

**OPERATION
TOE BREAKER**

Here's a real¹ war story: Sergeant D█████ broke Matt ██████'s foot so Matt wouldn't have to go to the desert. He was tagged to deploy and watch Third Country Nationals clean port-o-johns in an undisclosed location. That's a job that should scare no one, a job that should bore everyone, and most importantly, a job that must be done.

—That's not artful.

—Because it isn't art.

—Then you better make it so.

The summer of 2000, before I joined the Air Force, I moved back to California to do some real work after earning a 0.67 G.P.A. at Concord College in Athens, West Virginia; the only work I did was sleep all day and drink all night until days bled into nights and nights bled into days and the whole damn summer became one big bloody mess. One night, at some girl's apartment in Lancaster, CA a bunch of my friends and I were drinking and talking about the political ramifications of *The Snorks* or *Fraggle Rock*, and a guy I knew from high school started screaming about his sister, "She² was my love," he'd yelled. Something close to that. I didn't have a tape recorder.³

He'd finished Marine boot camp a few days earlier and was on leave. Marine boot camp, in my opinion,⁴ is a serious thing. I completed most of Air Force Basic Training with my BCGs stowed in my cargo pocket. It was no harder to fold creases into the elastic of my underwear or march in step with the trainee in front of me whether I had crisp vision or saw the world as if it were beneath muddy swamp water. I'd like to believe that Marines need to complete tasks in Basic Training that nearly-blind men cannot; that is one way in which I distinguish Marines from Airmen. I've heard that Marines are also trained to be killers that see the things they kill.

—Some guys in the Air Force are trained for that.

—Others have to imagine the deaths they're responsible for.

—No one makes them imagine anything.

—No one prevents it either. Go ahead. Try to stop an imagination.

—We've already been down that road.

The New Marine was drunk and screaming about his love, whom, as stated earlier, was his sister. Why he used the past tense I doubt I'll ever know; she was alive then and is alive now.⁵ I walked out on the balcony and leaned over the hard, black railing. The New Marine sat on the sidewalk and smashed a hunk of pavement against his foot. He grunted and spat with every blow. What he did not do was injure himself in a profound way.

—Should I describe the red-orange horizon and talk about the wax-paper moon in order to evoke the McCarthyesque?

—Cormac. Not General McCarthy, right?

—Right. Let's say Cormacesque for the sake of clarity.

—And you mean *Blood Meridian*. Not *The Road*.

—Indeed.

It was another B.M. Cormacesque Mojave Desert eve and, on the sidewalk below me, the New Marine repeatedly slammed a rock on his foot and screamed about his sister. She was his love, as I said before. This phrase meant something to him; I'm sure of it.

I was drunk at the time. That was one thing I was quite good at in my middle teens, and late teens and early twenties and mid-twenties and late twenties. Soon I may be good at being drunk at thirty.⁶ That's not misguided bragging or a persona thing. I didn't read much until I started to care about writing. If I had, then I might have drank less to ensure I didn't "riff off" Bukowski and Thompson and Joyce and O'Brien and so on. But they riffed too, so when the riffing police ride into town on their peppermint horses, we're all gonna be fucked.

—What does that mean?

—You know exactly what it means.

The New Marine's unsuccessful self-destruction got on my nerves, and I'd had just about enough. I didn't go down there and confront him. Someone else did, and I remember feeling relieved that he had. *It's about time so-and-so went down there and took care of that nonsense*, I thought, because if he hadn't, I might have marched down there and handled things myself. Which is easy to say, and even easier to think, when there is no longer a possibility that you may have to act on your words or thoughts. Irritation mollified,⁷ I went inside and sat down on a couch next to a guy and girl who petted one another so fast that I feared they'd burst into flames and burn the apartment down.

—Objection. Relevance.

—It's a comment on public displays of lust.

—It's sustained stupidity.

I asked someone, "Where did the crazy guy go?"

Someone said, "To shoot himself in the foot."

—Did he shoot his foot?

—No idea. Never saw him again.

—What's the point then?

—She was his love, man.

There are a lot of ways to tell a war story. There's the *The Red Badge of Courage* way, and there's the *All Quiet on the Western Front* way. There is also the *Jarhead* way or the *Full Metal Jacket* way. For the philosophically inclined there's even Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* way, and although I agree with a lot of the stuff Ole Tzu said, I don't see any art in it.

