

ELLIOT ACKERMAN

Hometown Heroes

Skwerl had a trick: he'd convince every new guy he was from their same hometown.

He was Special Forces Detachment 7326's Intel Sergeant and had been in the team longer than anyone. By that virtue, he had played his trick on everyone. For six days he had convinced their 18 Bravo, Gonzo, that he was from Rankin, Texas. For forty-five minutes he had convinced their attached dog handler, Odi, that he was from Foxborough, Massachusetts. And for more than two weeks he had even convinced Captain Jabar of B Company, 2d Afghan Commandos that he was born in the highest reaches of the Pamir Mountains, thus explaining his fluent Pashto and fair skin.

Skwerl's convincing came through a technique he called circling. He would learn whole countries by remembering every generic name there. In the States, he knew the location of every Springfield, Greenville or Fairview. There wasn't a Thomas Jefferson High School or John F. Kennedy Drive he didn't know. In Afghanistan he knew all the Martyr's Squares and each of the Durrani Boulevards. He could list the townships, streets, and alleys named after Ahmed Shah Massoud with an autistic precision. From these places, he imagined circles spreading outwards. When someone told him where they were from, he'd conjure an entire community from where his generic knowledge overlapped with their real knowledge. The effect was a Venn diagram that convinced, every time.

The handful of guys in Detachment 7326 thought Skwerl did this as a practical joke, some hazing for the FNGs. And yes, that was part of it. But Skwerl understood something larger: if a new guy could talk about home, he'd transition to life at

Firebase Shantytown a bit quicker. In war, making that transition quickly was important. It could keep you alive. And once it happened, whoever had needed to believe in Skwerl's stories wouldn't have to anymore.

But there was one person who never stopped believing Skwerl. That was Shane.

7326 was four months into an eight-month deployment when Shane flew in. He came on a Chinhook, the weekly-rotator, and he was scheduled to fly out on the next week's rotator.

It was a Friday morning.

The Afghan Commandos, who the team advised, didn't work on Fridays so neither did the team. Up on the sandbagged parapet of Gun Position Five, Skwerl laid out on a lawn chair sunning himself. He was naked but for his boots and a pair of small polyester running shorts. The guys called these shorts Ranger Panties. Next to him was a box of wine, a 2009 Silver Birch Sauvignon. He balanced half a plastic cupful on his oiled chest.

Gonzo had just finished cleaning the position's fifty-cal. As the 18 Bravo, he maintained all of 7326's weapons. He did this every Friday, and now, finishing the last gun, he threw a beach towel on the sandbagged parapet next to Skwerl. His hands were still slick with dirty gun oil, and he squirted suntan lotion from a bottle into his cupped palms. Then he slathered the mix onto his chest.

"You're too Mexican to tan," Skwerl told Gonzo.

"And you're too white," he said. "You only freckle."

They sat out for a while and looked into the valley below. The Pech River ran through it. The rocks on the river's bank were gray, big and ancient. The houses on the bank were made of the rocks and ancient too. Skwerl and Gonzo were talking about the valley, its rocks, the river and the houses, when Odi and his dog Master Sergeant Aldo came over. (It was custom that the dog be senior to the handler by one rank.)

Shane was with them.

Odi introduced Shane to Skwerl and to Gonzo. Shane didn't ask what Gonzo was short for. Looking at the Mexican he could tell it was Gonzales. He didn't ask Skwerl about his name either. No one ever did. His high and full cheeks, twitchy movements, and quick words made him as obvious a Skwerl as Gonzales was a Gonzo.

Gonzo shook Shane's hand. He said how glad he was that a Bomb Disposal Tech had finally made the trip out to visit them. Then Gonzo brought Shane to the edge of Gun Position Five. The two leaned over the sandbags and looked down into the Pech Valley. Gonzo pointed out the road that ran along the river in the valley. At

first Shane couldn't see the road because the valley had many shadows in it and the road was dark and wet from the river. But soon Shane found the road. Gonzo then pointed out certain bends in it. These were the bends where the Taliban usually planted IEDs. Shane made some notes on a green pad.

As they finished their work, Skwerl asked if Shane wanted to take his body armor off and have a cup of the boxed wine. Shane thanked him, but said he was all right. Then the conversation took a familiar turn.

"Odi told me you're from Colorado," said Shane.

Skwerl looked over at Odi who shrugged. "Yeah," said Skwerl.

"So am I," replied Shane. "You from the city?"

