

5-2012

# When Time Stops

Andrew Mathas

Clemson University, amathas@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Mathas, Andrew, "When Time Stops" (2012). *All Theses*. 1334.

[https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/1334](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/1334)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

WHEN TIME STOPS

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate School of  
Clemson University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

---

by  
Andrew Mathas  
May 2012

---

Accepted By:  
Keith Morris, Committee Chair  
Dr. Jillian Weise  
Dr. Brian McGrath

## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is a collection of three short stories centered on exploring modern war and military life in Afghanistan. This collection engages in questions of truth, death, and what it means to live on the fringe of a modern warzone. War is a test of the human condition on both soldiers and civilians, the results of which are often impossible to comprehend. In examining that kind of an environment, I am giving voice to stories often forgotten or overlooked during war—stories that need to be heard if we are to have any hope of understanding our actions there. While this is a collection of fiction, it contains bits of reality throughout, though names and locations have been entirely changed. Upon reading this collection, my hope is that aspects of war and military life that were unknown previously will be brought to light, and as a result, a better understanding of what our foreign presence means, in both Afghanistan and other areas of the Middle East, will emerge.

## DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated first to my parents, for always encouraging me to look beyond any limitations, and for their unending support. I also dedicate these works to Chris Vassey, US Army Sergeant, Paratrooper, Recon Infantry, 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, for serving fifteen months in Afghanistan, and for being the inspiration for all of my work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Keith Morris for being supportive of my ideas, concepts, and the execution of this collection. Without his influence, I would not be the writer I am now. I also thank my other committee members, Dr. Jillian Weise and Dr. Brian McGrath for intellectually challenging me throughout my time in Clemson, and pushing me in directions I never considered possible before. I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Paul, Director of the MAE Program at Clemson, for always having her door open and helping me immensely throughout these two years.

Finally, I would like to thank my undergraduate literature professors at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey: Nathan Long, Dr. Tom Kinsella, Ken Tompkins, and Dr. Lisa Honaker. I would not have been prepared for Clemson without you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
WHEN TIME STOPS.....	9
Why.....	10
What's Important.....	15
On Patrol.....	28
WORKS CITED.....	54
WORKS CONSULTED.....	55

## INTRODUCTION

"War literature," I have found, covers an immense spectrum of human conditions, in both the realm of death and life. It is a genre overflowing with regret and shame, but in a public way, exposing those primary emotions as a centerpiece of narrators, main characters, or entire environments. And a constant engagement with the reduction of human life is always present. To understand such a notion, I first turned to theory by both Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault.

From Agamben, I looked to a specific section of his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* titled "The Camp as the Nomos". In this section, Agamben explores the phenomenon that is the creation of "camps" (referring at first to concentration camps, but later to a broader definition that is applicable today). Agamben explains that camps first appeared within structured governments due to states of exception. Basically, this means that in order to create a camp, a government first would need some exception that is occurring within its country or nearby: war, plague, riots, political instability, etc. In the case of the Nazi concentration camps, war and a radical change of governmental power allowed for the camps' creation, combined with constitutional statutes that were already in place and designed to suspend civil liberties in such events since WWI. Primarily focusing on the idea of the creation of camps in war, I attempt here to expand on his ideas by treating entire warzones as "camps"—what he calls "a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable" (170). In this kind of camp, there is neither law nor norms, only power over what Agamben calls "bare life," or life

that has been stripped of its sense of value and humanity so much that it exists completely exposed to those in power. To again refer to the Nazis, Jews were perceived as an exploitable threat, and thus were stripped of their life-status as quickly as possible. But the idea of stripping one of life-status can be applied to the treatment of anyone opposing a soldier, especially in a modern warzone such as Afghanistan, where the lines dividing "enemy" and "civilian" (read: "guilty" and "innocent") are blurred due to the concept of terrorism—namely that anyone is a potential enemy, including women and children, and the enemy is not contained within a certain country or boundary.

The most important aspect of this work of theory, though, appears when Agamben moves towards explaining why the atrocious actions committed on bare life can be done. For my purposes, I viewed this as an attempt to explain war crimes. He explains that because the state of exception—a warzone—is created completely outside of common law, its space is not defined by law at all, allowing for actions to occur within that space that have no mediation, no consequences, and require no accountability. Specifically, he says, "Whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign" (174). Thus, if the police (or soldiers) have no ethical sense, or are not strictly held to any code of ethics, then literally anything can happen inside a camp with no crimes being committed by those in power. Based on the war literature I have studied (Hemmingway, Heller, O'Brien, and Ambrose, among others), as well as personal accounts I have heard, this is a very common occurrence between soldiers and civilians, soldiers and enemies, and even soldiers amongst each other.

From Foucault, I concentrated on a section of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* titled "The Body of the Condemned". Here, Foucault outlines how governments have, over time, distanced themselves from death and torture as forms of punishment so much that such acts are now "shameful." He explains:

...it is the conviction itself that [now] marks the offender with the unequivocally negative sign: the publicity has shifted to the trial, and to the sentence; the execution itself is like an additional shame that justice is ashamed to impose on the condemned man; so it keeps its distance from the act, tending to entrust it to others, under the seal of secrecy. (9-10)

Foucault goes on to say that "from being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended human rights" which is intended to "deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain" (11). Thus the concept of torture (of committing torturous acts) is publicly shameful, and is now kept in secrecy. Applying this to an ideal warzone, one can see why acts committed there, especially when made public, are considered as awful as they are—a dark secret has been exposed. Take, for example, the recent murder of 16 civilians at the hands of US soldiers in Afghanistan. First reports of the incident spoke of several soldiers "appearing drunk," yet now that information is regarded as false, as the story has been changed to "one soldier" whose sobriety is now under question. Even in just that small alteration of facts, it is clear that some kind of attempt is actively being made to obscure the truth of that atrocity. War seems to bring out the worst forms of punishment, even on innocent life, which explains the attempts to conceal war crimes and atrocities that have existed since before the Holocaust.

Of the large amount of background material I consulted for this project, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead* are perhaps the most influential. Both were written by ex-soldiers, and both cover wars that, at their respective moments in history, had never been waged in that way before. *The Things They Carried* is intimately involved in the concept of telling a story and how truth is handled by those in times of war, in this case, Vietnam. "To generalize about war," O'Brien writes, "is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (81). O'Brien, like Agamben and Foucault, is acutely aware of the lines that are blurred when death and life are so closely related. For him, telling a war story is an act completely separate from telling any other kind of story, namely, he says, because the answer to the question "is it true?" is far more important (83). He gives an example:

Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen—and maybe it did, anything's possible—even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth. (83)

All war stories need to have truth in them; all war stories need falsehood. This aligns with my own approach to the genre—as a civilian, any story I tell must be fiction, yet must also be believable and be considered at least reflective of truth. O'Brien, having been a

soldier, has written in *The Things They Carried* a set of guidelines to go by when approaching this kind of craft, and considering the power of his material, it has greatly influenced my style and the style of others, including Anthony Swofford in *Jarhead*.

*Jarhead* follows Swofford through his experiences as a sniper during Operation Desert Storm. In the opening pages he writes, "Thus what follows is neither true nor false but *what I know*. I have forgotten most of the statistics and must look them up. I remember the weapons, though not their capabilities, so I must look those up as well. For the place names I refer to maps" (2). Swofford, like me, is from the outset of his story aware of the fluctuation of truth that is needed, and, also like me, he must consult an enormous amount of outside information to fill in the gaps. His story was doubly useful in that it covered modern war, new war—fast war. In fact, the war moves so quickly for Swofford that he never engages a single enemy. This allows for a much deeper concentration on the aspects of a modern war outside of violence: boredom, paranoia, and anxiety. It's no wonder that *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a book used as background material for my collection, is mentioned twice in *Jarhead*, both times referring to the fear of immediate death from a hidden enemy.

The most important aspect gained from *Jarhead* came from the confusion contained in his story. Near the end, for example, Swofford describes an encounter after the war is over in a duty-free shop:

An older Irish couple rushed up to me and the woman hugged me while her husband shook my hand and thanked me heartily and offered me whiskey from his silver flask. I was shocked by the display and at first confused as to the motivation for their generosity and praise, and then I remembered what I'd been a part of. I thanked them for I didn't know what and returned to the plane early. (250).

The terrifying, awful experience of war, for Swofford, was stolen from him, propelling that war to a new level of absurdity—one where the act of the war is actually both forgettable and unforgettable at the same time. Again, here is another blurred line created by war, in this case by the technology and speed of modern war. This brings me to my own stories, all of which attempt to engage in the modern war, the isolation and fear created by it, the questionable truths that emerge from it, and the absolute absurdity that governs it. And like Swofford, I also needed to consult the same kind of outside material for these stories.

