

ROMAN SKASKIW

Convoy Home

Sugar lay on his cot and sensed her, half way around the world, struggling over a blank paper, missing him, but not knowing how to express it. This was good, and, hopefully, the reason for her letters not coming. Helen would eventually apologize for not writing, and he would forgive her. He would be angry at her for a while and then it would be okay.

Sometimes he imagined himself forgotten and the idea simmered until he wanted to call her on the satellite phone, tell her in very few words how much pain she caused him, and then hang up and get killed.

He never called, and never got killed either. One more day is nothing, he thought.

Guys talked about fucking the same way they talked about fighting. At first Sugar would join but Helen seemed too good for that, and after a few awkward indulgences, Sugar resorted to simply waiting out the conversation or finding reason to leave.

He wanted to protect Helen the way he never before wanted to protect another human being. Sugar decided he was in love and a short while later, received two letters. They arrived together, though they were written months apart. Each left Captain Sugar bitter, lonely, and most of all troubled, but there were more immediate concerns.

There were things that had to be done right away, ASAP, now, yesterday. There was Iraqi at the gate offering to take anyone who will follow to the biggest bomb he'd ever seen in his whole life, which, as he privately asks the interpreter about his reward, will turn out to be a decade old mortar round, rusted, inert, useless,

and a big waste of time. There was a platoon sergeant irate over a broken machine gun and a company armorer swearing up and down that there's nothing wrong with it, mechanics who don't know how the Humvee doors keep getting stolen, and a Company Commander who needs Sugar to listen to his plan for tonight's raid, which will be the same plan as always, at the same time the Battalion Executive Officer expects him to explain which of his trucks are broken and why and what he's doing about them. And there were shootings, mortar attacks, and road-side bombs, which, when they happened, made everything else stop mattering.

There were comforts too—it wasn't all stress—comforts far more accessible than Helen's pity.

For example, Sugar wanted to smoke cigars with his peers, to stand by the warm fire smoking and bitching with them, but instead he rose from his cot, gathered his carbine and boonie cap, and pushed aside the flap of his tent.

He crossed the gravel motor pool to see the Colonel. The crunch of his footfalls seemed to linger in the darkness, dissipating but not departing, joining the vast heap of sensations he'd accumulated. It will all be over soon, he thought, all written in history, the stories replacing the facts. He would know about her soon enough. His great adventure would be over, and then he'd find out. A laugh trespassed into his darkness through the canvas skin of a tent as he passed. Sugar picked his way around the tent's lanyards, and walked toward the darker shadow the building that had been a meat processing plant before a battalion of paratroopers arrived on the heels of the invasion and converted it into their forward operating base (FOB). Reports conflicted as to whether it had shut down for the war, or if it had long been out of operation.

The Colonel looked tired, drained of his brash, aggressive manner. Our leader looks mortal, Sugar thought. The last call to prayer had sounded from the nearby mosque and he was still in uniform, in his small room. He'd been packing his belongings into two chests, making room for the incoming Marine commander. The single window was blocked with sandbags. Every shudder—from distant explosions or nearby construction—had precipitated a dusting of granules onto the floor that were not seen so much as felt under one's boots.

"Sit down," the Colonel said, still holding the framed picture of his wife and son. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"We're ready, sir."

"For tomorrow's combat mission?"

"Yessir."

“How is mighty Delta Company?” He smiled like a friend and not a warrior leader, not a battalion commander of paratroopers. Sugar felt uncomfortable.

“Good. Everyone’s looking forward to getting home.”

“I’ll bet they are. I am too,” said the Colonel. “Nobody’s getting lazy?”

“No, sir. The guys are on it.”

“Good. Stay focused.” The Colonel wrapped the picture of his wife and son in a brown t-shirt and placed it carefully in one of the chests. “You have one combat mission left. Don’t forget it’s a combat mission. I probably don’t have to tell you to stay focused.”

He didn’t. But Sugar wasn’t bothered. The phrase, or similar ones, were widely used and widely repeated to reaffirm the obvious when there was nothing else to say. Sugar had used one himself just hours ago when he gathered the subordinate leaders of his convoy to review the plan a final time on the hood of his Humvee. They walked the row of vehicles, confirming their sequence. “Stay focused,” he told everybody.

They used to say nothing, but that was a long time ago, a life time ago, back when they still thought they were charmed—believing in protection from luck or fairy godmothers or Saint Michael or God. That was before the bad one, when Sugar saw his gunner slouching in back of the truck, and yelled at him to quit being a pussy and get back in the fucking turret, before realizing he wasn’t being a pussy, and that no amount of yelling would ever get him back in the turret, and then feeling a great weakness in his stomach, and a profound desire to be far away from there before the swoosh and tooth-rattling explosion of an RPG brought him back to a world as sharp and as focused as it had ever been. That was before he and his supply clerk spent the night cleaning their friends’ blood from damaged equipment with bottled water and tooth brushes, and before the battalion hired Iraqi sheet metal workers to put steel all over the Humvees.

“Stay focused, Nick,” the Colonel said, “until the last vehicle is in Kuwait. Do you need anything?”

“No, sir. Just a little sleep and we’re good to go.” Sugar wanted to smoke. His men were racked out, the vehicles were lined up, and his friends stood smoking by the fire. Everywhere, guys relaxed in their tents, the guards stood watch in the towers—marines and paratroopers together—and beyond that, outside the wire, the Hajjis lived and drank tea and moved in the darkness, digging holes beside the road. Sugar wanted to unwind with his peers, and then rest so he’d be alert on the convoy.

