

J A S O N A R M E N T

A Bridge to Nowhere

It was a few weeks after General Patraues canceled Echo Company's suicide mission. I thought about what happened while I sat on post staring at a dozen decrepit buildings and a parking lot. In Baghdad the Mahdi Army had shot rockets from a borough nicknamed Sadr City into the Green Zone. The president of Iraq threatened Marine invasion of Shia cleric Maqtada al-Sadr's stronghold. Echo would have been the main element to roll into Baghdad and punch through the guts of Sadr City. The densely populated suburb promised small arms fire from thousands of enemy combatants, withering blasts of roadside IEDs, and hidden snipers using fifty caliber rifles. I'd have taken many of them with me in blaze of glory: fifty cal thumping, eyes wide, screaming like a banshee before I disintegrated into a cloud of blood and pulp. But it didn't happen. Instead higher scrapped the doomed mission.

I had half an hour left standing watch outside the small sandbag pillbox. I tried remembering how much time Echo had left in country. The desert was so hot out I couldn't remember what month it was, much less the day of the week. The thermometer on post read 120 degrees and rumor had it close to 140 degrees around noon. As the temperature soared time blurred.

I kept thinking about how I might go home without killing anyone, how I might not be a *real* Marine unless I took a life. I obsessed over it in the free time that being Battalion Quick Reaction Force (QRF) allowed me when I wasn't stuck on post. All QRF did was sit around and wait to get called out to either rescue a downed vehicle

(this happened often) or roll up to some place where Iraqis were doing something they shouldn't with the willingness to kill everything we saw (this happened a few times). I thought about it while I walked to the chow hall. I thought about it while I jogged around the dusty base of Habbaniya. I thought about it while I showered, while I jerked off, while I called home, while I wrote letters. I felt like a fraud when I would one by one slide the rounds out of my magazines and then pull the plates off of the bottoms to let the springs relax; this was important to do so they would function properly when I needed to kill someone.

I guessed maybe "need" was being used with a little stretch of the imagination, but it was quite possible to take a life completely in bounds of the Rules of Engagement. As QRF we utilized roadblocks where the main purpose was a show of our presence to the population. Roadblocks interrupted traffic, and this confusion was increased when Marines tried to keep Escalation of Force protocol straight in their heads—one hundred meters out utilize the Dazzler, a laser, to signal to the cars to halt, at fifty meters fire a warning shot into the deck, after that the vehicle was pretty much fair game, depending on its speed and if warning shots were put up the front to the windshield and then onto the drivers head—while trying to direct cars off the road to pull finger prints, or check IDs. Some Iraqis got more confused than the Marines, and others were too fed up with a scorching commute to comply quickly. Killing someone might not be a need, but depending on the day it could be done easily.

I threw rocks at a Camel Spider skittering across the road in front of my post as I ruminated, managing to break one of its gangly legs before it disappeared under a vehicle. Unofficial doctrine of the moment was to shy away from engaging vehicles because things weren't "hot," and not temperature-wise. Things weren't "hot" as in there wasn't enemy activity that involved Marines taking small arms fire on a regular basis. Somehow "hot" didn't take into account the numerous raids on smaller bases, like Forward Operating Base (FOB) Viking a few miles to the North, or things exploding in Fallujah that didn't have any business exploding. If there weren't rounds pinging off walls around you or shrapnel screaming into your Humvee's ballistic glass, you didn't really have much to worry about, or so we thought. I figured it was the indifference of complacency.

Finally the internal debate had worked itself out enough that I brought it up to my Team Leader, Rose. He was beside me flicking water from his Camelbak's hose onto a near by Humvee, watching the dark spots of water turn lighter and then disappear as they evaporated in seconds. Duties on post included making sure the vehicles weren't broken into and stopping anyone who looked suspicious from coming through the parking lot to our barracks or the neighboring unit's

barracks. Our barracks were two buildings that had been acquired when US forces seized control of the base. Habbaniya was an old base left over from the British occupation of Iraq in the fifties, a base that we shared with the Iraqi Army. They had habit of letting themselves into our trucks and borrowing our gear without returning it, so we watched the vehicles. The sun had finished blazing for the day and was now on the steady descent down the western sky. In a few hours the stars would spell out strange constellations.

“So I’ve been thinking, in a few months we will probably go home,” I said, then took a long drag of my cigarette. “You know, baring us getting blown up or something.”

“Let me have a smoke,” Rose said. His arms moved deftly in his body armor as he caught the pack of Miamis—generic Iraqi cigarettes. They cost about a quarter a pack, or five bucks for a carton. Even then we paid double the normal price. The tax didn’t bother me. I made more in a month than most Iraqis could dream.

