his eyes. His breathing was getting heavy, wheezy, so Spencer reached for the inhaler in his front shirt pocket. His hands were shaking so badly
he fumbled it into the grass. Brad spotted it and quickly knew what it was, weighed his options of kicking it or stepping on it, but decided to play with the kid some more. Before Spencer could bend down and grab it, Brad grabbed his ankles, stood up and inverted him so that the boy dangled with the inhaler just out of reach.

“Kid, you got issues,” he taunted.

Spencer was trying to extend his arm more, to stretch in spurts, but Brad kept the inhaler just beyond his grasp. Spencer’s wheezing was increasing, and it caused him to grunt each time he stabbed at the inhaler with his hand.

“You gotta toughen up, kid, or this world is gonna eat you alive.” Brad was enjoying the game and so was Josh, but Leroy’s face disapproved. “Put your hands out in front of you, Roy.”

“What?”

“Do it,” Brad ordered. Leroy realized what his associate was going to do.

“No.”

“I said do it!” Brad commanded with a glare that implied physicality for noncompliance.

Leroy reluctantly raised his arms and Brad shoved Spencer’s ankle into his hands. The kid’s wheezing was getting worse, hoarser, and he shot Leroy a pleading looking. His own hands were starting to shake, and his heart to sink in disgust.

The first thing the boys saw of Adam was his shadow in the midst of theirs. Before any of them realized what was happening the wiry man had grabbed Brad by the
shoulders from behind, flinging him backwards to the ground. Josh noticed the sudden disappearance of Brad before he actually noticed Adam, and then there was a hand grasping his shirt collar pulling him sideways into a circular motion that he could not control, and Josh felt himself being flung. Leroy had the most time to see what was happening and his first internal reaction was relief and satisfaction. But then the man quickly grabbed one of Spencer’s ankles in his left hand and smashed his right forearm across both of Leroy’s wrists. The blow forced Leroy to instantly release his grip on the kid and fall to the ground, while Adam quickly put an arm around Spencer’s waist, flipped him over, and set him on the ground. Adam spotted the inhaler and tossed it at Spencer, then returned his attention to the high school boys.

The one who had been holding the kid upside-down was still on his knees shaking his wrists out, and showed no desire to get up and come at him. The tall skinny one was charging hard while the large one was walking angrily and quickly, clenching a fist. The charging one tried to tackle Adam, but Adam gave him a light jab to the nose just hard enough to stun him and drop him in his tracks. The large one and the one shaking his wrists on the ground had exchanged glares, telling the large one he was on his own.

It wasn’t until he saw Brad from the front that Adam realized how big this bully was. He had Adam by about five inches of height and seventy-five pounds of weight. The man-child was furious, clenching his fists and preparing to pulverize this strange assailant who had intervened. Brad was probably going to get in trouble now for picking
on the kid, and for fighting, but this seemed like a good time to create a reputation by knocking the shit out of an adult.

Brad wound up and threw a big right at Adam. Adam knew instantly what the man-child was doing when he drew back, and reacted patiently at the proper moment. As the fist raced towards his head, Adam calmly stepped back and to the side, his hands and forearms coming up and redirecting Brad’s swing. Standing side by side now, Adam popped him quickly with his left elbow to the bridge of the nose, then easily slid down his arm to grasp Brad’s wrist. Before Brad knew what was going on, Adam was standing beside him and firmly had his wrist under control. Then before Brad could react and counter, Adam pivoted and brought Brad’s arm over and behind him, turning the wrist in one smooth motion. Brad was pulled over by his arm, and he fell hard on his back, knocking the wind out him. Though he distinctly had the advantage now, Adam continued. He stepped over Brad and pulled the wrist he still grasped, pulling Brad flat on his stomach. Straightening the arm out, Adam knelt down with both knees on Brad’s arm at the elbow and shoulder, not only pinning him down with little effort but preventing him from rolling over. Adam checked the other two adversaries, one of which was kneeling and holding his bloody nose and one that was walking away silent, and then looked back at Spencer. The boy’s mouth hung open, though a small smile hinted at the corners of his mouth. Adam winked at him and smiled. It quickly disappeared as the principal ran up beside him.
Mr. Marsh was amazed how quickly events had transpired as he ran to the fight. Adam had calmly walked up to the three bullies, all of which were bigger than him. In an instant Adam had pulled two of them to the ground and then freed the child from Brad Leech, whose form Marsh had recognized early and was not surprised by. He wasn’t surprised either when Brad got up and went after Adam. He feared a bloody fight from a freshly returned vet and a punk looking to make a name, but the adult had finished it before it even started. Although Adam had exhibited amazing control, a part of Marsh was a little scared of what else Adam could and would do. Adam was smiling at the kid, having defended the underdog, but went blank when Marsh walked up. John was almost ready to smile back down on him.

Almost.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” wailed Brad from the ground. “This guy assaulted us! You saw it!”

Yes he had. It was every teacher’s dream! But as much as he hated to admit it, Brad was right in a way. Although he hadn’t punched any of the kids, Adam’s actions legally might be considered assault. Even if justified, there was a potential that any of the boys’ parents could try legal or civil action. This was going to get ugly both in paperwork and parents’ gossip.

“You two, go to my office,” was the first thing Marsh could say to Josh and Brad, pointing to the school.

“But we’re not your preppy grade school students…” Josh started to protest.
“Go to my office NOW,” Marsh yelled. The high school boys couldn’t get to their feet quick enough and out of range. Adam let Brad up, who dusted himself off and glared back at him contemptuously. Marsh shook his head at the football player.

Marsh looked at Adam then, not sure what he should do at that moment. There was the right thing that he wanted to do, and then there was the right thing he had to do to cover both his ass and the school’s. It was Adam who spoke first.

“I saw it happening.”

Marsh nodded but still didn’t know what to say. An awkward pause.

“I had to do something.”

“I suppose you did,” was the best reply he could come up with. He looked down at the kindergarten boy still seated on the ground. “This guy thanks you.” Marsh wanted to as well himself, but feared such words or anything such as a handshake could ultimately cost him his job. Both looked down at the boy.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Banks,” said John looking at his own feet. “This interview is over.”

Adam couldn’t say anything. He’d expected this from the moment Mr. Marsh walked up to him. He headed for the street so he could walk around school and get to his car in the front lot. He didn’t care about the portfolio. Over his shoulder he called, “Goodbye, kid.”

Spencer watched him walk a little ways, confused why this guy who had beat the bullies off him was being sent away instead of being treated like a hero. “Bye,” he
finally said quietly. As he looked at the back of Adam’s head, he finally recognized the man who was cutting grass in the early morning.

“Come on, son,” Marsh said, helping the boy to his feet and awkwardly realizing he didn’t know his name. “Let’s call your mother.”
Adam and his team were exhausted as they exited the Operations Tent after the lengthy After Action Review. Three stinking hours of talking and note taking and diagramming were bullshit. Too much, too quick for him, with no time to digest the events or to decompress. But the higher ups needed to know what happened and how people had reacted and how those reactions had panned out and what might have been better actions to take, and it all needed to be done while the events were still fresh in everyone’s minds. Straight into the gate the Humvee went to the maintenance bay to patch the holes in its tire and its body, while the uninjured men were ordered right to Operations for the AAR. The brass was so wound up that they didn’t think to get the soldiers anything besides bottled water. Colonel Hendricks had been there, and a general, perhaps even a two star, was en route. With the deaths and the media attention in progress already, the Army was interested well above Brigade level. Adam’s eyelids weighed as much as his Kevlar helmet, and he could not walk without dragging the sole of his suede boot every couple steps. Specialist Brinks came up beside him and poked him with a long dagger of a finger in the stomach.

“Gonna get something to eat, Sergeant?”
Sergeant Banks rubbed his ribs and looked at Brinks contemptuously. His stomach didn’t feel much like food but he knew it would help replenish some of the salt he had lost during the day that now encrusted him. Neglecting the upkeep of his body was as bad as ignoring his weapon. “I think I’m gonna order in a pizza,” he replied with a dreamy look on his face. “You game?”

“Hell yeah,” Brinks said. “A large Chicago style, loaded with the meat of every edible animal in this region.” Dalmar Brinks, otherwise going by Dallas, had a light brown skin, which could give him an ominous stare when he focused his large, jet black pupils into someone. He was from the rougher south side of Peoria, which explained his loyalty for Chicago-style pie. A happy-go-lucky street kid, Brinks had found his way into the military police out of boredom and an ASVAB test score that surprised everyone, including himself. A position of authority appealed to him, and perhaps a yearning to see if there was truer justice that what he seen growing up. But if he were to become a cop in his own hometown, his neighborhood would disown him. What better than to police in another country, although most of what he was doing now was not related to law enforcement. Adam was glad that the Specialist wanted to talk about something other than the ambush.

Adam shook his head. “I’m not big on all that crust. And you want a pie with sheep, camel, and dog on it?”

“They don’t eat dogs, that’s the Koreans,” Brinks countered. “We’ll have to get double camel then.”
“Oh, if you could catch one of Saddam’s gazelle running around this compound, we could have some, what, African venison, I guess,” Adam said. “Or we could shoot Lucy the next time we go to Taji for some beef on it,” Adam said.

The Specialist shook his head emphatically. “No way. Rule number one is don’t eat cow that’s picking through the trash, ‘cause then you’re just eating trash. And number two, the cheese needs to come from somewhere so you can’t shoot Lucy, and I won’t stand for any goat cheese.”

“You just might make a ‘Sconnie’ yet,” Adam said with a weary grin. “But if you eat cheese from a cow that was eating trash, aren’t you still eating trash?”

Brinks brought his hand up to Adam’s shoulder and squeezed hard. “Don’t mess with me, Sergeant. You know my dream is to move to the land of cheese, and genuflect before Brett Favre’s locker at the historic Lambeau Field. It would be my Mecca. Don’t make me change that.”

“Stupid Bears fan,” Adam said. “Stupid F.I.B.” Adam hated it when Brinks went on forever like that, not realizing the point when he had passed being funny. They arrived at their tent, and Adam held the flap up for the younger enlisted soldier. Specialist Martins was inside already, lying on his back on his cot reading an issue of Military History and listening to some type of New Orleans jazz music on his headphones loud enough to be heard clearly by all. There was still some natural light coming in through the window flaps, plus he had the two light bulbs turned on already, but it hardly seemed like adequate lighting to read by. The magazine cover had a picture of what
looked like George Washington outside a white tent, with the words Yorktown next to it. Adam studied the cover briefly, and came to the conclusion that, if accurately portrayed, the tent could be the same one they were sleeping in.

“Wasn’t the Yorktown a ship,” Adam asked, “like in World War Two?”

Hakeem Martins pushed the magazine aside to give Adam a look made most people feel like an annoying child. His skin was dark brown, so it still had a sheen to it from the sweat that he was actively emitting. This made the dried salt easily visible in the crook of his neck and corners of his eyes, and his hands were pale as if they’d been floured. He had the narrow, focused face of an intellectual raptor and wore small, squared glasses that made him look more academic than he already was. Martins liked to look over them on his nose to show disapproval as a teacher would, and was doing that now to Adam.

“It was an aircraft carrier,” Martins said, “named after the battle of Yorktown. That’s how carriers got their names.”

“Wasn’t there a Hornet, too?” Adam asked. “I don’t recall a battle for any place called Hornet.”

“I think that place’s in Upper Michigan,” Brinks chimed in.

Adam nodded in agreement, while Martins rolled his eyes.

“It is a name that has a naval tradition,” Brinks said, tapping his magazine for emphasis. “Do not get stupid about it.”
“It does sound more like a high school mascot, though,” Adam said, shrugging. Martins went back to reading without saying another word. He often just tuned people out if he felt a topic was getting beneath him. Brinks had once described him as ‘the token black guy that any law firm or the Republican Party would love to have.’

Adam went to the foot locker at the foot of his cot, flipped it open, and began rummaging in his stash of canned goods for supper. It was an accumulation of items that had been sent in care packages and bought at a few newly established PX stores in country. The mess trailer had set aside several meals for the soldiers out on missions who were expected in late, pork chops that came in large preparation trays called T-Rations. The chops were always tough and it was the third night in a row. He looked at the other two.

“So soup? Pasta?”

Brinks shook his head; Martins sat up and said, “Toss me some ravioli.” Adam threw him a can of Chef Boyardee Cheese Ravioli, and dug through his collection of Chunky Soups, finally deciding on chicken noodle. He popped the lid, dumped the contents into a used plastic whipped topping container, and handed it to Martins to put in the microwave once his ravioli had finished cooking. The hum of the microwave did not blend well with the saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and tinny percussion coming from Martins headphones, and Adam and Brinks looked at each other in mutual annoyance. Martins sensed their unease and turned his music down, but this made the microwave the only sound and forced the occupants into a dull zombie stare-off. They were more
staring into each other than at each other, reflecting on and admiring what they had seen in each other. A certain degree of unspoken uncertainty had been replaced by trust and a higher fraternal bond. A circle. Only within this circle could today be truly known or understood or questioned. Alone, one had always had a unprotected rear flank; but now three, back to back to back, formed an outward ring that could hold the world at bay. Each saw reflections of himself in the other men. Yet Adam also seemed fixated inward.

“You look tired, boss,” Brinks finally said, noting the fatigue under SGT Banks’ eyes and cheeks. “Get your ass in the rack.”

Adam sat down on the red fabric folding chair beside his cot, and his feet felt immediate relief. The taut fabric cot with aluminum frame sounded surprisingly appealing. “That’s a good idea,” he said, and felt slightly out of breathe just talking. “Might go make a phone call first.”

Martins shook his head. “Phone lines are shut off.”

Adam gave him a confused look.

“Think about it,” Martins said, sitting up. “That blast is a media mess. Fox and CNN probably cut in before it was even finished. No one will get to call home and possibly leak information wrongly or preemptively. There will be…” he paused as he searched for the right word, “notifications to be made to some families back home.”

“Shit,” Adam said, shaking his head and looking at the ceiling of the tent. Another frenzied up media mess and all the family members back home will be wondering and worrying if it was their man who dies today. Philly would be worried.
After his soup was cooked Adam disassembled his M-16 and cleaned it as he ate. He didn’t recall if he had fired it or not today, in all the action. He hadn’t thought so, that he had exclusively fired the .50 cal. He checked it anyway, putting off cleaning the .50 cal later or tomorrow. There would be no mission tomorrow with the Humvee temporarily down, so it could be done tomorrow. Plus Adam wanted to check if the barrel was still in good condition or if that needed to be switched out. The other two men followed suit with their weapons, and each man was left with his own thoughts while he went about the mechanical distraction of scraping carbon out of the chamber or running CLP cleaning oil down the barrel. Brinks held his up against the artificial light in the tent, eyeballing the barrel, and found Adam and Martins giving him an odd and reflective look, as if he were doing something to jinx himself. He stopped that.

Martins said, “If we were knights, we would be cleaning blood off our weapons now.” He reflected for a moment. “I wonder if they had something like CLP to help them get that off without rusting their swords.”

No one replied to Martins comments, perhaps made uncomfortable by the thought, and the silence went on for ten minutes.

“Who you gonna call, anyway?” Brinks blurted out to Adam.

“Huh?” he said, looking up from his weapon and his thoughts.

“Who did you want to make a phone call to before?” Brinks restated.

Adam hesitated, knowing the reaction he was going to get. “The wife,” Adam replied as he set the M-16 down and began unlacing his tan suede boots.
“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” Brinks replied, shaking his head. He set his weapon on his cot and began stripping down to just his boxer shorts and t-shirt.

Adam unlaced his boots a little harsher but didn’t look up from them. “And why is that, Specialist?”

Brinks could not miss that Adam had used rank. “Listen up, Sergeant,” he started, “You think you and the misses are pretty tight. Maybe so, back there. Maybe you told her every woman you done and every test you cheated on, or whatever. This ain’t the same thing. Whatever you thinking about saying to her, you bite your tongue.”

“She’d want to know,” Adam said looking up.

“No, she don’t.” Brinks countered.

“How do you know?”

“Cause I asked my girl back when I was the greenest of green.” Brinks replied feistily. “Before I left I asked her, an she said hell no. Not at this moment, and not ever. Did you ask yours?”

Adam’s silence said it all.

“She don’t want to know.” Brinks was talking with his hands now too, making slashing motions as he spoke. “None of ‘em do. Even if they say they do, they don’t. They don’t want to think about us that way. They just can’t handle that.”

“What way?” Adam asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Listen,” Martins interjected, leaning onto the armrest of his folding chair. “My parents went through a lot. Back in the home country, back where the militias raped and
pillaged and came for husbands and sons and tried to do what they wanted. My village was poor, very poor, but we were outside of the war zone for a long time, limited to just seeing the aftereffects and the stories of the refugees who fled through our village. Then the militias started to encroach on the village. They started with demands and threats, and when those were fruitless, they made examples of people who had been out at night or down by the river alone. Horrific examples of men killed. The women were left alive to be living reminders of the sexual savagery men are capable of doing to women. These women were scars for the village to look at, thick scars on their conscience and insults to the men who could never love them the same way again. But the village organized and had some weapons, and one night captured three militiamen trying to sneak in and start fires. There was no legal system, no courts, just people making decisions the way which seemed best. My father was a strong man and looked up to, and it was decided that these three militia must be examples. He was one of the men tasked with doing this, and he led them away in the black of the night. The parents hoped the children would not understand and only think that these men were just being walked very far away, but I knew. When my father returned just before dawn, he laid down next to Mama. I watched from across the room under my blanket. She stared at him like a stranger, which he felt but tried to ignore for a while. Finally he rolled over and looked at her. He was facing me and I remember his eyes. They asked for something from Mama. I could not understand the questions his eyes spoke. Forgiveness? Understanding? Simply an acknowledgement that what he did had needed to be done? Mama put two fingers to his
lips. Perhaps it meant that he did not need to speak, but it was also to implore his silence.

“Never speak of it to me,” Mama told him. “Never give me the picture to make you just like them.” He never spoke of it, and the only comfort I saw in him was when he met the eyes of the other village men who had taken that walk with him that night. My father wore those eyes burdened by the weight of those three men until the day they sent me away for my own safety.”

There was a brief moment of silence, for neither Adam nor Brinks had known that about Martins, and wanted to afford him the respect of the memory of his parents.

“But that’s different,” Adam said quietly. “ Completely different between that and…this.”

“I know that,” Martins said. There was a reason why someone as young as him could hold such a weathered outlook on the world. He was twenty years ahead of them, and had already had a type of wisdom about him, a detached spirituality. “Listen to us. Even if they say they want to know, they really do not. Do not give them more than they can handle. Especially not when they are thousands of miles away and are forced to reflect on that every night for months.” He paused for a second to lean back. “Now if you have a thing with a field whore from a quartermaster company and want to get confessional with her, go right ahead. But this, this, stays here.”

They said no more, but Adam couldn’t help feeling that he had been schooled by two soldiers both younger than he and lower in rank. He stood up and went looking for music to borrow from soldiers in other tents. The heat was subsiding for the day, and
perhaps getting down near one hundred five, but it was the lessening of the direct sunlight that seemed to feel the best on him. With the coming darkness perhaps he would feel that he was more hidden, more concealed to a great eye that was watching him as fiercely as the Iraqi sun. Two tents down from his own he stuck his head in without knocking, hoping SGT Ivan Grahams was in. He was.

Grahams worked with another squad that escorted other convoys. He was squat, compact, and very jovial. He was a foreman at Ohio Rural Electric Cooperatives (also known as Buckeye Power, Inc.), a husband, and father of two young girls back in Marion, Ohio. Grahams lived pretty carefree despite all the responsibilities he had. ‘Be like water’ was the Bruce Lee motto he often touted. It is fluid, shapeless. Water can flow, or water can crash. Put water in a cup, it becomes the cup. Put water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. Put water in a short, fat tumbler, well it becomes me, Grahams would say with a smile. He sewed or stuck name tags on every piece of clothing or equipment he was issued, and his friends joked with him that his little girls had ‘Grahams’ tattooed somewhere on their backsides. His name was on the Dell laptop computer he’d brought so he could write and remaster music while he was deployed. Why someone would bring such an expensive computer and software out here Adam did not understand. So far the computer had not been damaged in all the jostling and moving the MPs had to do. Grahams smiled when he saw Adam and stood up to shake his hand.

“I heard, bro,” he said, engulfing Adam’s right hand within his own meaty palm while smacking Adam’s shoulder as hard as he could with his left. “I heard.”
Grahams cleared space on his cot for Adam to sit down, slid two binders full of compact discs to the opposite end. He also had brought an immensely extensive collection of CDs on the deployment, which was the main reason Adam was there.

“What’s up?” he asked, swatting and rubbing at the right side of his neck, which looked to be getting raw. “You doing okay?” He did not try to lead the conversation but left it open for Adam to get very excited and gung-ho or to be low-key.

“I’m doing okay,” Adam said. “My guys are okay, but the others….”

“But you have survived your first big ambush,” Grahams smiled, then added proudly, “Not a small one in terms of scale, either. And I hear you were unstoppable behind the .50 cal.”

Adam half-smiled but the complement did not give much consolation, and Grahams sensed that.

“Looking for something to borrow?” he asked, scratching now his right inner thigh vigorously. It was a silly question because everyone came to Grahams to get music; he had even surprised Martins by having not his first or second requested artist but Martins’ third choice of Ellis Marsalis.

“What are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “Something that matches how I’m feeling. Something that will clarify in my head where I am.”

Grahams stared at Adam for a good long time, measuring his musical requirements. He had been in more firefights than Adam and could tell Adam was
having a different reaction than he had for his first. Adam was full of reflection and seemed to never let things go, and although never stated it seemed he had a demeanor shaped by a religious upbringing that harbored an inner philosophy that all life was precious and worthy of love. But when a soldier from the lead Humvee had described to Grahams what he had seen across the divided highway, he said that Adam’s machine gun bursts had sometimes been vicious in their length.

“Are you sure?” Grahams asked.

“Yeah,” Adam said more emotionlessly.

“Take this then,” Grahams replied, tossing him a newer CD case that still had pieces of wrapper stuck along the edge. Adam took it without looking what it was. Grahams then reached up under the back of his shirt and began to scratch with the backs of his hands and fingernails as far up as he could reach. He growled in frustration.

“God damned sand fleas!” Grahams exclaimed. There were tiny little welts up his forearms and on the backs of his hands, and if a person sat still and watched would be able to see the small insects the fraction of a mosquito drifting in the air. Everybody had to deal with the pests to some extent, but they seemed to have taken a particular liking to Grahams.

“You’re gonna get yourself a case of the Baghdad Boil,” Adam said. “Maybe you should talk to Preventive Med or go on Sick-Call.”

“I will not go on Sick-Call for fleas,” Grahams stated, now scratching his left calf with a grimace. “Not for these things. You know, they are just so…Iraqi. Not like a
good old American horse fly or bee or even a mosquito, which comes at you and you can 
swat it. These are tiny and hard to see, and they come at you in swarms. One of them 
 isn’t going to get you. Not ten, not a hundred. But it’s like overall there are thousands of 
them that come at you ceaselessly in waves, biting and being smashed, biting and being 
smashed. One of them can never kill you, but you may die from a million pin pricks. 
That’s how they get us, Banks. That’s how they’re going to wear us down and drive us 
out.”