Skwerl looked at Shane for a moment. His black stringy hair had an uneven bowl chop, as if he'd done it himself. Between his front teeth there was a wide and fixable gap. Skwerl followed his intuition, "No, small town. You?"

"Small town." There was a little lifting to Shane's eyes as he answered, a soft type of hope. "You know Clear Creek, about an hour outside of Boulder?"

Skwerl smiled like a clever boy in class. "I been fishing brook trout out of there since I was eight," he said.

That small lifting in Shane now turned to a jolt. "Really? I'm from Georgetown."

"Me too!" said Skwerl.

Hearing this, Gonzo lay back down on his towel. He put a pair of sunglasses on. Odi and Master Sergeant Aldo climbed down from the sandbagged parapet, leaving Skwerl to say to Shane whatever it was he was going to say.

"I lived on the corner of Main and 7th Street," said Shane. "How about you?"

"Down by 1st Street."

"Okay, so near the I-70 ramp."

Skwerl's eyes made a little twitch, something noticeable only to him. "Yep, right by it," he said.

The two began to talk about Georgetown and Boulder just to the east. Shane said the Pech reminded him of Clear Creek back home. Skwerl agreed. He told Shane there were trout in the Pech, which there were. Shane talked about his favorite fishing spots, and one in particular, where I-70 crossed over Clear Creek. No one ever went beneath that bridge, he said. But, according to Shane, the trout preferred to school in the shaded water. Skwerl nodded with interest and when Shane asked where he went to fish, Skwerl muttered something about, "Out of town and up stream."

"Plenty of good places there too," said Shane. "But under the bridge is best."

"I can imagine," said Skwerl.

Shane's eyes wandered lazily in the Pech Valley below. "Man, just about every week the higher ups got me rotating to another firebase. You never get to know anyone that way. Sure nice to meet someone from back home."

"Sure is," said Skwerl, toasting Shane and taking a sip of his wine.

"Hey, how old are you?" Shane asked.

Skwerl wiped his mouth and rolled to his side. "Twenty-seven."

"I'm twenty-six. I swear I remember you from Roosevelt. Who'd you have for homeroom?"

Gonzo sat up from his towel. He leaned on his elbows and looked over his sunglasses at Skwerl.

"I didn't go there," said Skwerl.

"Where else would you've gone?"

Now Gonzo sat Indian style on his towel. A smirk spread across his face. Skwerl gave him a twitchy scolding look that Shane didn't seem to notice. Skwerl poured himself some more of his wine. Then it came to him.

"I was homeschooled," he said. "My parents were very religious. Mormons." Losing control of a grin, he quickly took a large sip of the wine.

"You're a Mormon?" asked Shane.

Skwerl nodded and gazed out to the road and the river in the valley. Then he looked back over at Gonzo and Shane who both stared at his cup of wine. He glanced down at the cup. "I'm a Liberal Reformist," he answered. "It was difficult for my family to accept ... even now." Skwerl took another large sip.

Gonzo pushed his sunglasses up on his face. He didn't say anything, but flipped onto his stomach and sunned his back.

Skwerl offered Shane some of the wine. "You sure?" he said holding up the plastic cup.

By now Shane had stripped down to just his utility bottoms and a t-shirt. Already the sun had reddened the pale backs of his arms. He'd begun to relax and seemed like a tourist who arriving at a resort can't decide what to do first: check-in to his room or hangout at the bar.

Shane took the cup. He drank deeply. "This is good. Is it a Pinot?"

"No, a Cabernet. You know wines?"

"Yeah, pretty well," said Shane.

"It's a 2009 Silver Birch."

"Silver Birch," replied Shane. "They get their grapes from vineyards back home, around Grand Junction. I spent a summer at a distillery there. I worked a crushing machine."

“You did?” said Skwerl.

Shane nodded, as though crushing grapes is what people from around Clear Creek did.

“Well,” said Skwerl. “I’m pretty sure this is a California wine.”

“Silver Birch? Naw, those are Colorado grapes.”

Skwerl held up the box. The two of them checked the label. The grapes were definitely not from Colorado.