—Then what the hell are you doing?

—This is pornography.

—What's art then?

—A mirror that refuses to show me my reflection after I've threatened to beat it senseless.

—What about a mirror you've beaten senseless?

—Then it's too late.

Slaughterhouse Five is pretty damn short as far as novels go.⁸ That's not a complaint; some novels aren't short enough. But Vonnegut's war story is a lot shorter than the novel. He was a miner in the first corpse mine. A man he knew vomited himself to death, and a guy was executed for stealing a teapot. This might have been the length of my Great Uncle Ivan's war story had he ever shown up to prove his existence with a narrative.

Ivan was my Great Uncle, whom I'll never meet. I know he was real because I read his obituary. Dad told me that Ivan was in one of the World Wars, and then afterward he attended and graduated from either Cambridge or Oxford with an accounting degree. I cannot verify any of that, but my dad's a reliable source. *Exempli gratia*: I was the varsity quarterback for Desert High School my junior year, and one night, as Dad and I soaked in our second-hand hot tub, and he tried to tease out a lesson from one of the numerous 0-63 shellackings I'd endured, he said, "You're too small to make it in professional sports." Dad was honest, and whether he was right or not at that moment, I never made it in professional sports. So he is right, even if he wasn't supposed to be.

Real war stories aren't about excitement and adventure—they're about facts. Shitty, blood-caked facts and weakness, failure and cowardice, and most often boredom, ignorance, shame, and hatred. When heroism shows up in a war story it's probably told by someone who's never been to war or by someone who knows how to give an audience what it's hungry for. Those things are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although there are people who believe those without combat experience should be excluded from writing about combat, which sounds to me like fear of competition. But who wouldn't try to use whatever one might in order to gain some kind of advantage in a world where so many people don't fight fair because they don't believe there is such a thing as a fair fight? The answer? Donald Trump.

—Who's Donald Trump?

—I meant Donald Duck.

Hugh Martin, a friend and war-poet⁹ from Ohio, said that a section like this requires the mention of Tim O'Brien.¹⁰ I bought the First Mariner Books edition of *The Things They Carried* from Barnes & Noble, stacked on a table of nonfiction. There are two title pages.¹¹ The first title page looks like this:

The Things
They Carried
A Work of Fiction By
Tim O'Brien

I read this book of fiction/nonfiction when I was twenty-five, and I hated it. I read it again when I was twenty-nine, and I know now that the reason I hated his book was that I was too immature to admit I was jealous of how simple it seemed for Timmy to communicate emotions with language.

This is a real war story: Adam D████ was my swing-shift supervisor. He was a great friend, but he seemed depressed¹² a lot of the time: perhaps the result of a divorce and psychological trauma inflicted by his ex-wife.¹³ I'm not a psychologist. In my best effort to cheer him up, I talked shit to him. This worked for me in my childhood, so maybe I didn't know any better because I was a product of my environment. Maybe I liked being an asshole to a guy who would take it, especially one who outranked me. Maybe I should say one more thing here to make sure this is a list of three . . .

Matt █████ got popped for a TDY to the desert. He was one of the few people that I spent any off duty time with. His deployment meant I was going to have fewer friends on base. Everyone else was lame. So what was I going to do? Boo hoo, minced meat underwear, hamsters in nutcracker suits playing violins, and so on.

It was common practice to go to Matt's dorm room on lunch at midnight, or whenever we were off, and pop a few painkillers (mostly Motrin 800s and Vicodin), then pound a couple beers before going back to sit at the console all night and play X-box on a giant flat screen (the TV was purchased with tax dollars that our sergeants spent to ensure that our shop wouldn't get fewer tax dollars the next year). On this particular night, we went to Matt's and Adam came along. Adam didn't care that we had a beer or two on our lunch break. And, although I never saw this in writing, people often said we were authorized one beer with lunch. That sounds like a cool Air Force, and I want to believe I was in that Air Force. But the Air Force I was in made me take a Homosexual Awareness Test.