“Sand fleas are the preferred weapon of our enemy?” Adam asked sarcastically. 
Grahams waved him away too in angst.

“Thanks again, bro,” Adam said, backing out.

“Anytime,” Grahams replied through the tent wall. “Go to number two.”

Adam got his CD player out and slid his folding chair outside the tent. He sat 
down to watch the twilight and try to enjoy some stars. That was one thing about a 
cloudless sky- the stars were always pretty clear at night, as long as one looked from the 
middle of the sky to west. There was some ambient light from Baghdad in the east, but 
not as much as one might expect. He pushed the play button and a female voice came 
through his earphones after a short piano intro.

How can see into my eyes

Like open doors

Leading you down into my core,
Where I’ve become so numb...

A chill ran down Adam’s spine, heightened by the fact that there were still pockets of perspiration in his shirt. What a voice this woman had. A guitar began to play.

Without a soul,

My spirit sleeping somewhere cold

Until you find it there

and

lead

it

back

Home.

The bats that lived somewhere on the palace compound were coming out, moving like a cloud of birds yet bending and curving like a snake through the evening sky to their feeding grounds over the bodies of water. Adam listened to this wounded voice as the living formation broke apart and it was every living thing for itself, a great dogfight like World War Two between fighters and bombers except the scales of the combatants were
reversed, the prey invisible to all and the predators making cuts and rolls of unbelievably
instinctive aeronautics.

As Adam took in the aerial show he dug into his pocket and retrieved a cigarette
that Staff Sergeant Sabinus had given him. Adam didn’t smoke, so at first he had taken
offense to the unspoken suggestion that he start. The thought disgusted him, not quite as
much as the thought of dipping, but it repulsed him nonetheless. But with his restless and
agitated state there was some kind of appeal to the little, white stick. It looked so
harmless. Adam willed his hand to close and put it back into his pocket.

A male singer joined for a chorus.

(Wake me up)

Wake me up inside

(I can’t wake up)

Wake me up inside

(Save me...)

Call my name and save me from the dark

A luminescent green parachute flare ignited in the sky outside the west wall and
slowly began to drift down. Adam didn’t know who pulled security for the compound or
if they ever saw anything with those flares, usually used when it was darker. He watched
it sink for a little bit then returned his attention to the aerial feast which was dissipating
like a quick squall, and then he just continued to stare at the same patch of stars. He
thought of today. He thought of a broken, contorted American body, struggling. He
thought of sensory overload from every sector of his body, log jamming into his brain,
and yet a moment of the purest clarity and silence. The eye of the hurricane, the place
where he could function, where he could fight, where he ultimately needed to go to
survive, was within his mind. He just needed to stop being scared, being scared of it, and
be willing to go there.

Save me from the

Nothing

I’ve

become.

She sang of love, but really she sang of so much more than she knew.
Adam could not sleep very well, so at 4 am he just got up and went for a run. It was going to be another hot day, he could tell from the morning humidity again, so his lungs labored harder to suck the thicker air in, and the sweat hung on his body like a film and sometimes ran in his eyes to spite him. He took the solitary county highway out of town and went west, paying greater attention to a good breathing rhythm rather than to pacing. His mind and body found the right pace to match the conditions, knowing he was firing optimally and efficiently to handle a harder workout, and today these were going to let him push his lungs. The sky was cloudless and the landscape unobstructed but for a few farmhouses and barns, so he could let the sky and the ground and the horizon blur together into an out of focus backdrop, with his internal autopilot keeping him from straying off his shoulder of the road. Inhale. Exhale. Blow the air out long, wring it all out of the chest, and then draw it in deep to suffuse the lungs. Exhaling was the most important phase, purging the dead air from his system so oxygen could replenish his cells, and then fighting the human tendency to gulp air back in. His lightweight black shorts and yellow tank top clung to him early like opponents, but their effect was negligible. Adam just gazed into the distance and told his mind to think about where they
were going instead of where they were, and the rest of him focused internally on the mechanics of his strides and his arm swings and orchestrating them with the constrictions of his chest. In trying to be completely aware of his entire body, he knew he could essentially create a space behind himself where he could freely think as well, the most peaceful place for his mind within the draft of his body.

He had no job. Houdini Academy had been the only position open this late in the year for his licensure. Sooner or later the savings from the life insurance would run out, and he’d have to come up with money somehow for the house upkeep and the car. He had a few job applications out there yet, to a couple of state and county services as well as to the local defense contractor plant that manufactured various trucks and vehicles for the military and hired many veterans. That might be the ideal job for him at this time, to work a machine all day and to be around a better group of people. No silly questions from people too lazy to read a newspaper. No self-centered people worrying about the most trite and unimportant things in their life, or who were longwinded at saying nothing. His own generation seemed the worst, so spoiled and soft and greedy.

Veterans Preference. The employers like to tout those tags, but they really meant nothing. No Experience Necessary. Really? Then why aren’t you calling? How can a person not meet the qualifications of No Experience Necessary. It was still a favorites games, some good ole boy network. Sure, someone up high would shake your hand if you could get an interview and say, ‘We’ve all been there, son,’ yet they really had no idea where he’d been.
It was hard to get away from headlines about the war. It was everywhere. On newspapers when he went to a gas station. It was on the radio. It was on the TV. The cable news shows had been running live video feeds of Baghdad in the background behind the talking heads. He just wanted to let it settle down, but it was always being kicked up in his face again. It was inescapable. But it was impossible not to want to know as well. How bad are things getting? What are those guys over there going through?

His mind told Adam when to turn around and he did, making the entire run a distance of about ten miles. He never kept time anymore, but he knew it had been long and hard enough from the burning in his lungs when he finished. In his house he enjoyed the quiet as he ate some peanut butter and toast, and yet there was something missing. If he stood still the house was completely silent. It was always silent. When he left the house, nothing ever changed. It was simply a shelter, a place for him to put his stuff. He didn’t bother to unpack many of his things as he wasn’t sure when he would need to move again. That was routine. Being mobile and not getting too vested in your whereabouts. They had traveled around so much for that year, from the POW duty at Camp Bucca to Camp Ridgeway to Camp Victory, then a short stint as at Logistics Base Seitz, the worst part of the Baghdad Airport complex, and finally at Camp Speicher. Half their missions were multiple day, overnight trips, so the cot that was home was always somewhere else. They lived out a ruck sack in the truck, lived simple. Now at home in the States he hung no pictures or decorations on the walls. When he stared at the walls he
didn’t want to get caught up thinking about people who were gone. The house had no heartbeat of its own, no vital signs, nothing to give it a pulse. Philly’s humming had provided that vitality at the old house in New Holstein, coming usually from the upstairs bedroom, where she’d often sit in the beat up rocking recliner beside the bed, where she read no-name romance fiction, cookbooks from the library, or random autobiographies of historical persons. The chair was God awful ugly, faded to an almost unidentifiable color, but so worn it was a calming touch. Even when she hadn’t been home, Adam would hear her humming in his head, and it was calming, pleasing, reassuring. It was never really any song, just sweet and soft noises that left an imprint on the air. His new house lacked that, lacked the vitality of another person’s imprint, to make it more than just a structure.

That was enough for Adam then. He picked up the phone and called Marilynn. She could easily beat Leo to the phone so she usually was the one to answer. She also screened calls though, and Leo had told him that sometimes she would not answer the phone or even would physically block Leo so that the answering machine picked up. There were other times too when Adam was sure that she had just deleted messages and not given them to him.

This time she answered not with a hello but with a “Yes?”

“Marilynn, this is Adam,” he said.

There was some nasal breathing on the other end, which may have included a sigh, but nothing was said and it did not go to dial tone.
“Please, Marilynn,” he said, rubbing his head. “Tell me where Philly is. It’s been how many months now since I’ve been home and I’ve missed her every day. Please, just stop this. I want to talk to Philly. Tell me where she is, please.”

There was a short silence and more nasal breathing could be heard.

“You want to talk to her?” Marilynn repeated.

“Please, Marilynn,” Adam asked, sweating almost as hard as he had during his run. “Tell me where she is.”

He was doing his absolute best to be very nice and mannered. He was begging, he knew that, and it was killing him. Groveling with his mother-in-law for the location of his wife’s grave. It pissed him off beyond everything. It made him white hot inside, hence the heavy sweating now, the shaking of his hands now, that and the struggle to remain under control. He wanted to verbally strangle her, for his words to throw her against the wall, for his justification to break things all over her house, and for her own guilt and remorsefulness to wet the floor like a melted snowman. But she had the upper hand, she held the knowledge he desired and thus she owned him, and he hated it. He hated that they all had shared Philly and now she would not give him back his pieces.

“Adam,” she said, and then she paused for a long moment. “Adam, you would know if you’d been here. And if you’d have been here, maybe she’d now be here.”

That kind of thinking was ridiculous, Adam thought to himself. No one can be everywhere at once. No one can protect another person 24/7/365. Impossible. An
accident can happen anywhere, to anyone, so who was Marilynn to think he could have changed anything.

Marilynn continued, “To want to talk to her is delusional. Between this type of stuff and the letters you wrote while you were gone, I can see you are still having problems.”

That reminded Adam that she had all the letters he’d written to Philly from Iraq, and he cursed her again.

“But…”

“No but’s Adam,” she cut him off. “You have to think hard on your decisions, and you also need to stop this type of foolishness.”

“Marilynn…”

Now he got dial tone. He set his receiver back in the cordless cradle. To Marilynn the decisions had to be black and white, and his had come across to her as black. That was the most she had let him talk to her in three months. He was stuck again. Stuck. He picked the phone up again and set it down harder. That felt good. He did it again, noticing that the clack of the plastics hitting almost sounded like a yelp of pain. He hit them again, and then again, and again and again. Then he just slammed the top part of the phone against the edge of the counter, shattering it onto the floor and leaving him holding the bottom half of the phone. Then he pulled the base of the phone from the wall plug and threw it against the wall. Man, did that feel good. Seeing all those pieces on the floor felt really good. And then it didn’t feel good. Then it was an
embarrassment, a loss of control. It was a weakness, a vulnerability that could be exploited if known. It was a mess he’d have to clean up, and a phone he’d have to replace.

Then the idea occurred to him. Cut Marilynn out of the picture. Perhaps he could find her by himself. Take the initiative. He could drive around some probable locations in the local towns, maybe start with New Holstein, since that is where they had last lived together, and maybe check Brillion, Chilton, and such. Or go right to Leo and Marilynn’s vicinity in Appleton since maybe she wanted her daughter close by and near her roots. Yes, it may be tedious and perhaps fruitless in the end, but at least he would be trying to actively solve the problem. It would be a lot like searching for weapons of mass destruction. He wouldn’t have to dig up the whole country, true, for he’d have probable locations. He could find people there who could give him plot maps of the cemeteries and names and locations of people buried within the past year. It could be a process of elimination, this search. What had Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said about the WMD search? “The absence of evidence is not evidence of their absence.” Using the scientific method each failure would be a success because he would be narrowing in on where she could truly be.

Unless Marilynn had her cremated…

Adam and Philly had never discussed that, not for her. For him, yes, because he was the one with an increased chance of dying. What if she wanted that? Or what if Marilynn wanted that for her? They had usurped his power as spouse, and he could see
Marilynn being just petty enough to have her daughter cremated just to spite him. Then she could be anywhere. She could be a WMD. Shit.

Adam shook that thought for the moment and showered quickly and threw on some relaxed fit blue jeans and an oversized white tee shirt that simply had the image of an eagle in the middle. He ran a comb through his hair three times and then let it lie as it rested. From the top of his head down to the sides, he thought it often looked like water moving through rapids with the way it banked and stepped down. Adam backed the Metro out of the driveway and set out with two bottles of water along and the passenger window rolled halfway down. Out of nowhere he spirits had shot up, and he found a rock station on the radio playing an L.A. Guns song he liked. An odd curiosity made him look at the house on the left of the woman who had honked at him two days ago while cutting grass. A car was in the driveway but there was no sign of activity otherwise. Adam took a right and found the same county road he had just run on, then started thinking of which roads he’d need to connect with to eventually take him to New Holstein in the opposite direction. But unbeknownst to him the road had changed since he had run on it, and he wasn’t going to get very far that day.

It was a Calumet County Sheriff’s Deputy who came upon Adam’s car about a half hour later, stopped just a mile outside of Kingsburg on that county road. It was running but stationary, and the brake lights were applied. Deputy Nick Harding had been with the Calumet County Sheriff’s department for the entire five years of his law enforcement career, and he considered his exposure to odd things still moderate. Rural
areas did bring out more eccentric people, that was for sure. He was regularly amazed by people still, so things that were not routine made him nervous. Pulling over three kids outside Reedsville too young to drive with an open intoxicant in the car made him nervous. Domestic violence calls in the trailer parks made him nervous. And now a car stopped in the middle of the road for no apparent reason made him nervous. He put his lights on as he came up behind the car, and placed his own light gray cruiser in park. He could see an occupant sitting upright and looking ahead, in no apparent medical distress but not reacting to his lights or the short burst of his siren to get his attention. Harding called in the plate and model, which came back clean, so the Deputy approached the car with his right hand just resting over his 9 mm sidearm. He made a wide loop to the left so he could get a good look inside the car as he approached.

A male driver sat upright in the otherwise empty car, grasping the steering wheel with white knuckles at the two and ten positions and staring intently at the road ahead. There was no oncoming traffic, and no sign of any type of accident up ahead. A quick glance of the car’s front revealed no apparent deer hit damage. Up ahead about a hundred yards a large raccoon lay on its side about a foot onto the road on the right side, freshly killed by traffic. Inside the car Deputy Harding could see nothing obviously illegal. He could see the man’s chest rise and fall noticeably, short and quick, but it was hard to tell if his eyes blinked.

“Sir?” Deputy Harding asked in a loud but not too steady voice.

This produced no movement.
“Sir?” Harding repeated and came closer. Still there was no reaction, so he came closer. No signs of trauma or injury to the driver yet. Nothing on the front seat except for a couple bottles of water. The driver’s window was cracked open about two inches. Harding approached and was about to tap on it.

“I can’t tell,” the driver whispered. His eyes seemed locked on the dead animal in the road. The Deputy began to plan to call for backup for a stoned driver.

“Can’t tell what, sir?” Harding asked. He didn’t get a response from the driver after ten seconds. “Sir, I need to see your license and registration.” The man did not move, and Harding started going over different scenarios in his head. He hated this stuff.

“Sir,” Harding said more forcefully, “Are you understanding me? I need to see...”

“I think I see wires coming out of it,” the man said quickly. “But I’m not certain.”

Wires? What about wires? Was this guy hallucinating or tripping out, Harding wondered to himself. We have to take this step by step, then.

“Sir, I want to help you with that,” the Deputy said. “But I need to make sure this is safe for all of us. Can I have you put the car in park, sir?”

No response, just a blank stare ahead.

“Just slip that gear into park for me, sir.”

The driver complied now.

“Good,” Harding said. “Now let’s turn the key off.”
No response.

“Just go on and turn the key off for me, sir.”

The driver blinked twice and seemed to come out of something. He moved his hand to the key and turned the engine off.

“Alright,” Harding said, “doing good here. Now I need you to slowly get me those identifications.”

The driver slid his right hand from the wheel and removed his wallet and found his driver’s license. Then he leaned forward to the glove box on the passenger side to dig out the vehicle registration, but as he did so he still kept his eyes on the road kill up ahead. He canted his head and craned his neck, having a slightly different angle to observe the object ahead.

“Thanks,” said the deputy. “Just stay put here a second as I run these.”

Deputy Harding realized how funny that had sounded now as he walked back to his car. Staying put wasn’t the guy’s problem. He called in the information. While he waited he continued to watch the car and its driver, and mulled over the odd thing the man had said. Wires. Wires coming out of an animal carcass. He recalled something about that he’d heard, something relayed from a friend who had a cousin that was deployed. The cousin had told him that the insurgents, the ones killing Americans, would place homemade bombs in anything, and the more obvious and harmless looking the better. Rigged up explosives and munitions would be put in inconspicuous things like MRE packages or a gas can or a tire and left by the road so that Americans would
hopefully think nothing of it and drive right by it. Or maybe even try to run it over.

They’d even done that with animal remains, like dogs and sheep and even cows, things that were every day sights along the road. Harding had a golden retriever of his own, and couldn’t imagine a human being rigging its remains to explode and kill another person.

Not just putting a bomb on his dog, but putting it inside his dog.

Dispatch called back normal on the license and registration.

“Check one more thing,” he called back over the radio. “Can you check if the guy’s got a military history. Like county records maybe.”

Gruesome, Harding thought as he waited more, the idea of someone cutting open a dog to stick explosives and wires and stuff in it. Who would do that to an animal?

Sure, there are plenty of people more desensitized to dead animals, like from hunting and taxidermy and such, but dogs are supposed to be man’s best friends. How is life viewed over there, then, if this is what you do with your friends?

“Affirmative military history,” dispatch called back. “Recent deployment. DD214 was on file with the county.”

That confirmed it for the Deputy. He walked back up to the Metro.

“Mr. Banks,” Harding said. “Everything is okay. You are free to go.”

Adam had not looked concerned about being detained, and remained nervous and unreassured.

“But what if there are some wires…” he explained. “Someone else could come up on it and…”
Adam didn’t finish his statement. The Deputy saw his perceived concern for the scene and other people coming upon it.

“It’s okay, we’ve got it covered,” Harding said. When that didn’t look like enough for Adam, he added, “We have someone on the way to check it out.”

“You do?” Adam asked.

“Yeah,” Harding replied, nodding.

“Okay,” Adam nodded then too. “Good.”

Adam still looked pale and shaken but was steady. Harding realized that Adam would want to go back the way he had come, so he moved his patrol car and watched Adam head back down the road towards Kingsburg. That was listed as his current address, so Harding speculated the man would just go home. When he saw that he was alone on the road he drove up to the road kill and walked up to it. It was a round raccoon, looking bloated but not, just a very fat raccoon that had been struck in the head as it tried to cross the road going from one corn field to the other. Harding figured he should prevent other problems, at least immediately, and gave it a great heave after putting on some of his latex first aid gloves. The carcass landed well past the ditch and into the corn field the animal had come out of, taking one bounce and rolling twice. *Bombs in those things?* Harding thought to himself. *What a disgusting enemy we’re fighting.*

Adam went back home with little recollection of the purpose he’d left. He went to the drawer and found a cigarette, lit it quickly and inhaled. His mind danced with
pleasure and release, while his lungs mutinied into coughs and his stomach clenched. He tossed the cig into the sink and found the Jim Beam bottle in the cupboard, tilting it back, relishing the burn of whiskey. His swig outlasted his breathe and Adam had to stop to cough, the booze running down his chin, neck, and shirt. Then he lay down in the darkened bedroom and for a long time won the staring contest with the ceiling. Sometime later he did fall asleep. He was in the right front seat of a Humvee, looking through the dirty glass at a place all too familiar to him. This place had a caustic, aromatic taste, like blood and sweat and burned hair and vomit and overly sweetened Mountain Dew. He knew to look way up ahead on the right, and there he could see his dinosaur monster lying lifelessly beside the road. It was dead, bloated in the belly with bile dripping from its open jaw. The front of their convoy was beginning to pass it, and that is when the beast’s belly exploded. The blast was small and disproportionate for the amount of munitions that could have been packed inside the large animal, but it was enough to tear open the right side of the Humvee which had been trying to give it some space anyway. A soldier had fallen out, someone who Adam knew that he knew yet couldn’t see who it was, and he lay comingled with the strung-out guts of the monster, mutual entrails projected from like abdomens. A soldier arrived to provide first aid, SSG Sabinus, and he began to desperately apply a tourniquet to the right leg. Adam was fixed in position, unable to get out of his Humvee and unable for it to move forward. Then the monster lifted its head, not dead at all despite the gaping hole in its belly, and snatchèd up a piece of remains, either its or the man’s, with its tongue. To Adam’s horror it rolled
onto its feet and in two steps had thrown Sabinus out of the way with its head. Then it feasted on the soldier that had been still alive, bit and pulled at pieces of his body like a common crow. It became a ragged chunk of man, lifeless now, and much of what the beast ate just flopped out of the flapping hole in its own underside. When this happened the dinosaur looked at Adam with familiarity and satisfaction, and bent down to repeatedly eat the same soldier meat again.
Adam, SPC Martins, and SPC Brinks drove back to the rally point to meet the rest of the convoy after doing some exploring in their Humvee of the occupied Iraqi base known as Taji. It had been Al Taji under the Saddam Hussein regime, an army base and airfield that now had rutted trails for streets and many scattered piles of Iraqi military wreckage were humble reminders of what was once a potent military power. At the airfield were several two-seat helicopters had been shot to hell and were missing chunks of rotor blades. The dining facility was a decent one so Adam’s crew never minded coming to Taji; it had the only soft serve ice cream machine they had encountered in country yet.

The PX was small and in a sheet metal building off the useless airstrip, but had a larger variety of DVDs and CDs than the other Post Exchanges, so the soldiers stocked up on things to entertain themselves. Since television was not an available form of nightly entertainment, purchasing a season of a TV show was a way to get a similar feeling and also get the most entertainment per dollar. Iraqis on post also hustled bootleg DVD movies, often having movie titles still in the theaters back in the United States within days after the movie premiere. Brinks had acquired *The Hulk* and *Terminator 3* on DVD just two days after their releases on American movie screens. At best a pirated
promotional copy was duplicated on a laptop in some other Middle Eastern or European
country, producing a copy of decent quality which had copyright warnings scrolling
across the bottom of the screen the whole time. Sometimes the movie had been filmed by
a handheld video recorder at a movie theater, resulting in terrible picture and sound,
unsteady frames as the camera moved, and with other people heard talking or even
standing up right in front of the video camera.

At Taji, the men were like boys exploring in the woods. On the north side was a
yard of relatively unscathed Iraqi military vehicles, making it the zoo of endangered
species that did not become the metallic corpses littering the sides of Iraqi roads that had
been slaughtered by the advancing American forces during the invasion. These were
operational tanks and trucks and artillery pieces that could one day service the new Iraqi
army, but for now were things the men stuck their heads into and yelled just to hear the
metallic echo. The men were children, even Martins, and played at frozen controls of a
tank and made the imaginative noises of driving and turning and shooting and playing
war. They dared to see who could walk the furthest out onto the slightly elevated barrel
of the T-72 tank, and Martins made it the all the way to the end, swung down so that his
head was directly in the large muzzle hole, and pleaded with his enemy captors that he
not be executed in this way. Adam quickly fell on his ass into the dirt when he tried,
landing on hard and broken ground instead of sand, soil just beginning to crack and
fissure from the summer heat and lack of rain. He pelted his subordinates with dirt
clumps in retaliation for their hysterical laughing. The Humvee leaned and bottomed out
when it pulled through some of the deep ruts as they drove back to the rendezvous point, and along the way they passed a large ballistic missile lying on its side just off the road.

“Think that’s a SCUD?” Brinks asked from the driver’s seat. The talking actually had to be quite loud for each other to be heard over the loud diesel engine of the vehicle.

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “But do you remember our first couple days of putting up with *Lightning! Lightning! Lightning!*?”

“Shit, yeah,” Brinks said, shaking his head. “I hated that stupid warning siren. But throwing on those chem suits in one hundred and ten degree temperatures is what I hated the most.”