Rose didn’t normally smoke, but whenever a Marine started off a conversation on post with, *So I’ve been thinking*, it signaled a time when having a cigarette to hide behind might be a good idea.

“I signed up to go to war and kill someone, among other things. I think we all did,” I said. I idly kicked rocks as I spoke, the tip of my boot barely touching the ground as I leaned way back in one of the few unbroken chairs that had been dragged out from the post.

“Yeah, I think most of us expected to kill somebody. You don’t exactly join because of how great it sounded to sweat in the desert, or how you watched a movie about war where they wasted their lives doing nothing.”

Rose’s eyes were hidden behind the dark blue Oakley ballistic glasses, helmet in his lap. He looked straight ahead, puffing on his cigarette with all the gusto of a novice smoker. Pausing for an extra beat between puffs Rose tilted his head at me and said “Don’t go to jail.”

That was all we said. If I wanted to kill someone Rose just wanted me to be sure that it was justifiable, or at least justifiable enough that it wouldn’t get me thrown in the brig.

All of our careers we had been told that at some point we would extinguish the lives of young men much like ourselves. Many of us had gone through basic training with Drill Instructors who were veterans of the invasion. They hadn’t been gentle about the harsh realities of pulling a trigger on someone who was just going about their business, that even children might become targets. Realistic training exercises had shown there would be times when the safety of the squad dictated someone die

that didn't have malicious intentions. The risk of allowing a car or personnel near a checkpoint was always real. Any car could be a Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device housing multiple 155 artillery rounds that would kill a handful of Marines. Whether or not this would make me a "bad" person didn't cross my mind. Good and bad, right and wrong, they were just mirages in the desert. Iraq existed away from them; out here life was too hard and death too sudden for such novelties.

"I'll try not to end up in the brig," I said as we stood to go to the chow hall.

Two Marines came out to relieve us from post. As they trudged nearer their gait seemed to slow, as if they were reluctant to accept the fate of having to sit through another few hours of watching their lives slowly tick away. By the time they made it out Rose and I were smoking new cigarettes and wore sour looks dripping sweat. The sinking sun was still scorching. Some of the bats in the palm trees stirred the air, although they wouldn't come out to hunt insects clustered in the glow of street lights until the night was well underway.

"Holy shit, take for fucking ever. Seriously," I said, flicking what was left of my cigarette at the nearest Marine's face.

"Watch it, motherfucker," Smith said as he casually batted the burning butt out of the air. "You put out my eye and they'll send me home, and then you'll really be in some shit!"

Smith was a big corn fed Marine, with blue eyes, a prominent jaw line chiseled from granite and bulging biceps. He stood a little above six foot, which put his face quite a few inches above mine. Behind him was Huelete, wafer thin compared to Smith's bulk. Huelete looked like some college kid with dirty blond hair that had somehow wandered into a recruiting station and then ended up in desert with the rest of us.

"Holy shit, it just took you eight minutes to walk less than forty meters." Rose said. His voice took on the wounded pride of a Marine that has been around for awhile and knows when some of the junior Marines aren't pulling their weight. "I don't know how in the fuck that's even possible."

"Fuck off, that's how that's possible. It's not like you guys don't make us wait for you to relieve us," Huelete said as he sparked up his own smoke. Huelete and Smith were both part of Assault, another squad that made up Weapons Platoon with Machine Guns and Mortars.

"You Assaultmen are always such martyrs. Speaking of," I said with grin slowly spreading across my face. "Huelete, wouldn't that God of yours want you to get out here extra early so we could have time to really enjoy the chow hall?"

Smith and Huelete started chatting as Rose and I walked away from post and down the road to the chow hall. We ate and joked around with other Marines from our Company. The chow hall was able to accommodate several hundred people. The servers were Indian men and women hired from a company that sold long term labor. Much of the personnel on the base had been contracted out from elsewhere. The guards at the chow hall and at the internet cafe were Ugandan Army, many of whom had seen action during some of the brutal conflicts in their country—they had the scars to prove it. The workers who helped run the internet cafe were temporary Indian labor, while the sanitary work on the base were American workers from the United States. All mercenaries here to get a piece of war's spoils.

The atmosphere of the chow hall always seemed phony. The fobbits—as those who never left the base were referred to—always in clean, crisp uniforms; officers with spotless pistols hanging from the newest tactile holster. Other times there were Marines from beyond the vast Al Anbar province, and they might not have had a haircut or a shave in days, if not weeks. Their faces were dirty, and their uniforms stained. Marines like me had shitty fades for haircuts, swollen muscles from alternating eating chow and pumping iron, and attitudes that turned from dark humor to something much more volatile.