In "Why" I am introducing the narrator, Eric Marcoti, and exploring the reasoning behind his enlistment. This is a topic that was addressed in nearly every piece of war literature I came across—soldiers needed a reason to sign up. For Tim O'Brien, it was against his will, being drafted for Vietnam. On the other end of the spectrum was Swofford, who was obsessed over joining the Marine Corps from a young age, and so swept up in the valor and honor of duty that he first tried to enlist at age 17. With Marcoti in "Why" I place him somewhere between these two extremes. He joins on his own accord, but not for reasons of honor. Instead, he joins because he "wanted to not think about what to do next. [He] wanted someone else to tell [him] what to do." I set up his enlistment as an act of both desperation and laziness, a combination that reflects the awkward combinations of emotions that clearly exist within a war story, as evidenced by the examples above.

With "What's Important" I bring the reader to the area of the conflict in Afghanistan and engage in both the boredom felt by the soldiers as well as the fear and

frustration that such boredom can produce. Vicks is obviously an important character in this story, as he is the one afflicted by boredom the most, and is responsible for spreading the consequences of that affliction to others. I also touch on concepts of shame (when Marcoti misfires his weapon), loss (during the cafeteria discussions), and a separation from reality (as seen in Marcoti's feeling at the end). Also important here is the establishment of the treatment of the civilians in Afghanistan in the way Vicks (and the narrator) passively torture them, which directly ties into my theoretical readings by Agamben and Foucault.

In "On Patrol," which is also the longest, I push the internal struggle within Marcoti over the validity of Vicks' stories to the edge, eventually resulting in a physical confrontation between the two characters due to terrible circumstances—the torture of a prisoner. In this story I am further involved in the concepts presented by Agamben and Foucault, as the ridiculousness of the story Vicks' pulls from the prisoner is impossible to believe, yet the consequences of it are unable to be ignored. Here, too, I engage in what the boredom of a warzone can produce, and the violence that can exist within our own bases as a result.

There is no doubt that this collection contains the most complicated pieces of fiction I have produced—partly because of the complex subject matter that they deal with, and partly because I have not personally experienced war. However, if a "trusted" source like Anthony Swofford must still consult the same kind of outside material that I did, perhaps the distance between civilian and soldier is closer than one might think. After all, a soldier must first be civilian. My goal with this collection is to remind readers

of the current conflicts that US military is involved in, and what those conflicts actually contain, both on the side of death and the side of life. For this collection, beyond the list of background sources and the material discussed in this introduction, I have been in contact with ex-soldiers, current soldiers, and others affected by war. They have been immensely helpful, both in providing details and clarifying any ignorance on my part. There is still an enormous number of stories that I could not address here, which is why this collection is merely the beginning of a much larger work.

WHEN TIME STOPS

## Why

My dad died of skin cancer when I was 4 years old, in 1991. What I hate about that the most, more than the fact that he's gone, is that my memory of him is too limited. He's forever stuck in the haze of my muddled childhood recollections, always dressed as if it's still the late 80's. I barely remember specifics about him. I remember sitting on his boney, angular lap. I remember a crisp sip of beer he gave me once. I know, thanks to an old Polaroid, that he dressed up as Santa when I was 3, pillow for a gut and all. But I don't know much about his life, really. After his death, that seemed to be more important.

Mom's decline was slow at first, and she never truly "lost it" in the traditional sense, but everything after Dad died seemed too difficult for her. She tried to keep things normal, she really did. She would make my lunches for school. They started, when I was in first grade, as fresh sandwiches—ham and cheese on whole wheat, a big juice box, animal crackers, sometimes even a small chocolate bar. The other kids were jealous. Half-way through first grade I started getting peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. By second grade I got a peanut butter sandwich and some money for a snack from the lunch line. By third I only bought lunch, and by fifth I had to use my own allowance money. With no brothers or sisters, I was forced to be nearly self-sufficient by middle school.

We lived in our split level house in Medford, New Jersey for ten years after Dad died. The first year after he died, Mom slept in the guest bedroom, but I was too young to understand why. It wasn't until we started packing, and I saw the sheer number of boxes

of Dad's stuff we still had—she still had—that I began to understand from an adult, sentimental perspective that I had already lost her in an important way.

We moved to a small apartment on the other side of town, and Mom was forced to put most of Dad's old stuff in storage. I started high school, where I promptly found that I didn't fit in anywhere. I was a new kid, I knew no one, and this pushed me to the edge of every social circle in school. I couldn't stop feeling like the new kid. I passed my classes because I had to, interacted with others because I had to, learned to drive because I had to, and all the while I didn't know *why* I had to. Everything about everything I did felt unremarkable, blurred.

Mom turned to chain smoking menthol cigarettes. We talked less and less, and when we did, it turned into an argument about something—my grades (mostly D's), why I didn't play guitar anymore (I hadn't for years), bills (could I finally help with the rent?), my shit job (I should ask for more hours, why don't I?), or what most of them ended on—Dad. I could never imagine what he would have done if he were still there, but Mom wanted me to think about it constantly. Probably because she did.

So when high school was nearing its end, just before the summer of 2008, I joined the US Army.

I was faced with what I thought was social and mental annihilation. I would pass high school without a future. I had no plans because I hadn't wanted them. I saw myself permanently sharing a space with Mom, working any number of jobs—all similar to hers—and it terrified me that part of me accepted that. College was impossible. The thought of living in a college dorm, surrounded by "academics", made me dizzy with

fear. I quickly became a drunk by senior year, at 18. Because of this, one night when I was particularly depressed, partly because of something I can't remember, partly because we were out of alcohol (even Mom's box of wine was dry), I decided to drink mouthwash. I figured hell, it had alcohol in it, and if you weren't supposed to swallow it, then maybe that was why, or maybe it was even better than normal alcohol. It ended up working pretty well, too. After half the bottle of Scope I felt a woozy buzz that teetered between a mellow headache and a minty delirium. But when Mom walked in and saw the opened bottle cradled in my lap as I laid back in my bed, glassed-over eyes staring up at my noisy ceiling fan, she started screaming and crying and pulling on my arms and slapping me. I dropped the Scope, and the pale green liquid spread over the old, stained carpet like acid. Mom didn't stop.

I was numb to it. She sounded drained, like an animal left outside in the heat for too long. And again she kept demanding, "What would your father say? How would he feel? What would he do?" and again I had no answers. She eventually left, exhausted, and I picked up the drained bottle from the floor, gulped the last of what didn't spill, and passed out with the sterile chemicals of mouthwash filling the air. The next day, hungover, I shuffled to the recruiting table set up in the school cafeteria, and signed. I wasn't swept up by commercials on TV, I didn't have a deep family history in military life, nor was I eager to "see the world." I just wanted to leave. I wanted to not think about what to do next. I wanted someone else to tell me what to do. I'd done things my whole life without knowing why I had to, and I thought that I would at least have a reason for my actions in the army, and a reason I didn't have to come up with myself. Now I wonder

how many soldiers are hungover when they sign. I bet the number is pretty high. Higher than you'd think, anyway. It has to be.

\* \* \* \*

I became Private First Class (PFC) Eric Marcoti after half a year of Basic and Advanced Training. I transitioned perfectly into the military, as my experience through training was no different from the thousands of other successful recruits at Fort Benning, Georgia. My life now consists of numbers to designate who I am. My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) is 11B—infantry. I am a member of the 101st Airborne, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, Company D (for Dog), 3rd Platoon. I am 23 years old, 6 foot 2, 210 pounds and extremely strong. My dog tags will tell you, upon my death, that I was blood type A positive and that I had no religious preferences.

I am currently deployed in Afghanistan as part of President Obama's 2010 injection of US forces into the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which is what we've been called for the past decade. I remember all of the parts of my past now as a summary, and any hope of redemptive reasoning for my current actions has gone to shit. This is a land of pain and I am convinced that it always will be. Dog Company is spread all over the country, but we—my platoon and the Afghani National Police (ANP) assigned to work with us—are tucked away in the northern province of Takhar, bordering Tajikistan. Our job is to protect civilians. More specifically, our job is to hunt terrorists,

and terrorists are everywhere. Even if you don't see them, you know they are there. Even in the miles and miles of flat nothingness around our base, they are there. This is what you must believe. Even in the small, tin-roofed village, even in the hut with children running and laughing outside of it, even there is an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attached to a tripwire or a person, waiting. And while I know that I volunteered for this, that everyone technically volunteers for this, there is a distinct difference between what you volunteer for and what you actually do as infantry, even when the sergeants glare at you and yell, over and over, inches from your face, "You *will* be a killer! You will or you will fucking *die!*"

I don't feel like a killer. I feel lost. They say when you step off the plane in Kabul, the capital, that time stops there for you. I get that. And now I find myself wondering, late at night in the middle of the middle of nowhere, what Dad would think about all this, if he were here. I still don't know.