They continued on to the rally point, passing local Iraqis doing odd jobs like laying bricks, painting stucco exteriors from canvas tan to ridgeback brown, or planting white Anistatica flowers around the camp, and watched by American guards who did not look thrilled with their assigned task. Most workers came from the small town right outside the camp, just over the wall. Short range mortar attacks against the camp came from just over the wall, and that is why the miserable soldiers living there always had to wear their flak jackets and helmets. The Humvee passed a couple of brick buildings and came up to another two Humvees and a five ton cargo truck, which they pulled next to and parked. The five ton truck was an M939 model and had six tall tires and a bumper at about waist height, and a large cargo back with a canvas over the top.

“Welcome back,” called Staff Sergeant Reynolds from the passenger door of the first Humvee. “Good timing. The Battalion Commander is going to be about thirty more
minutes, so start your pre-combat checks.” Jack Reynolds had been an MP on active duty for eight years before going reserve and going into the 97th MP Company. His nose skewed left from being broken once or twice and he had small blue eyes. He was a favorite in the company because of his competence and his even head but since he was in 2nd Platoon, Adam’s crew rarely saw him.

Martins checked the M2 .50 caliber machine gun and its ammo, having a belt that he could load in an instant when it was time to go. He dropped down out of his gunner’s nest and looked at the cans of .50 cal ammunition at his feet. He was completely open and unprotected in the gunner’s mount, a terrible vulnerability of the peacetime vehicle hastily deployed into combat beyond its design. Brinks popped the hood and checked the undercarriage, despite them driving it around all day, and then got out and walked around checking for any signs of leaks, checking the squat tires for their condition, checking the Kevlar doors. He seemed to enjoy poking around the engines of things and was curious about their more complicated workings, so Adam hoped such an interest could garner some schooling as a mechanic when his young friend got back stateside. Their M998 was just a basic Humvee model with a slanted “turtleback” tail but had been upgraded with Kevlar plated doors, the same material their helmets were made of, and reinforced side windows, plus a steel plate under the driver side. The thin metal siding of the vehicle otherwise would not stop a bullet from the typical variations of the AK-47 employed by local enemy forces, and neither would the front window. The paint scheme was woodland green camouflage of the Cold War era and concealed nothing. Adam did
commo checks with the other Humvees on the Sincgars radio. ‘Warthog’ had become their permanent name as their crew was bounced between various Army units and civilian contractors to maximize the employment of their radio jamming system, one of only a few dozen deployed so far in Iraq. Adam climbed into the back seat and turned on the Warlock system, watching the LED indicator on the small yet precious box switch from red to green. Then the truck crew waited, keeping the engine running so the Warlock wouldn’t drain the battery.

As the Battalion Commander arrived, they did a quick safety briefing and the five vehicles lined up and proceeded out the gate. SSG Reynolds’ Humvee led the way, followed by the Battalion Commander’s, then Adam’s crew, then the five ton truck, and lastly the other Humvee gun truck. The drive was slow and cautious as they cleared the gate, weaving through the series of angled concrete barricades that prevented high speed car bomb attacks, until they got to the overpass which allowed them to merge onto the Main Supply Route that ran south and north, MSR Tampa. This was a vulnerable bottleneck area, not just at the ramp but also for the next several miles of highway where the traffic congestion could be thick and civilians walked and dealt in close proximity to the road.

It felt good to get some air moving through the vehicle, even if it was dry and hot. Adam looked back over his shoulder at the Warlock device, which still had a green indicator light. It had been two weeks since they had inherited the electronic jamming
device which was supposed to reduce IED attacks. Brinks saw him checking this from the driver’s seat.

“Are the shields still up, Captin?” Brinks asked in his best *Star Trek* voice.

“No, Scottie,” Adam responded in character, “They’re not shields at all.” Adam then looked out the window, did a pretend double take, and looked at Brinks. “But there’s something on the wing,” he said pumping a clawed fist, “Some… *thing*… on the wing.”

Brinks looked at him blankly, missing *The Twilight Zone* reference.

“So what’s it doing, again?” he asked.

“It jams electronic signals the insurgents use in their IEDs,” Adam tried to explain. “Stuff like cell phones, walkie-talkies, garage door openers…”

“It also jams all country music stations,” Martins interjected, popping back out into the gun turret as quickly as he had popped in.

“How the hell can you hear us?” Adam yelled. He returned to watching his sector out the window but continued answering the question. “Somehow it interferes with the signals getting through, so the devices can’t be triggered despite the sons-of-bitches pushing the button.”

Brinks nodded understanding. He pulled the Humvee into the left hand lane as the vehicles in front of him had done. He followed like the midsection of a snake, trusting that the convoy commander was shifting from lane to lane as traffic conditions and possible threats situations changed.
“That’s a lot of signals to jam, ain’t it?” Brinks commented.

“Oh, it can’t jam everything,” Adam replied, looking at him. “That’s not possible.”

Brinks’ eyebrows went up. Adam glared in frustration from behind his tinted ballistic glasses, knowing it had been explained to them several times.

“It jams a couple channels continuously,” Adam explained again. “The ones that have been used the most by the enemy. Then it scans through a list of next most probable channels that have been programmed in, and when it detects them it jams them as well. That’s what the moving LEDs are doing on the box.”

“Shit,” Brinks said, “That don’t seem like much protection at all.”

Adam shrugged. “It’s maybe ten or fifteen channels total being jammed.”

“Shit,” Brinks said again. He took a swig of an open Red Bull can with his right hand and wedged it back down again by the radio. “So then it doin’ nothin’ against wire detonated IEDs?”

“You gotcha,” Adam replied. A message squabbled through the Sincgars headset, Adam listened then repeated to Brinks. “There’s a disabled car in the left lane ahead, going wide around it.”

Brinks nodded, kept his eyes ahead, and made the sharp cut to the right when the convoy did. Martins was very active in the turret, turning left, turning right, tracking the unmoving car, covering an apartment complex not too far off.
“Do those moving lights say when the machine actually jams something?” Brinks asked, his eyes darting between different vehicles around them.

“No.”

Brinks jerked his head towards Adam and back quickly.

“So let me get this straight,” Brinks began, as he slowed to adjust to traffic in front of him, “It can’t stop a wire detonation-”

“Right,” Adam said.

“The channels it jams is pretty limited-”

“More or less,” Adam nodded.

“And we don’t even know if it is doing something.”

“That’s correct,”

“Why the fuck do we have it?” Brinks yelled.

Martins popped his head down again. “That is called the placebo effect.” He smiled a toothy grin with a toothpick in his mouth, then shot upright again. Adam could only shrug.

They saw a gas station then, on the east side of the road, with a shoebox-shaped American M113 armored personnel carrier guarding it and a line of Iraqi cars coming out of it and backing up the shoulder southward along the road.

“Mark the distance,” Adam said, pointing at the line coming out of the gas station.

“Let’s see how long that line goes.”
Brinks checked his current odometer reading and chuckled. At the moment the cars extended beyond what he could see. Adam thought of a favorite Metallica song, and began to belt it out.

“Give me fuel,
Give me fire,
Give me that which I desire...”

Brinks let Adam scream by himself while he just watched traffic. It was good for people to be letting loose and venting from the stress, breaking up the monotony of staring at miles of roads and people, the mental and eye fatigue that goes with long periods of being on high internal alert. Adam was still scanning his area of his side of the vehicle and had the radio set near his ear if anything came over it, and yet he was holding the receiver like a phone or a microphone and singing into it as well. When the chorus came around the second time Brinks jumped in as well.

“Ooh, I burn,
Fuel is pumping engines,
Burning hard, loose, and clean
And I burn,
Churning my direction,  
Quench my thirst with gasoline!”

And then even Martins joined in, appearing mad to the soldiers in the five ton behind them, screaming the lyrics and pointing randomly at the civilian cars around them, gesturing, and thumping his chest.

“So, give me fuel,  
Give me fire,  
Give me that which I desire—  
Yeah!”

The droning of the engines then seemed like an odd silence as they all stopped the song right there, that awkward moment after something great spontaneously happens when those involved can only ask, so now what?  

“The line was one point three miles,” Brinks said.  

Adam shook his head and whistled. “Some say we invaded this country for oil, and yet these people don’t have the infrastructure to process all of that oil itself into gas—shame.”

Brinks just happened to be scanning out across the passenger side when he spotted a familiar child and pointed.
“Isn’t that our dude?”

Adam’s face brightened. “Oh, yeah. Wave to him!”

He was a thin boy of around five or six years old, and always seemed to be wearing the same clothes, or at least the same kind of clothes: thin jogging pants that came down to mid-calf, sandals, and a red t-shirt. His hair was thin and wispy but long in the bangs so it jumped about his face in the wind. The boy had waved to them the first time they saw him, and he did so every time they took this route. At first the men wondered if that would get the kid killed, but it seemed to have not. They had even discussed giving him a name like many of the familiar things they saw: Lucy was the black and white spotted cow they always saw grazing in the garbage dump along the Taji route; Uncle Sam was an old man with a rectangular face and white beard who vended ice out of the back of a 1986 white Mazda sedan; and so on. They decided not to give the boy a name because they genuinely liked the kid. He was hope. He was the next generation of Iraq. He was the barometer of the heart of Iraq, a heart that could be free of prejudice and hate against the Americans if they didn’t give him a reason to. The adults on the road told the other tale of the current state, how their eyes said it all as they watched the American convoys pass them on the highways. It was almost always men driving anyways, perhaps because of gender role or sexism or simply that the men were the ones out taking the risks to make a living. But their eyes said the most, and it was usually the gunner who saw this best when they passed the cars. Some eyes were timid and compliant, moving over so the military convoy could smoothly get past. No trouble,
no provocation to get rammed or shot, just get past me and get away. Some eyes were cool and observant, casual and nonchalant, and therefore dangerous. And some eyes were just glares of hate from those who had lost someone, either directly or indirectly to the violence, or who just resented Americans for who they were and their unwanted occupation. Eyes hollow on the bottom, scornful, vengeful, spitting venom. If they could kill you with their eyes, they would. If they could kill you with their hands, they would. There was this, and then there were little boys who waved at them.

The divided four lane highway transformed into a more cosmopolitan four lanes of traffic around them, with ramps that seemed to merge from above and below. Martins remained active, spinning left, spinning right, turning nonstop to bear the .50 cal on the ramps and overpasses, aligning the large barrel with cars jumping into the pandemonium perhaps just a little too quickly. His eyes, behind the tinted ballistic goggles, were quick and decisive, and scary to the civilians because they could not see a human behind them. His cheeks were taut, wrapping tight around the toothpick protruding from his lips, white from tension and wind resistance. His fingers were restless and jumpy, drumming the handles of the .50 cal unless he was using them to direct the traffic all around them, pointing for cars to move over or to back off. It was the challenge of navigating within a stampede, moving within the flow of the dull animals that bucked and jockeyed and didn’t realize that there were no individuals in this river of humanity, just a collective of molecules that banked and rose and dropped and merged and trickled off into distributaries.
There were a couple of lane changes around traffic and then the convoy hit the off ramp and was down onto the highway known as Route Irish that ran between Baghdad and the airport, the most dangerous stretch of road but usually in the opposite direction heading into the city. Under the highway and then it was just a short sprint until the gate at Camp Victory, encountering the large, dirt-filled Hesco barriers and the weaving concrete obstacles to slow down all traffic. As they entered, a familiar crew of a Bradley fighting vehicle cat-called to them in their “Barbie” car, to which they responded with smiles, fingers, and invitations for those 3rd Infantry Division pukes to drop their armor and bullet-proof vests and run “the Gauntlet” with them.

Beyond that point, behind large concrete walls and checkpoints and those linebacker Bradleys, that was where their collective breaths released, sighs let out and weary eyes could return to the minimal function needed. An uneventful mission was a beautiful thing. It was the common thing, though there was usually something that razzed the nerves on every mission: being stopped for an IED up ahead that was being disarmed and disposed of, or some odd behavior of a driver or a person watching; random gunshots, or perhaps a tire on a trailer blowing out right beside your vehicle. Today there was nothing, and the decompression cycle could begin. The men could return to living outside of the moment, could think about the future, think about tonight, tomorrow, next week because those days were still possible now.

They topped the Humvee off with fuel first as usual, then ate, cleaned weapons, and worked out at the air-conditioned gym. Martins lifted weights, Brinks rode a stepper,
and Adam ran on a treadmill. After a brief meeting to review the day and give out tomorrow’s missions, the time belonged to the men. They chose to spend it in the tent watching DVDs. Brinks had bought a season of *The Sopranos* and one of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Adam had bought the classic movie *Jaws*, and this is what they watched this evening as other soldiers wandered in and either chatted a couple minutes and left or set up chairs of their own and stayed. Adam wrote a daily letter to Philadelphia to tell her how the day was.

“You guys ever feel,” Brinks began to ask, “that when we go out, we ain’t the shark? Know what I mean? Like we got the weapons with teeth and can really fuck people up, but in the end we ain’t the predator.”

“We are not,” Martins said. “We cannot deviate from the convoy. We cannot pursue hostiles. We cannot leave the KBR trucks we escort, the civilians would be defenseless.”

Adam looked up from his letter and thought about that. “I think,” he said, “that the shark versus bait analogy isn’t right for us. I think of us as sheepdogs moving a flock of sheep along and trying not to lose any of us to the wolves.”

“Maybe,” Brinks shrugged at that.

“What a noble image,” SGT Grahams cracked. He sat next to Adam’s cot and ate intently at a bag of Tostitos Scoops and cheese dip. He randomly scratched different parts of his body and cursed the invisible sand fleas that bit him day and night. Staff Sergeant Carl Sabinus, sometimes just called Sable by soldiers whether they liked him or
despised him, came in and apprized the situation. He was squad leader for Adam’s gun
truck team, but rarely traveled with them. He was about six foot two and muscularly
built, and had built a reputation as the nastiest fighter you wanted to have on your side.
You had to watch his cheating at poker and you had to watch him from moving in on a
girl you might be flirting with. His eyes were a cloudy green, and if you examined them
you’d swear it looked like darker and lighter shaded pockets drifting and comingling
fluidly like a lava lamp.

“We got Grahams packing on ten pounds of cheese spread here,” he said in a
commentator-like voice, “and Banks having a pussy to pussy pillow talk here.”

“Fuck off, Sable,” was said in unison by all five men in the tent.

“Now that’s more like it,” Sabinus smiled. He came into the tent and watched the
movie for a bit, standing behind everyone and seeming to hover over their shoulders.
Then he started to walk around and look at the things hanging and standing in the
soldiers’ personal areas. It wasn’t inspecting at all, it was touching and handling pictures
and care packages without asking if it was okay. Martins was doing a crossword puzzle
and eating a large bag of M & M’s, so Sabinus said, “Hey, can I get some of that?”

Martins looked up at him, reflected for a moment, and counter-questioned, “What
have you ever contributed to the party here?”

Sabinus tried to look hurt, and put his hand on his heart.

“Ouch, that hurts,” he replied. “I thought we were brothers, man.”
Martins did not answer and had already returned to the puzzle because looking interested in the movie left open another window for Sabinus to talk to him, and the puzzle book also formed a nice barrier. So SSG Sable prowled on and came to Adam’s stuff, where he picked up a picture of Adam’s wife. It took Adam a minute to notice, but when he did he saw something weird in the way Sabinus was holding the picture. It was angled backward, and his eyes were narrowed like his mind was somewhere else. When Sabinus noticed Adam watching him intently, he set the picture down and just said, “Yeah, dude. Yeah.”

The way he had been holding the picture gave Adam the creeps a little, especially in the way that he had neither given a genuine compliment about her nor a smart-ass vulgar comment expected out of a battle buddy. Sabinus may have sensed Adam’s continued observation and brought up another topic.

“When my leave finally comes through,” he said, “you’re in charge of the squad.”

“Great,” Adam replied sardonically. “I can’t wait.”

“It might start in about four weeks, or could be closer to eight before I get to take it. Anyways, it’s only like three weeks actual time, that’s all,” Sabinus said, reaching over to slap him on the shoulder.

“Great,” Adam repeated. “Like I said before.

“Don’t worry, Bro,” Sable said slyly, “I’ll check in on the wife,” followed by a wink.
Adam did not laugh, and Sabinus held his hyena grin as the two looked at each other. Adam considered his responses to the remark, and none of them seemed satisfactory. A true objection that the comment was out of line would be disregarded. Breaking his nose would get Adam busted, and he’d be in a scruff that he’d only have a slightly better than even chance of winning. Even showing a reaction granted Sabinus some sort of satisfaction. No response seemed adequate. Two sentiments conflicted inside Adam: there was disgust and rage that wanted the senior soldier kept at as great a distance possible, and yet there was also the urge, no call it the gnawing warning, that there should be eyes on him at all times. Keep your friends close, the saying went, and your enemies closer. Sabinus certainly danced back and forth over that line, so Adam decided his interaction with Sabinus would also move back and forth across a line. He would run with the wolf, like he had on a few occasions at the bars outside of Fort Campbell, but when the beast went too far he wanted to be there to pin it down by its neck. Sabinus finally broke contact, acknowledging that Adam was not playing a game with his stare but growling with his eyes, and he pointed at the TV screen.

“Oh, great line coming up,” he yelled. “Wait for it…wait for it…”

The men watched as actor Roy Schneider threw chum in the water to attract the shark they are hunting. He had a cigarette in his mouth and his back to the water, yelling back to the captain of the ship, “Slow ahead. I can go slow ahead. Come on down and chum some of this shit.” With a soft splashing the giant shark’s head broke the surface, the teeth gnashed at Schneider, and the monster disappeared under the water. Schneider
backed up slowly, eyes agape in revelation of what they are up against, and he backed his way into the ship’s cabin. The cigarette bounced up and down as Schneider uttered his warning to the captain.

Sabinus pointed to the screen in emphasis.

“You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”
Adam arrived early at the Veterans Affairs clinic for the appointment, having had it drilled into him that arriving on time was late. The glass door slowly closed behind him as he entered the tiny waiting room, with a registration and office area that was proportionately small. Although its door and window measurements were surely standard, he felt towering when he bent down to talk to the low-seated clerk, like a human in a health care clinic for Hobbits.

“May I help you?” asked the black haired gentleman behind the counter, swiveling in his chair to face Adam. He wore a white buttoned shirt and plain navy blue tie, and almost knocked over a wooden cane when he spun around.

“Yes, I have an appointment with Ray,” Adam replied. The man spun counterclockwise to a computer screen and used the mouse to scroll down Ray’s list of appointments. He was just about to ask for more information when Adam added for him, “Banks, last four 1190.”

“Thank you,” the man nodded and clicked a few keys. “Have a seat, please; Ray will be with you in a few minutes.”

Adam turned to find a seat in the waiting room. There were four plain red chairs each along the two side walls. A man in his fifties in red flannel shirt sat along the side
closer to the parking lot, his head craned up into the upper corner of the room opposite
him, where a bald headed black man was hosting a talk show on the TV. On the other
side of the room was an elderly couple, maybe in their eighties, looking aged and
crumpled over. The man had a small belly and rounded shoulders. His thick bifocal
glasses magnified the size of his tired looking eyeballs. His wife sat to his right, her feet
barely touching the floor, her white hair still bundled in a headscarf though it was still
pretty warm outside. Her wrinkled and spotted left hand sat upon his right hand on the
armrest, both shaking slightly. They both stared out the glass door silently and
sometimes licked their lips.

Adam walked to the side that had more room so as not to feel his personal bubble
invaded, or invading others’ bubbles. He glanced at the magazine table as he passed it,
seeing an *American Legion* issue, a *TV Guide*, two copies of *Newsweek*, and several
issues of *AARP* magazine. He sat down and wanted to sigh already. Usually it just was
the other patients in the waiting room that made him feel that he was too young and
healthy looking to belong at any VA clinic, but today even the publications on the table
were calling him a child. Nobody looked directly at him, and yet it felt like everybody
was staring at him. In their not looking at him they were sizing him up, taking measure
of the new veterans, and perhaps wondering what the hell he was doing here. Did he
really need to be here, or was this healthy looking, twenty-something guy sucking away
time and resources that they depended on? What had he done to deserve it?
Everyone knew what each of the other generations had done from the unspoken historical footnotes. The World War Two generation had been drafted en mass to fight in the greatest conflict the world had ever known, into something that they didn’t want to do but understood they had to do. It was gross carnage, but their part in it was justified. They had sacrificed the largest amount of men, a great portion of their generation, to defeat the Nazis and Japanese and liberate all the countries that had been subjugated by them. They were the Greatest Generation-- truly. Korea was a debacle of the worst prepared American army in history, a surprise invasion that shouldn’t have been a surprise, a daring plan to retake lost ground, political arrogance that led to a long stalemate over severe winters, trench warfare without trenches. It was not just a cold war, it was the Cold War, and to a culture that equated anything less than victory being defeat it was tallied as a tie with an asterisk behind it, a ceasefire that was still tenuously in effect to this day. And what couldn’t one say about those from Vietnam? They fought without understanding why, many of them draftees who did what was expected of them, even if it went against what they believed. Land was traversed but not taken, not secured. The frontline was outside their firebase, the water encircling their island. The enemy moved all around them, and behind them, in the jungles, in the paddies, in the cities. Tunnels and swamps, napalm and Agent Orange, and yet the worst place to find themselves was home. And then everything they died for collapsed. This is what Adam understood as truth, as the truth that sat beside him in this waiting room, and there was no way he could objectively know where he fit in. What was Iraq, after all?
Adam sat in the furthest chair, opposite the elderly couple, who hadn’t seemed to look at him as he passed and still looked out the door. He looked down at the floor by their feet, or to the left or right when he looked up, trying not to be rude and look directly at them, for if he did he would end up staring at them for a while. Instead of studying their faces, seeing what he might become, he scrutinized their shoes. The man’s faded brown leather loafers were tied loosely, maybe the sign of an independent old man instead of a young pretty nurse. The soles were worn along the outside edge. The wife’s shoes were white and had thick bottoms. She wore stockings for swelling in the feet, which was still apparent as her ankles hung over the lip of her shoes.

“He was a Marine, you know that?” said the man seated to Adam’s right. Adam looked at him and wondered if he was talking about the old man in the room, but when his eyes never left the TV screen it became clear he was talking about the talk show’s host. Adam studied the man on TV for a few moments. The polished cranium might suggest a military background, but a haircut often is a ruse. Something in the host’s face told him that the man was correct.

“I could believe that,” Adam replied noncommittally. “I’ve heard a rumor that Mr. Rogers was a decorated sniper.”

The old man across from Adam ever-so-briefly glanced at him with those huge eyes in the spectacles, but was back on the door again immediately. The flannel man took his eyes off the TV and looked at Adam. “That’s just a myth, some rumor people
made up. Starting a rumor is like arson, it’s a psychologically deviant behavior. Strike a match a watch it burn.”

Adam nodded. The rumor-mill must be an age old nemesis every generation of servicemen faces, a liar that never dies and always crushes hope, causes controversy, and otherwise demoralizes troops away from home. Rumors about when the troops were going home, who was screwing around on his wife, who was gay, who wore women’s underwear, and on and on. It must be a game for some, a challenge to see what they can get people to believe.

“Maybe,” Adam conceded, “but wouldn’t it be interesting if someone who seems so soft could have such a past.”