Circling wasn’t just a technique Skwerl used to convince folks he was from their same hometown. As 7326’s Intel Sergeant it was how he did his job. Awake or asleep, he could shut his eyes and see the names of Taliban commanders, sub-commanders, bomb-makers and logistics facilitators extending over the Pech River Valley. He put this information on the cork targeting boards that hung in 7326’s team room. Here, they did all their planning, and Skwerl drew out where the circumference of sub-commander Abu Hamza brushed against the arc of elder Mir Wali, and how far past the radius of Mir Wali’s influence was that of bomb-maker Tor Jan. On the boards were the places where nothing met, too. These gaps obsessed Skwerl, the arcs of circles never meeting, their sides bowing to an empty space.

He wanted the emptiness filled.

To do this, Skwerl spent most of his waking hours with the informants who came to Firebase Shantytown to sell information. Some was good. Some was fake. And if the information was too good, it was usually fake. He also spent a lot of time talking with Captain Jabar.

Captain Jabar was only twenty-three, but he’d been fighting since he was thirteen, and this made him older than Skwerl even though in years he wasn’t. It also made him older than most of the other Commandos. And to be young and old, both at once, is what made him a good Commander. Usually they’d meet afterhours in Skwerl’s room, a plywood shack near Gun Position Two. There they’d drink boxed wine and speak in Pashto, exchanging the rumors of the day.

Two days after Shane arrived, the rumor of the day was that Tor Jan had set another IED in the road along the Pech River. An informant who lived in the valley had told Captain Jabar about it. Captain Jabar shared the news with Skwerl who answered, “No problem. You meet Shane yet? His specialty is IEDs.”

Captain Jabar nodded and asked, “Where does he think you’re from?”

“Colorado,” said Skwerl.

Captain Jabar shrugged. Then he scratched the back of his neck. “I met him in the team room yesterday,” he said. “Mr. Gonzo invited me to watch a movie with

him, then a funny thing happened. Earlier, Mr. Odi had set out a bowl of water for Master Sergeant Aldo. As the movie started, Shane came by. He interrupted us and asked why the bowl was on the floor. Mr. Gonzo looked up and said the roof was leaking. I thought this an odd thing to say. The windows were open and it was very clear out. Shane, noticing none of this, declared that he would fix the leak. He ran outside. Then we heard him grunting with much effort as he climbed the ladder onto the roof. A few minutes later he came back inside. He was sweating and said the leak could not be found. Mr. Gonzo gave him a strange look. I, not wanting to be rude, said nothing. Then Master Sergeant Aldo came in, wagging his tail. He drank from his bowl and still I don't think Shane understood. Then Shane left, saying he had some other business to take care of. But even as he walked into the clear day, he promised Mr. Gonzo that later he would mend the leaky roof."

Skwerl laughed at Shane, but not as hard as he wanted, it didn't seem right to in front of Captain Jabar. He also made a note to himself: he'd need to tell Shane that the roof had been fixed. Otherwise he'd be up there half the night looking for the leak.

The next morning 7326 left Firebase Shantytown to find Tor Jan's IED. They drove on the bank of the Pech River. Here, the sun cast shadows, making the enormous rocks in the valley seem even more enormous. The road wound between them. There were five Humvee's in the convoy. Skwerl and Shane were in the back one. In front of them were Gonzo, Odi and Master Sergeant Aldo. The convoy drove slowly, five, maybe ten miles per hour. Captain Jabar was in the front Humvee with the informant from the valley. The informant would point out the IED. He wore a black balaclava to hide his face. Still, even with him along, everyone scanned the sides of the road. Skwerl drove, but looked past the road. He watched the stooped elders and dusty faced children in the village. As the convoy went by, they all walked with a purpose back inside their stone hovels. This made Skwerl nervous.

It made Shane talk, "They're sending me down south next, to Garmsir for two weeks."

"Too bad," said Skwerl. "We'll miss having you around."

Shane looked out at the river. "Nothing to fish in Garmsir. It's a real shit hole." Skwerl didn't reply and then Shane asked, "You been there?"

Skwerl shook his head, no. "Spent my whole deployment here."

"You're lucky. Moving's got me just about worn out."

Skwerl nodded.

“Glad we met,” said Shane, “being with someone from home helps me recharge my batteries.”

Again Skwerl nodded, saying nothing. He was still watching the village and a very old man in particular, one who didn't go inside like the others. Instead he'd climbed on top of a large gray boulder. He sat, his sandaled feet dangling in the air like a little child's and his wooden cane across his lap. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a green pinch of snuff. He tucked it beneath his bottom lip. He spat the brackish juice onto the valley floor. He kneaded at his knotted beard with a concentration, as if he were solving a riddle.