“I wanted to tell you,” the Colonel continued, “you should be proud. You did a helluva job with those folks. Convincing them we’re doing God’s work here. I couldn’t have asked for more.”

“Thanks, sir. We’re ready for tomorrow. Ready as we’ll ever be. It’s late in the game for anything stupid to happen and everybody knows it.”

“I said goodbye to Sheik Rasheed today. Did you say goodbye to your folks?”

“Yes sir, at the last town council meeting a few days ago.”

“Were they sad to see you go?”

“I think so. But now I just need a little sleep before tomorrow.”

“Was there a whole lot o’ man-lovin going on?” the Colonel asked. Guys had joked about the kissing on the cheeks, and they had joked at Sugar for being close to the locals.

“A little.”

“I’ll bet.” The Colonel smiled in a way Sugar would have made fun of, had it been anyone other than the Colonel.

The electric generator failed again. Mohammed the electrician had said he needed a two-thousand-dollar part to make it run the way it used to, but Captain Black, the battalion supply officer, thought he was lying. The instant the lights went out, the Colonel automatically moved his hand to a battery-operated lantern on a plywood shelf above his desk. It flickered on, casting different shadows about the room. The Colonel’s helmet, body armor and M₄ carbine hung from separate nails above his cot. His duffel bags were half packed with uniforms, socks and boots. The lights on his laptop computer blinked on his desk next. Satellite images of the surrounding area were taped to the walls as posters had been several years ago in Sugar’s college dorm room.

“I’ll bet there was a whole lot o’ of man-lovin,” the Colonel repeated, still grinning stupidly at Sugar.

Goddammit, Sugar thought.

“Remember what this place looked like a year ago? There wasn’t a damn thing here. It was all broken glass and pigeon shit. We made what’s practically a city out of it. The soldiers did it. There was no one in the sector until we began operating here. The enemy had a safe haven, and we’ve squeezed them good. The boys should go home proud of what they’ve done. Make sure you give them a big pat on the back before they go home to see momma.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good.” The Colonel watched Sugar. “Get going then. I know you’re tired of listening to me. Go smoke with your buddies. Get some sleep too. I just wanted to wish you luck.”

Sugar felt his face flush. “Thank you.” The old man’s got a touch, he thought.

He left the Colonel’s room feeling the same exhilaration in his chest and lightness in his step he experienced as a child going to school on the last day before summer vacation, or, more recently, the excitement he felt when the last formation before block-leave was dismissed, and Sugar could see Helen in the parking lot waiting for him and her dress fluttering around her legs.

Even though she was just a girlfriend, he’d added her name to the list of spouses and significant others. She’d receive an email about his return. He imagined himself being indignant toward her, and her looking hurt and pleading for forgiveness before they’d make up.

Sugar walked slowly in the shadow slanting off the meat factory, avoiding curbs and breaks in the cement by memory and feel. This was real darkness. Blinking into it felt primal. He’d only known such darkness as a boy—the woods at night—fear, seduction, before his mother moved them to the city. It was like remembering a dream. The army put him in the woods again.

To keep his bearing as his eyes adjusted to darkness, he looked first to the faint light squeezing from sandbagged windows and second, over the wall and through the concertina wire to a dimly lit window of an Iraqi home beside its silent neighbors. His eyes began discerning various shades of black. Then he saw a flickering orange light from around the bend, and then the bright little fire burning in an ammo can and the silhouettes of his friends against it.

The three young men did not look like officers. Two stood, smoking cigars, staring down into the flames. The third squatted on his ankles, feeding secret documents into the fire. The paratroopers had long since gone native—at least to the extent of lax uniform standards. Two wore soft sweaters, perfect against the chilly night, and black wool hats. The tallest silhouette, Lieutenant Darby, who wore an FDNY baseball cap, and Lieutenant Rogers, who burned documents, wore the newly-issued, black, long-sleeved undershirt—the ninja suit. Their faces and desert-colored trousers shone in the light. M4s hung on their backs. Knives and multi-tools rode on their hips. Their eyes were glazed from looking at the flames.

“This is living. This right here.” Lieutenant Darby said in a luxurious voice. He warmed his palms until the heat became too much.

"I knew you bastards wouldn't wait for me," Sugar said as he approached. "No loyalty whatsoever."

"No loyalty?" Darby said. "Look who deserted his friends because mister big shot had to see the Colonel."

Sugar laughed. "I'm not a big shot. There's plenty of them round here, but I ain't one."

"Captain Black's a big shot," Lieutenant Coleman said. Coleman was the shortest officer in the battalion, but compact and strong. All his habits were rough and simple in a way that made everyone trust him. His men spoke candidly with him. "This morning he and I had a long talk to make sure I understood the importance of proper accountability of office supplies."

"Captain Black is a lot of things," Darby said.

"I was standing like this." Coleman assumed an exaggerated position of attention, locking his arms to his sides, puffing out his chest and pulling his chin into his throat—bracing, as he was taught in the Citadel's famously harsh plebe year.

"It's good to know you guys feel comfortable enough with me to raid my stash of cigars," Sugar said. "Warms my heart. Really."

Darby passed him a large Ziploc bag containing two cigars and a small tin. "We're comfortable enough to steal all kinds of shit from you," he said, "Haven't you learned yet?"

"I don't know where I'll get map markers from now that you're leaving," Coleman said.

