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Bosnian Roulette

A naval-mine sat in the mud beside a crumbling house. The giant orb was almost as tall as the building it sat next to, and rust-colored prongs jutted from the red-gray metal. Deep tire tracks led away from the mine and, one by one, children in tattered clothes hopped those tracks, slapped the mine, and then sprinted to the back of the line. If we'd have stayed in the Humvee until we got where we were headed, we never would've seen any of it.

It was the third day of our first tour and all of the country we'd seen by then was mud and rubble, seemed like luck that it stopped raining long enough for tire tracks to set. We followed the tracks of vehicles that had preceded us and hoped they'd lead us to a paved road, but before we found pavement, we rumbled into the center of a shelled-out town where an old man stood ankle-deep in a mud puddle and waved his arms to flag us down

Cammack asked Sergeant Harris to hold up, and the Humvee rocked to a stop. Cammack kicked his door open, hopped out, and slogged over to the old man. The man pointed his bony finger: North, South, East, West. Since I wasn't driving, directions didn't matter to me. And when Cammack came back he said, "I don't know what the guy's saying, but he sounds upset." Black clouds stretched across the sky that morning, but no rain had fallen yet, so I told Cammack, "The old man should be happy. It hasn't rained in minutes." And Cammack told me, "Never mind," that he'd handle it himself, and then he walked back to the old man.

I don't know if it was boredom, guilt, or what, but I told Sergeant Harris, "I'd better watch Cammack's back," and I followed him out there, each step mashing a deep reminder of my size twelve jungle boots into the mushy earth. The old man talked fast and clasped his chapped hands to his chest. He pointed again, and we nodded and took off in that direction. Sergeant Harris

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shouted, "You know we've got some place to be?" But we waved him off and trudged toward whatever the old man wanted us to see.

Beyond a couple three-walled building husks was the house with a naval-mine resting against it. I'd never seen one on land before. And all I could think to say as I watched those children skip the tire tracks and slap the rusty orb was, "What the fuck is this? Bosnian Roulette," because sometimes you just say the first the dumb thing that comes to mind. That's when a dark-haired girl with a green scarf knotted around her throat smiled at me and tossed a baseball-sized chunk of concrete that plunked off the mine. Just before it hit, the old man covered his eyes and bit his lip so hard that blood trickled down his stubble-covered chin. Neither me or Cammack flinched when that rock hit the mine, and the kids kept hopping the deep ruts and laughing as they tugged at each others' frayed shirt tails and caused one another to slip in the drying mud.

We might have just turned around and walked away if the old man hadn't shoved a picture in Cammack's face and said, "Please, help." The only English I heard the man speak. Cammack nodded at the man, said, "Fuck," and shoved his weapon at me. "I think his wife's in that house," he said. The old man flashed the picture in front of my face, but I shook my head and told him to put the damn thing away. He stuffed it in his breast pocket whether he understood my words or not.

We should have been in the Humvee headed wherever our orders said we were headed, but I didn't say anything. I just shouldered both our weapons like a dumbass comic book hero as Cammack jogged across the yellow-brown earth and then went through the house's doorless entry. Children tossed more rocks, the old man shielded his eyes with his liver-spotted hands, and

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I'd like to say that in that moment I wondered where those children's parents were; I didn't think about their parents until long after my enlistment was up.

I've never worked with that kind of ordnance, so I can't say what it takes to set off a mine like that. It could have been a dud dumped there by some soldiers not unlike ourselves. They might have hauled it from the Adriatic and left it there because it was no longer a threat to anyone on land or sea. Maybe I could have fired fifty-cal rounds into the side of it for hours or hooked it to a crane and used it as a make-shift wrecking ball without ever being in danger. None of that really matters, though, because Cammack came back unharmed.

I handed Cammack his weapon, and the old man dropped to the ground. His knees splashed into the mud and then his face did. He rocked backward and looked up at us; sludge dripped from his forehead and saggy cheeks onto his button-down shirt. "There was nothing I could do," Cammack told me. "She was already dead." And then we left the old man in the mud, and we left those kids to their game, and we hustled back to the Humvee.

Talk was all we had to pass the time as we rode on, and soon Sergeant Harris wanted to know what happened. So Cammack told him about the picture of the old man's wife and about the kids smacking the naval-mine, that green-scarfed girl pelting it with rocks. He told him how he ran into the house and saw the woman's dead body on her bed, long black hair matted to a pale forehead slashed with decades of wrinkles. "She was dead before I got there," he said. And that was how his story ended.

Sergeant Harris told him, "You tried to help. You should feel good about that." And Cammack un-velcroed his flak-vest and rested his shaved head against the door. Then he asked me, "Should I feel good?" And I told him that I didn't know how he should feel. What I didn't tell

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him was that walking toward that mine on purpose was the dumbest thing I'd ever seen a grown man do.

Soon the mud we traveled over became paved roads and, though no one mentioned it, we never heard an explosion. If we had, we wouldn't have stopped because we had a job to do somewhere else, and when we got somewhere else, we did our job. And for the rest of our tour Cammack didn't leave the Humvee unless we were pissing, making camp, or had reached our destination.

Some people ask what happened to those children, and I tell them that a month later, on our way back, we rolled through that same town, and I asked Sergeant Harris to stop so I could take a piss. The rain had washed my boot prints away, but I didn't need those to find my way beyond the crumbling buildings that had hidden the children and the naval-mine from us before. The mine was still there, leaned up against the old man's house. I didn't see the old man, though. And I didn't see the kids.

It would have been romantic if that little girl's green scarf was tied to a lamp post or the picture of the old man's wife was half-buried in the mud. I could've brought one of those things home and shoved it in a drawer as a reminder of what could have been Cammack's last day, and what could have been my last day had the mine's blast radius been great enough to send shrapnel or a shockwave tearing through me while I helplessly pointed two M16s at the black-clouded sky. But there was no scarf and no picture. If there had been, I still wouldn't know what happened to those kids. Maybe some good people showed up and carted them off to a safer place. Maybe they're all dead. It's nice to think they could be alright, though. Because I never got a scratch, didn't stub a toe, or stay hungry for longer than it took to heat up an MRE.

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Some nights my whole body feels like it's turning in on itself: fingers pressing into knuckles, toes pressing into feet, heart contracting too tight and wet lungs deflating to squeeze out more air than I could've sucked in. All I can do to fight that is drink until I knock myself out. Sometimes that's enough. Other times, though, the booze makes me grab the phone and start to dial Cammack's number so we can talk about that day when he ran into the old man's home. But I never finish dialing. It's been ten years since we left that place behind, and he might not remember any of this. I'd forget it all if I could, and I'm not going to be the jack-ass who makes Cammack remember things that could've happened when there are enough things that did happen to deal with. What matters is that we were all fine when we made it home. All of us. And if I'd kept my mouth shut, you could have stared at us forever and never known we'd been to war.

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Boots

Each day after PT, Rake and I polish boots. We sit on my back porch, open our tins of Kiwi and pour cool water into the lids. We stuff our right hands into white tube socks, dip the socks in polish and then water. We shove our left hands into the bottom of the boots and rest the boots on our left thighs. We swirl small circles on the toes until the sun's reflection becomes a few stars that burst off the boots, and then we grab our brushes and sweep until those few stars become two—one star for each of us. Then we polish the heels, and then the next boots. And when the polishing is finished, we pass the time talking about the day that Cammack died.

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Frayed cloth fragments, red-wet flesh ribbons that stream from arms and legs, cracked shingles, hunks of jagged concrete and shattered bits of stone. Black smoke billows from a hole in the earth, and the heat of a fire beneath the smoke presses out into the cool spring air. Rake tells Sergeant Harris, "Cammack had a smile on his face when he walked out the door." And Sergeant Harris spits a stream of tobacco juice into a yellow-brown mud puddle and says, "Dumb fucker." Sergeant Harris stuffs a pinch of wintergreen Skoal behind his bottom lip. He leans against the Humvee's hood for a short while and then shakes his head. He spits again, nods a couple times, and then tells us to get in the Humvee.

"We're leaving him?" Rake asks.

"Pick up as much of him as you want," Harris says.

A blonde-haired scalp is draped over a chunk of stone, a split jawbone rests in a mud puddle inches from a cracked glass bottle. The mud has absorbed most of the blood but isn't deep enough to swallow the body parts. A jump boot stands erect, a shin sticks out the top; just below

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where the knee should be is a bit of BDU fabric; the blousing strap still clings to the boot despite the fact that the explosion sent the rest of the boot's owner somewhere else. "There's some of him," Sergeant Harris says. The other boot lies on its side twenty yards away. Sergeant Harris points at the other boot. "There's some, too."