What can be said of that? It was multiple choice and I, as I was ought to do, probably passed with the minimum of 80 percent by clicking mostly C. So, as far as the Air Force is concerned, I am 80 percent homosexually aware, at least. I don't know what that means nor do I know what they wanted to accomplish. Likely some General woke in the middle of the night screaming because he'd realized there might actually be homosexuals in his Air Force. He was aware and that meant we all had to be aware, and the only way to enhance our awareness was a multiple choice test that everyone cheated on. Nah. There was probably a stupider reason than anything I can invent; I never went to Officer Training School.

I'm not sure what pills we took that night—probably something pointless. But the three of us drank Bud Light (a beer I hate save for when it's free) and stood around Matt's dorm room talking about his impending TDY. Laughter hovered around our conversation, but when I recall this, I'm forced to lock Laughter inside the room with us. Because we were all there, and the memory isn't real if one of us gets away.

I: Can't believe you're letting your troop go to the desert.

Adam: What am I supposed to do about it?

I: (Pointing to Matt) Break his finger or something.

Laughter nods at this suggestion and leans against the nightstand.

Matt (Sits on his bed, the springs creak. He swigs his beer.)

Adam: That's stupid. How will we explain it?

Laughter brings fist to chin.

I: Doesn't matter. Can't do shit after it's broke. Real world. Real consequences.

—You didn't say that.

—Those words orbited the words I did say.

Matt: (Adjusts his gold-framed glasses). How about a toe instead?

I: Yeah. A toe then.

Laughter shrugs, pats pockets for cigarettes.

Matt: (Unties left boot and tugs it off, then plants his black-socked foot on the floor).

Adam: How should I do it?

I: (Offering Matt's G.I. chair to Adam), Smash this on his foot.

Laughter furrows brow, pulls orange BIC from breast pocket and thumbs sparks.

Adam: This is a terrible idea.

I: But it's a great idea to let him go to the desert and die.

Laughter stands, and then walks to door.

I: He'd do it for you.

Laughter tries doorknob. Door is locked. Sits cross-legged on floor, lights cigarette and puffs vigorously to fill room with smoke.

Adam continues to say smart things and I say stupid, hurtful things, until finally Adam snatches the chair and slams the square leg on Matt's foot. The chair cracks from the impact and Matt says nothing—just finishes his beer, and then pulls his boot back on. I laugh and say, "I can't believe you just did that." Adam tosses the broken chair aside, and it collapses in a heap. We go back to work like we hadn't drank, popped pills, or smashed a chair on Matt's foot. Laughter did not follow us back to work, and I don't know what became of the chair.

Here's a real war story: I went to Saudi Arabia and never got shot at, never pulled nor touched a trigger, never ran for the cover of a bunker when a SCUD never came flying at me because I'm not the kind of guy who runs and hides from missiles that are never fired. I did not fear for my life at any point while in the desert despite the fact that on CNN every day tanks "prepped the battlefield" or blasted inanimate objects into oblivion in their pursuit of animate objects. I fought a war in complete security—fearless because there was nothing for me to fear.

And the day that poor bastard draped an American flag over a toppled Saddam statue, I was in Saudi. Me and everyone I worked with turned our heads and tugged on our DCU butterfly collars like Rodney Dangerfield's because we knew with some slight changes in circumstance, any one of us could have been the guy holding the flag.

People who say that they'd never have done it that way can kiss my ass.

Pontification after the fact is wholly divorced from deciding in the moment, and that guy just chose poorly while a camera was on him. If a camera was on me all the time, people would see me in a different way too. Good or bad, I don't know or care.¹⁴ But they'd see me through a camera lens. And it doesn't matter how wide your flat-screen TV is, or if it's so high-def that the plasma melts your face off, there will always be things happening off-screen that matter and things that happened before the camera was turned on. Things will continue to happen once the camera's off. On screen. Off screen. It all matters, and no one person can see it all.

Matt came to work the next day with a full cast on his foot. He didn't go TDY. Someone did because someone always has to go, but I don't know who went, and because I don't know, I don't have to care. Which doesn't mean that I don't, but at least it's my choice.

When it was my time to go to Saudi, I went. I didn't try to get out of it or run away to Canada (which I couldn't have done legally anyway thanks to a law enacted by a bunch of bastards¹⁵ too old to get drafted whether a draft is reinstated or not—an age I look forward to). And I was there when Matt's foot was broken and was glad that he didn't have to go do some stupid job that I wouldn't wish on anyone.