The radio in the Humvee squelched to life, “Mr. Skwerl, we have gone too far.” It was Captain Jabar. “Our friend says it is just behind your truck, by the large rock, over.”

The convoy stopped. Just ahead of them, Gonzo, Odi and Master Sergeant Aldo stepped onto the road. Odi followed Master Sergeant Aldo who sniffed around the road's shoulder. Gonzo leaned over the hood of their Humvee as if he were playing eight ball, glassing the high ridgelines above with the scope on his rifle.

Shane hopped out from the Humvee he shared with Skwerl. “I'll get the robot ready,” he said and ran around to the tailgate. Skwerl stood in the middle of the road looking for ‘the large rock’.

This whole goddamn valley is large rocks, he thought.

Skwerl's eyes rested on the old man whose sandaled feet still kicked at the air. The old man nodded his head a few rocks down. Then he laughed at Skwerl and it sounded like too much air coming through too small a hole. His remaining teeth pointed in every direction like a crossroad's sign at the end of the world.

There wasn't much to see, but Skwerl saw it: a lighter piece of darkness on the road's shoulder. A place where the stones seemed not quite so wet from the river. “Shane,” he shouted.

Shane looked up.

“I see it,” he replied, unfolding the long arms and rubberized treads of his bomb robot. To Skwerl, the robot looked like the assembled parts of an Erector Set he'd had as a kid. Clipped onto Shane's body armor was a carbineer. A remote with a small screen hung from it. Shane flipped some switches on it. The robot shimmied forward and back as he tested its responsiveness.

Skwerl grabbed a handheld radio. He told everyone in the convoy that they'd found the IED. He tossed the radio on his seat and made his way down the road to Shane. After a few steps, Skwerl stood on the road's shoulder. He leaned against one of the gray boulders. It towered well above his head.

He watched Shane.

Shane crouched in the middle of the road, coming eye level with his robot, guiding it forward.

Then, at the front of the convoy, there was a commotion. Captain Jabar was screaming something. Shane didn't seem to notice. The robot charged towards the IED. Its engine let out a tinny rumble in the same octave as a complaining child.

Skwerl poked his head around the boulder, trying to get a look up the road.

At the front of the convoy, the informant ran from the back of Captain Jabar's Humvee. His black balaclava was now pushed up his head. He wore this and a long shalwar kameez that hung past his knees. Skwerl thought he looked like some crazy Ebenezer Scrooge in sleeping cap and nightgown running towards the Pech River. The informant dove into the quick waters. He paddled. Captain Jabar and many of the others drew their rifles down on him. Their shots echoed. The shape of the valley captured the noise perfectly, as if it were a bell cast to ring in just this way.

The ringing met with a quiet. It lasted the space of a breath. The old man who'd been sitting on the boulder jumped down from it. He looked at Skwerl. Skwerl looked back, but he didn't see the man, he saw the side of the mountain. It came alive, glowing psychotic. Pinwheels of green tracers coughed from the rocks. They splashed against the convoy and the road.

The old man disappeared, slipping between the stone walls of his village.

The informant disappeared, too, his head lashed beneath the river by tangled lines of white water.

Everyone else in the convoy pressed against something – the side of a Humvee, a rut in the wet road – getting as small as they could. Skwerl pressed against the boulder. Some shot back at the fire coming from the mountain.

Gonzo shot back. He stood from behind the hood of his Humvee, hammering rounds from his rifle. It bucked in his shoulder. His movements were all violent jerks, as if avoiding a swarm of bees. Quickly, a tracer from the slopes above laced its way through his neck. Its burning green light passed in and out of his body with an elegance, like a seamstress hooking a perfect knot. He collapsed. There was no movement. A puddle spread from him. His head rested on it like a pillow.

On the other side of Gonzo's Humvee, Odi and Master Sergeant Aldo crouched by the front tire. Odi held the dog in his arms. It writhed against him, thrashing its head from side to side. Over the sounds of the steady gunshots Skwerl could hear a whimpering. He couldn't tell if it came from the dog or the handler.

Up the road, in its center, Skwerl saw the robot. It wasn't moving. Then his eyes fell back and saw Shane. He too was in the road's center, and he too wasn't moving.

He lay like a child sleeping. From one of his legs came the dark red wetness of deep bleeding. Then Shane slowly propped himself up on his elbow. His hands fumbled around his body armor, looking for something. He seemed unable to find it. Finally, he reached down to his pants and undid his belt. He rolled from side to side pulling it loose from the loops. He struggled to fasten the buckle high around his thigh, to use it as a tourniquet. Rounds still kicked up around him.