Rake wraps his fingers around the barrel of his M-16 and squeezes a layer of mud away then flips it at the ground.

"We're lucky he didn't get anyone else killed," Harris says.

Rake snorts. "Are all these body parts invisible to you?"

Harris squats over Cammack's weapon and says, "I meant one of us."

Rake straddles the shin-filled boot. A breeze sweeps through and the frayed cloth of the BDU pants flutters. Black clouds drag across the sky, and a few side-swept rain drops hit my cheeks. Rake grabs the boot, most of which is covered in mud, but the toe is clean enough for Rake to see the reflection of his stubble-covered jaw. He strokes his chin and says, "That motherfucker could polish a boot."

"Drop that," Harris says. "Unless you plan on stacking the whole man on top." Then he peels Cammack's weapon from the mud.

Rake drops the boot between his feet. He is surrounded. A thumb, ring finger, and middle finger connected to a bit of hand rest beside a copper soup pot; a child's arm blown off at the shoulder extended as if reaching for something; a rib cage half-covered in flesh, tangled bowels that leak from a charred torso, unnamable white and pink bits. Singed pieces of paper soak up red mud and the fire that rages in the center of the mine crater wisps into view as the smoke begins to thin out. "Senior Airman Cammack," Rake says. "A real American hero."

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Rake sometimes says we should have grabbed all the pieces and tossed them into the fire that raged in that crater because, "It would've been the closest thing to a respectful ceremony we could get done." But we didn't burn anything. We dropped Cammack's boots in the mud and hopped back in the Humvee and drove North, away from it all like it never happened because even though we'd lost Cammack, it was his fault for being dumb enough to think he was going to make a difference in the lives of children who spent their time tossing rocks at naval mines.

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Rake saw some things I did not. He saw Cammack die, saw him step out of that house with a smile on his face. His flak helmet tilted slightly forward, almost covering his blue eyes. Children tossed hunks of rock at the naval-mine and each thump of rock on metal should have been a reminder of how dumb it was for Cammack to go into that house. But Cammack was already in. An old man had flashed a photograph of a woman in Cammack's face, and Cammack had said, "The old guy's wife is in that house," and he went in after a woman he wasn't even sure was real. A girl with a green scarf knotted around her throat heaved a rock at the mine, and Rake watched it float toward that naval-mine while Cammack took his first step out of the house. His lips moved, and he said something Rake couldn't hear. All Rake saw were thin lips forming the last words Cammack would ever say.

The old man knelt on the wet ground and covered his face, twenty children tossed rocks, and Rake held a weapon in each hand. Rake had enough ammunition to kill each of those children. He could have dropped the weapons from his shoulders and fired round after round into each of the kids until they dropped lifelessly into the mud. They all died anyway, and if they

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were all dead, none of them would be able to throw rocks at the mine; Cammack could've walked the rest of the way over to Rake, and said something like, "She was already dead," and then we could've left the dead children and the old man behind and got on with the mission.

But Rake didn't shoot the children. And he didn't aim at each of the rocks those kids tossed at the naval-mine and blast them out of the sky so that they burst like flak and became shards and dust that fluttered to the soggy ground. The only thing I'm sure Rake did while I wasn't there was that he did not die. I imagine all the rest.

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When Sergeant Harris and I got to the blast site, body parts were everywhere. A shin was sticking out of Cammack's boot; the boot was a couple steps away from the smoldering ruins of the house he'd walked out of. The crease in the boot made it look like he was taking a step when the mine went off. His shin was there, like a skin-and-bone flower with camo petals that drooped haphazard around its red, white, and black center. His scalp clung to a rock, short blonde hairs still gelled into tiny spikes. The other boot had been blown twenty yards away. It was tipped over and looked empty. Rake and Harris talked about what had happened. "What an idiot," and so on. I walked over to the boot that rested on its side and picked it up. There was nothing in it, nylon laces slashed in half. I wiped gore and mud from the toe with my thumb and saw the reflection of my hairless chin in the glassy blackness. Rake had picked up the other boot by then. He'd asked about what we were supposed to do. Harris said, "Get in the Humvee." And we dropped the boots, got in the Humvee, and rode on.

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This isn't fascination. We don't want to remember children's body parts splattered all over a muddy town center. It's not an obsession with understanding why these things happened, it's not camaraderie or love for a man who's seen the same horrible things you've seen. Rake and I don't pause when we finish polishing one boot and look each other in the eye and just *know* something. If we did, I'd say it was coincidence.

The closest thing I have to an explanation is that once we were polishing our boots and Rake said, "I've polished these bastards for three years now and they still don't shine the way Cammack's did." He didn't say that because he misses Cammack. We don't polish our boots because we miss Cammack. We don't tell Cammack's story over and over because we want to remember Cammack. Rake's talking about boots; he's pissed that he can't shine his boots as well as a man who was dumb enough to walk into a house that had a naval-mine propped against it.

And maybe Rake thinks he needs to polish his boots better than Cammack did or he'll die in a stupid way—a thought that hinges on whether or not there are ways to die that aren't stupid. I polish my boots because I love dipping the sock in polish and water, making tiny circles, and beating the brush across the leather. I love the way the smell of polish fights bonfire smoke in fall and smothers honeysuckle in summer. I love that I can step into my boots because Cammack died and I did not. I love that I barely knew him, and most of all, I love that I can still say I don't miss Cammack at all.

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Waiting for the Enemy

We tumbled from the C-130's open tailgate and slashed through the night clouds that had hidden us from the desert airfield below. The plane's engines thrummed and drowned us in sound until we'd fallen so far that those thick rumblings were swallowed by the air that rushed past our ears and the rippling and popping of our DCU fabric. We dropped farther still, and our chutes spilled open and bloomed, the nylon cords snapped taut, and we glided to the sand—the same way we'd done on training jumps, the same way we'd done on earlier missions, and the same way we did when we dropped into the desert many times after.

That night Rake and I landed first. Our boot heels plowed into the loose sand until we skidded stopped, and we ditched our packs and slipped over the sandy, cracked asphalt, weapons pressed into our shoulders, ready to fire at whatever resistance waited. Rake and I peeled from the group and took the control tower; the rest of the guys took everything else. No one fired a shot because there was no one there to stop us from doing what we'd been sent to do. After we cleared the tower, Rake and I stomped down the stairwell, and our footfalls reverberated like mammoth springs because when there is no enemy, there is no need for stealth. We made it back into the desert night and leaned against the tower's painted cinderblocks. With the tower under our control, all that was left to do was watch the fence line and wait.

Strapped into the jump seat earlier that night I'd imagined descending on an enemy that screamed and blasted rounds into the sky, shouting about Allah and infidels, about oil and blood, about something worth defending. I hadn't considered being confronted with nothing because I wanted, and still want, to believe someone would stick around to fight if my home was invaded. But no one was there to challenge us, and soon our backs grinded down the tower wall and we

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sat on the rough concrete, rested our weapons across our knees and joked that we'd fight this war against a soldier-less army on our asses. To pass time we invented a firing position: the Lazy Ranger. Raise the barrel of your weapon just above dick level and fire indiscriminately. If you hit anything, good. If not, there'd be nothing to feel bad about because you hadn't tried that hard. No enemies came, though. So our firing position went untested. And I doubt a round would've been fired at all if that camel hadn't tumbled down a sand dune that was in our line of sight.

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We shifted our resting spots with the shade as it wrapped around the tower, the first day just staring at things: our tan, fleshout leather boots we didn't have to polish, fly swarms that hovered in the distance like frozen smoke, razor wire that spiraled along the base of the fence, weaving in and out of rusty tank tacks. We didn't talk much because there was little to say about the not-fighting that surrounded us. So I lived inside my head not talking about how Rake had recently stomped the shit out of the new guy who'd fucked our dead friend's wife. This was the first time the new guy had dropped in with our stick, and I wondered if Rake might be worried that the new guy would try to get revenge on a deployment, in this place where it was possible to shoot a man in the back and maybe never be questioned. I worried that Rake might try and frag the new guy in order to make sure the new guy didn't frag Rake first. But it never came to that. Those thoughts were probably in my head because of too many movies—*Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*. We needed everyone who was there—even the guys we hated. If we made it back home, then we'd name the new guy and he'd earn the right to get back at Rake. The new guy might've had a harder time blowing Rake's teeth through the back of his skull and getting away with it at home, but the fear of repercussions might've made him search for a more

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civilized path to justice, a path that wouldn't cause permanent damage to Rake—maybe even revenge we'd all laugh about once we'd grown too old and tired to fear one another physically.