The flannel man nodded agreement to that, then went back to the TV without another word. Adam guessed him to be a Vietnam vet by how old he looked, probably serving at the tail end of the conflict. There were always so many older vets at the clinics. He hadn’t seen one person yet that looked his age. Not one. He was part of the first group coming back from Iraq.

After a short and silent wait, a man in jeans, white cotton shirt, and striped tie came out of a room just down the hall. He scanned the waiting room, looking over all three of the male faces, and came back to the one he was looking for. “Adam, come on in.” He got up and followed the man he only knew as Ray, and felt a heavy bug-eyed glare from the old man across from him for getting quicker service. They went into the office that Ray had just come out of, Adam taking the chair in the corner, Ray sitting in
the black rolling chair at the desk. He typed a password to log back into the computer, clicked the mouse a couple times to get to the screen he wanted, then spun to face Adam.

“So how’ve you been, Adam?” Ray asked.

“OK,” Adam replied. He hated questions like that, questions that were ambiguous and almost redundant. *How do you think I am if I’m here to see you?* Maybe someone occasionally felt comfortable giving an upfront answer.

Ray quickly ran through a list of standard demographic and health history questions, looking for any changes since Adam’s last visit, clicking the ‘N’ key with every ‘no’ answer Adam gave. A reminder popped up on his screen, Ray pushed his glasses up his nose and squinted for a second to read it.

“Looks like you’re due for another physical next month.” Ray looked up at Adam, who just shrugged and nodded. “Blood pressure was a little high last time. Make sure you keep an eye on that- I’m speaking from experience.”

“Sure,” Adam replied, hoping Ray wouldn’t go into a long personal story like he had last time, spending a five minute tangent on his own experience in Uzbekistan.

Ray didn’t, instead going back to the screen and reading their notes from the last visit. “So last time we talked about your job search. How is that going?”

Adam shifted in his seat a little. “Nothing yet,” Adam said looking down, ashamed. He felt awkward at stopping there, but didn’t know what more to say. He didn’t feel like mentioning the incident at the school interview.
“Really?” Ray said, surprised. “You have a college degree, don’t you?” He quickly glanced back at the computer screen.

“Yeah,” replied Adam self-consciously.

“In education it looks like. Have you applied to any schools?”

“Yeah, I did,” said Adam. “There’s not a lot of postings on the state’s website, considering the school year has started already.”

“Replies?”

“A couple.”

“Any interviews?”

“Yeah.” Replied Adam simply. Ray leaned forward, raised his eyebrows, and gave him a look that said ‘and??’ “It didn’t go so well.”

“Just a bad interview?”

“Not much of an interview at all,” Adam said, pausing at that point before going on. He didn’t want to tell Ray more, but knew it was the whole purpose of being here. “Well…” he started, pausing again briefly. “There was a fight on the playground before I went into the interview, and I stepped in for a grade-schooler getting triple teamed by high-schoolers.”

Ray looked curious. “How exactly did you step in?”

Adam looked down at his feet. “I threw them to the ground and pinned the biggest one down by his arm.”
Ray leaned back and fought hardly to resist the urge to roll his eyes. The word he wanted to say to Adam was *duh*, but he fought that back as well. After clearing his throat Ray asked, “Any other prospects?”

“No.”

“What about some of those places we discussed that have veterans preference?”

“Mainly a load of crap. Didn’t hear anything back from the truck manufacturer, probably because I didn’t have any mechanical experience, though I drove their trucks about a million miles in the Sandbox.”

“Try the Post Office?”

“You gotta start part time and on-call with no benefits, when they finally get to your name on the eligibility list.” He often thought he would love to be a Postal Carrier now. They work pretty independently, sorting the mail for their route and walking the block. They have solitude, they get outdoors, and they get exercise- what more could a person ask for?

Ray slid his glasses down and looked over them at Adam. “You making ends meet?”

“Yes,” he replied. “For a little while longer.”

The office was very small really, not feeling much bigger than a closet. Perhaps it was larger than it seemed, but everything in there was practically on top of the occupants. The shelves were above where they sat, so a book at the edge becomes a blunt force
trauma, and even a little troll doll gains the superiority of the dominant high-ground.

Somewhere out of sight a battery-powered clock thumped with every passing second.

Ray scribbled a couple things down on a piece of yellow note paper. “Remind me to give this to you before you go. I know the veterans rep down at the Department of Workforce Development. Name’s Marta. She might be able to point you in a couple directions as well.” Adam was looking at his knee with a glassy look in his eyes. “You do want to find a job, don’t you?”

Adam’s head jerked up quickly, confirming that he was listening and that he didn’t like what had been inferred. His eyes blackened and nearly hissed at Ray, just for a second, and his eyelids could have choked like a wood splitter’s hands if he willed it with a squint.

Ray sensed this and realized he may have crossed the line. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to insinuate that you don’t. Everybody wants to work. Your attention seemed to be wandering.”

Adam crossed his legs, putting his right ankle on his left knee. His fingers, his eyes, and his chest relaxed again, but as they did so they now seemed almost sad. Living off a life insurance payout and his savings felt like living off welfare to him, that he was now more of a liability than an asset to society. What was life insurance anyway? It was blood money, simply. Sure, it is there to help ease the burden without the deceased’s income, but when you broke it down to the base barter system, the ‘this for that,’ it was money for a life. Anything one spent the money on seemed stained, or seemed to carry
the baggage of guilt with it, as it should. Nothing enjoyable or fun should come from insurance money-- lest you forget who it came from and how it was procured. But wasn’t he trying to forget? Wasn’t selling the house they’d shared trying to forget? Or was it just morphine, something to just numb the pain? Being jobless only made things worse because then he was forced to use the money, and felt like a roadside scavenger feeding off her carcass. If Philly were alive, how would they be getting by? They wouldn’t. They’d be falling behind. But didn’t Adam have it easier now with Philly gone? It made her the burden- not him. And Adam wanted to work in the worst way. He wanted to keep his mind occupied, to have a task to fixate on and to lose track of time to. He needed a process to be a part of, something with an end product or a deadline or a production goal. He needed that morphine of being a cog in the machine.

“Just tired, I guess,” Adam said to Ray. “I don’t sleep well sometimes, and sometimes I just zone out.”

Ray scribbled on his note pad some more, then glanced up at Adam. “Have you still been having nightmares?”

Adam did nothing for the longest several seconds, thinking, looking somewhere else, until he nodded and said, “Yes.” He didn’t care about meanings like Ray seemed to. Not everything was a symbol. Some things needed to be taken at face value, and other things existed that were really never meant to be understood. It didn’t matter to him if drowning was really the feeling of losing control or red was anger and death or if n=9. Adam just wanted them gone. Out of his head. Out of his sleep. They had just barely
started digging into his dreams at the last appointment, or Ray did over Adam’s resistance, but he didn’t want Ray analyzing his dreams like some of the phony psychics on the TV infomercials.

“Do you still dream about…monsters?” Ray looked curious, but almost sounded condescending, like he was asking a child about the fear of the nonexistent creature under the bed.

“It’s not something make-believe,” Adam defended. “It’s like a…

“Dinosaur, like, you said?” Ray tried to clarify.

“It’s not like that,” Adam said feistily. “Not some goofy Godzilla or Jurassic Park T-Rex.”

“What then?” Ray asked.

“Well,” Adam started, not sure how to describe this thing he didn’t have a name for. He closed his eyes. “It’s a huge, dark, predatory…thing. Walks on two legs but with the greatest stealth you could imagine, like it’s always able to get behind you. It’s fast and can always find who it’s looking for. It’s breathe is nasty, like rotting meat and your wife’s perfume mixed together, and there is this pull to it like a rope guiding you into its mouth, an inescapable gravity, like you’re falling down a hole.”

“Hmmm,” Ray said. “Are other people there?”

“Yes,” Adam said, his eyes moving as if reading an invisible script on the wall. “And they’re the ones it gets, not me.”

“And have these other people been hurt before- I mean in real life?”
Adam thought about it, then nodded. He thought about who he usually saw. He thought about Philly and Martins and Grahams and his parents and…and that damn clock was now thumping louder and slower than ever before.

Thump.

Thuummp.

Thuuuuuummmppp.

An instinct sent a little jolt to Adam’s spine, a directive to run. Run! Or stop-hide! Raise the drawbridge! Close the blastdoors! Shields! Shields!

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Adam said.

“I think we’re getting at something,” Ray said. “I think I….”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Adam reiterated forcefully.

“Really,” Ray said persistently, and he scribbled a couple more things down on his tablet. There was a genuine look of disappointment on Ray’s face, and as Adam sensed it his trust in Ray significantly dropped. Partly it was a feeling that Ray should be trying to give Adam something and instead he was trying to take something away, something that Adam did not want to give. It was stealing, of sorts. And it was partly competitive. He didn’t want Ray thinking that he could figure out what was going on in his head, that Adam was some book he could just pick up and read and after two sessions have discovered its meanings and symbolisms. Adam resented the idea of being so simple. He was not a math equation or a puzzle or a Rubik’s Cube.
“Really,” Adam replied. “I need to get going,” Adam said without even consulting his watch. Ray looked at his computer clock and saw they still had fifteen minutes left, but he knew not to push it.

“Okay,” Ray agreed, “We can stop here today. Stop up front to set up another appointment.”

“Sure,” Adam said bluntly. He got up quickly and didn’t look Ray in the eyes, trying to exit the room without having to shake his hand. He was to the door before Ray could get up, escaping successfully, but to not be rude Adam paused before he was around the corner and said, “Thanks.” He did not wait for a reply.

Ray drummed his fingers together for a few seconds, then ripped off the sheet of paper and slid it into a temporary manila folder with Adam’s name on it. On the paper were written such phrases as: fear manifestation, afraid of forgetting, self-loathing.

Adam walked past the desk, then abruptly stopped. He had fully intended on walking right out, but now was having second thoughts. The waiting room was empty, and the man behind the desk clacked on a computer keyboard. Adam flip-flopped several times in his head with what he wanted to do, then finally walked up to the man.

“Another appointment with Ray, please.”

“Okay,” the man said, doing some clicking with the mouse, his eyes bouncing up and down as he scanned the screen. “How’s nine o’clock on October 22nd?”

“No,” Adam said dryly. “I don’t want to wait that long. What’s his next available?”
“That is his next available,” the man answered.

“That’s…” Adam did the calculating in his head, “That’s six weeks out.”

“Yes,” the man said matter-of-factly. “It’s usually at least four.”

Six weeks!? Adam turned again to look at the empty waiting room. What the fuck? Six weeks? How are people supposed to get better if they have to wait six weeks? He thought of who had been in the waiting room, the flannel man and the old coke bottle glasses man, and realized they were the norm, they were the regulars who filled up the slots because they had been coming for years and years, and in coming for so long they didn’t need to be seen too frequently, and if the patients didn’t need to be seen that frequently then there was no need for increased staff so that people could get quicker access. It was bureaucracy. It was government healthcare. It was the norm. It was just another thing that hadn’t been taken into account before the war was launched.

“Would you like that time, sir?” the man asked, trying to finish the task so he could go back to something else.

“No,” Adam said quietly. “No. I’ll call if I want to schedule something.”

Adam walked out feeling numb, feeling desensitized, feeling nameless. He didn’t know if this process was any good for him or not. He felt on high guard now, that he had lowered his walls too low and something had escaped, or that something had gotten in. It was a nervous feeling and he didn’t like it, so walls were up again with orders to stay up. But it was the end of the visit that bothered him the most. Even if people like Ray were trying to help, doing what they thought they knew what was best, they weren’t allowed to
provide the best care because they were so short staffed. Six weeks. What was the point then?

He drove home under a fog that blurred colors and details, and cast large shadows on everything. When he got home he lay down on the living room couch and stared at the ceiling for a long time. When he fell asleep he was back in the Humvee on an escort mission from Camp Victory to the Green Zone, escorting the civilian fuel tankers from Kellogg, Brown, and Root. Adam was manning the gun for that mission, and everything was zipping past around him. Cars, palm trees, dogs- everything was running in the opposite direction. They were racing to Baghdad, he could sense that. It was urgent, urgent to get there fast, urgent to outrun something. The highway entered the city and still they moved faster than they had ever driven Route Irish. They needed to. The white cabbed semis took the gentle curves fast but nimbly, never slowing down at all. The road rose slightly, then dipped. Adam’s heart beat hard- they weren’t going fast enough, they were in the wrong spot. Something was moving beside them, parallel with them. The road rose again, and he could see a divided four lane highway that ran parallel with them for a short bit but up ahead would cross under their highway as they took a short bridge.

It was there.

It was running that highway beside them, with its eyes and the ridge of its back visible like the wake of a torpedo, and it was looking at them, looking at Adam. It knew him. How could something so large move so fast? Great reptilian strides pushed it along effortlessly, and the curve of its jaw, with several teeth protruding over its bottom lip,
produced a facial feature like an anxious smile. It looked ahead at the overpass, then looked back at the convoy and maintained its speed. It was on an intercept course for the bridge. No, it was on a collision course with the middle of the convoy, in front of Adam. Adam screamed down into the Humvee about getting them off the bridge, but no one was at the radio. With seconds to impact now, the dinosaur put its head down to ram the bridge. Adam tried to squeeze off some rounds on the .50 cal at it, but they fell in front of it, and as he adjusted his fire on it the beast slammed into the bridge. Adam screamed for them to stop and the Humvee started braking and skidding, and then a brilliant light followed by a massive shockwave that struck Adam like a body slap.
The military convoy slowly rolled out of the gate Camp Victory. It had taken the convoy commander longer than it should to show the guard the trip manifest and give a head and vehicle count. Usually it was more of a rolling stop, a wham-bam-thank you, man type of check. Adam was annoyed but not concerned. SSG Sabinus up in the front had done many convoys and would relay anything pertinent to them. Shit, he was probably small talking while everyone else backed up behind him wanted to get on the road so they could get to the Green Zone and get home.

They started weaving through the concrete barricades one by one, and when Adam’s Humvee cleared the gate and entered the protective maze he loaded the .50 caliber machine gun by pulling the slide handle back and riding it forward, pulling it back again and releasing it. He patted the long weapon on top, and stroked it behind the trigger similar to the way one would scratch behind a dog’s ear. This was, after all, his best friend, so why not remind it with a little love. He was a little uneasy being in the tail vehicle and covering the rear of the column. His was one of the few weapons, and set of eyes for that matter, that were looking backwards, making it a great responsibility. Not only that, but he had a fear that if something happened to their vehicle, the rest of the convoy could go on without noticing. They had argued that with the Warlock jamming
system they should be in the middle of the convoy so the device could project a protective radius around the entire convoy, but the new officer in charge either didn’t understand the concept or didn’t care, and assigned them to the rear. Sabinus didn’t understand it either and didn’t put up an argument on where in line the jamming machine should be, so they remained in the rear.

“Watch your mirrors,” Adam told the driver of the truck ahead of theirs, jumping up to his window to get face to face. A white civilian KBR semi-trailer preceded them in the convoy, driven by a short, dark man named Buck Sanders from Louisiana. “If something happens to us, you call your other truckers or honk your horn and flash your lights to the rest of the convoy in front of you.” The man had nodded vehemently and gave a thumbs-up, but for some reason Adam doubted that the man had understood the circumstances to which he was referring, and also doubted that all the lights or horn worked on the beat-up Mercedes truck which this cherry driver had inherited. The man was sweating profusely already for eight a.m., so he was either very nervous, unacclimated to the weather, or both. A stroke would kill him before a bullet. When Adam got back to his own truck he told the driver and radio operator, “Keep good commo with gun truck two.”

“Always do, Boss,” replied SPC Martins, who was manning the radio today. “You think he will watch us?” His grin conveyed he knew the answer to his own question.
Adam shook his head. “Watch us, sure, ’cause we’re covering his ass. But if we take fire, he’s gone.”

SPC Brinks, from the driver’s seat, tried to do his best western impersonation, a blending of Clint Eastwood and John Wayne. “Dying ain’t much of a living, son.” He laughed his energetic, crazy laugh, then in his own voice added, “Shit, it ain’t like every insurgent wants to blow up the gas tanker he’s driving. Just body armor, a helmet, and a Motorola radio. You think that’s worth the six figures he’s making?”

“Can’t be that much,” Adam disagreed.

“Has to be,” Brinks argued. The security guys are making upper five figures, so driving has to be riskier than that. I tell you man, Kellogg, Brown, and Root is the way to go to war. Tax free, you know.”

“You mercenaries,” Adam said shaking his head as he had climbed up the hood of the Humvee and into the gunner’s hatch on top.

Brinks slowly guided the vehicle through the obstacles, weaving sharply around them. Martins called Sabinus on the Sincgars radio.

“Bonesaw 6, this is Razorback.”

“Go ahead, Razorback” came the crackling reply.

“Bonesaw 6,” Martins spoke into the handset shaped like a small phone, “Razorback has cleared the gate.”

“--od copy, Razorback,” replied Sabinus, “Race you to the Green Zone.”

Brinks and Martins looked at each other.
Brinks accelerated after clearing the last barricade to catch up with the gas truck, which couldn’t accelerate too quickly. Adam grasped the handles of the .50 cal, leaned back, and pushed with his legs to swing the weapon around to the rear sector. Although the rear was his main priority, he would be constantly rotating the muzzle around to cover areas where an enemy could fire from or try to ram them from. He broke into a Willie Nelson tribute that would have sent him to his grave with the recently deceased Johnny Cash.

“On the road again. Can’t wait to get on the road again…”

Adam could see the front of the convoy curving on the overpass and beginning to descend and merge with the highway east. This was the first of many possible choke points on the route, but it was always empty this close to the base. He hated this road, and not just because it was one of the heaviest booby-trapped routes in Iraq, but because traffic could be tight, especially going right into Baghdad, and the local people drove recklessly. Not as bad as the rich Kuwaitis, but close. Some drove slow in any lane; some drove fast and passed on the shoulder of the road, like the Kuwaitis did, except here it was usually just dirt or sand. Most of all Adam hated the cars on the shoulders that crepted toward them against traffic, which even without a trunk full of explosives seemed like a suicidal way to drive.

“Take me places that George Bush ain’t never been…”

The lead Humvee was slowly merging with traffic, the gunner, Innes, using arm signals and the muzzle of his mounted M249 automatic weapon to force civilian cars to
shift lanes. That weapon fired the same size rounds as their M-16s, a 5.56 mm bullet, which despite a large rate of fire greatly lacked the stopping power of the .50 cal. Adam was so pleased that they had it. The radio crackled.

“Bonesaw has cleared the on-ramp.”

Adam pivoted in the turret slowly as the truck descended the curve. No traffic yet, and they got several miles under a series of overpasses until there were civilian cars. One old, white cab with orange corner panels drove fast but pulled off the road quickly and almost came to a complete stop when it saw the military vehicles closing behind it.

“I just can’t wait to get back on the road again.”

The wind pushed at Adam’s back as the vehicles picked up speed, but between the bracing of his legs and the heavy Kevlar body armor and helmet it couldn’t move him much from his stable position. The breeze felt good on his neck and cheeks, the only skin exposed to air. They had recently been given the Kevlar plated Interceptor vest to replace the useless flak jackets they’d had since deploying, and the plates felt heavy over his chest and back, but in a good way. Finally they were wearing something that had a chance of stopping a bullet, the same equipment most of their active duty counterparts had been wearing all along. The tradeoff for better protection was bulk, weight, and heat retention, so they would have to monitor their heat injury potential. Black leather gloves clad his hands. Adam’s eyes were protected from shrapnel and flying debris by tinted ballistic goggles.
The convoy slowly crawled up to 55 miles per hour, as fast as the old gas tankers were going to go. Traffic was thin, so they could take the middle of the three lanes for most of the way, staying clear from the sides of the road except when traffic dictated picking one. They swept past most of the old vehicles on the highway, old white taxi sedans with orange corner panels, or small white Japanese Nissan or Toyota trucks, all pulling to the side lanes so the fast moving convoy could pass. Some drivers waved noncommittally and smiled, or simply nodded acknowledgement. Some scowled or glared. A few did not look at all.

The grey and tan brick buildings, apartments and homes, sprung up on the left or north side shortly after they left the gate. These were low buildings and setback pretty far from the road, and so had never been much concern to the convoys. But immediately after the ramps for Highway 1 or MSR Tampa, the north-south major highway, buildings surrounded both sides of the road, sparsely and openly at first but gradually becoming denser. Claustrophobia could settle like a fog, giving a tightness from the feeling that the artificial walls of safety had quickly narrowed, and at the same time a tininess from not only being looked in on but being looked down upon. You were trying to speed through a straw without touching the sides. It partly reminded Adam of entering Milwaukee, of houses that were mismatched and patch worked together, a mixture of carelessness and futility, but these were less colorful, limited to earthy tones. Perhaps it was practical decorating, but he couldn’t help but think of them as dirty colors. People who either didn’t care or were desperate were people to be wary of.
It was a good day—bright, sunny, hot but still dry so far; Adam stayed cooler in the turret than the others. He kept the .50 cal Ma Deuce swinging left and right, never resting in one spot. He covered the high ground, the ramps, the buildings, and the overpasses. Even if there was no threat there, he wanted to give the perception that he was actively looking for areas where trouble could come from, discouraging a would-be attacker by appearing ready and looking anxious for a fight. Maybe the wind was invigorating him or maybe anxiety had him amped up, but Adam felt energized and good. A motorcyclist wearing a backpack sped past on the right side and pulled in between two of the trucks. The middle gun truck fell back and pulled right in front of it, its gunner bearing his M249 SAW on the rider. The unhelmeted rider pulled out to the right again and fell back as the convoy passed him. Adam watched as he fell further back and pulled off to the side of the road, keeping the .50 cal pointed in his direction but canted up. One round would disable the motorcycle or instantly kill the rider. Any weapon garnered respect, and the larger the weapon, the greater the respect. Adam watched the stationary rider recede into the distance, watched the man dig into his pockets, pull something out and put it to his face. Adam’s good spirits sank into dread. He stamped his foot to get attention from the soldiers below.

“Call everyone and tell them to stay alert,” Adam yelled as loud as he could to Martins against the wind and the loud droning of the diesel engine at high speed. The young Specialist grabbed the mike and nodded in acknowledgement, his eyes looking for
more information. “That biker just got on a cell phone!” Martins flashed a thumbs-up and got on the radio.

They passed a blackened frame of a destroyed car off the shoulder of the road, like a rotting animal road-kill at home that the Department of Natural Resources had stopped removing years ago. This rusting auto carcass was thoroughly scavenged down to the bone, devoid of doors or glass or upholstery or human meat. Road kill. Adam sometimes wondered if these were left on the road as reminders to stay alert, cautions against complacency. Perhaps the insurgency, and even the general populace, preferred them as visible reminders to the Americans as to what their fate could be. Road kill. People will naturally avoid a living animal on the road, but once it is dead they will ignore it or even think nothing of driving over it. Would a human body lying there really be that different?

They were now just miles from the American controlled Green Zone, and Adam was edgy. The convoy could never be moving fast enough for him now- it was slow, frighteningly slow, vulnerably slow. The old KBR trucks were at maximum speed, and that limited the rest of the convoy. His perception of time, and safety, had changed. Things that had been blurring past him before were now frighteningly clear. A soccer ball motionless in midair. Spit suspended on its course to the ground as a passerby expressed his disgust. Cigarette smoke, expelled from a man’s lips, coalesced into a drifting stream of black frustration and weariness. It was too much to comprehend. Every muscle in Adam’s body tensed and ached, every cell was tired and yet jittery,
sensing that premonition in his gut and his brain. Exhaustive hyperawareness. When he got back to camp all he would want to do is eat and go to bed.