Sugar felt light and good. He out-ranked the others, but still considered himself their peer. He was a promoted captain, like they'd eventually be, but this was his first assignment, which distinguished him as subordinate to the captains who arrived from the career course and commanded companies. Sugar took a cigar from the bag, held it gently in his teeth, sealed the bag, folded it twice, and leaned to slip it into his cargo pocket. He buttoned the pocket before turning his attention to the cigar. "Montecristos," Sugar said. "Worth every penny. I've made many alliances with these. Many friends." Numerous times, he had surprised and delighted Iraqis by sitting down and smoking with them, completely upending their expectations.

"Family send them?"

"Got them from an online cigar store. One that'll send to an A. P. O." Sugar puffed several times to get the flame going. "You share something with them, they will love you."

No one said anything. Sugar didn't care. He accepted their disdain for Iraqis. They are platoon leaders, he thought. They only Iraqis they meet are the ones trying to kill them.

"That's one of my rules for getting along with the natives." When he didn't have cigars to share with locals, Sugar would share the two photographs he carried with him. On back of the first photograph, him with family, he phonetically spelled the Arabic words for mother, sister, and dog. On back of the other, the picture of Helen, he wrote "za-weesh-dee," the word for wife. He chose "wife," because it would it'd avoid the explanatory baggage of "girlfriend" for this foreign culture. That was the reason. Everybody understands wife. Entire villages had crowded around him to look at those photographs. They giggled like school children when he said "Zaweeszhdee."

Sugar wondered what Helen would think of that. She smoked a cigar once too, on a dare. He liked that. He wanted to search out that mountain stream with her, retrace his childhood steps. He wanted them to bear witness to the darkness together.

Everyone looked into the fire.

"Speak as many of their phrases as possible," Sugar said, "Respect their elders, and ignore their women."

"Ignore them? I've seen some pretty hot women here," Coleman said, "and not just I've-been-deployed-for-a-year hot, but really hot."

"There's no harm in smiling and seeing if they smile back," Darby said. "Little victories. It's all about little victories." Darby always spoke with effortless authority, even when he was wrong. Like dancing around defenders as he did during officer sports.

A single burst of gun fire erupted in the south, the direction of the police station. Three red tracers rose steadily, then winked out, one after the next. Sugar listened for an exchange of gun fire. Instead, there was a second burst, identical to the first. It was nothing.

"You and your friends," Lieutenant Darby gestured toward the police station with his cigar. "Damn Hajjis." Darby's hard-driving platoon sergeant was perhaps the best in the battalion. Together they'd really achieved something. Each of the three times they were ambushed the drivers knew which way to turn their vehicles and the gunners, without waiting for permission, spun their turrets, fired, cranked their traversing/elevation mechanisms and fired again. Third platoon was lethal, and for that reason, beautiful. They made everyone safer.

Their competence made it difficult to object to Darby's always throwing prisoners in the mud as they awaited pick up, or his paying Iraqi children a dollar to go see if wires protruded from the dog carcass that had halted his patrol. It's hard to blame soldiers for surviving, or for being angry. Nine months is a long time. Sugar felt glad this was almost over.

Coleman still watched at the part of sky where the tracers had risen, then looked back at his friends. "It feels pretty damn good not to worry about that shit," he said.

"I'll worry for one more day," said Sugar.

"That's a good way to be," said Rogers, poking at the fire with a piece of rebar. "I'll worry for seven more. Seven and a wake up."

"The hell with worry. It's nice to sit on our asses and not have to go out," said Coleman. "It's somebody else's problem now."

It was nice. Guilty pleasure, Sugar thought, and we all know it. But that's okay.

These were the last of his cigars. They were as dry and flaky as parchment. The men spat dried bits of tobacco from their lips. Still, they tasted good and smooth and gave Sugar the feeling of a warm bed. After tomorrow, there will be no more cranky platoon sergeants, inept armorers, corrupt mechanics, urgent missions, ambushes, IEDs, mortar attacks, or frantic donning of body armor in the middle of the night. No more waiting for Helen's letters. Only good things. Sleep. Good food. No worries. Sugar looked at the fire. He'd be safe soon.

Across the motor pool, their Marine replacements moved along a row of Humvees near the main gate, their engines rumbling—a night patrol. The gate guard held a clip board and talked with the sergeant from the lead vehicle. Marines reclined on piles of gear in the backs of the Humvees, waiting to start. Others walked back and forth along the row, trying to find one another in the confusion of darkness. They were new and stressed. It takes a while to learn what matters and what doesn't.

Darby exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke. "Life's simple pleasures," he said, the words coming softly from a place deep inside. "Seven and a wake up for me too."

"My platoon's always getting screwed," said Coleman. "Two more goddamn weeks."

In truth, his platoon would be last because they took no casualties during the deployment, but no one said anything because that sort of talk would break the mood. Also because everyone enjoyed hearing Coleman complain. He did it with such intensity, it felt like he expressed everybody's problems and all the injustice in the world.

Lieutenant Rogers put the last heap of documents on the fire, and stood up, stretching the muscles in his legs. The fire smothered somewhat, but in a way that

the flame would fester and grow suddenly bigger. “Got another?” He looked at Sugar and put two fingers to his lips.

Sugar retrieved the Ziploc bag and pulled a cigar from it. “The last,” he said, offering the Montecristo.