I thought about those things because of the silence and the waiting. Until the ground pounders showed up with their tanks and trucks, we were stuck to that control tower like it was a womb. Once they arrived, we'd climb onto a transport and ride on to the next FOB. And if there wasn't a FOB where we were headed, we'd fill and stack sandbags until a FOB sprouted around us. Then we'd get our orders from a sat-phone and handle whatever came next and no matter what the plan was, it would change. Soldiers would die, go missing, get captured, be stupider than they were trained to be. And that's fine. In the moment, I deal with mistakes. Motion of the body is easier for me to handle than motion of the mind. And if I have to have a reason, that's why I'm forcing these thoughts out. I want to say them well enough so that they'll take on bodies of their own and hopefully be kind enough to walk out of my head and leave some space for the memories I want to spend my time with.

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The sun was still up on the second day when that camel clopped over the dune. It looked goofy, kind of drunk in the way its shoulders shuffled and its head bobbed with its steps. Rake laughed and said, "Never thought I'd see one of those outside a zoo."

"This feels like a zoo to me," I said. "All we're doing is sitting around and hoping someone shows up to carry us away."

Rake dropped his flak helmet between his legs and scratched it over the concrete toward his crotch. "But we're inside the fence."

"Yeah," I said. "So the camel's here to see us."

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“You and the goddamn camel are confused.”

“Help me see clearly then.”

“What pisses Kahlua and has tits that squirt Grape Vodka?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re in Sandghanistan, and there’ll be all kinds of shit for us to shoot at soon enough.”

The camel was forty yards away, but nothing else moved out there. So in my memory, in the unending emptiness of that desert, the flatness of the airfield surrounded by sand that crests and tumbles into more sand, yellow-gray and infinite, that camel stands a hundred feet tall. Its shadow creeps black and long across the dune it bumbles down, and it seems a miracle that any of the world’s light escapes the gravity of that shadow. I’ve seen a child’s headless body smashed against the spidered windshield of a rust-pocked car, a mother and father bound to chairs in a roofless, three-walled building who stared at their dead son—his pale throat draped in caked blood, and an old woman angrily stabbing a charred soldier’s corpse with a hoe, shouting, “Before you there was no danger here.” Not one of those things are as dark in my remembrance of them as the silhouette that camel cast over the side of the sand dune as it lumbered toward the fence. But that’s no mystery. I saw the camel before it reached the bottom of the dune, before it stumbled and rolled into the razor wire. I never had a chance to change what happened to the headless child, to the boy and his family, or to the soldier or the woman who wanted to hurt him after he was already dead.

When that camel rolled down the dune and into the razor wire, Rake laughed and said, “That humpy bastard reminds me of the new guy.”

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I laughed because that comment was the beginning of something more than silent waiting, something we could hold on to even after we'd made it home. But when the camel tried to stand, it caught its front left leg on the razor wire, and when it stepped forward, one of the blades dug in. I remember saying, "Jesus," and looking to Rake. He'd un-velcroed his flak-vest and was scratching his chest through his sweat-stained undershirt. The camel grunted and tugged harder than it had the first time and then fell onto the glinting wire. It flopped onto its side, kicking sand and bashing its head against the ground. Eventually it rolled to its belly and then bellowed as it tried to stand, but the wire had cut too deep into the ankle or it was wrapped around the foot in such a way that the camel could not push itself up to standing. When the camel toppled again, Rake pulled his vest snug, set his flak helmet over his face. All I saw were his stubble-covered lips and chin and he said, "Wake me up when this bullshit's over."

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A chain-link-fence stood between us and the sand where the camel struggled to free itself. One of the few things I'd learned from my father before he died was that it isn't smart to get close to wounded animals—especially large ones. Instinct makes animals fear those who near them when they're injured, and they don't have the ability to know if you're trying to help or hurt them. So I wouldn't have tried to step out there and cut the razor wire to free the thing even if I could have; I didn't live through firefights and nights of mortar shells hammering the earth all around me to parachute into the desert and get my face smashed in by a camel hoof. And I shouldn't have been surprised that the thing strained against the wire and cut itself deeper, wrapped itself tighter with every grunt and roll. But each time the camel kicked in the sand and the wire tore deeper into the skin around its ankles and flanks, I hoped it would break loose, that

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it would be the one camel to figure it out for all camels—some kind of dromedary prophet that would shake free from the razors and trot away to teach all camels how to do the same.

Just before the last light of that day burned off, Rake flipped his flak helmet off his head, licked his chapped lips and said, “Dumbass animal.” He stood, set his weapon into his shoulder, then aimed at the camel and fired. I thought he was shooting at the camel’s head. He could have fired one round and ended it, and then we could have both waited in silent mourning for the ground forces to show up. Rake was a good shot. Not the kind of marksman they talk about on television, not like all those assholes who hid outside malls or in towers and shot oblivious civilians. Most of those guys earned marksmen badges because they shot a paper target once or twice a year. Rake was near-perfect every time he fired a weapon, on the range and in combat. So when he stood and aimed his weapon, I exhaled in relief. I thanked a god I almost never talked to then and never talk to now for convincing Rake to end the camel’s pain. But Rake didn’t shoot the camel in the head. He shot the camels’ front left leg off at the knee. Then he set his weapon on the ground and said, “That’ll get blood flowing in the right direction.”

The camel groaned and kicked with its remaining legs and swept its spiny, red-white nub that oozed blood across the sand. I could’ve taken my weapon over there and shot that animal in the head, but I did nothing except hope the sun would tire of shining down on such an ugly scene and tumble over the horizon so I could pretend a camel wasn’t bleeding to death just beyond the fence. And before long, the sun did set, but it only made things worse; the camel didn’t die. All night, dull, pain-soaked sounds swirled toward us in the cool desert air. Each gust of wind that sprinkled my face with sand grains carried the moans of that bleeding and trapped animal.

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The next morning the camel was wrapped tighter than the day before—razor wire around its belly, around its throat. A few times it thrashed against its bonds and kicked up dust clouds that hung in the air for a moment or so before the wind shoved them off into the desert. After the third time the camel shuffled, Rake aimed at the camel and fired. He shot it in the belly, and the camel was silent. I hoped it was finally dead because I didn't want to see it that way any more. With it dead we could just wait out the rest of our time, backs to the tower wall, and then get on with this deployment. Go do whatever it was we'd flown all the way to the desert for, and then go back home and figure out how we'd spend our down time before we'd be sent to another desert, or jungle, or wherever the hell they wanted us to go next.

Heat waves slithered off the sand in the distance, and sweat beads dripped from my thighs, rolled down my shins and calves. My neck and back oozed and Rake and I pounded bottle after bottle of warm water from the case we'd been rationed in the middle of the night. We pissed into the sand on the side of the tower where the sun shone, and breathed in the ammonia-filled air that the sun had baked out of the urine-soaked sand. As the day spun on, we crept with the shadow that wrapped around the tower's base until we were again staring in the direction of the camel. And once the sun had dropped low enough so that our shadows stretched until they were swallowed in the darkness of the swelling night, the camel thrashed again.

“How the fuck is it still alive?” Rake asked.

I said nothing. But I wanted that camel dead. I could've done something a long time before it got to the point it was at that night. We'd sat there, waiting, anxious for the tread heads to arrive, so they could commandeer this airbase, so the Air Force could launch A10s and F16s and whatever else they wanted to send into the desert ahead of us and blast any serious resistance

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into steel-and-flesh shrapnel. We had no idea how long it would be before they arrived, and it was always hard—the waiting. But we would have been fine if that camel hadn't clopped down the side of a sand dune and stumbled into the razor wire right in front of us.

Night had drowned the world in purple-black when I stood and headed toward the sound of the razor wire, the near-silent jingle as it wobbled in the breeze. I stopped at the fence line but even from that short distance half the camel's face was all I could see; it had grinded the right side of its face into the sand: one eye set far back on its head, an ear that flapped as if to shake off flies that weren't there, a cleft upper lip, and a blood-caked nostril. It breathed slowly, sucking sand grains into the exposed nostril and blasting them out with each breath. Razor wire had stripped patches of flesh off its rear right leg and had chewed so deep into its flank that the pink-white of still-living ribs shown like some kind of cage that would not let that animal's life escape. The wounded leg and the hole in its belly were caked in sand-filled-blood, and I guess it was the sand that helped form clots and slow the bleeding.

The moon was full, tacked into the sky and shining so bright that stars were hard to see. The camel's bloodshot eye reflected that moon, and I thought about taking tin-snips and clipping enough links so that I could squeeze through the fence and reach down to touch the camel's face, to feel the coarse hairs on its belly near where the round went in. I thought about kneeling there, getting close so that I could feel its hot breath on my face and whisper into its ear that I was sorry for not ending its pain sooner, sorry for razor wire and the necessity of blood, sorry for the possibility of hell and sorrier still for the possibility of nothing. But when I finally raised my weapon to aim at the camel's head, the crack of gunfire sounded behind me, and the wind of a round swished past my leg and the top of the camel's head burst and scattered across the dark

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sand farther up the dune. The camel's ribs deflated then. And there was nothing left for me to do but head back to the tower, sit, and wait for someone to take me away.