They fell lazily, like pebbles tossed into a stream.

As the rounds inched closer and closer to Shane, he clumsily failed and failed again to tighten the belt around his leg. Then, giving up it seemed, his eyes met Skwerl's and he laid flat on his back. The weight of this look landed on Skwerl like too much gravity. He felt a twinge of resentment that Shane would look at him like this. And Skwerl, in that moment, could see a whole new set of circles expanding. These circles weren't places or people touching, but events in his own life. He could see this moment. Then, overlapping with it, he could see himself explaining to Shane's family in Colorado what happened. Overlapping with that, he could see himself tortured by the trick he'd played, pretending to be from his same hometown. As Skwerl crouched at the base of the boulder, relatively safe, he saw all the circles, and, terrified by the Venn diagram they made, he ran into the road to save Shane.

Rounds fell all around. They kicked up dirt. Skwerl could feel the dirt splash against his ankles. He crouched low and juked as he ran, pivoting on the balls of his feet. Each movement became an absurd optimism, as if some evasion on his part could trim the odds that he too would be shot. After just a few steps he was close to Shane. Skwerl dove towards him, sliding on his stomach, wrapping his arms around him as though he were second base and this a ballgame. Shane lifted his head. His face was clammy and doughy white. He almost smiled, gullible enough to believe Skwerl had saved him and that he might survive.

Skwerl wanted to say something.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," is all that came out. Skwerl sat up and kicked with his feet, pulling Shane's body from the road and towards the boulder's protection. The air around them was alive with snaps, each one an exercise in probability. In quick cadence two thuds slapped against Skwerl's chest. The ceramic plate in his body armor cracked. It sounded and felt like a bad tooth on hard candy. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." His voice was thin and wheezy.

Shane was getting heavy.

It hurt to breathe, but Skwerl knew he hadn't been shot. He thought, I'm okay, I'm okay, I haven't been shot and that's when he got shot. It shattered his elbow.

Skwerl didn't feel anything at first, but when he went to pull on Shane only one arm worked. At this moment Skwerl looked behind him, searching in the direction where the boulder was. If it was too far to make it back, he thought he'd just lie down, shut his eyes, and wait. He'd give those bastards in the hills a target that wasn't moving. They'd finish him off quicker that way.

But when he looked for the boulder, he found it right there. He could make it. Suddenly he felt an unbelievable rush of pain in his elbow. And with the pain came an incredible desire to live.

He grabbed Shane with his good arm. He bent over and bit onto the shoulder strap of Shane's body armor. Now he pulled with his one arm and neck. This was enough to move. After three tugs, and Shane getting shot once in the foot, (which he barely even noticed), they made it behind the boulder.

Skwerl felt like shit.

Above the boulder the hot sun had risen. Against the boulder there was shade. Skwerl needed to stop his bleeding, and Shane's. He didn't remember much of his medical training, but he did remember how in case of an emergency you should always affix an oxygen mask to yourself before that of a small child or an infant. He took his belt off and looped it around his left arm first. Then, again using his teeth and good arm, he cinched it down until it hurt more than he could stand. The blood that had run steady from his elbow ebbed to a trickle. Slow drips tumbled down his useless fingertips as if forming icicles.

Skwerl rolled to his side, to where Shane lay on his back. He'd begun to look like a statue. Like plaster setting. His belt was already around his leg, but he hadn't managed to cinch it down. The wound had blown out jagged edges, like a firecracker went off inside his thigh.

Skwerl crouched over Shane. He held the belt's running end.

Shane looked up with fading eyes. He knew what was about to happen. In a teary breath he muttered, "Fuck me, dude."

Skwerl tugged hard. Shane screamed, for a second.

He passed out.

Skwerl hitched down the belt. He held his index and middle finger to Shane's neck, just below the ear. What he felt there was soft. He kept his finger on Shane's neck for a while. Skwerl felt for a pulse, either returning or departing. Then, through the pads in his fingers, he felt a thrumming. Moment to moment it came ever harder.

Skwerl looked at his Humvee. He wished he hadn't left his radio on the seat.