## What's Important

PFC Martin Vicks points his fork at me, small drops of gravy falling from its prongs and landing back in the watery mashed potatoes on his plate, and says, "It's all they know how to do." His fork hovers for a minute more before he thrusts it into his food.

"Shit, Vicks," PFC William McReedy says. He's sitting to my right, grasping his plastic cup of water but not lifting it. "Course that's all they know how to do. Don't take a rocket scientist to figure that out." He picks his drink up and takes a sip, nodding to me when I catch his eye.

"I've been here for two months and not fired a single round," I say, which is technically true. "The fuck kind of war is this." I shake my head and move my fork through the muck on my plate. Outside, the wind pushes against the gray, canvas-like walls of the large mess hall tent.

"That's cause there's nothing to fucking shoot *at*," Vicks says. "And it's a *conflict*, Marcoti, remember?"

"Right, right," I say. "'War' implies violence or some shit."

"I seen plenty of shit to shoot at, just always after-the-fact," McReedy says.

"No, no, no," Vicks says quickly. He drops his fork and points to the door across the tent. "Even if we had the chance to shoot at those goddamned Hadjis *before* the fact, it wouldn't do shit." He taps the table with his finger. "You can't kill shit that's already dead inside."

“You got that right,” McReedy says, nodding. Hadjis are what we call the locals. Some still use the more traditional “ragheads,” but it’s all the same to me.

I move the potatoes around on my plate and stare through the clear-plastic window behind Vicks. Pale-yellow mountain tops accent the light-blue sky. “Cowards,” I say. Yesterday, the AM patrol was hit by an IED again—it was the second time this month. Killed three and sent four home. It happened the same way it always does. A few camels loaded with crap to sell at the market pass on the dirt road, people trailing in a thin line for a mile or so, and somewhere interspersed is a car, or a Jeep, or a truck. Sometimes, it just rolls past, pattering and wheezing on the white sand. Sometimes it’ll even honk for us, the driver waving or giving a weak salute. And sometimes it blows up. You’d think they’d run out of cars up in the Hindu Kush mountains after a while.

“And ya know,” Vicks says, pulling my gaze back to him, “if we killed ten of them, another forty would be ready to blow themselves up for us. They’re relentless little shits.”

“I bet the attacks wouldn’t happen if we weren’t here,” I say.

“Best thing to do is just keep occupied,” McReedy says. “It’s the little things that keep me going.”

“No army-supplied iPod or Xbox is going to fill the empty seats here,” I say.

“Calm down, Marcoti,” McReedy says. He puts one of his massive hands on my shoulder. “I ain’t trying to fill these seats.” He waves around the room with his other hand. A few of the other men look up, then go back to their conversations. “I’m just saying we got to appreciate the little things to take our minds off the big ones.”

“It’s pretty fucking hard to do that when shit keeps randomly blowing up,” I say, “and we can’t fight back.”

“At least we’re all still here,” Vicks says, mouth half-full of food.

“Damn right,” McReedy says. He moves his hand back to his fork.

I shake my head. “I guess so,” I say.

\* \* \* \*

Our FOB, or Forward Operating Base, is called FOB Spark. It’s about 80 miles from the closest piece of real civilization, a city called Taluqan. I stopped there once, before I was assigned here from Kabul, and aside from the abundance of rice and salt for sale, I saw no difference between it and any number of other Afghani “cities” I’ve heard about. I didn’t know the smells humans are capable of producing until I walked through an Afghani market—sweat, sand, salt, and garbage. Piles and piles of rotting, infested garbage everywhere. FOB Spark actually used to belong to Russians thirty years ago during their occupation, which a lot of FOBs share in common. So we still have the same 4-foot walls around us that they did, and we use the two remaining structures as sleeping quarters, which maybe they did, we don’t know.

For the first month the biggest threat to us were land mines. Most of this country was blanketed in the damn things by the Russians, and because sand tends to shift over the course of a few decades, no one knew where we could and couldn’t walk outside of civilian trade routes. Fortunately, enough idiots signed up for Explosive Ordinance

Disposal (EOD) to clear most of the surrounding area, which in turn led to an increase in patrols. *Unfortunately*, this led to an increase in casualties, as we hardly ever sustain even an injury on a mission, if we get a mission. We aren't near Iran or Pakistan, though, so there's not much to really do. Sometimes I think the ISAF forgets we're up here—until someone dies, anyway.

Today, I'm on a patrol with Vicks, McReedy, a gunner named PFC Cowel, and Sgt. Kelson, who's sitting in the back of the Humvee, busy with paperwork. One advantage, if there can be one, to being assigned to FOB Spark is our ability to bend, or even break, "protocol." On this patrol, for example, Sgt. Kelson has allowed us to walk alongside the vehicle if we'd like, but there's a lot of shit we can get away with out here.

Recently, I've noticed that the Afghans hate American music. So has Vicks. So as we walk on our patrol route today, I tell him to hook his iPod into the Humvee's radio—something one of the tech guys rigged up—and we blast Alice in Chains for the line of marching traders we're supposed to keep an eye on. This causes them to walk with their heads down, and if they occasionally look up, a look of disgust is clear on their faces.

I turn to McReedy and smile.

"They've come to snuff the rooster!" he sings, smiling back.

Vicks is lightly drumming on the steering wheel with his fingers as he guides the Humvee forward. The "mountains" around this patrol route are more like hills, slowly rising to an indefinable point, then sweeping back down somewhere miles away. This is

the safest place to patrol besides open desert because of the good visibility, though it all looks the same to me—yellowish sand on a faded skyline.

In the distance, I see an old, beat-up Jeep trailing a cluster of camels. Vicks turns up the volume. Cowel, manning the .50 cal machine gun atop the vehicle, is nodding calmly to the music, keeping a lazy eye on the horizon. After a few more minutes, the Jeep is about fifty yards away, and I swear I see the driver check something in the empty passenger's seat. It's probably nothing, but still. I grip my rifle tightly, and when I can see the driver's eyes, I'm certain that he's going to do something, as I see him check his passenger's seat again and again. I want to raise my rifle and fire at the driver. I ignore my trigger discipline, my finger carefully tracing the thin metal, and just as I'm about to bring my weapon up, McReedy slaps his hand on my shoulder.

“...Ohhh yeaaaa...” he sings.

I jump at the slap, and accidentally pull the trigger, but the gun jams with a solid *clink* that, apparently, only I hear. And as I look down at my rifle in utter disbelief, the Jeep rolls past in a low, gray cloud of dust, and nothing happens.

I turn to McReedy and weakly smile again, feeling oddly ashamed, but his eyes are closed and he's pulled his head back, belting the song to the sky. I don't fix the gun jam. The Afghanis stare at us with bored irritation. The song ends, and I sling my weapon over my shoulder with a small sigh. I tell Vicks to put on Metallica, then turn and wave to the passing Afghanis.

\* \* \* \*

Another week passes, with still no attacks. The three of us are sitting at our table in the mess hall, today with shriveled hot-dogs and baked beans.

McReedy says, "Never liked hotdogs," and takes a large bite of one.

"How can you not like hotdogs?" Vicks asks him. "They're like impossible to fuck up. That's rare when it comes to army food."

"True," I add.

"I don't know," McReedy says, examining his half-eaten hotdog. "I don't like eating stuff I don't know what's in it."

"It's either pig, beef, or chicken," I say, scooping up a spoonful of beans. "And you like all three, so there's no reason not to like hotdogs." My beans are cold.

"Eh, whatever. I'll eat them," McReedy says. "But I still don't care for them."

"I don't think whether or not you like hotdogs matters out here anyway," Vicks says.

McReedy shrugs. I keep eating beans.

"I've been so goddamned bored lately I've been looking for stuff to do in nothing," Vicks says.

"The fuck does that mean?" I ask him, squinting. Martin Vicks is half a foot shorter than me and from Bumfuck, Pennsylvania. According to him, he's here because there was nothing else to do back home.

“Well, like,” he says, “like yesterday I counted all the families that were carrying books.”