“Do you have the other kind?” Rogers asked. “The big ones are a too much for me.” “An Acid.” Sugar pulled a small tin from the bag and opened it with his thumb nail. He handed Rogers a miniature, tree-bark-colored cigar.

Rogers pulled the folding knife off his belt, and sawed the blade over the tip of the little cigar, trying hard to make as clean a cut as possible.

“What a small cigar you have,” Darby said.

Rogers grinned.

Darby continued. “Don’t be ashamed. Not everyone can handle one as big as mine.”

“I bet Captain Black can handle a big one,” Coleman said. “He’s been bending over for the Colonel since we been here.”

“I bet you’re going to think twice the next time you need map markers,” Sugar told him. “You selfish bastard.”

A wiry marine sergeant strode close enough for the firelight to shine in his eyes. “The hell you boys doin’?” He spoke in a twangy Kentucky accent. He could not have known they were officers.

“Burning documents. Graphics, personal mail and stuff,” Rogers said calmly.

The marine eyed them. Both the Marines and paratroopers had been warned by their respective chains of command to avoid pissing contests.

“You’re lighting up the whole goddamn building,” said the Marine sergeant.

“We’ll move,” Sugar said pleasantly.

The marine sergeant looked like he wanted to erupt. “Don’t do that again,” he said.

“You won’t see me again,” Sugar replied. He felt himself smiling inside and tried not to show it.

The marine sergeant turned back to the row of rumbling vehicles. Sugar heard his voice rising again. He yelled something about “your weapon” to another Marine, taking his frustration out on a subordinate. Shit rolls downhill, as they say.

Coleman spoke. “As if they don’t fucking know we’re here. We’ve been in the biggest fucking building in sight for a fucking year now.”

“The same bastards who mortar us are probably the ones who work here,” Darby said.

With his boot, Captain Sugar pushed the ammo can with the fire. It scraped the cement. They moved to where its light was partly sheltered by two trucks. "It's their show now. We pinged just as much when we first got here," he said.

A distant explosion roared somewhere north of them. It may or may not have been something.

Coleman let out a string of curses.

"It wouldn't bother me a bit if we killed them all," Coleman said. "Every single one of them."

"They're not all bad," Sugar said.

"You haven't seen what I have."

"And you," Sugar gestured with his cigar. "You haven't seen what I have. You only see the ones trying to kill us."

"Well," Darby broke in, "it's true you worked the civilian side of things, schools, town council and such. It's a matter of perspective. But I'm with you." He indicated Coleman. "They're a bunch of savages. Wouldn't bother me a bit if they let us just go to town and level the place. Really wouldn't. Be a great way to say goodbye—'Goodbye and fuck you too.'"

It wasn't a serious disagreement. They'd had it before.

"When I get home," Rogers said, "I'm gonna get so hammered."

"You're going to have two beers and you'll be on your ass." Coleman said.

"You've lost your tolerance," Darby explained, the cigar pinched in his teeth.

"That's fine. I don't care. Save me some money if I could always get drunk on two."

"The girlfriend and I are taking a cruise to the Bahamas," Darby said. He'd received a steady flow of packages from her during the deployment with not only chocolates, powdered drink mix, and ramen noodles, but, amazingly, pornography. "Hell of a girl," he'd say.

"You got a girlfriend, don't you?" Coleman asked Sugar.

"I hope so," Sugar said, joking, but it didn't register with his friends. "We'll see what happens." Yeah, he repeated to himself, we'll see what happens.

Whenever mail was en route, even the soldiers in the guard towers knew it. Patrols found reasons to visit Brigade or Division headquarters, picked up the distinct yellow bags, and radioed ahead with the good news. Headquarters soldiers would divide it by company, then Sugar would find a sergeant and tell him, casually, to round up a few heroes and sort the mail. He might scan the addresses inconspicuously as they worked before disappearing to his tent, or attend some duty. If a soldier came to his room with a letter or two, Sugar scarcely even looked up. "Leave them over there," he'd say.

The two letters from Helen were chatty and all wrong. They talked about work and car troubles and things that didn't matter. Then they spoke in very enthusiastic language about how good New York City felt after being in Fayetteville for so long. She planned a solo vacation to Paris. Paris!? She sounded dizzy with enthusiasm. It was all wrong.

The fire died and the stars seemed more apparent, and cold. A breeze pulled a red glow from the dying embers. Sugar had enough of the cigar and tossed the remaining stub into the can. He thought about sleeping. Okay, this is it, he thought. "Stay safe, guys," he said. "I'll see you on the other side."

He shook hands with each of them. They clapped his shoulders and bid him safe journey.

"See you in a little bit," said Darby.

"Be safe."

"No, you be safe."

Sugar's tent felt empty. He'd packed most of his belongings and given the rest to the Marines. The supply clerk, Private Bragg, snored quietly. The mission is nothing, Sugar thought. Attacks against us have been fewer and fewer. They're tired of fighting people who fight back. Or maybe it's a lull. Maybe they're waiting to test the Marines. The only threat, Sugar reasoned, is in the first twenty or thirty miles and even then, if it's a road-side bomb, there really isn't much you can do. Wear your helmet and body armor properly—unlike those useless, trigger-happy truck drivers we escort who sprayed and prayed every time they felt scared, then had the nerve to brag and give themselves awards as if it was heroic.

Sugar thought about "mitigating the threat," as the Colonel put it. Wear your equipment properly, and send the dismounts to try and catch them. This was all well briefed and well-rehearsed with his convoy. There is nothing else. Sugar imagined the infantry guys piling off the backs of Humvees, advancing, bounding through the ditches and fields. They'll be motivated. This is their last chance to get some. There's really nothing else, Sugar told himself.