—What about people you hate?

—Send 'em to the sandbox.

I wasn't always against the war, and I won't say that I was just because that's the popular thing to say when a war goes wrong. Wars don't go right. Fewer people might die than in other wars; that's statistically different. But once war is, it can't be reset. And the only thing that being there helped me to see more clearly is that no matter what side I stand on, pointing fingers at those who stand across from me won't breathe life into any of the dead or erase the images that keep men and women awake at night—real and imagined.

Before I joined, Dad told me, "Son. There's a big war about every ten years." He was right this time,¹⁶ and I went and came home and never went back. Other guys went and came home, or they went and didn't come home. Some went and came home, and then went back and never came home. I didn't know any of the guys who died over there and never will.

One day in a journalism class at WVU, this man came in and showed us some stop motion video his company was working on, another desperate attempt at news innovation. It was a map of Iraq. Stupid music played in the background, the kind that tells your brain, *Show everyone you are sad now*. As the song played, tiny red dots popped up on the map. Each dot, he said, represented a soldier who'd died. The man stood up front and gauged our reactions while dots filled Iraq's borders. He knew those dots would cover the map and make people cry, that the music would instruct them how to react. And I hated him for turning dead soldiers into red dots, and I hated him for using dead soldiers to sell a product. Some people in the class cried or bit their lips, and I kept my mouth shut. I could say that I didn't want to

ruin it for them, but the truth is I was afraid that saying something would hurt my grade.

I didn't stand up and tell that man I hated him that day, and I won't say I hate that man and his dot-covered map now. Because if I hate him, I must hate myself. I hope a better person with something better to say waits farther down the line, and I fear my truths will bring me nothing more than failure. But I won't fail because I said nothing. That is a worse crime than saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Halloween night of 2003 in Old Town Alexandria, months before Adam broke Matt's foot, Matt and I stumbled out of a bar after last call and searched for the parking garage where a couple friends waited on us. We headed down a side street that we agreed was the right direction. A black Nissan Spider was parked on the street and a Saudi Arabian flag was on the dash.

"I hate spiders," I said. Because I hate arachnids—the pointy legs and fangs and venom.

We walked on, and after some time, passed the same car.

"This is the wrong way," Matt said.

"No it isn't."

"That's the same spider," he told me.

"I hate spiders," I said again, because I am a spider bigot.¹⁷

"Wanna fuck it up?" he asked.

"You kick one side-view-mirror, and I'll kick the other one—simultaneous."¹⁸

I lined up to kick the hell out of the passenger-side-mirror, and we counted down from three. I ran and leapt into the air and kicked as hard as I could but hit nothing. When I landed, I crumpled on the ground and felt an intense pain in my left knee, a pain that I'd felt my senior year at football practice when my knee-cap slipped off to the side of my leg.

Matt rounded the car and said, "Dude, I missed."

"Help me up," I groaned.

He looked at me, then turned and looked up the street. We hadn't done anything, which I believe was a miracle, but I could see in his eyes that he wanted to run. I wouldn't have blamed him for leaving me in the gutter. Whatever punishment came my way for that attempted stupidity was deserved, although it's difficult to punish someone for doing nothing. Instead, Matt helped me to my feet, and when he did, my knee-cap slipped back into place. Constant pain replaced the intense pulses and that consistency was something I managed with gritted teeth.

We hobbled back to the parking garage, my arm tossed around his neck. Our heavy breaths burst steam puffs into the cold air, and once we'd almost reached our destination I saw a black man in a field jacket and jeans standing on the corner of some street and another. We'd passed him earlier that evening, and he'd asked for change. I didn't have any because I never carry cash. I feel better about myself when I don't have to lie to someone begging for money, so I'd told the man I was sorry I couldn't help, and then

walked a couple blocks and drank myself stupid. As we passed him this time, he shouted, "That's right, boys. Never leave a man behind."

Sometimes those words press so hard against the back of my teeth I can't swallow them, and I'll mutter them and snort. I'm not sure how I feel about those words, but I am sure that I never saw that man on the street again, and I haven't heard from Matt in seven or eight years—which is fine with me. It's not like we have shit to talk about anyway.