“They know how to read?” McReedy asks with a smirk.

Vicks ignores the joke. “Eight,” he says with gravity. “Out of the two miles of people, eight had books.”

“So?” I ask. Figuring whether or not the Afghanis can read seems like a stupid way to stave off boredom.

“So, I bought all the books,” Vicks says. “And then I ripped up all the pages, and sprinkled them all into the wind.” He dances his fingers in front of me, replicating the process.

McReedy starts laughing.

I shake my head and ask, “Why?”

“Why not?” he asks back. “At least the Hadjis aren’t getting any closer to being literate.” He laughs.

I can’t help but laugh at the thought, too. I wonder if anyone was depending on those books. I can’t possibly imagine it.

“Like I said, guys,” Vicks says. “It doesn’t matter what we do here. Not really.”

\* \* \* \*

Three days later there’s been another bomb attack. None of us were on patrol—it was guys from another squad. Two killed. No one else was hurt. I’m standing outside my

barracks, watching the sun set over the sandy horizon. Vicks stands next to me. I don't know where McReedy or any of the other guys are.

“What I'll never understand,” Vicks says, “is how they load up someone with explosives, but only manage to take out two or three or four of us every time.”

I keep my eyes on the sun. “What, would you rather more people die?” I ask him.

“Fuck no,” he says. “But you'd think they'd give up by now. They set out to kill the lot of us, but they get nil results every time.”

“Well, they're relentless little shits,” I say, quietly. A Humvee drives behind us, leaving diesel exhaust in its wake.

“Yup,” he says.

“Let's just concentrate on the little things,” I say with a sigh. “Seems to work.”

“Yeah, I guess it does,” Vicks says.

“Not like we can fight back. We just have to roll with the boredom,” I say. I've given up on the idea of retaliating—I feel like I've had the same magazine in my rifle for months now.

“I tripped a Hadji yesterday while on patrol,” Vicks says, facing me.

I look down from the sun. I wasn't on patrol with Vicks yesterday. “What?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “It was some girl. Made her drop a whole jug of water. Smashed it. It was hilarious.” He laughs, but it sounds dry and forced.

I stare into his eyes for a moment, trying to see how serious he really is, but the dying light mutes any emotions. “Whatever,” I say, and I look back to the sun.

\* \* \* \*

“One... *thousand*,” Vicks says to the woman. We’re about finished with our AM patrol route the next morning, and Vicks is bargaining with a woman for a small puppy that her son—a four- or five-year-old—is holding in his arms. Vicks holds up the Afghani money in front of her face. One thousand Afghanis is about twenty US Dollars. “*One...thousand...for the dog*,” he says, pointing to the puppy. The woman looks confused, so Vicks turns to her husband a second time. He thrusts the money forth, then points down to the dog. “*For...the...dog*,” he says, impatiently. Our interpreter is in another Humvee, and this isn’t worth pulling him back here.

"Vicks, just get back inside," Sgt. Kelson says, annoyed.

"One sec," Vicks says. "Just a second, hold on."

The local man's expression is blank but serious. He looks at his son—the most confused among them—then back to the money. I’m certain he gets the message. Vicks is about to give up when the man reaches out and snatches the money, then turns to his son and says something in their language. The child hesitates, but steps forward and holds the puppy out for Vicks, who grabs it by the skin on the back of its neck.

“Thank you,” Vicks says, turning back to the Humvee. “*Jeez.*”

“What the fuck are we going to do with a dog?” McReedy asks.

“Not sure yet,” Vicks says. “I’ll think of something.” He climbs into the Humvee and resumes driving, the puppy in his lap. It’s a white pup, with black fur around its eyes.

Vicks looks massive in his gear compared to the dog, it passively yipping in his lap. It hardly seems worth the twenty bucks.

\* \* \* \*

After patrol, me, Vicks, and McReedy are all standing at the edge of a cliff a few hundred meters behind our base. Vicks is holding the puppy.

“Alright, what the fuck, Vicks?” McReedy asks.

“You got your camera, right?” Vicks asks McReedy, ignoring his question.

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Alright, cool,” Vicks says. He holds the puppy out for me to take it.

I laugh for a second, then ask, “What do you want me to do with it?”

“Toss it,” Vicks says. “Off the cliff, just toss it.” He laughs.

“What? Why?” I ask. I never really liked dogs, but this seems extreme. Wrong, even.

“Why not?” he asks. “It’s one less thing one of *them* has to enjoy.”

“Yeah but that ain’t the puppy’s fault,” McReedy says. “It didn’t do nothing.” He’s powering up the camera.

“So? I’m not taking care of a gooner dog,” Vicks says. “And we sure as shit can’t keep it on the base with us anyway. Take it, Marcoti. My arm’s getting tired.” He jingles it in front of me.

I grab the puppy by the skin on the back of its neck. It’s incredibly light.

“I mean seriously, does it matter? Really?” Vicks asks us. “This is the kinda shit that people would pay attention to if they weren’t *here*.” Vicks points to the ground. “Ya know? But you’re holding it, Marcoti. How fucking lame is that dog?”

I laugh. He’s right. Being here is nothing like home. “Nothing really matters out here,” I say. I glance nervously at the camera, then back to the puppy.

McReedy shrugs. “They were probably going to eat it anyway.”

“Fucking right they were!” Vicks says. “Start recording.”

McReedy hits the red record button on top of the camera.

I hold the dog out in front of it. “Aww...so cute,” I say. What bullshit. “So cute, little puppy.”

Vicks starts laughing. I chuckle, too.

“Uh...uh-oh...” I say, pulling my arm back, as if throwing a grenade. I let it fly. There’s a slight delay after the dog leaves my hand, but then it starts yipping and yapping as it somersaults through the air, end over end. Vicks bursts into laughter. McReedy follows it with the camera. After it goes below the lip of the cliff, there’s a brief silence before a small *thud* comes from somewhere below.

“Aw, that was *mean*,” McReedy jokes.

I turn away, laughing, feeling lightheaded. McReedy clicks off the camera.

Vicks composes himself enough to say, “See...that...that’s the shit I’m talking about. That’s one of those little things we can fucking worry about instead.” He starts laughing again.

McReedy simply stands there, shaking his head, a dumb smile across his face.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, back at the base, Vicks, McReedy and I are standing outside the mess hall. Vicks is holding McReedy's camera, and has the flip-out screen queued up to the small picture of me holding the puppy. McReedy is chewing on the end of an unlit cigar. One of the newer soldiers, clearly exhausted, strolls up—PFC Sam Levine—and Vicks lights up at his approach.

“Hey! Yo, Sammy!” Vicks says, quickly moving over to him.

McReedy and I exchange a glance and follow Vicks, standing behind him as he holds the camera out for Levine.

“Check this shit out,” Vicks says.

Levine remains curiously quiet, and leans over to see the camera's small screen. Vicks hits the play button.

I watch as the short scene of me tossing the puppy plays on the miniature screen, and for a moment think about why Vicks had wanted this recorded, but his sudden burst of laughter causes me to lose the thought, so I smile, just as the puppy's yapping softly plays from the built-in speaker.

When the video is over, Vicks nudges Levine with his elbow and asks, “Wasn't that awesome?”

I look at Levine to hear his answer, and he isn't looking at Vicks or the camera, but instead stares at me, his jaw clenched tightly shut. He holds this look for only a second, though, then glances to Vicks and, relaxing, says, “Yeah, tha—that's pretty cool,” and offers a weak chuckle.

“Yeah, picked that dog up from one of the Hadjis this morning,” Vicks says.  
“Man I wish they could’ve seen that.” He nods towards the camera, chuckling again.

I shift my weight and look down. Something doesn’t seem right.

“Like I said,” McReedy says. “They were probably going to eat it anyways.”

McReedy is smiling like he was earlier and moving the cigar butt around in his mouth, but Levine catches my eyes and that same look of seriousness washes between us once more. Then he smiles and says to Vicks, “You should upload that to the internet. People would love it.”

Something in his words sounds accusatory, and for a moment I want to speak up and protest, but then I see that he wants me to do just that. He crosses his arms, wearing a satisfied, humble smirk. So instead, I slightly bow my head, still holding Levine’s eyes in my own, and say, “Yeah, do it, Vicks. They’ll love it.” My words sound hollow on the wind, and I suppose that they are, but honestly, I don’t care. Maybe I would have a long time ago, or maybe back home, but not here. Levine narrows his eyes at me, but I find myself looking back to the camera and I say, very softly, “It doesn’t matter,” though I don’t think anyone hears me.