He resettled in his cot, determined to sleep.

He'd made sure everyone knew the nearest evacuation point for each leg of the trip, the frequencies and call signs for the convoy and for the other bases they'd be passing along the way, break down procedures, actions on contact, and what was expected of the advance party. Organizing information and briefing it had become automatic to Sugar. He'd learned from his commander how to ask questions: He'd

point to the map with the tip of his pen. “You. What’s your job when we get here?” Don’t just say words. Make them understand.

It’s like jumping out of a plane, Sugar thought. The first bunch of times you worry, then you realize it ain’t up to you. You can don your parachute carefully, no twists, ensure nothing gets caught up as you shuffle toward the door, and you can make a good strong leap from the plane, and then the rest isn’t up to you—a roll of the dice.

Some day in the distant future, after Helen visited the mountains with him, he’d show her the journals he kept in Iraq, and reveal to her the last few chapters of his heart. He didn’t want to carry the weight of these experiences alone.

Sugar had confidence in the way Helen once told him about an emotional friend of hers whose husband had returned from a deployment. She seemed to want that experience for herself, and this gave Sugar confidence. She told him in great detail about her friend preparing a dinner, following a recipe, asking for help choosing wine, because she’d been intimidated by the notion of it, and about candles and the trouble of a makeover. Sugar imagined the rest: glistening hair, painted lips whispering things close to his ear, high heels, a tight dress, and all the smooth skin of her back. He imagined a clean, sturdy house that didn’t creak in the wind, or shudder from distant explosions, a soft bed, white sheets, and a faucet from which water, hot or cold, never stops flowing, cupping his hands, lifting the clear water to his lips and drinking without worrying about getting sick. Everything he could want in the world had come to him at last. There will be no more wars for me, he thought. I am finished with this business. I should have told her what she wanted to hear, he thought. He imagined wanting a family.

It was still dark when the Colonel addressed the men of the convoy, telling them to stay focused and to be proud of what they’d done. The chaplain said a prayer and left with the Colonel. It was Sugar’s show. “Let’s go,” he said.

Private Bragg, his driver, sat waiting with his hands tucked into his body-armor, staying warm. He wore bulky goggles beneath his helmet and a brown scarf around his face. Only the tip of his nose was visible, and his eyes calmly attentive inside the goggles.

“You ready for your last mission?” Sugar asked.

“Oh, yes sir,” Bragg answered slowly.

Sugar liked Bragg. He was a supply clerk, not an infantry man, but he listened carefully and did not pretend to know things.

Just as the colors of things became apparent in the earliest light of dawn, Sugar finished the last radio-check and the convoy of three trucks and twenty Humvees

lurched forward. The dew that fell during the night had drawn the salt from the ground. It formed in tiny crystals over the fields and looked like a dusting of snow.

Sugar and Bragg each chambered a round in their M4s as they left the gate. The convoy included a contingent from each of the battalion's infantry companies—redeployment by thinning lines—plus medics, mechanics, and staffers: “fobbits,” they called them—guys who never left the FOB. They drove and Sugar could feel the distance from the meat factory, a place he'd never return, increasing behind him.

Young Lieutenant Malvesti led the advance party. He was from another company. Malvesti joined the battalion after they'd already been in country a few months, but he seemed earnest and somewhat competent. The kid struggled at first, thinking, as many of the new ones do, that his job was to do many things, but he learned quickly, and now did the few important things well. Sugar imagined the heavy echo of a distant 50-cal followed by Malvesti's excited chatter over the radio.

The convoy drove down the familiar market where goat carcasses hung by their hind legs in bamboo stands. Fully-veiled women groped eggplants and examined chicken eggs. Roosters fluttered in their cages. Four policemen loitered at the entrance of the police station, two leaning against a jersey barrier, and two sitting on the curb, looking like bums. One had an AK-47 in his lap. Sugar recognized them but didn't know their names. It would have been nice to learn their names: the young one whose shirt was too big for him, and one who'd been very warm toward Sugar ever since Sugar allowed him to handle his M4 and peer through its optics, the smiling one who wanted to know everything about America.

Sugar wanted to yell. He wanted to lean out the window up to his waist and yell at the top of his lungs: “So long, you fuckers! So long, and good fucking luck! I can't help you anymore! You better learn what you don't know pretty goddamn fast, because it ain't my goddamn problem anymore!”

Instead, he smiled and waved, and they waved back. The one who'd been warm toward Sugar recognized him, and made a motion with his fingers like he was smoking a cigar, and then they were gone, vanishing quickly toward the horizon along with the rest of it. It would have been nice to learn their names, Sugar thought. He reminded himself to scan for threats.

Tiny American bases stood along the highway—the Military Police responsible for the route patrol. Sugar imagined their lives. Such small bases. He wondered how many soldiers were at each. Twenty? Ten? Five? He wondered about the possibility of them getting overrun. There was nothing around these bases, so the fields of fire from the guard towers were excellent. He imagined the tower guard's machine gun

reaching out to maximum range in any direction, and wondered how adept the MPs were at correcting a jam, changing an overheated barrel, or loading a fresh belt of ammunition. The thoughts came automatically to Sugar. He wondered about their radios and procedures for responding to an attack. He imagined how the enemy might watch these bases and where they could move undetected to place a bomb.