Off to the north side something caught his eye. Movement along the rooftops, a head ducking and bobbing up. It was a bearded man, maybe middle aged, with binoculars. He looked at them, looked ahead, looked at them again. He talked into a cell phone.

“Something’s not right!” Adam yelled down to his crew. “Spotter – rooftop – ten o’clock!” He wished the rules of engagement allowed him to light up that rooftop, wished the man would pull out a weapon to justify killing him. But binoculars and a phone are not a direct threat: maybe the man was a birdwatcher; maybe he was curious about the Americans. And just maybe he wasn’t really up to something malicious.

Adam quickly spun counterclockwise to check his sectors at the rear, but saw nothing. He trained the Ma Deuce on the man as they passed him, and the binoculars continued to follow the convoy. Something was coming up. Adam spun forward and began scanning the surroundings from pavement on up for anything suspicious, anything buried or that had a wire sticking out of it. When he wanted slow-motion perception he could not have it, and fine details were hard to focus on. Scanning was superficial and quick, because so much area had to be covered quickly and new threat domains did not cease to speed at them. They were approaching a bridge, an opportune choke point for the enemy. The highway was coming up a slight hill, with the right side becoming open to view a road running parallel. It sloped back down, curved left and then came up and
curved right to cross that road which went underneath it. Light traffic was moving on the parallel road. Adam tried to see the guy on the rooftop again, but all he could make out was that the man was still there. He was too far away to be a triggerman. The movement of two SUVs on that road caught Adam’s attention. They were old and off-white, probably four door Nissans, but their bodies hung very low and heavy for their usual road clearance. One took a pothole and the bottom sparked against the asphalt. They lumbered forward, working hard for their speed, harder than vehicles carrying only two passengers should have to work. Traveling in a line, they split and went to opposite sides of the road, accelerating as best they could. The closer one had two occupants; the passenger had a phone and was pointing at the bridge, and the driver had his head out the window, pacing the convoy as it began to cross the bridge.

Adam went cold in the eternal moment of realization that he was witnessing death approaching, that he was seeing not only its biological form but its kinesiology. A person can die from a bullet or even a bomb and be dead before the mind realizes it. Or a bullet can come out of nowhere and pass through one’s head, leaving a split instant in the limbo between worlds to assess that the mortal transition had just happened. But here, Adam saw it approaching.

“The bridge!” he yelled, and swung the .50 cal to the right side and began to align it on the lead truck, when the highway dipped back down slightly and Adam could no longer see the other road or the trucks on an intercept course.
“Shit!” Adam swore. “The BRIDGE!” he yelled down to Martins. “Get them OFF the bridge! Get off the BRIDGE!”

After he yelled it, the world seemed to go silent. They began to take the slight rise in the highway before the curve into the bridge, but the rest of the convoy was past that already. The lead Humvee with Sabinus was already in the middle of the bridge. There were two fuel trucks behind them, spaced too close, one just on the bridge and the other to enter shortly. The middle Humvee was fast approaching the bridge, with the other two fuel trucks between them and Adam’s. As his elevation increased, Adam began to be able to see parts of the corresponding road that was beginning to dip under the bridge. He sprung the .50 to life, firing in the approximate spot he guessed the SUVs would be, striking well above anything and pocking holes in the cement on the opposite side. He depressed the trigger loosely with his thumbs but gripped the handles tight, feeling the kickback rock the Humvee slightly. Brass links and shell casings dropped onto the top of the Humvee and down into the turret like metallic rain. His vantage point slowly increased so that he could lower his fire, but it wasn’t going to be in time.

With the warning on the radios and with Adam’s fire, the convoy was now aware of the car bomb attack under way, with the lead Humvee and the trucks behind it scrambling to get off the bridge as fast as they could. Sabinus’s gunner, SPC Innes, was just bringing his .50 cal to bear on the trucks below and was able to only get a couple rounds off before his line of fire was obstructed by bridge itself and its railing. The middle Humvee had come to a screeching halt and found itself a quarter way on the
bridge, with the two trucks behind it locking their breaks and trying not to jackknife and run into the Humvee. Their gunner immediately focused on getting those trucks out of their way and moving backwards so not to be stuck exposed on the bridge. One fueler had jackknifed into the far railing along the north side and couldn’t back up, but the one behind it had stopped quickly enough. The gunner was pointing frantically backwards and screaming, “Go, go, go!” The driver had it moving in reverse and the gunner realized he could be firing back also, so he flipped the safety off the M249 SAW on his turret and began unleashing 5.56 rounds on the closest things he could see on the road beneath him.

Adam finally felt the heavy braking of his own Humvee as Brinks tried to get it stopped without flipping it over. He dropped lower and tried to straighten his legs as best he could to fight the momentum, holding on now to the hatch and hoping the flaccid .50 cal would not swing around and hit him in the face. He had kicked the backs of Martins’ and Brinks’ seats, but they were holding on for dear life themselves. The radio mike whipped into the front window but somehow didn’t break, and Martins’ M-16, which had been muzzled out the window, fell to the floor.

There was that moment then when everyone lost sight of the approaching SUVs burdened with explosives. Their own weight seemed to have driven them down, down, down, into the ground, under the pavement. Adam’s mind thought of a fast moving dorsal fin receding under the water, the moment when the shark was going under your boat and all you could do was expect the great upheaval of hell in mere moments.

*Come on down and chum some of this shit.*
Adam dropped onto his seat, into the Humvee, and covered his head with his arms. The others two did likewise.

The flash and concussion hit everyone first, an upward eruption that then moved sideways too, rocking all vehicles, at least all that had been lucky enough to be far enough away. The loudest boom any of them had ever heard ran searing blades of pain through their ears followed by a deafness that made them question their mental faculties and the ability to command their own voices without confirmation the order was received. Their heads hurt. Their eyes hurt. Their teeth hurt. Their knees hurt. A wall of dust and smoke and debris slammed everything, at least that’s what they felt and saw. Concrete, metal, rocks, sod, paper, burning tire, and unidentifiable fabric rained on them, horizontally at first but then gradually from above. Adam checked himself, felt everywhere, squeezed tissue, moved joints, looked for blood just in case another of his senses had left him for some reason. Everything thing worked, everything responded. He touched Brinks and Martins, and they responded with useless mouth gesturing at first, and then just a thumbs-up. Brinks’ face had struck the side window and his left nostril bled, which he wiped several times and then ignored.

Adam stood up in the turret and the other two opened their doors to survey the damage. The bridge was no more. Some of the concrete had been blown upward and outward by the blast, and some of the thick chunks were just too heavy to be thrown very far, so they have traveled up a short distance and them came down and crushed everything below. What those types of explosions cannot project, they crack, crumble,
and implode. One quarter of the bridge was in an intact piece in the middle of the lower road, sitting upon other rubble and some automotive scraps. There were no real signs of the original SUVs, just gaping, bowl-shaped craters. The convoy’s lead Humvee, Sabinus’, sat motionless on the other side of the chasm; its gunner lay face down on the roof, either wounded or unconscious. One fuel tanker was also on the other side, undamaged, its driver stumbling around. The two tankers near the tail of the convoy were still on this side of the bridge - the one that had jackknifed was briskly aflame, while the other had been able to get further away from both the initial detonation and the subsequent explosion of the other tanker had not have blown but appeared to have some exterior damage from flying debris. No leaks in the tank were apparent, but that was no guarantee.

“Martins! Brinks!” Adam called, “Find those tanker drivers!”

Their hearing must have been returning for his two soldiers grabbed their weapons and each started sprinting towards a different tanker. The yell had hurt his own ears but he had been able to make out his own voice relatively clearly now. Adam swung the .50 cal away from the scene to provide outward security and to continue surveying the scene. Martins headed for the burning truck, running to the driver’s side but being repulsed by the intense heat being given off from the flames and the fuel that had been flung a good distance and burnt on the ground. He could see no signs of a human being anywhere inside or out, and doubted any such proof would be found. Brinks had dashed to the intact tanker and found the driver, Buck Sanders, on the ground shaking and
crying. His forehead and the right leg of his jeans were bloodied but neither appeared to
be bleeding heavily or to have any major breaks. He was repeating to himself, “Oh
my…oh my fucking Lord…” Brinks began to help him up and Martins was beside him
because there was no one left for him to find, and together they carried him under the
armpits back to their Humvee.

While they had done that, Adam believed he had located the tanker that had been
on the bridge when the truck bombs exploded, another hundred meters north of them on
the road that had cut under the bridge. A large fire raged there with a collapsing metal
skeleton in the middle, melting and hissing, with a trail of flame leading from the bridge.
The plume of smoke drew his attention to the wreckage, starting low as a black wall but
spreading out as it rose, then scattering, dispersing, settling, and obscuring so that the
visibility of the entire area was decreasing from the gray-out. The smoke from the closest
tanker danced in a circular, corkscrew pattern up and then drifted across the highway,
making it harder to see the other side.

But where was the other Humvee?

Martins and Brinks had the tanker driver back by their vehicle, the man panting
heavily.

“Was Gun Truck 2 over there?” Adam asked them. It had been trying to get off
the bridge at the time of the explosion. Again the yell hurt his ears and head. He had not
realized that all this time their own truck had still been running and they were yelling
over its idling engine noise as well.
“No,” Martins answered for both of them. “It was not by the tankers.”

“There it is,” Brinks called out. They followed his arm and finger, not across, not out, but down. Down on the lower road, following a skid trail down the embankment that looked like there had been several rollovers, the other Humvee lay on its roof. Its position had been difficult to see at first through the thickening smoke, but they had not expected to find it down there. It was motionless except for the back tires which continued to spin in reverse. The gunner appeared have been thrown from the rollovers and he lay on the embankment. Another soldier lay on his side on the pavement with what looked like a misaligned lower leg. The other two had to be in the truck still.

Adam looked across the highway at Sabinus, and saw the SSG out of his Humvee and also looking down at the vehicle below. His gunner was upright, coming to his senses.

In the distance, in the direction of Camp Victory and Baghdad International Airport, there was a series of booms.

Several sharp snaps broke the air. Adam’s first thought was that a vehicle, perhaps theirs, was backfiring and another was beginning to explode. Then his brain registered its familiarity, and another snap burned his arm.

It came from the highway behind them. Two men in black pants, shirts, and scarves across their faces, carrying AK-47s, had jumped the guardrail and were running towards them. The larger one had a Rocket Propelled Grenade launcher strapped across his back.
Martins, Brinks, and the civilian driver ducked behind the backside of the Humvee. Adam squeezed off bursts that made the attackers hit the dirt but he missed widely. He cussed. His arms were tense and shaky. The attackers were splitting up and heading to different sides of the road. Adam squeezed another burst at the closer man but felt his thumbs grasp tight, so his shots were behind the running man, who dove to safety behind a concrete barrier. Brinks took a kneeling position behind the front corner of the Humvee and began returning fire. Martins was on the radio trying to reach the Humvee on the other side but everyone soon heard its .50 cal come to life, as well as M-16s. They were repelling an attack from five masked assailants. Adam only had time to glance, and saw muzzle flashes. He watched the two spots where his own attackers had disappeared.

“Banks,” Martins screamed, taking a prone position and beginning to fire down the hill, “the wounded are being attacked!”

A green sedan with three men in it had pulled up on the lower road. One had started firing at Martins and their Humvee immediately, while the other two began rushing at the Americans lying on the road and in their motionless upside-down truck. Adam began to swing around and Brinks hollered that he had this direction covered, and just in time he saw an insurgent unload a magazine of rounds into the motionless body of the gunner lying on the embankment from twenty feet away.

“Dammit!” Adam cursed. “Dammit!

Martins saw it too. “Motha! Fucka!” He shifted his rifle left at the exposed gunman who just realized he was standing in the open. Martins had a good position to be
able to take good aim at the man, and squeezed off a series of shots that dropped the man as he tried to run for cover behind the sedan. One insurgent was firing at them from behind the sedan while the other was trying to move up and shoot the soldiers in the overturned Humvee. Martins’ fire had forced that one to retreat behind the sedan, and now Adam had them in his sights. The insurgent who had been shooting at them was pulling an RPG out of the car.

“Dammit,” Adam said almost to himself. “Damn yous. Dammit.” He exhaled long and looked straight at where he wanted to shoot. Then he depressed his thumbs on the trigger, held them there, and swept the car with fire.

He started at the back seat where the insurgent had the RPG out and was trying to shut the door to get it out of the way. He aimed for the passenger side, and his rounds easily punched through the glass and the thin car door like paper, violently jerking the man’s body as rounds exited him and ricocheted off the concrete behind him. Adam kept firing and dragged the tongue of death forward to where the other man was now crouching low behind the front of the car, almost trying to get under it. It didn’t matter. Not one bit. Adam directed rounds through the middle of the hood, directly into the engine, where they tore it up, sparking underneath. He elevated his fire towards the far passenger side and continued to damn them to hell. The car collapsed, the tire blew out, the whole wheel blew away and he never saw any more movement from that area again. Surprisingly the car had not ignited yet, so he swept his line of fire back to the gas tank
and heard it explode in an unimpressive *poof* like a gas grill igniting. At this he released his thumbs.

Better not melt the barrel, I guess, he thought.

Adam had not even noticed that Brinks had been sporadically returning fire in the opposite direction, keeping the other two men somewhat pinned down, at least enough that they weren’t able to take any shots at Adam’s exposed back. He realized how vulnerable he had been. He swung around one hundred eighty degrees. Martins watched and covered the lower road in case more insurgents appeared.

“They’ve been moving up,” Brinks yelled.

The concrete dividers had given the insurgents a covered route to advance to almost 50 meters away from them, but then it came to an abrupt and open stop, so they would either have to stay put or come out into the open. Adam saw the end of a long cylinder pop up and down behind the one on the right.

“Hajji’s got an RPG!” Adam yelled.

Fire came from the left, striking the Humvee, punching holes in its thin metal skin except for the Kevlar doors, and some bullets cracked in the air to Adam’s left. He jumped a little, and cursed that the government had not given him any armor shielding. Brinks returned fire in that direction, but the insurgent was already behind the concrete barrier again.

Then the man on the right popped up and shakily fired the Rocket Propelled Grenade. It should have been an easy shot, a death blow to the Americans, at such a
short distance, even with how unreliable that weapon could be. But nerves account for so much too, and he was firing as he was still rising, unsteadily, so the easy kickback almost knocked him over. Adam and Brinks saw it being fired, saw the slow projectile traveling towards them, and ducked low behind and inside their Humvee. Adam could see its trajectory through the windows, and doubted that they were thick enough to protect him. He wanted to close his eyes and yet wanted to watch. He watched. Watched it sail high and wide, and with great excitement and anger and jubilation he jumped to his feet again and trained the .50 cal on where the shot had come from.

“I got the right!” Adam called to Brinks.

“Roger, dat,” Brinks replied. “I got the left.”

The insurgent had to be loading another RPG round. Adam stood poised to fire, twitching his thumbs. He would aim low and work his way up if necessary, that way using ricochets to his advantage and at least getting a gut shot maybe.

The man on the left scooted out the front into a kneeling position, trying to raise and steady his AK-47, and Brinks planted several rounds in his upper chest. The insurgent on the right popped his head over the barrier, likely hoping he would have cover fire, and swung his launcher over it to fire from a kneeling supported position. Adam blinked, a reflex he felt could have gotten him killed, and depressed the trigger. A five round burst raced from one man to the other, and Adam’s aim would have been a gut shot, had the man not been kneeling.
One bullet took his head off like an overripe tomato on a baseball tee, one second there and just gone the next. Not bunted short or grounded out or lying next to the tee, just gone, with tomato pulp everywhere. The corpse simply dropped.

Brinks looped around the back of their Humvee and moved up, verifying that the man on the left was indeed dead. He crossed the highway to the other insurgent and stopped as short as he needed to. No doubt he was dead. Martins stood up. All of them lowered their weapons and realized how heavy they were breathing. The truck driver, who they had forgotten completely about, had laid curled up in the Humvee behind the plated doors and now stuck his head out a door. Adam looked across the chasm and saw two soldiers from Sabinus’ vehicle making their way down to the Humvee below. They had repelled their ambush without casualties either. Bonesaw Six was on the radio, finishing up a request for reinforcements and a medical evacuation helicopter. When he finished he looked across the divide to Razorback.

“Razorback, this is Bonesaw Six, come in.”

Martins called back, “Go ahead Bonesaw.”

There was a short silence as everyone just looked at each other across the opening that seemed like the Grand Canyon. The Convoy Commander seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Go ahead Bonesaw Six,” Martins repeated.

Again a pause. Finally the radio asked, “You guys alright over there?”
Martins looked at the other two. Brinks had his helmet off and swigged water thirstily from his canteen, then dumped some over his head and face. Adam had sat down on the Humvee roof with his arms in his lap; he watched his hands twitch uncontrollably. Slowly Martins brought the mike back up to his mouth.

“We are not injured,” he finally said. “But there are casualties.”

There was no reply over the radio, just a visible head nod from a long ways away.

An Apache began to circle, preceding the Blackhawk which arrived shortly and found a spot to set down on the lower road since that was where the living casualties were, two of the soldiers. Two soldiers and two civilian drivers were dead, and two fuel trucks and a Humvee had been destroyed. On both sides Humvee gun trucks began arriving, and the rumble of tracked vehicles en route nearby could be felt.

Brinks went over to Martins and each looked at each other over without words. Mutual survival needed no other acknowledgment. Then Brinks gave him a heavy, unexpected chest bump.

“Can you feel that?” Brinks yelled with a wicked smile.

Martins returned the smile, knowing what he was referring to and yet not exactly what he meant. Brinks chest bumped him again, harder.

“Oh ah ah ah ah,” Brinks put his head back and howled, then began to bob his head to a melody. “Oh ah ah ah!” he howled again.

Martins recognized it now too, and got his head in rhythm with Brinks. Then together they let out two guttural barks. They headbanged in unison and then let out the
guttural barks again. Adam smiled, recognizing the song now, and watched them break
into the lyrics of Disturbed. He felt that inside too, that savage exuberance at being alive
after going tooth to tooth with another dog, that he should be licking his mouth and
wiping his chin. But there was something else. Something nagging at him, or poking at
him.

_Soldier Boy…_

The old, high-pitched voice called to him from somewhere deep inside.

Fuck you, he said back to it.

_Oh, my little Soldier Boy…_

Shut the fuck up!

And it did. Adam spat and slammed his fist against the roof. Fuck you, he said
one more time for good measure. It was all quiet, so he started looking for something to
wipe his face with and for something to eat. He was famished, though it was probably
still plenty before noon. The sun was very hot.

They drove back to Camp Victory with several other Humvees, and the surviving
fuel truck too. A bullet had punctured their left rear tire, not making it undrivable but
making them drive slower on it. When they reached the gate of Camp Victory, Adam
squatted down inside the vehicle. Against the intense midday sun one could easily see
from the inside the holes punched in the back and side of the truck’s thin metal, the dust
dancing in bright streams of light. It was laughable now, the amount of protection that
they actually had. Just laughable. The Warlock had not been damaged at all, thankfully, so Adam switched its power off.

As they entered the barricades the men looked for their familiar comrades from 3rd ID sitting on their Bradley at the linebacker position. They didn’t want any lip from those guys today. It was a different crew, strangers, who saw what they looked like and just nodded.

“Glad I don’t have to see those assholes,” Brinks muttered.

Once inside the gate the convoy came upon an M88 tracked recovery vehicle sitting with a damaged Bradley. The monstrous armored shoebox was the size of a tank, with a small crane on the back, and was used to recover the heavy tracked fighting vehicles when they became disabled. This Bradley had been hit outside the gate by an IED which had been made from large artillery rounds and buried in an area where the pavement transitioned into dirt and sand. The Bradley had left its position at the gate to reinforce some soldiers in a heavy firefight just down the road. This had been one of the blasts the crew had heard after their own attack. This was the Bradley crew that usually greeted them at the gate. Only two of them were there, sitting on the gun turret and looking downtrodden and exhausted. The vehicle’s front left corner was mangled, blackened, and crumpled, with the track snapped and several of the wheels missing. There was a red stain on the outside of the drivers hatch.

The two crews just stared at each other as the Humvee drove past, without animosity, without feeling, without pity for each other. No waves or grins or salutes were
exchanged. Just stares, transfixed with each other, knowing that what they saw was the closest thing to what they themselves looked like.

“We’re gonna need a bigger boat,” Adam said in a dry, vacant, and humorless manner. He wanted to call Philly.
Adam sat on his cot, awaiting the decision of several officers in his chain of command that were discussing his situation, and feeling the numbest he had ever felt. The term numb sounded inadequate, because he was completely without feeling. Physically, mentally, and emotionally- he had stumbled into a place devoid of all pain, sadness, anger, or misery- not to mention the absence of any good feelings as well. He was numb, and yet there was a mental clarity that came from the freedom from the clouds of emotions. He wondered if he had reached some incomprehensible plane of existence where only objectivity existed.

It was a unique situation, to say the least, especially when he made the most unorthodox request that any of them had ever heard of. His convoy had gotten back to camp a little before noon, and as he had been instructed to do Adam went directly to the operations tent. A number of people were waiting there for him: Lieutenant Jason Riggons, his platoon leader, a decent and wiry man who came up through ROTC so was about the same age as Adam; Captain Brendon Willis, a man who was neither greatly liked or disliked and talked with a nasal whistle, and who Adam rarely saw and preferred to avoid; Chaplain Harry Sweeney, a middle-aged redhead, trim and serious, attached to the battalion, who usually maxed the physical fitness test; and Lieutenant Colonel Mark
Timmons, the battalion commander. It was unusual for a battalion commander to be present at such a meeting, but Timmons had encountered Adam on several occasions so was familiar with him as one of his soldiers. He also decided to come in because he was concerned about the nature of the Red Cross message which had been relayed to him from the company commander. He was concerned about the content of the message, on its impact it would have on the soldier and on the response which might be necessary in order to make things right for the soldier. If decisions needed to be made he wanted to be there to make them on the spot, to be able to call his chain of command for resources immediately or to implement other action to assist within his own command. His presence was influenced too by the fact that the battalion headquarters was also on the BIAP/Camp Victory complex and he did not have to risk travel any Iraqi roads to get here.

The day had proceeded as Adam had expected and feared. After reporting to operations, he was taken into Captain Willis’ tent with the assembled group of officers for privacy. Adam felt even more uneasy because of the overwhelming outnumbering of the brass to a single enlisted soldier, something one might expect for some type of serious conduct investigation or ass chewing rather than for a Red Cross message. Adam was offered a seat on an actual metal folding chair within a semicircle of them that had been arranged for the group. Then Chaplain Sweeney addressed Adam and gave him one of the messages he had been expecting since he’d had a day to think about all the possibilities a Red Cross message could contain.
“I got a bit of bad news for you son,” Sweeney prefaced and paused.

Adam stared at the dirt and the soft asphalt road that was served as the floor for the tent, and waited expressionlessly for him to continue. It almost seemed like Sweeney’s pause was more for theatrical effect rather than word selection.