“Dude, that’s a fucking *great* idea,” Vicks says. He laughs again.

“I’m going to eat, guys,” Levine says, moving past us. “Thanks for the laugh.”  
And as he passes into the mess hall, I see him nod at me, smiling. I smile back.

## On Patrol

It's feels like a long time since anyone has died. There have been explosions, sure. There are always explosions. In fact, that's what Vicks is about to tell us about. We're all standing around him, suited up for the day's patrols. It's morning, and the cold night air hasn't quite given way to the heat of the day.

"Okay, you all listening?" he asks everyone. "Okay. Alright, so, I was on road patrol, ya know, like we all are, with the line of them going for miles." He always makes sure to establish the scene, even though we all already know it. "And like, fucking a *half mile* away from us this gooner runs waayyy out of line and starts flailing his arms all over the fucking place."

He mimics the motion, waving frantically while bobbing his head from side to side. A few of the guys chuckle. Vicks smiles and rubs the back of his shaved head, then continues.

"And of course I'm like, 'What the fuck' and all, right?" He pauses to glance around, holding his hands out imploringly, making sure most of them are with him on this. "But no one else sees this guy," he continues, "and he's just flailing and running and I guess screaming who the fuck knows what."

"Jihad Bullshit," PFC Hall clarifies with a smile.

"Yeah, fucking Hadji Jihad Bullshit," Vicks agrees, nodding. "And I, of course, can already tell this guy's a newbie at the whole suicide thing"—he pauses, making eye contact with as many people as he can—"so I didn't say anything."

I haven't heard this story yet, but it doesn't surprise me that Vicks wouldn't report a potential IED attack. He clearly thinks they're funny. I see McReedy come out of the mess hall tent. He already has an unlit cigar in his mouth.

"Man, that can be dangerous," PFC Levine says.

"No, no," Vicks says back. "No, you don't get it. So, the guy's running at us, and I see, just barely, but I see him *drop* the fucking *detonator!*" He laughs at the recollection.

Levine doesn't look nearly as amused, and offers a small smile with some obviously forced laughter. Some of the other guys are laughing, but most are waiting for the punch line.

"So, what happened?" I finally ask.

Vicks quickly calms himself and says, "So, it drops on the ground, right in this pile of dirt. And he stops dead – completely shuts up, too – like he *must* have been wondering what, exactly, had just happened." He's looking right at me while he's talking. "And of course the line of people going to the market stops, and they're all looking at him. I mean, the guy ran so far away from the line that when he looked up I swear you could see him actually shit his pants right then and there."

I laugh along with a few other guys. Bombers never appear on my patrols. I mean, I guess that's a good thing. Patrols are usually so boring I sometimes wish something would happen. Not a bombing, necessarily, but something. Like Vicks' story.

"So he drops down to the ground," Vicks continues, moving his hands around, "scrambling into this pile in front of him. Meanwhile I'm standing there laughing my ass off, and Renholder here," he points to one of the PFCs next to him, "he runs over and is

all 'what the fuck, Vicks.'" Vicks is starting to cackle between words. "But...but I'm just laughing at this Afghani digging for his detonator in the dirt...and...and then the guy finds it, and he gets up, and I swear—" he pauses for a moment to calm himself, then says quickly, "The guy takes *maybe* another 6 steps and BAM!" Vicks claps his hands, loudly. "The guy blows himself up in the middle of nowhere!" He doubles over in laughter.

There's the punch line. It actually is kind of funny, but I have a few questions. McReedy is laughing with that low laugh that acts as a bass line for the group.

"What'd you do, then?" I ask him. A Humvee's engine starts in the distance.

"What do you mean?" Vicks asks.

"Well, I mean, what'd you do next?"

"The fuck do you mean, Marcoti?" he asks, then says, "We kept on our patrol. I mean we made a note of the event, but that's it. What'd you want us to do, pick up the asshole's pieces and bury him?" He laughs again.

I'm about to respond when Lt. Jones calls us over for our briefing for this patrol. I'm sure Vicks had an answer for any question, anyway. He always does. We all pick up our gear and head over.

\* \* \* \*

Patrols always take place on a road. That thought might not make sense at first, but what else *would* we patrol? The desert? It's hard enough to think that we're actually

*protecting* these people. I don't think I've been in a situation yet where I've had to protect anyone – I still haven't fired a single round in combat.

Our patrol is usually twenty people, including the interpreter, or *terp*. We always have to have a *terp* – usually a local guy we've selected to translate for us because *no one* here knows a word of Farsi outside of "hello" (if that). Even with this guy we're limited—half the population up here is either Tajik or Uzbek, though supposedly not where we are. I'm in charge of our Humvee, though that role doesn't really make me a "leader" – we just don't have a sergeant in here right now. I just tell our five-man group what to do if I have to—protocol bullshit, really. It's not like I'm the Commanding Officer (CO) of the patrol. He's two trucks back. Right now I'm in the lead vehicle with McReedy, who's driving. Our *terp* is in the back. Vicks isn't on this patrol. He has post duty at the base today – the most boring job possible. I would hate to be Vicks right now.

McReedy reaches up and pulls the unlit cigar from his mouth. "Wish we had the damn iPod," he says.

"I thought it was in here already," I say. I sigh and put my leg up on the dash. "This is going to be a long haul."

"How many songs can that thing hold, anyways?" McReedy asks.

"I don't know," I say, still staring ahead. The line of civilians we cruise next to seems endless. "A couple thousand. Didn't you ever use it?"

"Naw. Not my thing," he says.

Our *terp* is quiet. But then, I guess they all are. I've forgotten his name, so I turn and ask him.

"Faraj Mohammed," he says, looking to me, then back out the window. He stays silent. He's older than we are, maybe thirty years old, with short hair and a mild beard. He scratches his cheek. I swear they're all named Mohammed.

"At least it isn't hot out," I say, looking forward again.

"Got that right," McReedy says.

It's really nice out – abnormally nice, actually. The desert stretches off in all directions as usual, but if you look at the sky, you hardly notice it.

"Hey," I say to McReedy. "You know Vicks' story?"

"Yeah," he says. He chuckles for a moment then asks, "What about it?"

"You think it happened like that?" I ask.

"Sure, why not?" he asks, a bit confused.

"Well, I mean, a lot of what he saw happened a half mile away," I say. "There's no way he saw anything that clearly."

"C'mon Marcoti, you know Vicks," he says, moving his cigar around in his mouth. "He goes with whatever sounds best."

"But a guy blowing himself up for no reason?" I ask. "Just to, what, *follow through*? Live up to expectations? They always have a *reason*, right?" I glance back to Faraj behind us. Would he know the answer? He doesn't seem to be paying attention to us.

"Man, I doubt some of them even *want* a reason," McReedy says. He seems to completely disregard Faraj's existence behind us.

I sigh again. "How are we supposed to care when that kind of crap happens, you know?" I ask, suddenly frustrated. "It's like...what are we *doing here* if that shit is possible?"

"Protecting people," Faraj says behind us.

I see McReedy look into the rearview. I turn to Faraj.

"You protect them. Give them security," Faraj says. "You catch the bad guy. Save lives."

"What bad guys have we caught?" I ask. "We're always the target."

"Better you than innocent people," Faraj says.

"And what lives? I haven't saved anyone," I say firmly.

"Then you should try harder," Faraj says. He looks back out the window.

\* \* \* \*

Five hours later the heat has come upon us. McReedy actually took his jacket off – usually a real no-no – and the M4 in my lap radiates its own metallic warmth into the cabin. Goddamn it's hot. The soldier walking out to my right doesn't seem to notice the heat, though. He looks too nervous. The other one, on McReedy's side, hopped up on the .50 cal about half an hour ago. The cabin stinks like BO, though – something I'm positive we can thank Faraj for. I turn to look at him.

He's completely drenched. We don't make terps wear Active Combat Uniforms (ACUs), but even civilian clothing is uncomfortable with this climate. His faded yellow t-

shirt is now an ugly, sweaty brown, and his jeans seem to be the main source of the stench.

"Hey Faraj," I say, getting his attention.

He turns to me. His face glistens with sweat.

"You guys ever get used to this heat?" I ask.

"No," he says. "No one gets used to it. The best you can do is deal with it."

"I thought you guys liked this weather," McReedy says. He doesn't seem as uncomfortable as the rest of us for some reason.

"No," Faraj says. "Anyone who likes this kind of weather is a fool."

"Hah. Fucking right," McReedy says. Faraj turns back to the window.

"Got something up ahead, sir," the gunner, PFC Falkner, calls down to us. "About half mile, right side of the civvies, in the road."