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One night, a couple years before Rake got so drunk that he broke his back trying to sit on a chair that was no longer beneath him, before he was medically discharged, before his ex-wife found him dead from an OD on muscle relaxers, I asked him about that first night in the desert. We'd driven out to the abandoned drive-in to drink and stare at the silhouettes of trees and mountains in the moonlight, to listen to the crickets and to the wind, shaking leaves loose from cold-cracked branches. We didn't talk much because we'd almost run out of things to say by then. There was no unspoken understanding, though. We'd formed no bond that only soldiers can form from living through combat together. So I can't say what it was that made Rake want to spend time with me; I never asked him. But I felt something like comfort sitting near him in the darkness, in a place where I had nothing to fear but my own thoughts and knowing that he'd never try and force them out of me.

I'd fished the last beer from the Styrofoam cooler and Rake had just plopped back onto the tailgate after pissing on one of the yellow, drive-in speaker poles. The shocks squeaked as he settled and when they went silent I said, "Remember that camel that wouldn't die?"

He set his beer between his thighs and said, "Hadn't thought about that in years."

"Sometimes I think about it when I see a dog or deer smashed all over the freeway."

"Out of all the shit we saw, why would you think about that?"

"Don't know," I said. "Maybe I'm in love with camels."

Jennings

“Maybe.” Rake grabbed his beer, sucked the swills from the can, and then crushed it.

“You think about any of the guys who got their asses blown off?”

“No,” I said. “I hated most of those fuckers.”

“Well that was just a camel.” Rake tossed the crumpled can over his shoulder, and it clanked against the bed-liner. “It shouldn’t be hard for you to hate that fucker, too.”

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It’s been years since I’ve been to the desert, and I’m sure the carcass is gone, sun-bleached bones scattered over the sand like the round casings, empty water bottles, and boot prints we left behind. But even though that camel is gone from where I watched it die, there are a lot of nights when I see it headed down that sand dune, toward the razor wire, and I want to crack my skull open so I can crawl inside and tell that camel to turn back. It’s funny to me that I’ve become this man who sits alone on his porch, thinking about screaming sense into an animal that died years ago. Because even in my memory, this thing I can use words to mold into whatever I want it to be, the camel’s too goddamned stupid to know I want to help. It always stumbles, and moans, and bleeds until its head explodes. And it makes no difference if I can make you see the camel thrash against those razor-lined bonds. See its blood drip from the jagged points that smack sun-flashes into the sky. See that camel rise and shake free from the shimmering wire that pins it to the desert and then lumber up the dune and melt, one heavy footfall at a time, down into the sand that shifts toward the horizon. See nothing but the glinting razor teeth scattered across the base of that dune where the camel should have suffered long and slow until it bled dry. It makes no difference if you can see that camel’s footprints trail off into the desert, because those footprints were never there. They only headed toward the fence; I can’t make them go away.

Jennings

The Last Story My Father Told Me

The green Astrovan in the driveway means Dad's home. I wouldn't care, but I dropped Devon and Eric off at their party, so I'm alone. I lean on the mustang's hard-top and stare at the house's tan stucco walls. There's nothing waiting in there except words I don't want to hear. If I'm lucky, Dad will have already climbed into bed with Mom, and I'll be able to just watch TV for a few hours. But I'm not lucky. Dad boots the screen door open, and I consider hopping back in the mustang and driving over to Steve-without-a-T's place and then onto Palmdale to get some rocks. Dad wouldn't chase me if I drove off, but I haven't seen him in three days, and I figure something is up because normally he's gone a lot longer than this.

He retired from the Air Force four years ago, and still it's strange not seeing him in a brown T-shirt and BDU bottoms. Now he always wears washed-out jeans and T-shirts with frayed collars and somehow that makes him seem less human.

"The recruiter?" The words blast out from under his bushy brown mustache.

"Yeah," I say. "Devon wanted to join the Coast Guard."

He puts a big hand on his stomach and laughs. "What the hell would he want to do that for?" The screen rattles shut behind him as he steps onto the driveway. "Got a rabbit caught in your bumper there."

I turn and see the blood-caked ears and bucked-teeth. The little tongue hangs out the mouth, and the only thing that would make it look more comical would be little Xs on its eyes.

"That's the new style, old man. All the cool kids are doing it."

Dad walks over and tugs it free. "Take this out into the desert. I don't want coyotes digging through our trash."

Jennings

The mangled thing dangles from his fist, eyes open—like it's looking right at me. I snatch it by the ears, and Dad lets go and wipes his hand on the front of his jeans. "You gave him your real name, dumbass."

"What?"

He slides his short-clipped fingernails over the gray-specked stubble on his neck. The sound is rough like teeth scratched over cement. "Petty Officer Tiller left a message."

"Good." I head off toward the edge of our yard where the yellow grass meets sand and cracked pieces of foundations that shattered before they ever had a chance to support anything.

"After all the shit I told you," he calls out. "You still have to see for yourself."

"Yep," I say and keep moving.

The horizon is purple and orange, but there's not enough light to illuminate much more than humps of sand and red rocks. It'll all be silhouettes soon and then I'll be stuck in the house with Dad unless I get in the car and drive somewhere. But there's nowhere to go. Devon and Eric get play, and I'm tossing a dead rabbit into the desert. The ears are slick from my palm sweat and the floppy body raps against my thigh with every step. I kneel and set it beneath the first Joshua tree I come to—branches reached up like it's celebrating some kind of victory. To the victors go the dead rabbits. I drop the corpse by the trunk and head back home.

*

Dad's on the couch, steel-toed Doc's propped up on the coffee-table, glass of Wild Turkey in his hand. That whiskey's the only thing we don't touch, and I wonder how long that'll last.

Devon drinks anything, and the longer he's here, the less he'll hold back. Not that it matters. Dad used to give Devon whiskey whenever he came over, liked to watch him cringe when the fire lit

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up his throat. It was funny the first few times, but Dad hit that same note over and over until it sounded hollow. Maybe I expect too much from him. He entertains himself, though. That's probably all anyone can hope for.

"Sit down," he says. The TV flashes lights over his face. Green and red and white highlights the wrinkles in his forehead; they look like deep black trenches.

"Gotta head out," I say. "Just wanted to say bye to Mom."

"She's out for the night." He pats the couch. "Hang for a few, boy. It's been a while."

"Is that my fault?"

"No." He turns the tumbler to his lips and ice cubes clank against the glass. He presses his shoulders back into the couch like he's puffing up to impress me. "I need to talk to you."

Talks with him are like bad sex-ed movies. The title says it's going to explain things, but afterward you're more confused and disgusted than if you'd just made it up yourself. "What?" I sit on the couch, throw my arm over the armrest and the wood frame beneath the worn fabric presses into my ribs.

A baseball game's on. The pitcher snatches the rosin bag from the foot of the mound, tosses it up and catches it. White powder dusts his green uniform and hangs in the air around his head like mist for a moment then disappears as he drops the bag beside the rubber and adjusts his cap. A couple white fingerprints stick to the brim like bleached-bones.

"Joining's not always a bad thing." He takes a drink and sniffs, rattles cubes against the glass. "A lot of guys join for good reasons." He sets the glass on the end table. "But you need to understand where guys like me were coming from."

Jennings

"You felt like a pussy because you missed out on Vietnam." I expect to get backhanded, but only because I always expect that. The last time he hit me I was eleven and had left my bike behind the van in the driveway. He backed over the bike and bent the tires. I deserved to get hit for doing something so stupid, but Mom gave him hell. He bought me a new bike the next day and never hit me again—threatened to plenty of times but never followed through. Devon was the one who always showed up to school with bruises. Talks about his problems at home never got very far, though. He'd deflect the subject, make it seem like no big deal.

"I was lucky I was too young, moron." Dad pulls his feet off the table and leans forward. "I didn't storm the beach at Normandy, either. And I'm not ashamed I missed out on that."

The pitcher shakes off a sign then hangs a curveball high and tight. The lanky batter turns on his heel and sends the ball over the fence in right center. Devon shook signs off all the time. Hit so many guys on purpose that guys he wasn't trying to hit would fall down in the box when he threw curve balls. Eric bitched about Devon shaking him off so much, but what can you do when the pitcher's right? This fool on TV is too confident. That ball in the bleachers should help him remember how special he is. More special than me. He's on TV, and I'm just watching. He gets the chance to give up big hits, and I'll never even get to do that. Good for him.