“Our wife,” he continued, “See, there was an accident at home. She tumbled from the steps and hit her head pretty good. Fractures of the skull and internal bleeding. She lay there for some time, see, before she was found, so the damage was good when help got to her. So I’m saying son, see, we lost her.” The Chaplain fidgeted with his hands and his Bible some, probably feeling paternally that he should put a hand on Adam’s knee or shoulder, but like the Casualty Notification Officer who relayed soldier deaths to their immediate family, he was trained not to touch the person when breaking the news.

The semicircle of officers sat there quietly and looked at Adam, watching him take in and process the news. They tried not to stare, tried not to make him the campfire they were huddled around and waiting to get hot enough to roast marshmallows, but to Adam their presence felt more like a hundred feet away. He had put his two hands together at the fingertips, touching only at those points, creating a vaulted space within that pointed heavenward, cathedral-like. He tapped this against his chin, sometimes pressing those fingertips against his lips, but at no time did the palms press together or the fingers slide down and intertwine. He slid his jaw from side to side, a mannerism that when combined with his long gazes could make a cow seem thoughtful. His eyes moved
back and forth along the dirt and asphalt, sometimes sweeping slowly like he was reading a sentence, and sometimes darting like he was watching a ping pong match.

He had been prepared for the pierce of the message, for the worst outcome, and had practiced receiving it hundreds of times in his head. It was the details which he could not have anticipated before. The back steps. She had fallen down the back steps. There were only three steps on that concrete stoop but they were taller than an average step. If a person went tumbling head-over-heels from the top it would be like falling off a ladder, and landing on the head would certainly be quite a blow. She hadn’t been crushed in a car wreck or shot in a mugging or stabbed during an assault or choked as she ate alone, she had simply fallen down the steps.

Then she laid there for some time.

That was the part that began to trouble Adam some, the thought of Philly lying on the concrete, probably facedown and spread-eagle. If he had been home, would he have been working that day, substitute teaching while he looked for a fulltime position, or would he have been home? Would he have not found a teaching job and taken a third shift factory position to come home and find her there for just a couple minutes? Would he have emailed her at work, and in not getting a reply tried calling her, only to be told that she had not come into work, and then he could have tried calling her, and when that failed he could have come home to check on her? At least there would have been a chance.
Adam’s entire body felt restless. His feet were bouncing slightly off the pavement, alternating, heels tapping. His chest squeezed his lungs, compressed his chest, as a giant constrictor wrangled its coils tighter and suffocated him from the inside out. All sounds and voices became background noise, white and distant. His mind raced, mixing questions about details with memories and images.

Was she unconscious and pain-free the whole time, or had she woken up in agony and been unable to move? He saw the memory of her slipping on the driveway last winter while they were shoveling, falling on her rear end hard, laughing and crying at the same time. Then he saw her lying facedown on their back concrete, head turned to the right, eyes closed but struggling to open, with a dried trail of blood running from her nose. Had she been forced to lie there and think to herself, in fear? Had she perhaps called out to him in vain? He saw the summer morning she woke up as dawn filtered in the windows and birds chirped outside, so she rolled over to him and started to say his name softly over and over again to wake him. When he pretended to still be asleep she began to nibble on the tip of his exposed ear. Then he saw her face against concrete, jaw almost pinned shut but fighting to open, to force air out as her facial muscles worked to part her lips enough for noise to escape. Her breathing was labored, and to speak she needed to inhale and dedicate an entire breath to her message, seeming to steal a breath from the amount her body depended on to fight for life. As her words came out, they were not yells or hollers, but a mix of a gasp, a moan, and crying. (adam?) No one else could hear it, she could hardly hear it, but really no one else was meant to hear it, except
Adam half a world away. (Adam?) It wasn’t asking for help but pleading for one last moment together, one last word, maybe one last touch of his hand on her cheek. It was the softest of requests, yet it pierced accusingly with the power of Christ’s agony upon the cross ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

But Adam would never know. Unless someone gave him some proof of these things later on, Adam would never know. He would never know her last thoughts. He would never know if she finally expired by loving him and forgiving his absence, or by cursing him and regretting that she had been with him for the last several years of her life. The very last years of her life, as it were.

Then Adam saw the back of his mother’s head, graying hair in a bun, facing into a corner of their old house but rocking in the old wooden rocking chair. He also saw his father’s back, standing in the doorway, watching her, his shoulders slumped in despair. Then he saw the back of Private Tony Moretti, walking away down a long hallway in a barracks, carrying his bags with him, as other privates stood at their doors and watched him go.

“Son,” Chaplain Sweeney said, clamping a hand on Adam’s left shoulder and breaking him out of a trance. Adam wondered how long the chaplain had been standing there talking to him. “Are you still with us, here? Are you all right?”

After a short hesitation, as if Adam were waiting for sound to catch up to light, Adam seemed to show a look of understanding. “Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, I’m fine. I understand what you told me.”
“Good, then,” Sweeney said, “Because there’s more.”

More? Adam gave them a perplexed look, moving from one stony face to the next. Officer faces, he remembered. Too many officers. Was this what all of them were doing there?

“What more could there be?” Adam asked. “Are there problems getting me home?” Adam looked past his Company Commander and right at the Battalion Commander. “You are sending me home, aren’t you, sir?”

But after he said it something twinged in him, in his head or in his stomach or somewhere, but Adam knew that something felt funny.

“There’re some complications, Sergeant,” CPT Willis spoke up for the group. Adam again looked at each of them, confused. “What do you mean complications, sir?”

“Well, with you being gone here…” the Captain started, “There’s been a vacuum in the disposition of your wife and her intentions. Since you’re absent, her parents took charge of her funeral and final wishes. Your mother-in-law has grabbed control quite abruptly, and is making very brash decisions.”

“You mean Marilynn?” Adam asked, to which the Captain nodded. “Brash decisions? What are you talking about?”

“Well, the message only said that she had determined that a funeral should not become a drawn out affair and put off for too long. Since her father is Jewish and your
wife seemed not to take another religion, she wanted your wife interned according to
Jewish customs, which is to bury the body as soon as possible.”

“So when does she want to do that?” Adam asked. “As soon as I can get home,
right? She needs to know how fast I can get home.”

The Chaplain looked at the Battalion Commander and then back at Adam.

“Ah …no, son,” he stammered, “She wants to do it tomorrow morning at 9 am
central time.”

“What?” Adam croaked. “She what?”

Adam’s sorrow and guilt quickly transformed into disbelief like a rapid boil. He
got up and had intended to push the chair back but instead tipped it over. Adam was
trying to quickly do the math in his head. Baghdad was eight hours ahead time wise, so it
being about 2:30 in the afternoon here translated into 6:30 am back home. So tomorrow
at 9 am central was twenty-six and a half hours away.

“She just wants to do it?” Adam shrieked.

LT Riggons started moving like he might stand as well to try to calm Adam, but
he didn’t leave his seat. He had played the role of a young lieutenant well, knowing his
place was above the enlisted and yet knowing that many of those experienced soldiers
had much more time and knowledge than he did, so he deftly balanced his position as a
young manager might by hearing all input from his soldiers on his decisions, asking
advice of his peers and superiors, and putting the needs of the soldiers first. He always
did that, making him seem like the older brother left in charge of his siblings because
their parents died, learning on the fly, struggling, but respected because you could see he was looking out for you.

“Easy there, easy there, Sergeant,” said the Captain, standing up, putting his hands up like he was dealing with a wild horse, and moving towards Adam, who took a reflexive step backward to preserve his personal space and because he didn’t want anyone touching him. Everyone stayed enough away from him, and Adam let fly a string of expletives and curses upon his mother-in-law. When he finished, Adam looked suddenly drained. He found his chair again and sat down, as did the Captain. Adam put his head into his hands, leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs, and looked at the ground.

“That was why Burke couldn’t tell you anything,” CPT Willis said, “Because we knew already what she was doing. We could get you on a flight out that departs in two hours.”

“Why didn’t anyone send me back here sooner?” Adam asked. “Why not send someone to pick me up?”

“And risk the lives of other men unnecessarily?” the Battalion Commander spoke up again, as if trying to reclaim some authority. “That was my call. It was brought up and I flatly denied it. No unnecessary missions, no going out if we don’t have to. Is this worth one or more of your buddies dying?” the LTC asked.

Adam looked at him, considered it himself, and shook his head.
“I thought for them to tell you the whole message and leave you powerless at a distant FOB would jeopardize your concentration, and thus not only your safety but that of your comrades. I enforced the privacy of the Red Cross message.”

Then the LTC pulled a rectangular black object out of his pocket and offered it to Adam. He glanced at it angrily, hating it because the BC was offering something to him. But as he took another glance at the plastic block he noticed its bent shape and retracted antennae—it was a civilian satellite phone. It looked barely more stylish than the bulky cellular phone prototypes of the 1980s, but to Adam it was suddenly the Pandora’s Box of technology. The LTC acquired it so he could make important calls whenever he needed to or when someone needed to reach him. The necessity was never there, but he insisted that his subordinates call him on it for “important” matters, so he was often seen with his phone when he was around peers and large groups of lower enlisted, or basically anyone who would perceive it as a status of power and importance. Aside from the circumstances, Adam viewed having your own phone while everyone else waits in line at a phone bank for thirty to sixty minutes as egotistical and a selfish use of rank. But now that this perk had been offered to him, he was not that critical.

“Go ahead,” LTC Timmons said, “Use it.”

Normally that would sound like some sort of temptation or trap, but given the circumstances it was just the right thing to do. I should take this and let everyone in the battalion call home and talk to their family, wife or girlfriend, Adam thought. Rank has its privileges, so the saying goes, but along with that is the opportunity for that rank to be
gracious and extend the offer to someone else to call back to the states. The LTC pushed
the power button on and extended the antennae, showing Adam that it was ready for use.

“Thank you, sir,” Adam said, taking the phone and going outside. The brightness
of the sun strained his eyes as if he’d come out of a movie theater. The wind was calm,
so there wouldn’t be much background whistling from the environment. As Adam
looked around to get some space from the Captain’s tent, he spotted several soldiers in
his platoon sitting out on a picnic table under an awning made from camouflage netting.
Some were smoking, some were just sitting or leaning on the table, but all were looking
in the direction of the tent he had just come out of, looking and wondering what was
going on. Brinks was one of the men sitting there, cracking roasted peanuts and tossing
their shells into a bucket as he ate the nut. They crushed out their smokes and disbanded
when he saw them watching him blankly, like vultures, and were just as likely to return
later. He dialed the phone number of Leo and Marilynn’s home. It ran ten times without
an answer or an answering machine. Adam hung up. He waited a minute, looking
around as he did and wondering what to say. How could she do this to him? It seemed
deliberately spiteful against him, when she should be giving him extra time and
consideration for what he was doing in Iraq. The only soldiers outside seemed to be
moving with a purpose, doing something or on their way to do something. Adam felt
suddenly that he was without purpose, that his mission here was really of little
significance, that all the little things, the preparation, the maintenance, even eating and
sleeping, were without purpose. What does it matter now? He shook his head violently
as he saw Brinks open a crack of the window flap to see if Adam was still outside. He remembered that someone else was always depending on him, and even if he no longer gave a shit about anything in the world, they probably still did, and he owed it to them to do his job and ensure their safety. Adam pushed the ‘send’ button again, let it ring ten times, then hung up again. He waited only thirty seconds and pushed ‘send’ again. This time there was an answer.

“Whoever the hell you are,” Marilynn answered annoyed, “it better to important to be this insistent.”

“It’s Adam,” he said, skipping any salutations to show his displeasure with her.

“Oh, it’s you, boy,” she replied with just as much attitude. “It’s about damn time you called. I assume your soldier buddies have filled you in?”

“They sure have,” Adam said. “What the…”

“I have had to do your job, you know,” Marilynn said snidely. “Your wife just died while you were playing soldier.”

Her voice did not sound sad at all, which pissed Adam off, and he could tell she had an ax to grind on him by her use of the word ‘playing,’ but he didn’t want to take the time to be drawn in about that and be on the defensive.

“What happened? It was an accident?” Adam asked. “She fell off the stoop?”

“Yes, someone was bound to fall off that dangerous stoop, and of course it would be her. I hope you’re…”

“What did she look like?” Adam asked, still dodging her accusations.
“What morbid question is that?” Marilynn answered. “I’m not describing my daughter’s body to you. What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you want to know that?

He wasn’t certain himself what he had meant by the question. Partly he wanted to know if she had died looking scared or at peace. He also wanted to know if it had been gruesome looking. He wanted to see her bruises, her scrapes, her fractures, her blood. For some reason he had gained some small peace of mind after Grahams’ death by knowing what he had looked like as he died, or at least as he was close to death. He had seen him in his worst condition and he could channel this into empathy, an imagined dream of every pain and fear that Grahams was going through as he died. Adam had tried to imagine that it was him, to feel himself in agony and to imagine either the fear or the calmness that was settling in as Grahams, as he, was expiring. He wanted to know what she had been through, and what she had thought about him.

“I’ve wondered what was becoming of you over there,” Marilynn said. “It disgusts me.”

“Never mind that, then,” Adam said. “Why are you having her funeral so fast?”

“Because that’s the proper way,” she said. “That’s the way it is directed by her father’s religion.”

Adam noticed that she had not claimed that it was her own or Philly’s religion.

“Leo’s never practiced anything Jewish in Philly’s life,” Adam answered.

“Well!” Marilynn exclaimed.
“She told me that,” Adam said. “And I’ve never seen it either.”

“Sometimes we don’t think about that until death,” Marilynn countered.

“Bullshit, Marilynn,” Adam said, “Leo’s no late returner.”

“How dare you…”

“If he is, then you can put him on the phone and I want to hear it from him.”

“No, we won’t,” Marilynn said. Adam noticed that she had worded it ‘we’ instead of ‘I,’ but he still knew it was all coming from her. “You selfish son of a bitch, how dare you just think of yourself at a time like this.”

“No, I’m thinking about my wife and how she’d want to give her husband an opportunity to be at her funeral.”

“Perhaps there wouldn’t be a funeral if it weren’t for you,” Marilynn slashed.

Adam pulled the satellite phone away from his head. Many times she had voiced some of the apprehensions about the deployment as he, and had claimed it as abandonment. But now she fingered him, as though he was guilty of manslaughter by negligent military deployment. He’d resisted countering her misguided assault to maintain congeniality, but each burning under the interrogation lamp was melting his resolve and his patience. His frustration sloshed horizontally below the surface, looking for a fissure to breach the surface and erupt. He wanted to vent at her so much, to let the swirling hot gases so long compressed within escape and scald her. He could only growl in frustration and look like an angry, unintelligible ape storming around and pumping his fists. Oh, to throw the phone would feel so good. Instead he brought it back to his face.
“That is so out of line,” he said. “So left field. There’s no justifiable way a sane person could say that.”

“We did the right thing by her,” Marilynn said, “not that you’d know what that is.”

Adam paused, pulled the phone away, breathed deep, brought it back.

“I should be able to get home within a day, then we can have the funeral and burial.” Almost as soon as he said it, he anticipated the response that Marilynn would say.

“We’ll do it all right away,” she said.

For me, Adam thought. For her husband to get home, perhaps. But why should that be any different than the funeral.

“You just have to do this tomorrow,” Adam said, “just to spite me.”

There was not answer to that.

“Okay,” Adam said, giving up. He resented how powerless he was from such a great distance, how he had been completely cut off from news and had been removed from the decision-making process for his wife. “Whatever.”

“Listen here, Adam,” she said. “I don’t know what you’re doing over there…”

Adam really wanted to rip into her at that instant. She really had no idea what he was doing over here, what he was going through, what he was missing, what he obviously had missed, and what he had done. No clue, no comprehension, and therefore she had absolutely no right to judge.
“…and no idea why you volunteered for this war…”

Actually he’d volunteered long before, the war just happened to come up.

“…but you’re a lot less responsible that I thought you were.”

Adam was torn between letting himself get angry over her lecturing, or to just ignore her and let her just *blah, blah, blah* if this was going to go on for a while.

“You need to ask yourself where your priorities are right now,” Marilynn said.

“And you,” Adam said, “need to wait one more day for me to get home. I’m flying out in about two hours, and depending on layovers, can probably be there, but just in case…”

“I’ll expect you tomorrow,” Marilynn said coldly.

With that the call was ended on the other end of the line without any goodbye, just a dial tone in Adam’s ear.

Adam sat down on the pavement outside the Captain’s tent and felt like he’d just been kicked in the head. He wished he could strangle that woman. Or choke slam her. If he made it back in time he’d be buzzing into Appleton with very little time to spare, and he’d have no say in the proceedings for Philly. He’d be showing up, like any other guest. Until he went home to his empty house. Fuck- the house. Who would take care of the house now? What about the mail, and the bills?

Adam looked out at the rows of tents and saw PFC Samson cleaning his weapon on the picnic table. It was a handmade table that SPC Hoyman from 1st squad had made from scrap wood with the power tools he’d brought along in the unit’s shipping
containers. Samson had everything laid out on a paper towel on the table, with the small pieces taken out of the bolt carrier. He was scrubbing with the toothbrush meticulously at some carbon on the bolt, giving up on that and selecting a wire brush. A gust of wind suddenly came up, swirling dust between the tents and blowing the paper towel and its contents onto the ground. Adam could see Samson grabbing for them, but by doing this he just ending up scattering them more. He hollered out, “Oh!” The kid never swore, like ever. All he said when his tiny extractor pin and his firing pin retaining pin were blown onto black pavement was “Oh!”

He’ll be dead in a week or two, Adam thought immediately.

Adam wasn’t thinking figuratively dead, like if he couldn’t find the parts and get his weapon reassembled and functioning. No. The kid was an idiot, a simpleton. Nicest kid in the world, perhaps that you wouldn’t mind as a little brother, the dipshit kind. But he’d made it into the Army, into the MP’s, into this unit. He was clueless. He was a Forrest Gump or a Cacciato. He could be a liability to his team, the guy who gets someone killed. Or more likely the dipshit who gets himself killed, and then his name could be added to the list on the wall of the port-o-potty just twenty meters from their tents. He was a body that could hold a gun, so he was needed.

He’d become Adam’s responsibility to train for some of the house clearing operations beginning in a week or two.

Shit yeah, Adam thought, he’s another name on the wall.

A voice in Adam’s head asked, Another Tony Moretti?
Private Tony. Adam’s battle buddy at Basic Training. The company had teased him of being an Italian wetback from New York, fresh off the boat and ready to make pizza. Tony had a thick Italian accent, but he was from Phoenix, not New York, and he was allergic to tomatoes. He was short and wiry, incredibly strong for his size, and easily the hardest working Private in Basic. He was also perhaps the dimmest, taking longer than anyone to catch on to everything. He couldn’t shine his boots right for three weeks. He had no rhythm for marching. He could never make the allotted time to put on his gas mask. But Adam worked with him endlessly, late into the night after lights out, and Private Tony was getting by. He was going to pass Basic. Then Adam left for his emergency leave right before rifle training. His parents were dead, he needed to go. He was gone one week, and when he got back, Private Tony was nowhere to be found. Washed out, the rest of the company told him. He failed big time, and was kicked out.

Adam did not form any other friendships from Basic Training, suspecting that most of the other privates had grown tired of Tony falling behind, and so they cut the dead weight and allowed him to fail. He had wanted to be grunt. *What a Gump! A Cacciato! He’ll get someone else killed in the infantry.* He was sacrificed for the greater good.

Adam thought of the last thing that Marilynn said, about thinking about his priorities, where they had been and where they were supposed to be. His had been on staying alive, first and foremost, while over here. That had been something Philly had agreed on, surely. And second priority had been keeping other people alive. His team most importantly, the ones who depended on him but also that he depended on. There
was a mutual assured protection among a fighting team, the idea that ‘you save my ass
and I’ll save yours,’ upon which trust and cohesion was founded. It started with the
people you worked closest with, and widened out in concentric circles that lessened in
intensity as they expanded in number. Beyond your team or your squad was the platoon,
which was a group you knew somewhat well but a little less, interacted with a little less,
and depended on a little less. There were people in the platoon that Adam barely knew.
Beyond the platoon was your company, in which no one could be that intensely vested in
a hundred plus people. It began to become a numbers game at this level, for command,
but for everyone else in that manner too. The company deployed with one hundred
sixteen people, and the goal was to bring that many home alive. It was perhaps
unrealistic for a unit that frequently put its soldiers in harm’s way to have such an
expectation, but it should be a goal, because to allow the command or the soldiers to
accept that deaths will happen could allow a lessened sense of importance or decreased
attention to detail that could cost someone his life, if it was expected. An ‘It was bound
to happen’ mentality was not an acceptable way of thinking. And for the record, three
people in his company had been killed so far in the deployment. Beyond the company
was the battalion, one thousand people who were mostly names at best. Above that was
the bond of the uniform, anyone wearing that flag on their sleeve, but they could be as
abstract as a word or a symbol. Brotherhood or comrade or American. That was the
outer ring of the circle really, beyond which all of humanity floated. There drifted the
Iraqi police and army, the ones you hoped were on your side and equally hoped weren’t
incompetent or cowards, and you genuinely wished them safety and success. But if one or a bunch of them died, it was an external thing, something far away and detached, unless you had an attachment to an interpreter. The same went for the civilians, whom you pitied because they were so defenseless and destitute and caught in the crossfire. You could look at one of their bodies, either blown up or shot in the head or beheaded, and say simply ‘that’s too bad’ with only the sad resignation of the situation and of the human condition in general. It was sad when one looked at a head without a body and realized that this is within human nature, this is what we were, and we didn’t really hold the highest place among the animals as we think we do. Perhaps it could be said without feeling anything, as long as you didn’t make personal connections to someone you loved.

So where had Philly been in his priorities? In that sense, perhaps she hadn’t been one, she hadn’t factored into the life or death paradigm, at least not Adam’s. She had been a responsibility, of sorts. He needed to remind her that he loved her and missed her, needed to ease her anxiety so that she in turn could be supportive and keep his mind as free as possible to focus on the job at hand- staying alive. He needed to write her daily and call or email whenever he could. Her happiness ultimately serviced him, and likewise served to benefit all who depended on him. It was his responsibility to be able to focus as much as humanly possible on the job at hand, to live in the moment or risk not living. That went the same when someone inside the circle was killed. There was the responsibility to be able to deal with it so that each person could continue doing his job,
could keep surviving, and keep ensuring the survival of the others within the circle.

There’s nothing you can do for the dead, so focus on the living.

There’s nothing you can do for the dead.

Philly was now dead.

Adam almost threw up when he thought about it that way, felt a violent upheaval within his stomach and behind his eyes. They too wanted to puke, to purge that emotional flu simmering and reducing back inside his head. It would feel so good to do that, so awfully, painfully good to vomit out everything, all the mental collages and half-digested pieces of people and the acidic stomach sewage they floated in, to feel that burn as his innards were wrung out and his eyes wretched. There in the vomit would be all the nightmares, oily images of shifting color like gasoline in water. There Grahams’ missing eyelid would be, in Adam’s stomach all this time, along with an Iraqi man’s finger and tongue, and miscellaneous clumps of burnt skin. To purge all these things, as well as what he was feeling about Philly now, would make him feel so much better. But he fought it down, as people do out of reflex, because nobody really likes to see all that they’ve ingested. Adam fought it down, clenching his eyes and breathing slowly and deeply, and when it was safe he spit a couple times on the ground to get the taste out of his mouth.