The valley became silent. Skwerl listened to Shane's heavy pants next to him. Shane's eyes had reopened. They looked like glass streaked with oil and Shane didn't blink. The two sat quietly for a while. Upstream the road crossed the river. Skwerl could hear men shouting and running from this direction. Their sandaled feet scuffed in the dirt of the road. The voices sifted down the bank, moving between the wet boulders.

Shane fought a heavy lidded sleepiness. Color dropped from his face, emptying.

Skwerl flicked Shane's ears with his middle finger. "Wake up, dude."

"I'm awake."

Skwerl looked up the road. He couldn't see Odi, but he could hear Master Sergeant Aldo panting. Gonzo still lay by the hood of the Humvee. The pool around his neck had stopped growing. His skin had turned ashen, but had also reddened, strangely. It was sunburned. How odd this seemed to Skwerl. If dead men could sunburn could they also tan? He wondered what would happen if he put suntan lotion on Gonzo. Would his dead skin bake to a bronze? Skwerl thought that perhaps he should put suntan lotion on, too. It'd be a long while before his corpse would be recovered. He didn't want his body to go home lobster red. He thought of himself laid out for a viewing like an idiot who'd fallen asleep by the pool. The image made him laugh. It was pleasant to laugh.

For a moment, Skwerl became conscious of these strange thoughts. He felt close to an alluring edge.

Next to him, Shane began to grunt and shift.

"I can get the radio from our Humvee," said Shane.

There was a fresh determination in his voice. From his vest, he unclipped the controls to his bomb robot. He thumbed at the buttons. The robot began to wheel back up the road with a high whine. Immediately, almost every rifle in the valley went for the robot. The rest, the ones that didn't shoot at the robot, shot at Odi's Humvee. Odi cursed and Master Sergeant Aldo whimpered. The robot made its way towards Skwerl's Humvee.

A number of the bullets found the robot. The impacts rocked it on its treads like a ship thrown by angry waters. None of the bullets managed to stop the robot, though. It made it to the Humvee.

It raised its mechanical arm into the cab.

Shane could barely sit up as he looked at the small video camera on the controls. Sweat beaded off his blood starved face. His lips were clearly blue. He bit the bottom one with determination as he worked. The radio, not much bigger than a brick, was firmly in the robot's claw. It reversed away from the Humvee and screamed back

towards Shane and Skwerl. As soon as the robot was within reach, Skwerl grabbed it with his good arm, pulling it behind the relative safety of the boulder. Skwerl burnt his fingers as he did this. The robot's metal frame was hot from where the many bullets had passed through it.

Skwerl had the radio now. He spoke into it, gasping call signs, chanting grid coordinates. Through the static, steady voices met his. They made assurances. They promised help. Close air support. Medevac. Artillery. These weren't lies, Skwerl knew that, but it seemed an impossibility that they'd live. After each request, the voices would tell him, "Just hold on 7326. Help's coming." Behind the boulder, he and Shane clutched the radio between them. Once all the requests were made, there was nothing but its static and their ambushers shooting overhead. Shane fought to stay conscious. His eyes weren't in danger of closing now, but of rolling back into his head.

Again Skwerl flicked Shane's ears. "C'mon, tell me what we're going to do when we get back to Clear Creek."

"Clear Creek?" Shane looked at Skwerl, not understanding. Then he asked, "Is it true about the brook trout in the Pech River?"

"What?"

"Brook trout, in the river."

"I think so. Jabar told me that once."

Skwerl could hear footsteps coming towards them.

"Find a place in the shade," said Shane. "You'll catch the most there."

Skwerl opened his mouth for a moment, as if to tell Shane something else. But he couldn't. If he thought they were going to live, maybe he could've. He closed his mouth and swallowed.

Shane looked out at the river. "I wonder if it's all true?" he asked.

Then his eyes rolled up into their whites.

The footsteps were very close now. Skwerl could hear them on the wet gravel of the riverbank. Then above him there was a whine.

Jets.

They flew lower than the low clouds. He could see the gray on gray writing against a fuselage. He could see a small silhouette behind a glass cockpit. And from their wings came a heat. The last thing he remembered was how it felt on his face. And the light.

A few days later Odi flew to the hospital in Bagram as a visitor, not as a patient. Here, he sat on the foot of Skwerl's bed and filled in everything else that had happened.