"God damnit," I hear McReedy mutter quietly. He moves the cigar around in his mouth and sighs.

"What is it, Falks?" I ask.

"Not sure," he says. "Group of them are all around something. Looks like a woman. I don't see anything hostile. We could just go around them."

I consider that choice. "No," I say. "Someone might need help."

McReedy glances at me and sighs again. He picks up the radio and clicks it onto broadcast. "Hey guys, this is Hotel 1," he says into the mouthpiece. "We're going to break for ten-fifteen here. Civvies got some kind of problem we're going to check into. Standby."

The other vehicles send their acknowledgements. I look at the soldier still walking on my side. "Relax, Karmin," I say to him. "You're going to choke the air out of that rifle if you hold it any tighter."

"Sorry," he says, loosening his grip.

"Don't be sorry," I say. "Just calm down. The civvies would be flipping out if it were something serious." Though that isn't completely true. They can be amazingly calm, even when there's an IED attack. Or so I'm told.

A few seconds later and we pull up about forty feet or so from the small group of locals. There are four of them standing in the middle of the road – three men and a woman, who is wailing and crying hysterically. Two of the men are just standing there, looking concerned. The third seems to be laughing just as hard as the woman is crying. She's bent over on the ground, though, and looks to be holding something wrapped in a blanket, though I can't tell what it is. Every few seconds she pulls her head up and screams skyward, then doubles back over whatever is in the blanket, sobbing. None of them seem to notice our approach. McReedy puts the Humvee in park and I step out, hoisting my M4 over my shoulder. It actually isn't as hot outside as it is in that Humvee, and the fresh air is fantastic. I walk to the front of the vehicle.

"Stay up there, Falks," I say to the gunner. He nods.

"C'mon, Faraj," McReedy says into the cabin as he steps out. He grunts as he puts his ACU jacket back on. "I'm pretty sure we're going to need you on this one."

Faraj opens his door and steps out, shielding his eyes with his hand. He and McReedy walk up to me, followed shortly by Karmin. They all look to me.

"Well, Marcoti," McReedy says, putting his helmet back on. "Let's get this over with." He lazily holds his M4 as he glances at the crying woman.

"Alright," I say. "Karmin, stay here with Falks and just keep an eye on everything. We'll see what the big deal is. Terp'll come with us." I check the safety on my M4. It's on.

"Easy enough," Karmin says, nodding.

"Keep an eye on us, Falks," I call up to the gunner.

"No problem," he says.

"Let's go," I say. "This shouldn't take long." We walk over to the group of locals.

The two serious-looking guys are each wearing pretty much the same thing – dark brown robe-like garments topped off with traditional-looking turbans. Their clothes are caked with dirt and sand, but then again, they usually are. They finally notice us when we walk up to them. The one who's laughing is wearing more western-looking clothing, with a somewhat tan, loose fitting cloth for a shirt over some kind of baggy khakis. All of his clothes look hand-made. The woman has on the same thing all the women here have on – a black burqa – only her face isn't obscured. She must come from a more relaxed household. I still can't see what she's crouching over.

"Anyone here speak English?" I ask the group. The woman continues to wail, and the one man keeps laughing, ignoring me. The two other men stare at me, and say nothing. I sigh. Of course they don't speak English. "Okay, then. Faraj, tell them who we are and ask them what the hell is going on."

Faraj looks at the two men and speaks in Farsi for a moment. The men glance at each other, then one of them sternly says something to Faraj.

Faraj turns to me and McReedy. "This man," he points to the one laughing, "apparently did something to the woman's daughter."

Suddenly, it feels a lot hotter. I look down at my safety again—still on. "What did he do?" I ask, looking back up. I exchange a glance with McReedy before looking down at the woman. She sits back and lets out another loud wail, but I finally get a good look at the bundle in her lap. It looks like...a doll? That's it? Yes, it actually looks like one of those Cabbage Patch dolls from the 80's—the Caucasian kind—wrapped tightly in a dirty, dark blue wool blanket.

"The hell...?" I hear McReedy say next to me. He's seen the doll, too.

"Wait. Ask them what this guy's relationship is to her," I say to Faraj.

Faraj nods and speaks to the men again. Both of them talk to him this time, still just as serious. He turns to me after another minute of conversation. "These two men are brothers of the woman. He," he points to the guy who's *still* laughing just as hard as when we walked up, "is the brother of the woman's husband."

"Where's the husband at?" McReedy asks, squinting.

"I do not know," Faraj says. "One moment." He turns back to the men again.

"Shit. You got the cuffs if we have to take this guy back?" I quietly ask McReedy between the woman's sobs.

"Yup," he says, paddling his side.

Our orders are, if we capture anyone—and we never have—that we have to take them back to the FOB until either we can transport them to the nearest Afghani National

Police establishment, or they come to us. I have no idea how long that would take, but that's just the kind of conflict this is.

Faraj turns back to us. "The husband is sick," he says. "This is why he is not here, and these men are. Apparently this man found out that the woman may have cheated on her husband, and that her baby may be the result of that affair." He clenches his jaw when he finishes.

"Well, shit," I say. I look down at the guy laughing. "Did he kill the baby? Where is the baby?" I reach down and lightly shove the guy's shoulder. He keeps laughing.

"Hey, asshole!" I say, getting angry. "Shut up!"

The man finally turns to us, but only gets a little calmer.

The woman sees us, too, and her eyes widen as she takes in my uniform. She stands up, still clutching the bundle in her arms, and rushes to me, pleading something I can't understand. She smells awful, too.

"What's she saying?" I ask. "Tell her to calm down!"

Faraj comes to her side and says a few things to her in Farsi. She calms down a little bit, but keeps murmuring to herself. He looks back to me. "She says that her baby is gone," he says. "Probably dead. That is what she fears. She wants someone to save her baby. That is what she keeps saying."

"What's with the doll?" McReedy asks him.

Faraj has another minute of conversation with the men, then turns to us again. "These men say he replaced the child with the doll," he says. "It was not long ago that she realized that the baby was not real. Maybe half an hour."

Suddenly, the woman rushes over to me again, and turns the doll over, thrusting it forward and wailing loudly. The bundle looks...wet? Stained.

"Calm down!" I say, though I know she can't understand me. I look at the bundle again. It isn't wet, but it is stained. There are dried flakes on the tattered wool, like burned sawdust, and some of them fall on my boots because of the woman's frantic shaking. Her eyes are brimming with tears and fear. I look to McReedy, but he's staring down the laughing man along with everyone else. The blanket is frayed at the edges, too, showing its age—much older than the child that should be there. The stain covers the entire underside of the bundle, and part of it has rubbed off onto the woman's hands, making them almost maroon.

"Fuck," I say. "That's a bloodstain. *Shit.*"

McReedy looks over. "Sure is," he says. He's holding his rifle firmly now.

"Alright, alright," I say to the woman. I turn to Faraj, pushing the bundle down, out of sight. "Faraj, please try and calm her down. Move her behind us."

Faraj speaks quickly to the woman, pushing her behind us. She keeps crying, but I can tell she's trying to be quieter. Faraj comes back around, still clenching his jaw.

"Well where in the hell is the baby?" I ask.

Faraj turns and speaks to the men again, but quickly turns back to us. "They do not know," he says.

I grab the laughing man, and spin him around to face us, holding him by his shoulders. He reeks worse than Faraj. My sudden move causes the three men to back

away, cautiously, and I see the line of civilians momentarily look in our direction. A few actually stop walking to watch.

"Shut up!" I yell at him. "Ask him where the baby is," I say as calmly as I can, staring at the guy. Up close, I can see how dirty he really is. His hair, cut short and lacking a turban, is matted with sweat. His face is rough, grimy, dotted in a muddy mixture of sweat and dirt that his stubble can't quite penetrate. He's missing a few teeth, too. He looks savage, like what Vicks would call an animal.

The man seems to see that things are serious, so he finally stops laughing enough for Faraj to speak to him. Though even between words the guy seems to giggle here and there. I tighten my grip on his shoulders and he stops giggling.

"He says the child is gone," Faraj says.

"So, did he take it?" I ask.

"Yes," Faraj says. He swallows tightly.

"Is it dead? Did he kill it?" I ask.

"He will not say."

I turn with the man still in my grasp and easily fling him onto the road. He collapses and coughs into the dust. "I guess we have to take him back," I say. "There's a first time for everything. McReedy—"

"—Got it," McReedy says. He slings his gun over his shoulder and pulls out a pair of the plastic zip-tie cuffs we've never used before.