¹It's important to define real here as "more than true." What I mean by real is that it is factual. These are facts, mostly. And with these facts, I give you truth. Although, it would be easy to use facts to give someone untruth, you won't find that here.

²She was also a girl who I'd made out with a few times before I left for West Virginia, and now she is a mother and a wife, and hopefully doing as well as she deserves.

³Unlike Hunter S. Thompson, I wasn't living purposely to tell my story later; it was an accident. If the accident will. And it will all right.

⁴This is based largely on having never done it. I cannot say with certainty how serious it is, but one of the ways you determine your masculine capitol in the military is by what service you join, and then after you are discharged from service, you might be asked what branch you were in and catch yourself saying, *Just the Air Force*. This is something I have done a million times. Were you deployed? *Just to Saudi Arabia*. Were you molested? *Just a little*.

⁵Assuming the now in which you're reading this is a now in which she is still alive. This fact is an eventually-not-fact. So it's a fact until it isn't.

⁶Turns out I was so good at it, that I had to take one of my comprehensive examinations hung over, and I passed. I was also so good at it that I vomited bile one afternoon while my dog, Finnegan MacCool panted anxiously for a while before curling around my feet, as I bear-hugged the toilet bowl. I love him so damn much.

⁷This word wouldn't be used here if not for Molloy being mollified in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*.

⁸I read the entire book as my wife drove us to Cedar Point. I cried at the end, but I hid that from her. I was still too much of a banana to cry in front of her back then.

—What the hell is a banana?

—It's a banana.

—Cryptic for cryptic's sake?

—See: An Introduction to Badass Continuum Mechanics

⁹This term is not as awesome as it sounds; it's a reduction. Hugh is a person, he is a poet, he is a veteran. His poetry, although often using war as the setting, isn't really "war poetry." I mean, what the hell is only "war" anything? I don't want people to talk about me as if I am "That war writer," or "That violence writer," or "That guy who jacked a dude off when he was nine, and how in the grand scheme of things he wasn't really that molested writer. I mean, what about those women who were abducted and held in some guy's backyard for years? I bet they'd be like, "Poor baby. Did you get some jizz on your knuckles? I didn't even

know that there was a yard beyond the one I was trapped in. I didn't even know it was the back yard, dude. I was like a housecat put on the porch for the first time. I just stared out at all that unknown, unable to even wonder about it because the connections in my brain weren't able to keep up with the input. I don't want to be comparative, but don't you think you could like pull yourself up by your bootstraps and stop whining about it? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

—That got a little out of hand.

—Yeah. I bet those women wouldn't be that mean to me.

—Still you did it to yourself.

—Self-deprecation is a physically safe form of self-harm.

—Is it self-deprecation when it comes through the mouth of an imaginary woman?

—Well, yeah. Whenever I am writing, I'm every woman . . . It's. All. In. Me.

¹⁰Initially this first sentence was all that I wrote to appease him. It was dick-ish. So I added the rest.

¹¹A book's quality is directly proportional to its number of title pages.

¹²Funny I could spot depression in others but never imagined that I might be depressed myself.

¹³This woman was so terrible that she claimed she gave him herpes, and then years later he was tested and found out that she'd lied about it. He doesn't have herpes. But much like herpes, he has a memory that pops up and haunts him, and it is no doubt painful even if a sore doesn't accompany it. What's worse? I don't know. But there's no Valtrex for memories.

¹⁴—Oh, come the fuck on, man.

—Well. I mean. I don't care because there isn't and that means caring about it would only add anxiety to the anxiety present in response to things that are happening.

¹⁵I would like to believe that not all old politicians are terrible, but . . . maybe that's for another book.

¹⁶As it turns out, there's always been a war since. There are Americans who've lived their entire lives with our country at war. It's normal now.

¹⁷Other things I hate: Sharks, Felt, Snakes, Pop Culture, Reality TV, Danzig, Licorice, Jagermeister, Gin, jokes about tubas.

—We don't have time for this.

—I'll amend it some day.

¹⁸This is an *Apocalypse Now* reference that is also a reference to surfing, which is also a reference to the Vietnam War, which is also a reference to my father-in-law, which is . . .