Odi told Skwerl how under the cover of the jets, Captain Jabar had managed to drive back up the valley and pull them out. Odi showed Skwerl the smooth top of his left arm. The hair there had been burnt off, the only wound he'd received. A miracle. Master Sergeant Aldo had been shot through the ear, but aside from that and a bit of burnt fur, he'd come away unscathed. Another miracle. Odi told Skwerl that Gonzo's funeral had already happened back in Rankin, Texas. If he wanted, he could get him photos of the ceremony. Apparently the Governor had come. Skwerl didn't want to see the photos.

Neither of them wanted to talk about Shane.

After a couple hours sitting together, Odi had to catch the weekly-rotator back to Firebase Shantytown. He stood from the bed and wished Skwerl good luck. He was being flown to the States for surgery on his elbow the next morning. Then, as Odi headed for the door, he stopped and said, "I made sure they put Shane in for a Bronze Star, for getting you the radio. We'd all be dead if he hadn't done that."

"Thanks," muttered Skwerl.

"Maybe in that hometown of his, they'll name a park or something after him."

"That's a shitty thing to say," said Skwerl.

Odi didn't say anything else, but left.

Skwerl stared up at the ceiling lights. The bulbs shone onto his bare eyes. When he shut them, he could see halos on the backs of his lids, exploding into circles.

Skwerl stood on the corner, his arm in a sling. He cast a long end of day shadow on the sidewalk. Next to his shadow was a street sign. 7th and Main. The house was a Victorian. It had a wraparound porch. The balustrades had been painted brightly. Blue and gold, blue and gold, the pattern matched the trim on his dress uniform. He felt awkward wearing the uniform, especially now that it matched the house. But, for the reason he'd come, he didn't feel right not wearing it. He walked up the steps. They creaked loudly beneath his heavy jump boots. Inside a dog barked. Before he could knock, a woman peeked out the side window. Seeing him, she cracked open the door.

She was young, a few years older than Skwerl. She had a child on her hip, a boy with brown eyes and a round face that matched hers.

"Can I help you?"

Skwerl didn't know what to say. He'd assumed he wouldn't need to say anything, that the appearance of him in uniform would be enough.

"I was a friend of Shane's," he said, the words felt like ice cubes caught in his throat.

"I'm sorry, Shane?" said the woman.

"Shane."

"Shane?"

Skwerl looked back at the street sign. "This is 7th and Main, right?"

The woman nodded and looked over Skwerl's uniform quickly. "Would you like to come in?" she asked.

"A friend of mine from the Army lived here."

"I grew up in this house."

Skwerl stood on the porch.

"Would you like to come in?" asked the woman. "We're about to sit down for dinner."

The boy on the woman's hip began to squirm. Skwerl looked down at his uniform. He apologized for bothering the woman. She apologized for not knowing his friend.

She thanked him for his service.

He left the porch and went back to the Hospitality Inn. He had a room there. It was down by 1st Street, near the I-70 ramp.

Inside his room, Skwerl drew the curtains. He took off his uniform and lay on top of his bed. He wore nothing but his Ranger Panties. He shut his eyes and stared at the back of his lids. The circles didn't appear. There was no Venn diagram, nothing to tell him where Shane was really from. Instead all he saw were lines, extending in every direction. No overlaps, just random and uncontained intersections.

And looking at the impossible tangle, Skwerl felt an incredible appreciation for Shane, traveling from firebase to firebase, never staying for more than a week or two. So he'd been lonely and made up where he was from, same way Skwerl did. He'd just wanted to be with someone from home, even if that home were nothing but a lie shared with someone else.

As Skwerl fell asleep, he felt it was all true: he and Shane had been from the same hometown.

It was late the next morning when Skwerl woke up. He packed up his uniform and dressed. He wore jeans and a loose button down shirt, one he could get his busted arm through. He checked out of the hotel and drove out of town, east on I-70 towards Boulder. On his left side, his bad arm's side, Clear Creek looked almost white, reflecting the high sun. The mountains cast barely any shadows. Soon I-70 intersected with the creek. Here it ran over a bridge. Skwerl recognized the bridge. Underneath it, the water did seem darker.

Skwerl pulled onto I-70's shoulder. He put on his hazards and left his car. He climbed beneath the bridge. The air was heavy and wet. The rocks were wet, too. Carefully, Skwerl stepped right up to the bank. His reflection rippled in the water. He looked past it. His eyes focused deeper. Running the creek bed were brook trout, whole schools of them.

He climbed the bank and got back in his car. He crossed the median, making a U-turn towards town. He'd buy a pole there, something cheap. Just enough to cast a line where Shane once told him to.



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