Dad says, "Where's Devon?"

"With Eric."

"He's moving in with them?"

"No," I say. "They'll be back later."

Dad stares at the TV. "I'm not going to keep paying for him to stay here. It's bad enough I don't charge you rent. You've been out of school for a damn year already."

Jennings

"What the fuck do you pay for? He's not flushing the toilet twenty-four hours a day or irrigating the desert. I pay for the food we eat. The AC wasn't even on until you came home."

Dad scratches his chin. "Who the hell do you think pays the mortgage?"

"I have a job," I say. "Sign the house over. You're never around, anyway."

Dad slides his feet off the table, leans forward and grabs the bong then says, "How much longer do you think you're gonna have a job while this shit's around. He's not helping keep you straight."

"You always think it's someone else," I say. "I bought it."

He smirks at the bong, spins it around like if he turns it enough it'll morph into something he wants it to be—a bottle of whiskey, a more interesting life, a son who admires him. "I just don't understand how you could go for this kind of shit."

All I can think about when he starts to lecture me are stories of him blazing at Floyd concerts, Hendrix concerts and Iron Butterfly concerts. He's told me these stories since I was eight. His whole life was smoking, drinking, and listening to music, and he can't believe that saying things like, It was the best night of my life, would interest me. You can't erase that with, Don't do as I do. Jimmy Hendrix on stage with lights and explosions, a deep voice growling out, I am the Fire God—things like that get seared into a kid's head. Thank God he never bought me a guitar or a drum kit. Then I might be really fucked up. It's bad enough I thought I was going to play baseball for a living. I was just another third baseman who couldn't knock the ball over the fence. Why the hell I believed being part of a winning team had anything to do with my chances of success, I'll never know. There'd be no stars without teams. But without stars no one would

Jennings

give a shit about the game. No one wants to watch average players compete. I've watched middle-aged men play softball. It's no mystery why they drink during those games.

"I should have been harder on you," he says. "Your mom couldn't stand to see you punished. But I should have done more. My old man would have beat my ass if I'd have talked to him the way you talk to me."

His old man was probably around enough to beat him. I say, "If you want to beat me now, it would round out the day. You can make up for lost time and see how much I improve between now and the next time I see you. Next year or whenever you feel the need to drop by and let me know I'm a piece of shit. My birthday would be good."

He laughs out his nose, sets the bong on the table and picks up his glass of whiskey. "You want a shot or a glass?"

I shake my head. "Neither. It tastes like ass." He thinks this is bonding. If Devon and Eric were here, Dad would be asking about baseball games, Remember that no-hitter in Trona? He loves to talk about the way I made that backhanded grab on the third base line and threw off my back foot to get the runner at first. Devon was unhittable that day, but if I'd have missed that grounder, it would have ruined it for him. Some days I wish I'd have let it hop by. Not that it would have made a difference. That no-hitter didn't get Devon into college.

Dad pushes himself off the couch and goes to the kitchen for another drink.

"Listen," he calls. Ice cubes plink into the glass and the bottle cap squeaks as he twists it off. "Your grandpa never told me anything about our history." He walks around the corner and sits back on the couch. "I just wanted you to know where you came from."

I say, "Let's not make this a cheese fest."

Jennings

He sighs and takes another drink. "I told you why I joined."

"Join the military or go to jail is what you said. Or was that like one of your Nam stories where you left out the part where you were never there."

He sets the glass down, grabs the remote and turns off the TV. "I never lied about Vietnam," he says. "You heard what you wanted to hear."

"Sure," I say. "We jumped out of helicopters into the water. You meant the royal we, of course. As in we are America. We did it together. We didn't win in Vietnam, but at least we lost as a team."

He rolls his eyes. "Don't act so fucking smart."

I squeeze the loose fabric on the couch arm and roll my head back. "So you never lied about Vietnam. It was all in my head."

"What do I have to hide? I'm not ashamed of what I do."

"You shouldn't be ashamed of your job." I lean forward, stare at a picture hung above the TV stand. Mom's sitting on Santa's lap. Dad's dark mustache peeks through the false white beard. She's got a leg kicked up, her head's thrown back and she's laughing. Not a mom I remember. "You've got too many other things to be embarrassed about."

"Are you finished?" he asks. "I wanted to explain something to you." He taps his index finger on the tumbler a couple times. "You gonna listen or should we just sit here and watch the ball game?"

"Let's hear the revelation." I want to leave, want to be with Devon and Eric, be doing anything besides sitting here and listening to some half-drunk sentimental explanation for why

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he is and I am and we are and all of that. Here's our new history, son; it's all a goddamn lie. *We* are nothing.

Dad nods. "I used to beat this kid's ass on the way to school every morning—Charlie Morgan. He just took it, but if he would have fought back, I'd have moved on."

"He was smaller than you I bet."

"He was, but that wasn't why I hit him. Weakness." He pokes me in the shoulder. "That was the reason." Dad takes another drink, sets the half-empty glass on the coffee table. "I had a friend—Rake? I've told you about him. Used to go to bars and tear beers out of guys' hands, chug them in the guys' faces and then smash the empty bottles over their heads."

These guys always have names like Rake or Dent. It's impossible for me to buy any of it, but stopping him's not worth it. "Yeah," I say. "You told me about him."

Dad tugs at his mustache. The taut hairs yank his upper lip away from his teeth. He lets it snap back and licks his lips. "So," he says. "We went to Charlie's house a year after we graduated. Rake's girlfriend was there. She was fucking Charlie and Rake knew it. I didn't know where I was going at the time, just got in the car and went. It was the thing to do. Work at the lumber yard all day and then drive around drinking beers to pass the time until you woke up to do it all over again."

"Sounds manly," I say.

He nods and clears his throat. "It was. Not like the pussy-footing around you little shits do. We got to Charlie's house and the door was unlocked. Rake walked in like he was invited, so I followed him inside and Charlie was on top of Kelly on the couch. His jeans were around his knees and Rake grabbed Charlie by the collar and dragged him into the kitchen. Kelly didn't even

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have time to scream, or if she did, I never heard her. She'd probably seen Rake do worse, so I guess maybe I was more shocked than she was."

I tap my fingers against my knees and take a deep a breath. Mildew and dust mix with the smell of Dad's armpits. He likes to be on stage and can sense my attention slipping. He'll just make the story more and more ridiculous until I'm locked back in.

"Charlie was bare-assed on the linoleum kicking his socked feet around and Rake pulled the refrigerator over on Charlie." His Adam's apple jumps up and down as he swallows. "You need to hear this."

"I'm sure I do," I say. "Sounds really important."

"I don't even know why I try with you anymore," he says.

As much as I want to take this away from him, I can't. Where am I supposed to run off to? If he would only be honest with me about everything, it wouldn't be so hard to get on board with this kind of thing once in a while. But I'm not even sure I want to hear the truth. He's gone for weeks at a time, but he only works half an hour away. Do I need to know where he stays or who he stays with—no. It doesn't matter. He's not here with Mom and that's all I need to know. "Go on," I say.

He squeezes his fists to crack the knuckles, being dramatic, building suspense. Make him want the story. Hold it from him so he has to beg.

"I really do want to hear it," I say. "Come on."

"Alright," he says. "Shut up and listen."

I nod.

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"Rake pulled Kelly outside by her hair, and I ran out there and shoved him in the back even though I knew he'd fuck me up. His forearms were big as my calves, big as your thighs probably. All that I thought at the time was that Charlie was under the refrigerator and there was nothing I could do to make that *un*-happen, but I could keep Rake from doing whatever he was about to do to Kelly if I made him focus on me. I stepped out on the porch and said, 'Let her be, man.' Rake turned and looked at me like I must have been some kind of monster, like I was crazy. And while he stared at me, Kelly took off up the street."

And once again he becomes a hero. "So what happened?"

"Rake got in his car and left me there. I pulled the refrigerator off Charlie. He was fine as far as I knew. Just like pulling a fatass lineman off the quarterback, I guess. But Charlie stared up at me, and I didn't know what to say or do. There was this kid I'd punched in the face and kicked in the head and all kinds of terrible shit for years flat on the floor, wheezing with his pants around his knees. The only thing I could think was that he might say I did this to him. He could have, and maybe Kelly wouldn't have vouched for me or God knows what. But Charlie just said, 'Thanks,' so I called the cops and they came and I told them everything. They hauled Rake away, and I have no idea what happened to him after that." He stares at me, eyebrows raised slightly, like he's waiting to hear me say, Wow, or fall onto the floor and praise him.

"Where's the part about jail or the military?"

Dad's mouth hangs open, tongue pressed against his bottom teeth. Ugly brown hair clings to his sweaty forehead and he's breathing heavy. It's disgusting to see him this way, heaving like a salted slug.