I turn back to Faraj. "Tell them where we're taking him and where he'll probably end up," I nod to the two men. "Get their information if you can. Here," I pull a pad of

paper and a small pencil from one of my pockets and hand it to him. "If they care, that is." I look back to the woman, still sobbing behind us. We can't take her with us. "Get her info, too, if you can," I say. "I'm going to radio one of the other trucks up here to pick him up."

"Alright," McReedy says. He's pinning the guy to the ground.

I turn and start back to the Humvee. That baby's definitely dead. I don't know if it would be worth saving even if I could. I look over to the line of civilians. They've all resumed their trek.

\* \* \* \*

The prisoner didn't talk the whole way back, according to the other truck. After the debriefing back at base, a few soldiers are carrying the prisoner off to one of our supply tents. We don't have an official "holding area" like we're supposed to. I think we did a long time ago, before I got here, but after so many months without a capture, it turned into another supply tent. I'm standing outside our barracks next to McReedy, who removes the cigar from his mouth to spit before putting it back in. It's dusk, and the painful heat from the day has almost completely disappeared. I see Vicks off to the side, intently watching the prisoner. He looks angry for some reason. After another minute he jogs over to us.

"Alright, what the fuck, man," he says quickly. "What the fuck happened?"

"Got a prisoner," McReedy answers for me.

"No shit," Vicks says. "What the fuck *happened*?"

I recap the events of the patrol for him. While I do this, he keeps shaking his head, but I can't tell if it's because he expected it all or can't believe it. When I finally get to the part about cuffing the guy, Vicks interrupts me.

"Wait," Vicks says. "Hold on." He holds his hands up. "So, you don't *really* know what happened?" He squints at me, frustrated.

"We know he took a baby," I say. "Probably killed it. That's enough for us to take the guy."

"Yeah, but what's the story there?" Vicks asks.

"Story?" McReedy asks.

Vicks turns to him. "Yeah, story. How did he get the baby, what the fuck did he do to it, *why* did he do it—and don't give me bullshit about cheating on a husband. If it were that simple they'd just have killed her."

"Killed her?" I ask.

"Did you not do any fucking research on these people before they sent you here?" Vicks ask me. "I mean, shit, you know about them cutting off hands and fingers for petty crimes and shit, right?"

"Yeah, we've all heard that," I say. "But that's Taliban." Vicks is generalizing again.

McReedy nods slowly.

"It's fucking *amazing*," Vicks says.

"Well, I don't know about 'amazing,'" McReedy says, crossing his arms. "Just seems kind of backwards."

"No-no-no," Vicks says. "It just shows how much they really, *really* don't give a shit."

"Don't give a shit about what?" I ask.

"Each other!" he says loudly. "Anyone! Us!" A couple of guys outside the mess hall tent glance over. He pauses, calming for a second. "The stupid fuck you brought back, when did he stop laughing?"

"After I pushed him to the ground to get cuffed," I say.

"And even then he still wanted to laugh," McReedy adds. "I could see it. Guy had this grin on his face like he was holding shit back."

I never saw that grin.

"Didn't it bother you at all?" Vicks asks. "Didn't you want to know what was so funny? Why it took that long for him to stop laughing?"

"No, Vicks," I say. Vicks' curiosity is making me nervous. The prisoner was clearly laughing at that woman, right?

Vicks sighs in frustration. "Don't you see?" he asks. "They never care. They *never* laugh."

"Vicks, come on," I say. "They laugh."

"You ever seen one of those shits laugh?" Vicks asks. "Even a terp? McReedy?"

"Can't say that I have," McReedy says. "Never really cared to notice, though."

"They're people, Vicks," I say. "They laugh."

"Oooh no, Marcoti." Vicks says. "No, no. They are *not* fucking *people*." He looks angry again. "They don't give a shit. They fucking blow each other up. They cut off each others' hands. They kill their wives. They—"

"That's enough," I say.

"Oh come the fuck on, Marcoti! You see it all the time!"

"No, Vicks, I don't," I say sternly.

"Well today was your chance," Vicks says. "And you *blew it*. You could've found out *everything* and seen what kind of things these people are." Vicks moves over to me, standing right in front of me. "Up close," he says. "First hand."

"Get the fuck away from me," I say. I push him back, but not hard.

"Cool down, Vicks," McReedy says.

Vicks points to the tent they took the prisoner to. "You should chain him up like a dog," he says, glaring. "Treat him like he's used to."

"Fuck, Vicks, do you even hear yourself?" I ask. "I mean, you sound like one of *them*, according to your own fucked up definition."

Vicks' anger suddenly seems to vanish, but blood rushes to his face and he steps back in front of me, this time much closer to my face. "Don't ever call me one of them," he says. "If they want to act like animals, then I'll fucking treat them like animals."

He steps away before I can push him again.

"Vicks," I say.

"Want to know what I did today?" he asks, now looking at both McReedy and me.

"Not really," McReedy says. "Not until you calm the hell down."

Vicks ignores him. "I went into the terp's footlocker. The one out with you guys. Did it on a piss break."

"Goddamnit, Vicks—"

"*Let me finish,*" he says, cutting me off. "I wasn't really looking for anything. I was just curious. I found a picture of him and his wife."

I take a quick step towards Vicks. "Damn it, did you steal something?" I ask, furious. He could get us all in trouble with his bullshit.

"No," he says. "I didn't take a damn thing."

"What the fuck *did* you do?" McReedy asks. He moves the cigar around in his mouth.

"I found that picture," Vicks says. "They weren't smiling. Either of them. They were just staring at the camera like fucking corpses."

"So what, Vicks?" I ask. "No one else cares if our terp smiles with his wife. No one else cares if the—"

"I'm just saying," Vicks says. "Even when they're supposed to be happy, even fake-happy, they can't smile. I even dug around in there for anything else, anything personal, and that was it. One fucking picture of two people looking miserable."

"Vicks, just leave, okay? Just go get some food or something. Cool off."

He stares at me for a long few seconds, then at McReedy, who says "Go cool off, we'll be there in a few to talk about something else."

"Fine," Vicks says. He starts to move toward the mess hall tent, but turns around. "But you keep wondering why he kept laughing, okay Marcoti? They never fucking laugh."

\* \* \* \*

It's cold in my barracks, nighttime having pushed all of the heat to the other side of the world for a bit. I stare at the stars out the crappy plastic window near my bunk, having lost count a long time ago. I wracked my brain the past few hours, searching for a memory of one of them laughing. Of all the miles of patrol I'd crossed, the thousands of people, did I never see one of them laugh? Tell some joke in Farsi to each other? I can't remember. Why does it matter? But I've never seen someone laugh like the prisoner. I sit up in my bunk and look around the small living area. Everyone else is passed out. One soldier fell asleep with a laptop still open, and the dim glow of the screen saver gives just enough light to make getting to the exit possible. I decide some air and water might help, so I get up, throw on some civvie shoes and quietly head out.

When I step outside, it's *cold*. So cold that, in my rush over to where the bathroom is, I almost miss the echo of a cry bounce across the base. But I hear it, so I stop, and look around. Most of our lights are kept off at night—can't give away positions—so the darkness is always thick as oil. We usually move the machine gun (MG) nest every couple of days, too. I see someone on guard at the edge of the base, but he's busy cleaning the MG in the nest. Then I hear it again, but barely. The sound almost blends

with the silence of the desert, but it's there. I turn to the prisoner's supply tent. A faint light flickers through the seams near the back, where the laughing guy is being kept. I don't even notice the cold anymore as I head over.

I quietly slip through the heavy cloth door and move to the back, towards the light. It smells like sewage in here. I hear muffled crying – sobbing, like someone's choking on a pillow. I hear laughter, too, but not the prisoner's.

"Relax," Vicks says. "*Relax*, it's just a fucking paper cut. Tell him it's a fucking paper cut."

I hear Faraj say something in Farsi, but he sounds upset, too.

I turn the final corner of boxes and see what Vicks has done.

"What the fuck, Vicks," I say.

The prisoner is cuffed to a pole extending from the ground and into a support beam overhead. He's collapsed. Blood is speckled all around him, but most of it is smeared on the pole. The guy's pants have been torn off, though he's still in some kind of underwear. The guy's shit himself, too. Pieces of it dot the floor, near his feet, and I can see it blotched on the guy's thighs. He looks at me, eyes wide and begging. He has cuts on his face.

"Marcoti, you're not going to believe what this guy did," Vicks says.

"Vicks..." I say again, still looking at the guy. He has a towel or something jammed in his mouth. "What...Where's the guard?" I ask.