Malvesti's platoon, the advanced party, was parked on the first highway overpass, waiting for the rest of the convoy pass through the danger spot before speeding forward again. Malvesti stood with an elbow on the open door of his truck, holding the hand-mic to ear as casually as could be. He pointed a finger pistol toward Sugar's truck.

The morning mist burned away as the sun changed from red to gleaming white. Sweat dripped from Sugar's nose. He sat crookedly in his seat, as usual, so the chest plate of his body armor faced the shoulder of the road. His back ached and the barrel of his M4 rested on the edge of the cut in the steel that formed the window. He watched the country flash by beyond it. The radio's hand-mic was tucked under his chin strap, pressing against his ear, and on his lap he had the collection of maps, folded and fit together between two sheets of plexi-glass. Sugar ticked off their progress. He leaned toward his driver and shouted over the Humvee's rattling.

"How you doing Bragg? You want some water?"

"I'm fine, sir. Got me some right here."

Bragg had pulled off his scarf and gloves. The convoy drove in the middle lane, slow enough that Iraqis passed on both sides. They'd ease toward the convoy, smiling and waving the way they always did, as if saying: hello, or thank you Americans, or please don't kill me, or hurray, or all of those things at once, or none of them, before lurching forward and accelerating past the convoy. It no longer mattered what they said—somebody else's problem now. Sugar scanned the passengers and didn't smile back. He scanned the side of the road ahead of him and whatever structures they passed. He saw the places where gunmen could hide, or move back and forth. He saw doors, fruit stands, and thin walls that didn't matter far as bullets were concerned, and he saw the heavier walls that would provide cover against small-arms fire. He imagined the big 50-caliber machine guns chopping through them. He saw it all without thinking.

One Iraqi driver passed the convoy with a boy on his lap. They gave the convoy a thumbs up. A woman's eyes turned toward him from the back seat, eyeliner coming to sharp points in the corners of her eyes like an ancient queen, her painted lips parted slightly. Her veil had fallen open and she stared with shameless, lustful

curiosity. Sugar looked at the round moon of her face, smooth skin, defined brows and Arab nose. He wondered how he must look to her, weapons, armor, electronics—part of a machine. Her eyes took in the convoy, the big machine guns above the turrets, the rattling ammunition cans mounted beside them, Sugar’s Humvee with its crude steel doors, his helmet, his body armor, electronics, his M4, Sugar himself. There was no fear in those eyes, no pretense. Those eyes are not afraid of his elaborate powers, but he was a little afraid of hers.

When Helen drove him to work for the last time, his packed duffel bags in the trunk, Sugar sat uncomfortably in the passenger seat when she laid it in his lap—like an easy fast ball down the middle of the plate. “I’ve always fantasized about saying goodbye to a lover,” she said, “and him not wanting to let me go, and finally telling me how much he loves me before he has to leave.” Sugar stared at the side of the road as it flashed by and said nothing. From the moment she drove away from the barracks, leaving him and his two duffel bags, every experience felt like a swallowed bubble. It was all still inside of him, swelling and pressing, needing to be shared. He’d tell her about his friends, Coleman, Rogers, Darby, about Private Bragg, the farmers they’d accidentally killed and visiting their families afterwards, about the Iraqi policemen, and how they all did nothing but stare the first time a man ran out into the middle of the street with an RPG, took a knee and aimed carefully at them. The man, boy really, looked so determined, trying to keep himself together as he saw things through to the end. He exploded in a burst of smoke and chunks of himself, probably from a faulty round, startling the transfixed soldiers into loud, shameless laughter. Sugar smiled to himself, his eyes now shut. No, he thought, that one I should keep to myself. Don’t mention the laughter. He wanted her to admire him, the way she had. After they’d started dating, she left a note one morning under his car’s windshield wiper: “You’re my hero. Love, Helen. PS. You look hot in uniform.” He wanted to be a hero. Especially hers.

They passed the second danger area, and the third, and the last, Sugar’s mind drifted farther than it had in a very long time. In the places where the highway was good and wide, and tall power lines stood, and the danger of bombs was low, Sugar felt, for brief moments, like he was on an American highway. He could be going anywhere. Everything was fine. Helen could easily be seated next to him. He saw her knees, and the wind whipping her black hair. He felt her eyes on him. He imagined shopping with her at a supermarket: endless, brightly-colored fruits, the air, clean and air-conditioned. He felt the heat of the parking lot, and himself standing on the sun-baked asphalt without a plan—able to get in the car and go wherever he chose. Able drive just for the sake of driving, no convoy brief, no

rehearsals, just driving to see how far they could go, no phone or radio, no plans. He imagined driving and driving, going anywhere, nowhere.

The convoy reached the refueling station at noon, an enormous fortress built over the middle of the highway. Miles of civilian tankers lined up before it. The convoy slowed as it passed them. The tanker drivers seemed to know the routine. They relaxed, legs dangling from the open doors of their cabs. Some drank from bottles of water. Others jumped down to stretch. Some wore blue flak vests. The convoy drove past the sandbagged guard shack and inside the wire where canvas hoses snaked along the shoulder, reaching out to individual fuel points. They were numbered, one after the next as far as you could see until they disappeared into the blur of the shimmering horizon. It was an enormous thing. The convoy refueled. Soldiers opened their body armor, venting their sweaty uniforms. Everybody reached for warm, dusty bottles of water.