Jennings

"If I didn't join the military, there'd have been another Rake. Or when Rake got out he'd have come at me so hard there'd have been no way to get around him unless I put him down for good."

"You fucker." Never in my life have I called him this, but being here alone while Devon is out there with Eric, with those girls, is more than I can take. "You have a disease." I want to punch something—anything, but there's nothing to punch but Dad and even if he's full of shit he doesn't deserve it. "As much as I would have hated this to be a bonding experience, at least that would have been honest. It isn't, though. It's just another excuse for your life."

He smirks and the creases in his forehead cut deeper, become darker. "I can't make you see it my way."

"What was the point?"

""What?"

"Your reason to join was better than mine. Is that it?"

"If I had to guess."

"Don't guess! You made out like you were going to tell me why it was O.K. for you to join the military. Instead you tell me this story about how your life was exciting, and I can see how boring your life is, now. That's why you disappear for weeks at a time. You can't handle coming home to a woman who's in bed all day. To a son you don't even know."

"I have to travel for work, boy. Some of us don't have the luxury of choices."

I shake my head. "You made choices. You were too afraid to stay home and face your friend after you turned your back on him. Now you're too scared to come home and see what you did to Mom."

Jennings

"Don't say anything about your mother."

"Don't start acting like you care. It's too late." I push up from the couch, kick the screen door open and walk onto the crackly lawn. Wind that carries the faint odor of grilling meat rushes over my face. Not a hundred yards away some family is making dinner and having a good time. Could have had a good night here, too, but that fucker is nothing but stories and bullshit. Maybe he can't help it, but I can't sit around and listen to him run his mouth anymore. All the stories that spill from him when he wants to pretend he's not a terrible father, a terrible person who lets his wife get drugged up and splash around in a pool of her own drool and sweat for weeks at a time. That's fine. He can continue to run away and touch base here whenever his conscience eats him up so much that the booze and whatever else distracts him can't compete. He won't entertain himself with me, though. That's over. I'm not a toy. I don't owe him anything, and I don't expect a damn thing from him either.

Devon and Eric are probably having a blast with those girls, watching some dumbass movie while they all rub each other and pretend the night will never end, that they care there are actual people inside each other's bodies, that they aren't just puzzle pieces. I bet the girls are so fucking pretty, and they think Devon and Eric are super cute. It's so easy for them because tomorrow they'll all wake up and get fed. If they kept this up for forty years it would go on the same way because everyone who matters understands how hard it is for them. All that potential and nowhere to apply it. Such a shame they didn't make it in sports. They just need a little time to unwind and get their heads straight. It's so hard to give it all up and become a different person overnight.

Jennings

Rust has eaten through the chipped scoop of the shovel that's leaned up against the garage door, and the white of the garage peeks through the orange-ringed holes. I'll bury your rabbit, Dev. Don't worry. Everything will be just fine like it always is because I'm here to clean up after you just like your mommy. The shovel's rough handle feels like it's shriveling in my hand and maybe in a hundred years or so the shovel might twist itself into a billion splinters, and who'd care. More shovels are being hammered out every minute of the day and that won't stop until long after some bastard's dug the last hole and slung the last scoop of shit on top of the pile. Then it will topple so the next generation won't be without something to occupy their time.

Out past the yard, where the rabbit carcass rests, the silhouette of that triumphant Joshua tree sprawls like a tentacled beast. Too bad it's just a tree that won't uproot itself and raise some kind of hell no one is prepared for. When I'm right next to it, I see how the bark slides over itself like plate armor. That's something Devon would say—an armored tree. Him and his obsession with knights and bullshit. If it hadn't been for me, that kid would have just been another loser drowning in a sea of fantasy. Games with dice and paper to pass his free time when there's a world outside. He'd never get in trouble for hurting anyone in that game. It's only out here where we can get locked up for doing things. He'd never have been caught stealing gas from unlocked garages in the summer if I'd let him sit at home scribbling in his notebook about wizards and whatever the fuck else was in that thing.

I wanted him around, though. Had to have him there to breathe in the night air and beat his chest in the moonlight with the rest of us, break windows and stomp on rooftops because immediate danger was the strongest drug we could get. It was always stronger when Devon was

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with me—it is stronger, and I hate myself for having so much trouble letting that feeling go. I want to hate him for being able to let go of all that and let go of us so easily.

The little rabbit corpse is facedown and raggedy. I stab the shovel into the sand and toss the grains aside, jab again and mash my foot onto the blade over and over. Sweat drips off my forehead and soaks my armpits and back. This hole's a waste of time. If something wants to eat this dead rabbit, it'll paw away at the loose sand sprinkled over the carcass and snatch the dusty body away. But even if it's pointless, it feels good to be digging now, and that's better than anything else I've had in a long while.

The hole comes up about a foot on the handle and that seems deep enough. I nudge the rabbit with my shoe and the body flops in; the head tumbles down after it. Maybe I could have done it more respectfully, but what difference would it make. I'm the asshole. It's my fault because my foot was on the pedal; my hands were on the wheel. It was all because I wanted Devon to stop me. And he wouldn't. Why the hell should he be the one to stop me from doing anything? I don't need help with stopping, anyway.

The hole's filled the best it's gonna be, so I head back to the house, sling the shovel onto the yard and sit on the mustang's hood. Soon Devon's going to leave; I'm going to lose this car; I'm going to get fired. I know these things, and I don't care because I can't. This or that. Good or bad. Devon thinks that way because he thinks there is good, doesn't understand that it's all bad and we just have to choose less bad. If he did, things would be fine between us even if he did fuck Melissa behind my back. It's not even because he fucked her. She fucked *him*. Melissa knew exactly how to hurt me when I was most vulnerable, and if I'd said it all, came right out and told her everything, she'd have hurt me worse.

Jennings

The screen creaks open. Dad leans his big right shoulder against it, another full glass of whiskey in his hand. "Have you calmed down?"

Sweat rolls off my upper lip and when I lick it off, the saltiness bursts onto my tongue. Clumped hair around my ears is thick with wet, my back is sore. I'm tired and it feels good. Soreness and calm help me sink into my shoulders and melt into the metal of the hood for a minute. In this silence, between gusts of wind and words, it almost feels like resting.

Jennings

Another Shoddy Moonlit Apocalypse

I lost my job today and Devon's leaving for the Air Force tomorrow afternoon, so I drove us to a hill outside Edwards Air Force Base that overlooks a bunch of rusted-out school buses to smoke the only crack rocks I've ever bought. The buses form a huge square, bumper to bumper, their empty wheel wells stabbed into the sand, and I'd ask where all the wheels rolled off to, but anything capable of leaving this place would be stupid to stay—inanimate or not.

The three of us stand in front of the Mustang, its red paint covered in dust and dirt-crusting bird shit. Some bastards will show up and cart it away soon or else I'd clean it. I could barely afford the payments while I was doing electrical work, and even if I was able to get work at a grocery store or something, it wouldn't pay enough to keep the car. Dealing's the only thing I could do around here without wheels, and I don't have the connections.

Eric pokes me in the chest and says, "Who run Bartertown?"

I shove him and his Mets hat falls off his head. He bends down, grabs it with his long fingers and pulls it on backwards—so low that it hides his thick eyebrows.

Devon pulls the bottle of Absolut I bought out of the paper bag and then kicks at a pair of pink baby shoes half-buried in sand. "Nothing says Crack O'clock like dead baby remains."

"There's nobody out here," I say. "This is just where people ditch shit they don't want."

"We've never seen anyone," Eric says. "That doesn't mean that half the Manson family isn't inside those buses plotting a Sharon Tate rerun."

"They'd have to dig her up first." I hand Eric the light bulb we grabbed to make a pipe, and he sets to work on it. An engineer of convenience. "Don't bust that."

He nods. "Have faith, bitch."

Jennings

No clouds slip across the sky, and the full moon's sickly blue light shines down on the fluttering pages of a book half-mashed into the sand. Tumble weeds and Joshua trees surround this place, and it looks and feels like the perfect place for everything to end. "This is where the final battle will go down," I say.

Devon laughs. "A zombie battle or a religious war?" He picks at a patch of flaky skin on his elbow. "Guess it could be both."

Eric hands me the bulb-bowl and says, "People will be amphibimen. It's the only way we'll survive all the changes."

"What changes?" Devon asks.

Eric shrugs. "The climate?" He pulls the pink baggie from his front pocket, and we all sit on the Mustang's hood. Devon twists the cap off the vodka and turns it up. He'll drink it one gulp at a time until it's gone and pass out in a pool of his own vomit. He won't smoke with us, though. He's got principles.