So-- Philly was dead.

He thought it without the reaction this time, so he was free to continue thinking.
She was dead. Now what? Considering he was still a soldier in Iraq, still bound to the same commitments and duty, should his priorities be any different? Reluctantly, his mind said no. *Take care of the living* is what his mind said. That was where he could maybe still make a difference. Sabinus was still on leave, so when Adam wasn’t out on missions he had been filling in as squad leader, sitting in meetings, relaying information, trying to help his soldiers solve issues. *His* soldiers. They belonged to him, were his responsibility.

Outside of escort missions the platoon had started training for a temporary assignment that would pull them off convoy duties for a couple weeks. They would be assisting an infantry company that was shorthanded and needed some bodies to perform foot patrols and searches. Since this was a seldom practiced task for their MP job, the soldiers had been conducting training on their own time, working on signals, formations, room clearing drills, and close quarters combat. This was where the soldiers needed to get to know their weapon in the dark better than a woman. The training was coming along slowly, clumsily, painfully, and not just for the troops but for Adam as well. With room clearing, the soldiers ran into each other the first time they burst through the door. Or they got tangled in each other’s feet. It had greatly improved from the start, but it was still not smooth, not automatic like it should be. Adam wasn’t comfortable ducking out of training with his soldiers, especially if he had to potentially come back from a leave and jump into a team that had been doing missions already. It was his responsibility to make sure they were trained. Samson was his responsibility.
Keep the living alive.

And then there was the eerie similarity of the situation with that of Private Moretti, the battle buddy he had supported at boot camp until he was called home on emergency leave for the deaths of his parents. Déjà vu, perhaps. But knowing what had happened when he took leave in the middle of Basic seemed to stand as a lesson for the decision before him now.

Keep the living alive.

Adam stood up, somehow feeling clear of head and unburdened by having made a decision. He entered the commander’s tent without notice, and caught the officers discussing the soldiers in the unit. They fell silent as soon as they realized there was an enlisted man in their presence again.

“Well?” CPT Willis asked.

Adam shook his head and laid out for them how the conversation had gone and what Marilynn was doing. They shook their heads in displeasure at what he told them, each of them calling her a bitch in their minds, even the Chaplain.

“That settles it then,” said LC Riggons, “We gotta get you home quick, before she makes anything worse. Turn your weapon in to your team leader, pack essentials, and let me call…”

The LC froze when he felt an empty front pocket where his satellite phone usually was, then smiled in relief when he remembered he had given it to Adam and saw it there in his hands.
“Wait,” Adam said. “Wait on that, sir.” Adam held the LC’s phone tightly in his hand and did not offer to hand it back. “I have a request.”

Adam prefaced the actual request with a brief history of the last emergency leave he had to take, followed by his thoughts to the things Marilynn had said and the thoughts he had come up with after her conversation. Everything was being taken care of by Philly’s parents, whether Adam wanted it or not. If he was being sent home to mope and breakdown then he could do that just as well here, without depriving his team and platoon of a valuable soldier.

“So,” Adam said, “for the good of the platoon, I’d like to stay.”

“What?!?” was the officers response in unison.

“You can’t do that,” Captain Willis said to Adam. Then he turn to the LC. “He can’t do that—can he?”

“I’d like to remain here, sir,” he addressed to the Battalion Commander, “instead of making a trip home that would probably be pointless in outcome compared to what I could be doing here.”

“Hmmmm…” said LC Riggons as he rubbed his chin. “That’s an unusual request. That’s a request I’ve never heard of…” The LC moved away from his chair and began to pace while massaging his chin. He was mumbling in an internal conversation.

“When, then?” the BC asked.

“Um…when what, sir?” Adam asked, confused as to what the question was.
“If not now,” the BC replied, “Then when do you want to go home to give your respects to your wife?”

Adam scrunched the right side of his face upward in a moment of thought. He wanted to say *At redeployment, sir. I’ll see her when everyone else gets to see their families- when we all go home.* After some reflection he answered, “Later, sir. I don’t know when, but sometime later.”

“Not a good idea, sir,” Captain Willis said to the LC. “He needs to go home. He needs to deal with this now. It’s best for his sanity…”

“My sanity?” Adam said, disbelieving the Commander had used that word. “Did the Army think it sane when they transferred me into this war against my will? And now they would go against my will when I say I want to stay. Where is the sanity?”

“Hmmm…” LC Riggons said again. “Why don’t you excuse us for a minute so we can talk this out.” Adam was pleased that it would receive discussion, and started to leave. “And by a minute, I mean give us a while to discuss this. Go back to your tent and we’ll send for you.”

So Adam had gone back to his tent and sat in his folding chair staring at the tent wall while he awaited the deliberation of the officer panel. Ultimately it was the Battalion Commander’s call, but he was probably fielding input from the company officers and asking for more information about Adam himself. Brinks and Martins sat there quietly as well, Martins on his cot with a book while Brinks sat in his folding chair with nothing to do, squirming restlessly and eager to ask questions but respectfully not.
After about a half hour a specialist, the CQ runner for the day, came and summoned Adam back to the captain’s tent.

This time Adam announced his presence at the flap of the tent and asked permission to enter. They told him to have a seat, and the Battalion Commander rose to speak for all of them.

“Your request to stay here in a time of great personal tragedy is an unprecedented one, to say the least. Under normal circumstances it would be considered ridiculous, even crazy. These aren’t normal circumstances, though. That’s the thing about war, the unbelievable circumstances it puts you in. The choices it forces you to make are decisions a person never imagined they’d be in a position to have to make. Decisions that can cost people’s lives, demanded in an instant, without reflection, just based on beliefs, character, and courage. This situation is not a snap decision but nonetheless one that we don’t have a great deal of time to consider. But you have thought it through pretty thoroughly, Sergeant, and in that time came up with a decision based of logical reasons. Not emotional reasons, but purely logical.”

Adam felt more restless as the LC went on and on like a judge reading a preamble to his decision, or a game show host building up tension to the announcement of a winner. He realized then that in his heart he was strongly pulling for one side, pulling for his request to…win. It was something to be sad about, because Adam didn’t know then why he wouldn’t want to go home, even if his request to stay was more logical. He should want to go home for Philly, and lay flowers at her grave and talk to a stone and
some dirt like grieving loved ones ought to do. He should want to go home and take care of their affairs, to do whatever needed to be done for the house now. He should be crazy upset for her, distraught. He should be just going crazy. Instead he was being reasonable. Yet he wasn’t reasonable. He was hoping to stay here when he should at least be neutral on the decision. It wasn’t about losing an argument. He wondered if inside he was avoiding the situation at home. Or he wondered if this was a way of trying to stick it to Marilynn for her cutting him out of the parts of the burial process that he certainly would have come home for.

“So what I’m trying to say here, Sergeant,” LC Riggons continued as he walked a very small circle back and forth, “is that you have my support in your decision.”

“Yes, sir.” Adam said, nodding understanding.

There, he had won. But Adam didn’t feel good like a winner should. He immediately felt sad. Sad about the decision he’d made, that its impact was now free to hit him, both psychologically and hit him in whatever form Marilynn’s actions took. She would surely take this as a further insult and abandonment of her daughter.

“I want you to check in with the Chaplain here on a regular basis, though,” LC Riggons said.

“You do?” both Adam and Chaplain Sweeney said at the same time.

“Of course,” the LC said matter-of-factly. “This is pretty much a lose-lose situation, Sergeant, and you’re going to need to clear your head.”

“Yes, sir,” said Adam with fully no intention of following through with that.
LC Riggon went to the tent flap and stared out at something, and the occupants fell silent, awaiting some word from him. He looked distant, looked all the way home and saw his own family. He considered if he would make the same decision if he were put in the enlisted soldier’s shoes. He had kids, though, ten and six years old, who would need him there if something were to happen to his wife. Their parents were too old to assume full time parenting, and all of their family was scattered across the country.

Although he trusted his staff and had full confidence in the Major who served as his Executive Officer, the Lieutenant Colonel felt that if an E-5 sergeant was indispensable in that position as a team leader, shouldn’t that mean that he was irreplaceable as a Battalion Commander. He looked at his satellite phone, which was more of a symbol of his status than the rank he wore on his collars, and realized that phones as easily as battalions could be handed over to someone else.

He realized that everyone was waiting for him to say something, so he said, “That is all Sergeant Banks. You are dismissed.”

Adam stood and exited the tent without saying a word or looking at the officers in his company. As he slid past the LC and out the tent he heard the electronic beep of buttons being dialed on the phone, and the LC say to the others that he’d give them a chance to call home too on it.

Rank has its privileges, Adam thought again.

Brinks and Martins looked up at Adam as he entered their tent.

“You need some help packing, Sergeant?” Brinks asked.
“No, my friend, I am staying right here for a while,” Adam replied, grabbing a bottle of Gatorade from their cooler and taking a long swig.

Brinks and Martins exchanged a confused look, but there was also was a glimpse of relief in their eyes.

“I’ll explain it all later,” Adam said, downing the rest of the bottle. He hadn’t realized he had gone so long without something to drink, and he was parched.

“Okay,” said Martins, pushing his glasses up his nose, “then what do you want to do now, Sergeant?”

Adam looked around at his gear scattered around his bunk, hoping for some answer to come from the equipment. His eyes settled on his M-16 lying on his cot.

“Battle drills,” Adam said, then looked up at both of them. “Gather the squad and assemble at the house clearing area in full battle rattle in ten minutes.

The company, mainly SPC Hoyman, had constructed a mock first floor of a house using two by fours and plywood as a training area for the soldiers to practice room clearing. Near the front corner someone had dug a small hole and laid the pants legs and boots of an Iraqi army uniform so as to protrude from under the house a la wicked witch in The Wizard of Oz. These legs had become dubbed the Wicked Dictator of the Middle East. And now, free from the tyranny of their witch, the Munchkins had begun killing each other and trying to kill Dorothy.

“Aye aye, Sergeant,” Brinks said, getting up with a small grin of contentment on his face to tell the other tents to get ready.
The convoy started its engines and began to do radio checks. The gunners loaded ammunition. It was midafternoon, the warmest part of the day with temps in the low sixties, yet the soldiers zipped up their field jackets or Gortex, pulled their Neck Gators up to cover their necks and mouths, and pulled their gloves on. Once the convoy got driving, the sixty mile per hour wind chilled things off quite a bit, especially for the gunners. There was a dampness in the air still from rain yesterday, adding to the cooling factor, and mud puddles on the ground. This was the end of winter in central Iraq.

Within the convoy was a standard 5-ton M939 truck and a new LMTV, or Light Medium Tactical Vehicle, which was its replacement. The soldiers driving the LMTV looked down on those driving the 5-ton, just as those who drove the 5-tons looked down on those still driving the Vietnam era M35 ‘Deuce and a Half.’ It was modern, it was new, it was progress. To the soldiers driving the older truck it was unproven and snub-nosed, but to each their own. Both trucks had been unloaded of the supplies they’d brought north and were driving back empty. Two gun truck Humvees escorted them, with SSG Reynolds from 2nd platoon as convoy commander up front, and Adam’s crew in back for rear security.
Reynolds had several small rectangular boxes in his hand as he walked back from the brigade TOC, drawing soldiers from every vehicle for a look.

“Hey, what are those, Sergeant Reynolds?”

“What you got there, Sarge?”

“Are those what I think they are?”

“I saw you with a box. What’s in the box?”

Reynolds opened his passenger side Humvee door and sat on the seat. He set all the packages down except one, which he opened. Inside on a sheet of white paper was a typed award, and in the base of the box was a medal. It had a star connected to a ribbon, which had a thin blue vertical stripe running down the middle surrounded by a wider red vertical stripe on either side.

“That’s a Bronze Star,” one of the soldiers said.

“It is,” Reynolds said, scratching his head, “yeah, it is.”

“Who’s getting that?” Brinks asked from the back of the group. All the soldiers had left their vehicles and gathered around him. “Gotta be First platoon.”

“Hell, no,” another soldier countered, “They don’t do shit. This is for Second platoon.”

“Which war you been watching?” another soldier countered. “First platoon runs this shit.”

“Is it for the guys who died?” Adam asked from the back. “Is it a post-humus award?”
SSG Reynolds got flustered with all the attention and questions being asked at once and closed the box up as quickly as he could.

“I don’t know,” he yelled back. “We shouldn’t be looking at it. I don’t know who they’re for. Get back to your trucks, y’all. Go. Get. Let’s get on the road.”

With a collective “Awww” they all walked back to their vehicles and mounted up. They cleared the gate, navigated the ramp and entered traffic heading south for Baghdad on MSR Tampa. It was bumper to bumper civilian traffic, and as usual they grudgingly moved over for the American convoy. It was Martins turn to drive again.

“There was not a ‘V’ device on that Bronze Star,” Martins commented.

“No, I guess not,” Adam said, paying more attention to the crowds around the crude market stands along the road.

“That means that award was not for valor,” Martins said.

“I guess not,” Adam said, still hardly paying attention.

“Those Bronze Stars are going to officers,” Martins said.

“Anyone can win one,” Adam said

“Not everyone earns them in the same way,” Martins said, shaking his head. He spoke without taking his eyes off the road or the crowded streets in front of him. “Oh, did I say earn? I meant that some are given out and some are earned. For the lower enlisted, people with rank like you and me, it is earned by valor in combat, and it has the ‘V’ device on it. It is also given out to high NCOs and officers for meritorious service.
Meritorious service! On one hand a soldier has to put his neck on the line, and on the other hand a big shot gets an ‘at-a-boy.’ It is bullshit.”


“No, it is bullshit,” Martins reiterated again, speaking forcefully. “Military awards are bullshit. They are about ego and politics and advancing careers. What really matters is what you did and how you did it.”

“Naw, people need awards, though,” Adam said, waving to one local that he saw frequently on this drive. “Even if some are shams, people need to know what they’re doing is worth something. Purple Hearts, Medals of Honor, even Bronze Stars. People need them. Families need them.”

“Do you know what my brothers got for their fighting in our war back in my homeland?” Martins asked.

“I’ll go out on a limb and say nothing,” Adam said.

“Not nothing,” Martins said, quickly pushing his right sleeve up to the elbow and thrust it towards Adam. “Not nothing. They got these. These are their awards.”

Martins exposed the scar on his right forearm, a jagged and thickened river of skin, even darker than his usual complexion, about four inches long. He never would disclose the origin of the scar when asked. Adam said nothing.

“These are their awards, all over their bodies,” Martins said, shaking his arm for emphasis. “These are their badges.”

“You’ve been reading Stephen Crane, haven’t you?” Adam asked.
“I read everything,” Martins replied seriously, “but this I learned myself. Awards are for glory hounds—“

“No, they’re not,” Adam countered.

“Yes, they are,” Martins said.

“No—“

“Yes—“

A perceptible change outside stopped them both in their words. It was a sudden silence, an increase in the light reaching them, and the all the room in the world to take a deep and uneasy breath.

“Be on your toes,” warned Reynolds over the radio.

“This ain’t a good sign,” Brinks yelled down from the gun turret.

The congested highway became suddenly barren, the traffic around them halting and pulling off to the side as the military convoy continued on. The civilian traffic had been part of their hazard, part of their threat, but it had also been part of their cover. They were the only vehicles on the road now, and they felt exposed to all eyes. There were no vendors along the roads, all makeshift shops had been left as they were, with valuable propane tanks stacked by a stand without anything stopping someone from carrying them off, and freshly butchered chickens swung in the breeze at another. What breeze? It seemed to have left with all the people, even the air blowing against the soldiers.
“This reminds me of a western,” Adam said. “When everybody deserts the streets and it’s just the sheriff out there, out in the open,” Adam said.

“Like ‘High Noon,’” Martins said.

“You ain’t Gary Cooper,” Brinks yelled down.

“How the hell can he hear us?” Adam commented. Martins just grinned and shook his head.

They drove past empty cars with their doors still open, past a chart with a mule still hooked to the reigns, past abandoned war trinket shops. A mangy looking dog sniffed around the unattended belongings for food. That, and the cows grazing in the garbage dump they passed, was the only creatures about.

Brinks pounded on the roof of the Humvee. “Kid!” he yelled down.

Adam scanned all around, and finally he spotted the child on the right side of the road. It was the kid they saw all the time, the one who waved, their kid, “Iraqi Kid.” He wore sandals, red sweat pants, and a long sleeved white t-shirt which sharply contrasted his brown skin. His black hair was unkempt and all over, a wild hairdo that only a drastic cutting could resolve. He waved to the lead Humvee as it drove past him, which the gunner ignored. He waved to the 5-ton truck as it passed, which the passenger limply returned. He waved to the LMTV as it drove past him, which the passenger pointed his weapon in the boy’s direction but then casually returned the greeting. He turned toward the last Humvee as it approached him, and waved more heartily as he recognized the occupants.
Brinks motioned with his hands, pointed, for the kid to go. “Stupid kid,” he muttered to himself, “get out of here.”

Iraqi Kid just kept his right hand waving as the Humvee approached, and as it drew close he began to walk toward the road more. He was walking onto the road, apparently meaning to cross it just as the vehicle was coming upon him.

“What’s he doing?” Martins said, pulling the steering left and guiding the Humvee a few feet over.

Iraqi Kid kept walking, looking directly at the Humvee. Martins pulled the truck further to the left to ensure they made it around him, getting the vehicle close to the unpaved median of the road that separated the four lanes of highway.

“Kid!” Martins said. “Stop!”

Adam also motioned with his hand for Iraqi Kid to get out of the road, which did nothing. Martins tried to accelerate to get around him faster.

Martins never saw it.

Adam never saw it.

Brinks spotted the odd contour of the ground in the median, looking like a small mound of dirt. Although all the ground looked relatively moist from the recent rains, this dirt looked darker and wetter than that around it, and that this ground had recently been turned. He realized very close, almost on top of that mound, too close to stop, so he dropped down out of the gun nest for his own safety and began screaming.

“Cut right, cut right!” he screamed. “Bomb-- Get over!”
Martins followed his instincts, not looking at Brinks and pulling the wheel sharply to the right. It didn’t get them far from the mound as they passed it.

Outside the left windows there was a bright yellow flash followed instantly by a grey cloud that slammed into the front left side of the Humvee like a train. All their ears popped. After the flash it seemed to go black for them, their sense of vision lost and their hearing severely painful and reduced to a muffle. They felt everything though, like a train had slammed them at full speed and continued to drive through them, continued to push the Humvee upward and to its right. Their necks and heads were flung left, whiplashed as the last part of a chain to react, their bodies held in place by their lap seatbelts. Brinks did not have any type of belt on, having ducked down onto his haunches, so he was projected into the right side of the vehicles like a spitball, striking head and shoulders first.

The Humvee rolled over three times, the hard, bouncing rolls that rectangular objects take. Martins and Adam had their heads whipped back and forth with each bounce, and their heads struck the roof when it happened to land on that. As the roof was crushed in, the windows shattered out. If the vehicle were a piggy bank being shaken, Brinks was the penny. There wasn’t even time for his body to hit every surface before the rolling of the truck catapulted him into another side.

When the Humvee stopped rolling, it came to rest on its roof, which was crumpled in halfway. The left rear tire was bent ninety degrees outward. All the windows had either shattered outward or popped out as the vehicle’s skin and frame had
been compressed and twisted. The motor was still running, still spinning the right rear
tire. There was no left front tire, no hood, and no driver’s door.

It was black when Adam regained consciousness. He could not tell if he’d
blackened out or not because both his senses and his sense of time were distorted. He
wasn’t sure if he couldn’t open his eyes or he was just too scared to. It was lightless. It
was numb. It was tingly. The first pain he noticed was across his lap, that the lap belt
was pinching him incredibly tightly. There was a tugging through his chin and neck, and
his arms were being pulled upward.

No, Adam thought to himself, I am being pulled downward. We are upside-
down.

Adam couldn’t hear much. The loudest noise was the ringing in his ears, constant
and confusing. It blocked out other noises, and distracted his concentration. He could
tell the engine was still running, yet it did not concern him much. He could hear other
things, perhaps voices, but he couldn’t tell if those were real or not.

He willed himself to see, and a sliver of light stung his eyes. It wasn’t bright by
any means, yet it was focused and intense to his eyes. His eyes burned, even with them
closed; they felt warm and the burned. He had to be bleeding somewhere. He forced the
eyes open again, and there was a brief tunnel of light. Closed again. Open again, and
hold them—there—a white fog. It burned, and he had to blink much, but he held his eyes
open, held onto the fog, until a fuzzy dark shadow flitted across his upper field of vision.
Something near him was moving.
Mumbling nearby. Incomprehensible mumbling, but it was speech nonetheless. It was on several sides on him, but loudest on the right. Wait, no, he was upside-down—that was his left. That’s where Martins should be. He tried to turn his head, felt it slowly rotate in the direction he willed it to go. Still fog, but several dark shapes moving there.

“---Banks?” Adam could understand someone say.

He tried to say ‘I’m here.’ It came out as, “Nnnnnnnnnnn…”

“We got a response from him at least,” Adam heard someone say.

Adam closed his eyes and decided to focus internally. Move your right foot, he commanded. He felt his right foot move. Move your left foot. Left foot moved. He still had both legs and feet. Move right fingers, he commanded. He felt his fingers extend, and then tried to squeeze as hard as he could. He felt a fist. Move left fingers. I said, move left fingers. Come on, move! He felt the fingers in his left hand twitch. Ok, good, everything is accounted for. Now, see, he commanded.

Adam opened his eyes again and he could see through the fog, see not just circular shapes but figures with arms and legs.

“That’s not good,” Adam heard someone say.

‘What? What’s not good?’ Adam tried to say. It came out as, “Waaa Naaaaaa…”

Then Adam heard the breathing. It was thick and raspy, slow and labored. It had a slight gurgle to it. It became his mental beacon, the thing he focused on, and it became clearer than the ringing in his ears. It was like a guttural snore. It seemed tired, not desperate. It came from his left.
“Maaa…” Adam slurred out.

“Let’s get him out first,” someone said.

“Medevac’s en route,” someone shouted from farther away.

Adam could see more definition now, definite outlines of people and finer details as well. There was a face not far from his. It was gray. Adam knew that his color vision was not right yet, but that this face should be darker than it was. The jaw was off-center, the lips did not align. Blood was dripping from the upper lip. No, wait, it was dripping up from the bottom lip.

“Maa…nnnn,” Adam slurred out.

There were faces, upside-down faces, beyond Martins’.

“I got his head,” said one of them.

“I got his body,” someone else said. “I’m cutting the belt.”

Adam saw Martins body succumb to gravity and begin to right itself, or at least to be lain flat on the ground. He was slid about ten feet away from the Humvee but Adam could still see him.

“Shut that damn thing off,” someone said.

Adam saw another face in a helmet come into the vehicle on Martins’ side and do something near the steering wheel. The engine sputtered out.

“Get him next,” someone said.

Adam did not know whether that referred to him or Brinks. He remembered Brinks calling out the IED and dropping down for cover, but after that he did not recall
seeing him again. If Brinks had been thrown from the truck through the gunner’s turret, then Adam was who they were referring to. If Brinks had remained inside while the vehicle rolled, then he would have been tossed around like a dog’s chew toy and would be in pretty bad shape.