"I'm the guard," Vicks says. "Told Renholder and Detnor I'd handle this guy for the night."

"Vicks, you can't fucking do this to a prisoner!" I say, finally looking at him. He has a pocket knife in his hand. He's smiling.

I look at Faraj, who's standing off to the side, clearly terrified.

"And Jesus fucking Christ, Vicks, the terp?" I ask. "What the fuck."

"Oh come on, Marcoti," Vicks says. He points to the prisoner with the knife.

"How the hell else was I going to find out what this guy did."

I tense up and take a step towards Vicks, holding his stare. "He took a baby, Vicks," I say.

"Did he?" Vicks asks, looking back to the prisoner. "Is that all he did?" He looks to Faraj. "Hey terp," he says. "Is that what he did?" He chuckles.

Faraj carefully shakes his head.

"This guy," Vicks starts, "found out that his brother's wife cheated on her husband."

"For fuck's sake, Vicks!"

"Wait! No, but it's better," he says. He walks over to me. I see specks of blood on his white t-shirt. "See, she did it with an *Israeli*."

He stares at me as I absorb this information. I look to Faraj. He stays motionless.

"But this all happened like a year ago," Vicks says. "She didn't know what the guy she fucked *was*. But the brother here, the *good sport* he is," Vicks points to the guy with his knife again, "found out, and didn't say anything. She didn't know a *thing*. Like a fucking soap opera. So he waited until there was a baby."

"Vicks, there are no Israelis up here," I say. "That doesn't make sen—"

"Let me *fucking* finish," Vicks says with gravity, moving closer to me. "He took it, the baby, right? He took it—didn't even know if it was the Israeli's or not. And he took it and he went off somewhere and he fucking killed it, Marcoti, but you figured that, right?" He waits for me to answer.

I hold his gaze for a long time. "Right," I say.

"But what you *didn't* know, was he fucking sliced the little shit open, and let it bleed to death," he says, now very close to my face. "And you know why?"

"Why."

"Because that's what the Jews do to their meat," he says. He stays close to me for another few seconds, then moves back to the prisoner. "And then!" he continues, "then he threw what was left to some dogs, because—what was it, *terp*?" he looks to Faraj.

Faraj swallows and quietly says, "Because it was as good as dog food."

I feel sick with disgust. I can feel the stench of the room on my skin.

"So, I thought this guy could bleed a little," Vicks says. "Show Marcoti your hands, asshole," he orders the prisoner.

The man looks at him, weeping, but doesn't move.

"Damnit, *terp*, tell him," Vicks angrily says to Faraj.

Faraj says something to the prisoner. The man, shaking and still cuffed to the pole, holds his bloody hands up as best he can for me to see. Vicks has sliced small gashes between each of the man's fingers and across his palms. I don't know what to do. I feel a wave of anger pass through me, but with no direction. I glare at Vicks, then the prisoner. The story is impossible. It's a lie.

"I got his feet, too," Vicks says. "And ears. And arm pits. And the back of his neck. And—"

"Stop it," I say. Blood has started to pool at the base of the pole.

"What?" Vicks says. "You aren't about to stick up for this guy, are you?" He steps over to me again.

"No," I say. "Look at him, Vicks! He'd tell you anything you want to hear. He'd tell you he fucked the baby's eyes out if you wanted him to!"

He ignores me. "Animals, Marcoti. They're all animals."

He's said that a hundred times before. But if this prisoner wasn't an animal before, Vicks has made him one now. He is ravaged, bloody, sprawled on the floor in a mess, unable to control even the snot from leaving his nose. And Vicks keeps smiling, breathing calmly, all while loosely gripping his knife, his hand careless in its comfort around the blade. Vicks arches his eyebrows and nods, silently telling me how frankly right he thinks he is. The prisoner coughs, spitting more of himself across the floor, but Vicks doesn't move. He just smiles. I pull my arm back and throw a punch at Vicks' jaw, hard. My hand solidly connects with his face, making a loud *smack*. Vicks doubles back, but stays on his feet. He's dazed, though, so I rush forward and grab his knife-holding hand, twisting it easily until I grab the blade and throw it to Faraj, but he misses it and it clatters on the floor near his feet.

Vicks shakes his head, regaining himself, and looks to swing at me, but I tackle him to the ground before he can. My heart is pounding, and I barely hear the whimpers

coming from the prisoner over my heartbeat. I've pushed Vicks back to the corner, near where Faraj is. The ground is freezing.

Vicks finally swings and hits the side of my face. I don't know where the swing came from, but it hurts, and I fall off, to his side. I forgot how strong we all are.

"Fuck *you*," he says. He shoves me over further, so I have to hold my arms in front of me, keeping myself somewhat vertical even though both of us are on the floor.

Faraj shuffles over to where I entered the area. "*Stop it*," I hear him beg.

Vicks and I lock eyes after Faraj's statement. I can tell he's struggling not to punch me again.

"You look at that pile of shit," Vicks finally says, pointing to the cuffed man.

"And you look at what he did and you tell me *right now* that he isn't shit." He turns and spits off to the side.

I turn and look into the prisoner's eyes. The man is beyond terrified, his eyes watering over with tears as he futilely grunts into his gag. I remember those same eyes, just as wet, but with laughter earlier today. I stare, looking for something there, something in the blackness around his pupils that tells me he's alright. That if it weren't for this situation, he'd be human, not shit. But I don't see anything. I turn back to Vicks.

"You fucked us," I say to Vicks. "What the fuck are you thinking?"

"You really think someone will give a shit about him, don't you?" Vicks asks me.

Faraj is staring at the prisoner. I don't say anything.

"No one will care," Vicks says. "You're the only one that seems to think otherwise, Marcoti. For some fucking reason."

"Because it shouldn't be right," I say, but my words feel empty. I look into Vicks' eyes. They look the same as the prisoner's, only full of rage, not fear.

Vicks reaches over and picks his knife off the ground. He closes the blade and pockets it. "And what's 'right' out here in Afghanistan, Marcoti? You tell me."

I don't have an answer. I stare at the prisoner again for what feels like an eternity. He'll bleed a lot, but he won't die. He'll have scars all over his body, too – I can see spots of blood now under his shirt – but he won't die. Vicks must have been here for hours.

"We deal with people we can't shoot," Vicks says. "People who blow themselves up because they think they'll get pussy when they die. We go four weeks without a single fucking thing happening, then a few of us die by an IED some random afternoon. That's all this is, every—"

"Then we're going to just walk away," I say, startling even myself.

"What?" Faraj says.

I slowly stand up, still looking at the prisoner. Someone will find this in the morning and flip shit. Vicks will get blamed, but without "real proof," he'll get off. And no one will believe a terp on this shit. I pause, finally looking at Vicks. "He's right," I say. "No one will care about this man."

Vicks slowly gets to his feet.

"But this man is not Taliban," Faraj says.

"That doesn't matter," I say. "He's just a POW." According to protocol, all prisoners are to be treated relatively equally until the ANP arrives, but this guy is alone.

"Just leave while we can. We're done here."

"You finally said something that makes sense," Vicks says.

"Get out," I say. I feel utterly exhausted, defeated. I touch the side of my face. It stings. I'll have to make an excuse for this if it bruises, which it will.

Vicks moves past me, and Faraj quickly steps to the side as Vicks walks out of the tent.

For a few seconds, Faraj and I stare at the prisoner, as if still unsure what to do. The man is quiet now, whimpering softly while trying to hug himself, though he can't. He will have to sit in his own filth for the rest of the night. Once the ANP gets him, things won't be much better, either. That's what we've heard, anyway. A breeze moves the walls around us. I eventually turn to Faraj and push him to leave, but he resists for a second.

"Aren't you going to at least help him?" Faraj asks.

I pause to glance back at the man on the floor. "Help him?" I ask back. "I saved his life."

## WORKS CITED

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 3-30. Print.

O'Brien, Timothy. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998. Print.

Swofford, Anthony. *Jarhead*. New York: Scribner, 2005. Print.

## WORKS CONSULTED

*All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque

*Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* by Stephen Ambrose

*Brothers and Keepers* by John Wideman

*Brother, I'm Dying* by Edwidge Danticat

*Catch 22* by Joseph Heller

*Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Michel Foucault

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemmingway

*Here, Bullet* by Brian Turner

*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* by Giorgio Agamben

*Jarhead* by Anthony Swofford

*Phantom Noise* by Brian Turner

*Philoctetes* by Sophocles

*Simulacra and Simulacrum* by Jean Baudrillard

*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

*The Vertical Hour* by David Hare