"El lighter-o, please." My hand is out, waiting for Eric to drop the lighter into my palm.

Eric says, "Did you bring one?"

I pat my pockets. "Negatron."

Eric opens the passenger door and crawls into the back seat. The car rocks and squeaks as he searches. "Can't fucking believe this."

"Get out here and drink," I say. I slap the pink baggie on the hood and sling the bulb into the darkness. It shatters but the sound is muffled by Eric's footsteps, and when the passenger door slams shut, a light beams out of one of the bus windows.

Devon takes a drink, swallows, and then says, "Shit."

Jennings

Eric walks around to us and says, "There's no goddamn lighter."

The light glides from the back of the bus toward the door. "Someone's in there."

Devon says, "Maybe we should bail."

A bus door squeaks open and then the sound of shoes scratching over sand fill the air—a low hiss that rises with each step. The light shines toward us, hits me in the eyes and I turn my head.

"Maybe this cat's got fire," Eric says.

It's hard to see the full shape of the person headed toward us, but the long hair and swaying hips make me think it's not a man.

"Hey," a woman's scratchy voice calls. "What are you guys doing out here?"

"What are you doing out here?" I ask back.

She stops, shines the light onto the ground and clicks it off, becomes a silhouette like the hills and Joshua trees that surround us. "I live here."

Eric laughs. "Did you move out here because you wanted to increase your chances of being raped and murdered?"

"It's free and no one bothers me," she says. "Not before tonight, anyway."

"You got a lighter?" Eric asks.

She shoves her right hand in her front pocket then cocks her head to the side. "What for?"
A silver earring flashes when it catches the moonlight.

"Came out here for an eye opener," Eric says. "But left our lighters at home."

She walks closer. Pretty and smells like raw onions. Flat and cute nose like Melissa's, and her dark hair hangs past her shoulders in tight braids. She sits on the hood, pulls one knee up to

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her chest and says. "I'm not giving you my lighter so you can smoke crack."

"What difference does it make?" Eric asks.

"It's stupid." She unzips her hooded sweatshirt enough so that her orange bra and cleavage shows. Devon glances at her chest and sets the bottle on his thigh.

"We've located the anti-drug oracle." Eric snatches the bottle from Devon and drinks.

"Trevor will be back soon," she says. "You guys should leave before long."

"Is he your pimp?" Eric asks.

She swipes the bottle from him. "That's the only thing you could think of? I live in the middle of the desert, and I'm dirty, so I must be a whore."

"I never said you were a whore," Devon says.

She looks at his crotch. "The bulge in your shorts says different."

I laugh. "That kid's got a hard-on all the time. Don't take it as an insult. But it's no compliment." Melissa noticed that too. If I'd have tried harder, I might have kept her eyes from wandering.

She turns the bottle up and chugs.

"Who's Trevor?" I ask.

She hands the bottle to Devon, coughs a little and says, "My older brother."

"Is it just me," Eric says, "or do ninety-five percent of murders start this way?"

"If I don't fuck for a living, I must kill for it." She scratches her scalp with her index finger and says, "Maybe I'm a senator. Or a judge."

"Stop me if I'm wrong, but this shit's not run-o-the-mill," Eric says. "You're the only person I've ever met who lived in the middle of the desert—bus or not."

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Devon passes me the bottle, and I drink while he stares at her dirty jeans. Why would he want to fuck this girl? Because she must be easy, because he can fuck her and never have to see her again?

"The only thing not normal about any of this is that you guys are here. It's been weeks since I got to sit around and talk with anyone other than Trevor. I saw your headlights and heard you guys talking and figured it was now or never. So here I am."

"What's your name?" Devon asks without looking up from her chest.

"Simone."

"Bullshit," Eric says.

"Why would I lie to you?" She tosses a few dark braids over her right shoulder. Even though I'll never be attracted to her, I can see what Devon might like, how all the dirt on the outside can just be washed off. If there's something pretty about her when she's filthy, then who can say how beautiful she is beneath the dirt. Underneath it all, she could be Melissa. Dirty or not, beneath me is me.

"You ever read *The Butcher Boy*?" she asks us.

We all shake our heads.

"Too bad," she says. "There's a copy in the bus."

"Fuck you," Eric says. "We follow you into the bus and a bunch of masked dudes hop out and rape us. Or tear out our kidneys."

She groans and then laughs. "I'll go get it. I'm not a trap door spider."

"What's the book about?" Devon asks.

"That's not a very good question."

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"What the hell else is he supposed to ask?" Eric grabs a sand clod and rockets it at the nearest Joshua tree. The clod explodes against an L-bent limb and dust sprinkles the ground.

"I don't read books for about. Maybe it's a good question for someone else. Just not a good question for me—that's all."

"O.K.," Devon says. "What's a good question?"

"That's a good question," she says.

"You're like a hippy Yoda." Eric rubs his palms on his jeans. "With tits."

She smiles. "What's your name, backwards hat?"

"Eric," he says. "Please write it on my chest so the police can identify my body after you dismember my corpse."

Her jaw drops. "How did you know my MO?"

Devon laughs and adjusts his crotch, shifts his dick up and under the waist of his shorts to strangle the erection. He's been doing that for years.

She puts her hand on Devon's thigh and says, "What's your name?"

"Devon." He clears his throat.

"Well, Devon. A good question might be what is one good thing about the book."

"O.K.," he says. "What's a good thing about it?"

"It makes me cry," she says. "Only two books ever made me cry. *The Butcher Boy* and *Slaughterhouse Five*."

"See," Eric says. "Butchers and slaughter houses."

"Shut up," I say. "I read *Slaughterhouse Five*. It was better than any of that crap my dad made up." If Devon had read that he might not be dumb enough to think he's going to make a

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difference by joining the Air Force. They need good people, he says. What he doesn't understand is that we aren't good people, and the military doesn't need us. It was fighting before we were born. It'll fight after we're gone.

"You read?" Eric says.

"It was assigned in English class," I say.

Eric says, "That book was so small I figured it couldn't be any good."

"Size doesn't always matter." Simone rubs her hand up and down Devon's thigh, nail-bitten fingers sliding over his tan corduroy shorts. She leans close to him, smiles, and then pulls away.

"You two aren't fucking on my car," I say. I don't care how well she knows books or how much of a pain in the stride Devon's dick has become.

"What the hell, Sean?" Devon scowls at me.

Simone squeezes Devon's thigh and says, "Are you his mom?"

"Basically," I say.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Devon grabs her wrist and sets her hand on the hood.

"I pay for everything while you sit on the couch all day. Isn't that what a mom does?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow, asshole."

"About time, too," Eric says. "Sick of you talking about making a difference."

The dead air feels like lead aprons stacked on my chest. I glance at Simone and smirk. She bites the corner of her lower lip and says, "I'm gonna grab that book." Then she clicks on her flashlight, hops off the hood, and jogs down to her bus.

When she's little more than a shadow, I say, "Whenever the next big STD shows up, I

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guarantee they trace it back to her pussy and your dick."

"She's nice," Devon says.

"Does she have a choice?" Eric asks. "She lives in a school bus—in the desert."

"She likes me," Devon says.

I say, "So do I."

Devon shakes his head and bounces his heel against the bumper. "Don't be a fag, Sean."

I take a drink, spit out the bitter saliva that coats my tongue, and then hand the bottle to Eric. The flashlight floats through the bus and stops at the back.

Eric says, "We should jet before she comes back with chloroform and a hacksaw."

"She's harmless," Devon says. "And besides. I want that book."

"You want that box," Eric says.

Eric offers the bottle to Devon, but Devon pushes it away and says, "Fuck you guys." He hops off the hood and jogs into the darkness after her, a broad-shouldered shadow that fades into a backdrop of purple and black and then disappears. Soon all that's left behind is the slap of his big shoes on the bus steps. I don't want to think about what will happen in there, but Melissa told me how Devon fucked her and I can't get it out of my head. His arms locked out so he could stare down at her face while he pounded away, sweat dripping off his nose and onto her little tits. How she raked her nails across his lower back and drew blood. She showed him the red on her fingers and he kept on anyway.

Eric says, "If he screams, we know he's getting killed. If he doesn't scream, it might be because they told him not to."

The flashlight moves from the back of the bus and stops in the middle. After a few

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seconds, the light goes out. Maybe he's in there talking about novels, trying to get to know her better through literature. And maybe the repo men will show up and yank the Mustang right out from under my ass.

Eric takes a drink and then hands me the bottle.

"This is the perfect one night stand," I say. "Unless she fixes up one of these buses, she could never come tell him if she got pregnant. She wouldn't know where to drive anyway."

Eric grins. "Maybe I should go down there, too."