A person appeared in the driver’s door again and crawled behind the driver’s seat. Adam knew then that he wasn’t next, which meant that he was in better shape than Brinks. He tried to turn his head to the left more, and could see Brinks flat against the overturned roof of the truck. He was unconscious and bleeding from the nose and face, but otherwise Adam could not tell how bad he was injured.

“How’s he doing?” a person said.

“I got his neck, you pull him out,” someone else said.

“Ok—go,” the first person said. “Where’s the damn chopper?”

“I know,” grunted the second person, “I want these guys out and then to get the fuck outt ourselves.”

Adam tried his arms, which moved despite feeling weak and tingly. He could pull them from the roof of the truck up to his lap belt, where he tried to unlatch it unsuccessfully. He felt around his body then, felt for wet spots on his legs or abdomen or chest, and felt nothing. That guaranteed nothing, but was a reassuring start. Adam looked out the open driver side door and at Martins. A Combat Lifesaver was working on him and had already got an IV bag running saline into his body. His jaw was still disfigured. His face was gray and damp, more like dolphin skin. His uniform on his left
side was dark red, even through the part of the woodland patterned Interceptor vest. Adam could not see if there were holes in his side, but that would have been the blast side and the vest’s Kevlar plates only sat in the front and the back of the body. A soldier was almost done cutting the uniform top up the side, and he had to peel it away from the body.

“Mawtin…” Adam was able to say. There was no response.

His chest was also turning gray, and Adam thought he could see several puncture wounds with dark liquid bubbling out.

There was suddenly a loud creaking to Adam’s right, and his door was open.

“Your turn,” a voice said. Adam recognized the face, though he could not recall the name.

Adam felt pressure being applied to the strap, and within seconds it had been cut. Another soldier had his head and tried to guide it to the side as his body succumbed to gravity, and then the two soldiers dragged him out, around the vehicle and beside the other two casualties. Brinks was lying on his back, no longer being stabilized at the neck because there weren’t enough people in the convoy to give aid, pull security, and call on the radio. Adam could again hear Martins’ raspy, gurgling breathing.

“Marty…” Adam said, and heard himself clearly say.

Adam could hear the whup-whup-whup of a helicopter approaching.

“Birds here,” one of the soldiers working on Martins said as SSG Reynolds came upon them.
“Yeah, about time,” Reynolds said, “the CASH hospital in Baghdad isn’t that far away.”

“Did you call him in as urgent surgical or expectant?” the soldier asked Reynolds.

Adam looked at Reynolds, and Reynolds saw his horrified eyes awaiting the response.

“Just keep working until the flight medics relieve you,” SSG Reynolds said.

“Marty?” Adam was able to yell. There was no response, just an autonomic eye twitch. “Marty?”

Adam tried to lift his head and got it up a few inches before it fell back down with a clunk of the helmet. The effort hurt, but not intensely, and the greater effort seemed fighting the weight of the Kevlar. He tried again, and could only hold it up for a few seconds longer. He brought his right hand up to his head blindly, groped around for the chinstrap, and pulled it open. He pushed it aside a few feet and raised his head again, this time able to flex slightly at the chest.

“Whoa, there,” a soldier said, “don’t try to move, Sergeant. Just lie down.”

The Blackhawk helicopter was landing on the road south of the casualties, within the safe zone secured by the other vehicles. It was creating a greater white noise for voices to compete against, and kicking up dust and debris. An Apache gunship circled above.

Adam bent his knees a little and dug his heels into the dirt, then squeezed with the muscles in his gut and legs to pull his body upright.
“Don’t move,” the soldier said again, moving towards Adam. “You might—“

“Don’t touch,” Adam commanded, which the soldier respected since he appeared to be without major pain and regaining more and more function.

Adam looked around. He saw the blast damage on the driver’s side of the Humvee. It was blackened like the crust of burnt toast. It was torn and hole ridden like an aluminum can savaged by a shotgun at close range. It was cratered, it was sinewy. A wheel still spun on momentum, slowing, slowing. The engine coughed and wheezed at odd intervals although it was no longer running.

Off to the north, Adam looked for Iraqi Kid. There was no sign of him, live or dead.

Suddenly everyone seemed to be moving so fast, like ants scurrying about. A soldier dragged the busted jammer from the other side of the truck. It had proved ineffective again. Medics in green flight suits transferred Matins onto a litter and ran cumbersomely back to the Blackhawk with him. Another pair transferred Brinks. Reynolds commanded a soldier to gather the .50 cal machine gun, which had been located some twenty meters beyond the blasted Humvee. Two medics ran back to Adam, helped him to his feet and walked him quickly to the chopper. Dust whipped into his eyes. He wasn’t even seated and the Blackhawk was taking flight.

The chopper banked southeast, and as it ascended Adam could see people and things getting smaller. The American soldiers really looked like ants now, scampering and hustling back to their trucks and beginning to move south again. The Blackhawk
began veering east towards Baghdad while the Apache continued south with the remaining convoy. Another set of ants began to show from their holes and mounds, scattered individuals at first, becoming waves from all directions that ran towards the wrecked Humvee. It looked like a toy from above, and Adam saw thin smoke that he hadn’t seen from the ground. They would attack his truck, finish it off by either stripping it to the bones like crows or burning it as a symbolic gesture. Its remains would stay there for a while, a burnt out carcass, like all the other road kill. An odd thought crossed Adam’s mind about the beloved truck: *We thought you’d be like the Millennium Falcon, and you ended up like the Enterprise.*

As the Blackhawk continued to rise, Adam felt disembodied. Soldiers can be so one dimensional operating at ground level, so naive to what lies above.

He looked at Martins, who had an oxygen mask over his mouth, resting above his face because of the displaced jaw.

“Marty!” Adam yelled, and barely heard himself over the helicopter engine.

Something inside told him that Marty could not hear him anyway. He wanted so badly for Marty to hear his voice and to respond. Adam wished for him to say something, to impart some bit of wisdom via a reassurance. But if one didn’t have an intercom helmet on like the crew, the thumping and growling of the engines drown out all other noise, creating a silence that even the brain had to yell against to hear itself.

Adam realized Marty’s glasses had been left down there somewhere on the pavement, further and further away, smaller and smaller.
Adam drove in a trance, frosted like December glass. Monica sat back in her seat and alternated between looking out the window at the harvested corn and hay fields and indirectly looking at him. He hadn’t spoken much since they’d left Dick’s Drive-In, when their conversation had been light and fun. The atmosphere had brought up stories of teenage dating, and the mishaps each of them had had. Adam, for instance, had once stopped with a girl at McDonalds after a high school football game, and in his fervor to get out quick and open her car door for her, he’d forgotten to put the car in park. It was funny, but the embarrassment led to a cascading level of nervousness in him that made the girl uncomfortable. Monica relayed a story with the opposite point of view. She’d been picked up by Clyde Mulliman, the star running back of the mediocre football team, after a game and taken to a mom and pop drive-in. After he went back to the counter for seconds, he got caught up in a burger eating contest which really turned her off. Even though as adults they’d relaxed and not put that same pressure and importance on this similar experience, they both wondered in the back of their heads if it meant anything to the other person and amounted to anything between them.

The music on the country music station in Adam’s car dominated the conversation for a while, talking for both of them. She wasn’t particularly fond of country but
tolerated it, and didn’t know any of the artists or songs. First there was an old song sung by a deep-voiced male, touting the virtues of drinking a lying, cheating woman off his mind. Then there was another by a man asking his friends that if he should die before he wakes, they should feed Jake, because he’d been a good dog. And then there was a slow ballad by a woman, a widely known tune Monica had actually heard on a pop station about how no matter what happened between her and her man, he’d still be the one for her, the one she’d run to, the one she’d kiss goodnight.

Monica was mildly impressed at how Adam had kept his car clean, and not really surprised at how low-frill his auto was. No air conditioning? Really? That was almost unheard of nowadays, but that struck her as an extension of him. He was a Chevy Metro. She also wondered that if a Chevy Metro could transform like the Hulk when it got angry and smash every car on the road around it, what he would look like. It. She meant it. What it would look like.

Adam began to hit buttons for preset radio stations, quickly rejecting several across a spectrum of genres, finally landing on the rock and roll venue from Appleton, WAPL. That channel was in the middle of a commercial for another regional hamburger chain called Tom’s Drive-in. She noticed that Adam did not change it from here.

“Do you often go surfing for hamburger commercials?” she asked. “Personally I don’t think the jingle is that catchy. I prefer the ones for taco places. I don’t know if it’s because I just like tacos better than burgers or if taco commercials have better jingles.
Like Taco John’s. It just sticks in your head, and makes you want to go get a taco. It’s 
*Taco-Tuesday*, Taco-Tuesday, at Taco John’s.”

Adam smiled and glanced sideways at her.

“Uh, no,” he said, “I just didn’t like the songs on the other stations and simply felt 
like waiting it out on this one. And that song is weak compared to the Big Mac song.”

“So,” Monica asked, “some stations are worth waiting through commercials for while others aren’t? And what Big Mac song?”

Monica wondered after she said it if that question would be that transparent or if 
Adam would simply see it as about radio stations.

“Yes,” Adam said, “some radio stations are reliable and you know there will be a 
good song on when the commercials are done. Some are a gamble. And you know the 
Big Mac song.”

Ok, Monica thought, no way to tell if he’s playing along metaphorically or going 
literally.

“So do you flip through some people while waiting out others?” Monica asked.

“And do you mean that square record that came out in the 80’s?”

“I think some people can be skipped over right away,” Adam said. “And no, I don’t mean that stupid record which had the menu on it. I’m talking about the jingle 
about just the Big Mac’s ingredients.”

“Like people who eat an entire peanut butter cup supreme sundae by himself?”

Monica quipped. “And they made a song about the Big Mac’s ingredients?”
“Maybe more like people who like tacos better than hamburgers,” Adam replied.

“And it’s not a song like a radio song, it was a commercial jingle.”

“Well, duh,” Monica said spontaneously, “I know we’re talking about jingles, not songs.”

Adam gave her a squinted glare out of the corner of his eye, but said nothing. Monica noticed this. He could have a touchy side.

“Sorry,” she apologized, “not funny. I know burgers are serious business.”

Adam gave her a quick glance out the side of his eye and cracked a brief but fleeting smile.

“Really, what gives?” Monica asked.

“You….” Adam said as he guided the car around a corner, “You reminded me of someone, just then.”

“Oh,” Monica said, understanding what he was talking about. She had not only gotten him thinking about his deceased wife, she had made him draw a connection between them. That could be bad.

“Do you still think of her often?” she decided to ask, choosing to dive in rather than retreat.

“Every day,” he replied. “Without skipping a heartbeat.”

Monica leaned back in her seat and tucked her hand under her chin. “Tell me about her.”

“Wh-what?” Adam asked.
“Tell me about her,” Monica repeated. “Or tell me about thinking about her.”

“Well,” Adam started, and paused to wonder where to begin. “Well, when I was gone I would just think of her at night in my cot, when we were back at camp and things were finally quite. I would imagine myself sleeping next to her, and waking up in our own bed while she still slept. It was a huge bed, and she always slept on one side instead of near the middle. I guess I’m more of a snuggler, so I would always cross onto her half and pin her against the edge. She hated that. But she wrote me that while I was gone she did the same, scooted over and slept on my side of the bed, imagining I was there and pretending to snuggle me.”

“Do you still do that?” Monica asked. “I mean sleep like that.”

“It was worse when I got home, having all those pictures around in the empty house, and actually being in that bed and waking up alone. I sometimes would roll over and still expect my arm to fall across her waist. You can only get so close to an edge before you fall off it. There were times I woke up on the floor. Then I started sleeping on the couch mostly. I couldn’t stand living in that house without her there, so I had to sell it, had to move out. Sold the bed too.”

“You know what I kept from that house, though?” Adam asked.

Monica shook her head.

“I saved the answering machine,” Adam said. “Just as it was, with her voice on it as the outgoing message. I didn’t switch the tape, I got a whole new answering machine, just to save the old one.”
Monica sat quietly for a moment, not sure what to say.

“When you’re supposed to be getting over something,” Adam said, “nobody ever tells you what you should be keeping and what you should be pitching.”

Monica mulled over what he’d been saying, and how it seemed like now there was someone between them in the car. It was her fault in bringing it up, though, and hadn’t realized that just because he was single didn’t mean he was in the same situation as she was. It is easier for a divorcee to break the emotional ties than for a widower. She’d have to allow more time if she wanted to get to know Adam better. It was obvious that parts of him still longed for his wife, meaning that his heart was still occupied, and there was nothing she could do to displace it.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” she finally said. “It’s not your fault. You were off doing your job, serving your country for Christ’s sake. You can’t be everywhere, you can’t protect everyone. You can’t always see double-crosses coming. Sometimes you just have to relinquish it to the will of the world. Fate. Destiny. The Devine Plan, or whatever you believe.”

“I believe in relying on myself,” Adam said, “because then only one person can let you down. I believe that nothing is permanent. And I don’t believe in making promises because even the most well intentioned ones can be broken.”

“What kind of promise are you talking about?” Monica asked, and then realized that was a huge question.

“Nothing,” Adam answered. “I don’t mean anything, I was just generalizing.”
Monica doubted that.

They were driving on county highway 10 now, leaving what was collectively known as the Fox Cities area and heading east. The road could lead directly to Brillion if one stayed on it, or could branch off to Chilton, New Holstein, Kingsburg, and a number of other small towns if one chose.

Monica thought about Spencer as she looked out the window. Spencer liked Adam so much it was scary, and had been disappointed to not be able to accompany his mom with Adam on their drive. She’d been surprised when Adam had asked her, both in that he had asked her out, sort of, but also that he had invited her on a trip to the next county’s jail. That didn’t scream ‘date’ in her mind. Did that mean that Adam trusted her in a way that she wasn’t dateable material, that she was in the friend-zone? And for Spencer’s blind trust in Adam now, was that better for Adam to be a friend/uncle figure versus potentially a father figure? Oh, what a dirt bag his father was…

She felt Adam braking a little bit, and could see when she looked out the front windshield something on the road not too far off. It was a small animal, light gray, and sitting in the car’s path. It sidestepped a little, and Monica could see it was a rabbit. Adam gave the brake another small tap, decelerating a little more. The rabbit noticed the car coming then and took several hops to the right, onto the shoulder of the road. There it stayed as the car approached, until the Metro was almost beside it. The rabbit panicked then, taking one hop towards the ditch, but then inexplicably cut back onto the road. It got a foot onto the pavement and then froze.
There was a quick swerve of the car to the right, a quiet thump, and quick swerve left. It took Monica a moment to realize what the thump had been, and then another moment to realize that the rabbit hadn’t moved, the car had.

“Oh my god,” she exclaimed. “You just hit that rabbit.”

Adam was stone-faced and did not say anything. He pulled the car over and put it in park, looking down at the steering wheel.

“You hit it,” Monica said in disbelief.

“I guess it did get hit,” Adam said blankly, eyes on the steering wheel.

“No, no,” Monica said, aghast and pointing a finger. “You hit it.”

Adam suddenly got out of the car and started walking back to the spot some thirty feet behind them. Monica watched him in shock for a moment, then got out and followed him.

“What are you doing?” she yelled.

“Confirming something,” Adam said without lifting his gaze from the road. He scanned the immediate vicinity of the hit, then began to scan outward in a widening circle. It could have traveled in a straight line if only injured, or could have been projected out and forward if simply thrown from the impact.

“Confirming what?” Monica exclaimed.

“That I got him,” Adam said, scanning the ditch.

“What?” Monica exclaimed, whipping her hands around. “What???”
Adam did not reply, sure that he could not give a satisfactory explanation to her, or even come up with one. He had fully intended to simply go around or past the animal, to slow enough that it would be frightened away and then all would be fine. And it started to do that. It had followed its instincts and had begun to flee- at first. But then it stopped and made a move back. It cut back towards the car, towards danger. Why would any animal cut back? Why? It went against all survival instincts. And then the jerking of the steering wheel by him- that had also been…what…instinct? Reflex? He just did it without thinking.

“What does that matter?” Monica yelled. She had stopped, standing in place watching Adam search, then returned to the car as Adam began walking towards the ditch. She wasn’t sure if she didn’t want to see what may have become of the rabbit or if she just didn’t want to be near Adam now. It had all happened so fast, and his reaction had been both immediate and emotionless. She had struck animals before- raccoons, skunks, and even a deer that did some heavy damage to her car. But those had been accidents, had been unintended. She had felt guilty about them, even the raccoons, and always tried to avoid them. Hadn’t she? Hadn’t she put the brakes on? Did she care entirely if the animal lived or died? Had she done everything she could to avoid running over the small rodents, or had she just slowed a bit and said ‘oh, well’? “What does it matter?” she yelled to Adam again, perhaps asking herself the same question.

Adam didn’t answer because he didn’t have one. He didn’t know what it mattered, he just felt this compelling urge to know whether or not he had hit the rabbit.
He didn’t know if he wanted it to be alive or dead. What if it was wounded? Should he then feel compelled to help it in any odd way or should he finish it off? Would finishing it off be out of mercy or…?

There it was, lying in the ditch on its side.

It did not move. Adam walked up to it, and looked down. There was no reaction. There was no effort to flee. There was no movement of the chest, or the eyes. There was no blood. It was dead alright, and at least that he could be sure of.

Monica watched him from afar. She could tell he’d found it. Then he stood there and just looked at it. What was going through his head? What was he thinking, standing there looking at it? Remorse? Anger? Was it little things like this that made him snap? She could only see part of Adam’s face, as most of his back was too her, but what she saw looked tense and yet devoid of emotion, not because he had no emotion going on but because all of them were going on. Neutral was not just neutral, it was forces from every direction colliding at the same point and cancelling each other out. Zero was the sum of positive one and negative one. It was also the sum of a positive infinity and a negative infinity. His expressionless face was not the absence of anything; it was the sum of everything.

“Why?” she heard Adam say.

Yes, that was the same question she was asking of him. Or was it?

“Why??” he said again, louder.

Monica wondered then if the question he was asking was not introspective.
“Why???” he yelled, moving his hand from his mouth and directing an open palm at the rabbit carcass.

Was he asking the question of the rabbit, posing it to the universe, or demanding it of God? It could have been any, or it could have been all. Adam finally moved then, squatting down and grabbing the carcass by the hind legs. He stood and brought it up to face level.

“Why?” he asked quieter one last time, and then heaved the as far as he could throw it into the field alongside the road. He watched it fly, spinning and twisting and tumbling, and then landed on the plowed dirt and bounced once. He wondered if that were good enough, or if that were the proper place for it. It would rot there, into the dirt, and become part of an agricultural crop, then to most likely make its way through a farm animal and in some small degree through innards of a man, the cycle that Hamlet had once described.

Monica wanted to go to him to console him, and yet wanted to stay away from him, out of respect and confusion and…and she did not want to admit what else. Adam had purposely turned his back to her completely now. His head was down, and his body seemed to shudder. She could not tell if he was crying or about to cry or just quaking. After a minute of this he composed himself and walked back to the car. She got in right away, and tried not to look directly at him. From his gossamer reflection in the windshield she could detect no proof about his eyes, and little evidence of his presence likewise.
He put the car into drive and they silently drove on.

After a while, Monica thought she should speak.

“What did you mean by ‘kid?’” she asked.

“Kid?” Adam repeated.

“Yes, kid,” Monica said again. “Before you...before...you said something about a kid or called it a kid.”

“Oh,” was all Adam replied before falling silent again.

“Are you ok?” Monica asked.

Adam was not sure when he heard the question if she had meant at the moment or in general. Had there been something about him that had always struck her as not being ok?

“I’m not sure,” Adam whispered honestly.

The fields passed off to the sides in the dark, peripheral and alternating with each other, sprinkled with houses. They were not far from Kingsburg.

“Do I scare you?” Adam asked without looking at her.

If he’d have asked that just days ago, or weeks ago, she would have had an automatic answer, but now...

“I’m not sure,” Monica answered as quickly and honestly as she could. How could she describe what she felt? Uncomfortable seemed the only term she could grasp.
Adam, likewise, was hammered with embarrassment and carelessness and regret over inadvertently revealing something as potentially catastrophic as national secrets. He felt naked.

On their street Adam had first thought to pull into his own driveway since she was basically across the street, but decided it was rude to do that. His next thought was to pull into her driveway, but it seemed awkward to be backing the car out. He simply pulled it up to the curb and put it in park without turning the lights off.

He wanted to thank her for accompanying him on the original mission to the county jail, but somehow a thank you did not seem appropriate.

“Goodnight, Monica,” he said, making sure to use her name as a term of endearment.

“Goodnight, Adam,” she responded with a look of slight distress.

She shut the car door gently and made her way to her back door without looking back at Adam. As she turned from the car she spotted the houselights in the home next to Adam’s backlighting a figure in the window. Upon realizing he had been spotted, the figure withdrew from the window. Adam pulled the car into his own driveway.

Inside, he stared at the kitchen for a while. He stared at the kitchen table. There were four empty chairs. Empty yet not empty. Three had enough space to be occupied, and he felt expectant looks from them. They had reserved one chair just for him. *Come on, they beckoned, play with us tonight.*
Adam declined as he always did. He declined twice, three times. They insisted. Then he conceded and went to the bedroom for the apparatus of the game. He came back with the handgun and set it on its side in the center of the table. Adam looked around the table to offer each of the players the chance to deal, and as always it was left to him.

He spun the gun with a strong twist of his wrist and watched the barrel make its circle around the room. Was there a secret to which way it was pointing at the start and how forcefully it was spun? Perhaps. Perhaps a dealer could consciously or subconsciously rig the game so that he won or lost, but ultimately it was a game of chance. Ultimately the game decided itself.

The gun’s spinning slowed, and the barrel came to rest pointing at the chair opposite Adam. There’s our winner, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Adam picked up the gun and put it back in the drawer in the bedroom. From there he simply laid down in bed without taking his clothes off or brushing his teeth. He dreamt that night that he was driving some kind of vehicle. There was no perception of what, if it was military or civilian, but he was just holding a wheel and driving. Ahead, Spencer stood in the middle of his lane. Adam could not stop, could not decelerate, could not veer right. The only direction he knew he could go was left, and there in the left lane was his beast, large and hunched down with jaws low and agape. Its reptilian tail wagged in the air like an expectant dog. Spencer smiled and waved just his hand. Adam thought he would just let go of the wheel and let fate decide, but he could not pull his hands away. He decided to close his eyes then, and expect to feel a large impact or a smaller
one. When nothing happened, he opened his eyes in the dream and found himself back at
the starting point of the vision, again traveling toward Spencer. He gave the same smile
and wave. Close the eyes—restart. Close the eyes—restart. The cycle was finally broken
when Adam opened his eyes for real at four-thirty in the morning.

As he went out the back door for a run in the cool morning to clear his head, he
spotted one eye hovering in the blackness in the middle of the back yard. The silhouette
of the body and ears formed as his own eyes adjusted to the dark, and he could even
make out the nose twitching. How long was that standoff—ten minutes? Twenty
minutes? When Adam finally moved one of his feet, the animal jolted into a long series
of leaps without looking back. Hind legs over front, it bounced synchronously away, and
as Adam walked quickly to get a look, he saw that it did not halt in the next yard but kept
running until it was out of sight a few houses down. How far it went didn’t matter,
because it would come back when it wanted, and it had made its presence known to him.
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