As they left the refueling point, Lieutenant Sugar's radio crackled. "Delta Five, this is Charlie One Two, my truck is making a noise. Can we stop and check it out?"

"This is Delta Five. What kind of noise?"

"It's rattling and it don't want to go over about twenty."

Sugar radioed the lead vehicle and told them to pull over. The Humvees rolled to the side of the highway, keeping a good interval between each vehicle. The mechanic's Humvee, which was toward the back, left its spot, and sped forward to the troubled vehicle. Sugar radioed the trail vehicle and reminded them to let him know when everybody was halted. Then he radioed the advance party and asked if they'd been monitoring the radio traffic. They had, and they'd be waiting.

Sugar exited his Humvee the moment it stopped. The thing inside him which had slackened, formed again in his stomach. All the things that needed to be done came automatically. He scanned the side of the road. He looked up and down the convoy, and everywhere soldiers were hopping off the backs of their vehicles to kneel on the ground, facing either side of the road. They were motivated, just like back home when they're coming in after long field training exercise. Do everything right, Sugar thought, and the rest isn't up to you. Sugar saw an overpass ahead of the convoy, and wanted to put soldiers on it. He reached through the window for the hand-mic, but already saw soldiers already scrambling up the side—Sergeant Latham, from the lead truck, taking initiative for once. Good. He put a hand on Bragg's shoulder and pointed to a mud hut across the road.

"Don't worry about anything else. Just keep an eye on that building."

"Yes suh."

Sugar felt the perimeter forming around him, a home. He got back in his Humvee, tucked the hand-mic under his chin strap, looked at his watch and waited. He scanned the side of the road a second time, and couldn't think of anything else. He waited.

A man with a camel came by asking one dollar for photos. He probably made a living off the traffic around the refueling station. The camel wore a hat. Two of its legs were tied together with a woven rope, limiting its stride. Little girls begged for food and money. This comforted Sugar. It meant there were probably no bombs here. Soldiers shifted from knee to knee, or grew tired and stood up, leaning against their vehicles. Maybe we will still fight, Sugar thought. Soldiers gave one of the girls two sports bars and an apple. She went to an older boy who took the things from her hands without looking at her, and walked away. She scampered along, tugging his sleeve until he broke off half a sports bar. As soon as it was in her hands, she sat straight down in the dirt and ate slowly, seeming to forget the rest of the world.

Wrench Six came over the radio. The truck would only get worse. What do you want to do? They squeezed the soldiers into other vehicles, attached the truck to another with a tow bar, and started rolling again.

Late in the afternoon, they passed a burnt passenger bus, black and smoldering, a tire still aflame. The crowd of Iraqis pulled their eyes from the bus and fixed them onto the convoy. They looked exhausted. Two animated ones pumped their fists and shouted, "Good. Good. America." Another made drinking gestures, asking for water. There was nothing for miles but the power lines and highway. The horizon was very distant. For the next few miles the convoy passed little groups of people. Some walked slowly, carrying little. Others sat, waiting for the cool of evening. Sugar watched them. Then he watched the desolate land.

They drove passed stretches as barren as could be—not a single structure or tree in sight. The road changed from highway to gravel and back several times for no apparent reason. He watched the flat, far-away horizon and the big sky above it, and everything seemed opened up from the crowded urban terrain. For the last nine months, he'd worried about what was around the corner.

Something that had grown to feel like a part of him began uncoiling inside of Sugar. Helen seemed just beyond the horizon, and Sugar still could not think of what to tell her. He knew she would feel guilty if he died and wondered if there would still be a fight.

Dusty and tired, they arrived at the Kuwaiti border where the Headquarters Company first sergeant received them. The men pulled off their armor and crowded around, stretching their road-weary muscles. He congratulated them in

two sentences, then said: "Now quit feeling sorry for yourselves because we have a lot of work to do." With impressive efficiency, he orchestrated the unloading and organizing of bullets, grenades, flares, smoke, rockets, and other ammunition. He wanted to finish before dark, and get them refueled for the drive across Kuwait. Once things were set in motion, he and Sugar shook hands.

"How was the trip, sir?"

"No problem," Sugar said.

"It'll be about four hours across Kuwait to camp Victory, sir," he told Sugar. "The Kuwaiti cops lead us the whole way. I'll remind the guys before we go: there's no need to drive in the middle lane anymore. No IEDs in Kuwait. That's somebody else's problem now."

It was somebody else's problem. Sugar nodded.

"It's a big show at Camp Victory, every last thing gets stripped from the vehicles. They get cleaned before loading the ships. We have to be ready for inspection no later than Tuesday." The first sergeant went into great detail.

Sugar nodded.

He was in Kuwait now, out of Iraq. He shucked the rounds from his magazines into his helmet and dumped them into a crate. Soldiers balanced on the vehicles with perfect ease, lifting boxes of fifty cal. ammo and TOW missiles. They worked without body armor.

Sugar felt much lighter now that he moved without ammunition. He had no bullets and could do little if someone tried to kill him. He felt certain he was in love.

Iraq lay beyond the double, razor-wire-topped fences. Coleman, Darby, Rogers, they were still there, and the Colonel, and the corrupt mechanics, and angry platoon sergeant, and the Iraqi cop whose shirt was too big, but not Sugar. Never again. He didn't mind not going back, but he would keep that to himself. He was in Kuwait now. There were people in Kuwait who wanted him dead too, Sugar felt certain, but it was in a general way. In Kuwait, they weren't actively trying.