No squeaks or moans have traveled up here. I don't need to hear them, though. Devon gets scared when he's got to take control, but Simone wasn't subtle. Neither was Melissa. She grabbed his hand and led him into that locker room. He never would have asked her. Not because he didn't want to. He was scared she'd say no. That's one thing I understand.

"Headlights." Eric points to a couple lights that shine in the distance.

I say, "We better go get him."

Eric says, "He's bailing tomorrow. This will give him a head start on independence."

"We may never see him again."

"He's fucking a drifter, man. He's not up here reminiscing about shit we used to do."

This is what we used to do. No reason to reminisce about things that never change. "I'm not letting him get fucked up."

"He ditched us for pussy and tomorrow he's ditching us for the Air Force. He deserves whatever he gets. Good and bad." The headlights glow brighter and the shocks squeak as the vehicle rumbles closer. Eric taps the half-empty bottle on the hood.

"Once he takes off, I won't be able to do anything," I say. "But he's here right now."

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Eric stands. "You're lucky I don't have anything better to do." He takes a drink. "Cause I'd be doing it."

We hop in the car and roll down the short hill to the buses. Eric hops out and knocks on the door. Trevor, if that's who those lights belong to, isn't far away. Staticky voices and guitars swell as the lights near.

"Push the door open," I say.

Eric shoves the door in and stomps up the steps. He shouts, "Come on, Devon." Tires crushing tumbleweed shards and loose sand make a cage of sound around me. Headlights illuminate the rust-pocked yellow bus, and through the window I can see Eric's backwards hat, Simone's braids, and Devon's face stretching the threads of his red shirt as he pulls it over his bushy head.

The truck stops hard and slides a few inches on the sand. High beams blast on and the engine gurgles, idling loud and erratic. A deep voice says, "Who the fuck's in there, Simone?" The truck door opens and a man steps down, a double-barreled shotgun gripped in his left hand. His tan boots and jeans with holes in the knees make me wonder why the hell Devon had to run dick first into this.

The man says, "Whoever's in the bus better get the fuck out, now."

I shout, "Come on," and see both Eric and Devon hop down the steps. Eric turns and sees the gun then says, "Fuck," and dives into the back seat. Devon's pulling his shorts up, balls of corduroy in his fists as he stumbles toward the car.

Trevor doesn't raise the gun and the only reason I can think of that keeps him from doing it is shock. How did these boys find my sister out here in the middle of the desert? This must be a

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hallucination. It's not, Trevor. You can't go anywhere and escape this. This is us and we are everywhere. Desert to forest to sea. Generation after generation and all the way down to each individual and pathetic finale.

Devon flops onto the seat, buttons and zips up. A warbling steel guitar pierces the static, and Simone hops off the bus and sprints toward Trevor wearing only her jeans and orange bra that glows against her pale skin. Her dark braids bounce between her shoulder blades, and she says, "He didn't hurt me. They didn't hurt me." He raises the gun and Simone drives her naked shoulder into his stomach.

Eric says, "Hit the gas, you fucking idiot."

I drop the gearshift into reverse, and Trevor shouts, "She's fifteen years old."

Devon ducks and I mash the pedal, throwing sand and dust all over Trevor and Simone, and once I've got enough clearance, I slam it in first and tear across the sand. Gunshots echo and a series of thuds sound off from the trunk.

"Are you alright?" Devon asks. The thrumming engine is the only response, so he says, "Eric. Are you alright?"

"Yes, fucker."

The tires hit the pavement and catch. I slam the shifter into third, rev hard until I drop it into fourth. Let Simone and Trevor alone. They're running from something. There's no other reason to live out there.

"He shot the car," Eric says.

"Thanks for the verification," I say. "I was worried that no one would say anything and

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then the damage would get confused and fix itself."

Devon leans back into the seat and drops a raggedy book on the dashboard. "All that for a book." A scent wave of Vodka burns my nostrils, and I see the bottle on its side next to Devon's huge shoes. "That shit spilled all over the floor." He picks up the empty bottle, rolls down his window and drops the empty bottle onto the freeway.

Eric says, "You fucked a fifteen year old."

Devon grabs the book from the dashboard and peels it open. "No. I didn't." It's too dark in the car for him to read, so he shuts it. The front right corner of the cover looks gnawed off. He sets the book on his bulging crotch and holds it there. Can't even scare the hard-ons out of him.

"Where's the crack?" Eric asks.

"Shit," I say.

Eric says, "I knew that bitch was a head."

"She's not a head," Devon says.

"Stop defending your girlfriend, pedophile."

I say, "The baggie was on the hood. It must have blown off."

"We have to go back," Eric says.

"I'll drop you here and you can walk back there and get shot on your own."

Eric groans. "No drugs. No pussy. Not even any booze. What are we going to do?"

"Enjoy each other's company," I say.

Eric says, "Bullshit."

I doubt Trevor will try to chase us down, but if he does, I'd rather be in a place with a lot of people. The car skids a bit as I whip into the turn-around in the median, and the tires grip the

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pavement and we speed away.

"Where are we going?" Devon asks.

"Not back home," I say. "My dad'll flip out if he sees the bullet holes." That sounds right, but if he never comes home, he'll never have any reason to be upset. And he'll never come home again. I wouldn't.

"Does insurance cover that?" Eric asks.

"Yeah," Devon says. "It's included in the event of a shooting during a botched attempt to smoke crack clause."

"I'm going to sleep," Eric says. "When I wake up, it'll be like you were never here."

The needle bounces near E and I want to see how bad the damage is. If it's not too bad then it might look like some kind of stupid mistake, a hunting accident maybe. Once I've seen it, it'll be easier to make up a story. A guy who hasn't got out of the car to look at the bullet holes in the trunk probably seems a lot more like a guy who's running from something than one who can say, Yes, sir. I am aware and I'm going to have it taken care of as soon as possible.

I pull off at a Chevron and park at the pump. The station's open 24 hours and the clerk doesn't do anything more than give a quick glance in our direction before he gets back to reading the magazine in his hands. I get out and head into the store.

"Twenty on pump three," I say.

He doesn't look up, just extends an open hand. His fingernails are long and he has a tattoo of Gadzook from the Flintstones on his left forearm. "Anything else?" he asks.

"Nah," I say. And then drop my last twenty dollars in his hand.

Back outside I walk around the front of the car. Don't want to stop at the trunk before I

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start to gas up. If he looks out here and sees me staring at something he might get suspicious.

Devon has the book opened, and Eric is knocked out in the back. I shove the nozzle into the tank and then head around to the bumper to see the damage. Three holes. The taillights are good and he didn't fuck up the spoiler. One hole's near the trunk keyhole, and the other two are just above the bumper. The spread seems strange, but I must have been far enough away that most of the grains had spread out so much that they floated off into the darkness without doing any damage. This could be cleaned up at a body shop, no problem. I'm sure all it would take is a hammer, something to seal the holes with and then primer and paint. A brand new body.

The pump clicks off. I yank the nozzle out, shove it back on the rack, and then twist the gas cap on.

"Hey." The clerk's leaned against the entrance door. "What happened to your car?"

I didn't think he could see anything from inside. "What do you mean?"

"Those holes," he says. "I'm more of Vette man, but it's terrible to see a car like that all beat up."

I say, "Not much to do after it's done."

He nods and sips from a glass Coke bottle. "I know a guy who does body work. He could have that fixed up in a couple days, probably." The clerk heads over and the door hydraulics hiss as he walks around the rear. "Got his card here." He pulls out his wallet, un-Velcroes it and snags the card then offers it to me with two fingers.

I take it and say, "Thanks."

"The whole damn world's a war zone these days," he says. "There's a good man's number on that card, and that's harder to find than you might think."

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He takes a final look at the holes, lets out a wet whistle, and then heads back into the store. I get in, shut the door, and pull out slow.

"What did that jackass want?" Devon asks. He drops the book on his lap.

"To help," I say.

Devon taps his fingers on the book cover a few times and says, "Help."

"He gave me some guy's card," I tell him. "Says he does body work."

"They're just going to repo the car. What difference does it make?"

"It doesn't make a difference."

All that matters is that the tank is full right now, and I'll drive until it's not, all over this desert until it's time to drop Devon off at LAX. He's right next to me, but he's already gone, has never been here at all. I told him how I felt but it was nothing more than a joke that got swallowed up in tepid bursts of wind and dust. Swallowed up like our friendship, like Melissa and me, like Trevor and Simone. All of us, inside and out, sun-bleached bones scattered over the red and brown sand of lifetimes spent doing nothing in nowhere. And some people say it doesn't have to be this way, that you can be whatever you want and whoever you want. But this is who I am now and who I will be for however many miles I choose to travel on or until someone stronger comes along to shut off the ride.