They flew home on a commercial airliner hired by the military. One flight attendant was very tall. It was Sugar's first good long look at a real woman in ages. She had messy, light brown hair, freckles, and when she stood, a habit of dragging one toe of her flat shoes into the floor behind her in a very girlish sort of way. Sugar fantasized in silence. He answered politely in all their interactions, but got nothing from her that wasn't consistent with her fulfilling of flight attendant duties. He listened to a couple of soldiers interrogating her. She was from St. Louis and had

been flying soldiers back and forth for some time now. It seemed obvious she knew the effect she had on the men. She appeared tired of it. The other flight attendant was older, blonde, and motherly, and the soldiers wanted to know everything about her too.

Sugar sank into a thick sleep. He awoke into a world where huge white bodies circled each other in a primal blue ocean, almost formed, and broke apart against the sky. There was nothing but the colors, and a smudge of comfort inside. There was no time even. He came back very slowly. Sugar was facing the window. He resented Helen. It would be a fantastic reunion. Then she would make him feel bad for never having enough time, never taking her anywhere, or she'd guilt-trip him for looking at other girls. This went away, and he couldn't wait to see her. He still didn't know what to say. He closed his eyes and slept some more. They made disorienting stops in Germany, Shannon Ireland, and Nova Scotia, before reaching Fort Bragg's adjacent Air Force base at one in the morning, local time.

A crowd, wild with enthusiasm, chanted names of soldiers, and screamed. They held signs, big and small, and colorful balloons. Flags lined the entrance and nobody remembered what the general said, but his comments were appropriately brief. Then he said "Fall-out!" and the formation of soldiers disintegrated into the crowd of families, friends and well-wishers. Before he gave up looking for Helen, Sugar saw many familiar faces. Men he hadn't seen since they'd been med-evaced from Iraq. Sergeant First Class McPherson was there, his wife by his side, leaning on a pair of crutches and looking gratefully at familiar faces. Private Yadkin was there too. The last time Sugar had seen him, he lay on the side of route lion. Despite his injuries he'd managed to pull his pants down and confirmed his genitals were okay. "Oh, thank God," he said before passing out. Sugar squeezed their hands, and put his arm on their shoulders. Familiar faces appeared in the crowd: Officers he'd known who hadn't deployed, or whose units had already rotated back. Sugar felt thankful for them—glad they came. They patted his back, shook his hand and inquired about the flight, about when others would return.

After all the families cried in each other's arms, after the soldiers with no friends or family in attendance stood aside joking about themselves, after bags were recovered, busses loaded, weapons turned in to the arms rooms, after the barracks were unlocked and rooms re-opened, and after families disappeared in cars and pick-up trucks with their darling soldiers, Captain Sugar retrieved the familiar ring of keys he hadn't seen since a life-time ago. He unlocked his office. It looked small and familiar. The wrong time shown on his clock radio. It was safe here. No danger. He unloaded his bags to the floor. They represented everything he owned

for the past year. His desk chair made a familiar squeak. The office was quiet and air different than that of the desert, wet. He smelled the forest. Sugar switched on the radio.

Twenty six Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers had been killed in the Gaza Strip. On the next station, a woman talked about the war in Iraq. Sugar listened to see what the rest of the world was saying about it. He wanted to hear about the places he'd been, and the things he'd participated in. He wanted to know how the cops were doing with the pair of trucks Sugar convinced Captain Black to buy. They were subtle and interesting problems.

"It's just such a horrible, horrible thing," the woman sobbed, "and all those poor kids. I wish they didn't have to go." She continued crying for the soldiers and Sugar turned off the radio.

Electric lights burned in the night outside his window. There was a vast quiet, not stifling really, but big, like no sound or words could ever make it out of that quiet. Helen surprising him was really an impossible thing to begin with. He knew that now. He also knew that he was safe. He told himself this.

The Things he needed to do came to him all at once. He needed to get his belongings out of storage, at least the basics, and to find a hotel--a place to stay while he looked for an apartment. He needed to call his mom too, and the battery in his car was surely dead.

He unrolled a sleeping mat on the floor, pulled the sleeping bag from his MOLLE and spread it over the mat. There would be no mortar attack tonight. Maybe at the meat factory, but not here.

He dreamed of Helen, of all the women he'd ever slept with, and all the women with whom he hadn't. They were elusive in his dreams. They would appear then dash away like rabbits. For a while, there was nothing. Not even Sugar. Then a primal sense of being. Warmth. He returned to himself, Sugar, his office, his sanctuary. After a moment, he forgot the strange sensations of his dreams, and felt only an overwhelming desire to return to Iraq.

He stood slowly, the muscles in his legs still heavy and luxurious with sleep. Harsh light slanted through the blinds. He wanted to make a list and brief somebody, to point with his pen and tell them the car battery was most important. The car battery came first. Mobility on the battlefield.

There had been no killing on the convoy home, just the idea of killing, and no love either, maybe, but the idea of it, and the idea of something worthwhile.

Sugar opened the blinds and sunlight crashed into his eyes, filled the office, almost knocked him backwards. When his eyes adjusted, he saw people walking

in twos or threes, children too. They looked foreign and happy -- like they had everything, and they didn't wear uniforms so you couldn't tell their names or ranks. They didn't carry guns, and Sugar wondered if they knew how powerless they'd be if someone tried to kill them. The sky was blue with pleasant little puffs of cloud. He wanted very badly to return to Iraq.

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