As I walked under the palms on the way back to the barracks the bats braved the light, darting out and snapping up insects. The sun threw its last rays over the black horizon, making the trees cast long shadows on the rocky sand of the base. A hot, dry breeze was blowing, but not hard enough to kick up sand or dust. Terrible lung infections could take hold from exposure to winds that carried debris; there were health hazards in the sand, fecal matter from animals and chemicals from the war. A light breeze would allow breathing with an uncovered mouth without too much risk.

I started planning as I walked back to the parking lot by the barracks. If I was going to smoke someone at a roadblock I might get a chance tomorrow. We were supposed to set up between Habbaniyah and Rhamadi, the next major city to our west. Following the rules of engagement was imperative, and that meant adhering to the different tiers of escalating force. I figured it was lucky I was a turret gunner behind a fifty caliber machine gun. It would make the work a lot easier.

I stopped by my vehicle in the parking lot in front of the barracks. My knees creaked and my back ached as I hauled myself up the side of the MRAP. MRAPs looked like SWAT trucks on steroids. The vehicle weighed around 12,000 pounds. Its hull came to a V at the bottom of the vehicle, made of heavy reinforced armor so if we got hit by multiple 155 rounds buried in the ground it wouldn't tear us apart.

But I'd heard stories that it didn't take much more than five to eight thousand pounds of explosives to flip an MRAP, and when that happened pretty much everyone died. Personnel would bounce around inside like jelly beans in a can, and the sharp edges of gear, guns, and the inside of the hull would split you to pieces. If the bouncing didn't get you the flipping upside down and burning to death would; there was no way to crawl out from under the gear. I imagined it felt akin to getting in a tumbling dryer after dousing yourself with gasoline and lighting a match. I tried not to think about it, but it visited me in nightmares.

Sweat poured down my face as I pulled myself up onto the side panel, and then finally onto the top of the truck. The little food I had just eaten in the chow hall threatened to come up, and my back throbbed. The deployment was wearing me down, making me old, but I had to press on. I hopped into the armored turret behind the fifty cal and checked the few things to make sure it would fire properly tomorrow. Rooting around the inside of the truck turned up a bottle of lube that I used to douse the bolt of the weapon. I inspected the ammo in the box attached to the large gun, making sure there was no rust, and quickly cleaned off the film of dust that had accumulated since I had checked it last.

Climbing back out of the turret and on top of the truck I became afraid someone would see and know. I thought about it for a second as I checked the barrel of the weapon to make sure it was screwed in properly to the receiver. I checked my weapon often, much more than the average Marine. Even if someone did see me they wouldn't think it strange. I lit a cigarette. I felt better behind the smoke as I sat crossed legged, the truck's hot metal surface making my ass feel like it was on fire.

Rose walked by, laughing with a group of Marines staying in barracks close to ours. He glanced at my truck and saw me sitting on top smoking like the desert heat was making me smolder. The ember on the tip of my cigarette turned my glasses to squares of fire with each puff they reflected. Rose didn't say anything, or call out, he just looked sad. We locked eyes for a moment, and even though we were only a few meters away, I knew that if I got up at that moment and ran to embrace him I would run forever. As close as we'd become from deployment this came between us, like some kind of gulf. It wasn't that Rose found killing distasteful or wrong. As Marines we'd been taught that blood made the grass grow. But the decision to pull the trigger on an innocent was like jumping off a high point into a body of water. The first few steps off the ledge to start the descent marked the beginning of a fall that was solitary. Rose couldn't join me in the journey. It wasn't that kind of war, not for us anyway. Maybe taking lives didn't come between brothers in arms during

the invasion, when everyone was slaying bodies. But this wasn't the invasion, this was the occupation.

I crawled off the truck and wandered over to the designated smoking area. The fifty caliber machine gun was ready, but it was a precaution. Because the requirements of escalating force I would start the engagement with my M-16. Usually I had my Beretta nine millimeter pistol at the ready while I was in a turret; the smaller pistol was easier to maneuver. I needed to transition quickly between the warning shot and engaging the driver's head with my rifle. Going from pistol to rifle would be hard in the turret behind the large fifty caliber. Using the fifty seemed like overkill, and the transition from whatever weapon I used for warning shots to the fifty would take time. I'd heard sometimes Marines would use the fifty for warning shots and skip the rounds off the road into the vehicle. The round would skip off the deck and into the cab, bouncing around and causing multiple casualties. I needed the kill to be a careful application of force, not some turret gunner who lost his mind and sawed a vehicle in half with a machine gun.

I lit a third cigarette as I thought, unsure if I was becoming lost or oriented in all of the jargon, protocols and procedures. I would have to hope for a good field of fire when I set up, which would be a lot of luck. Getting a bad driver could be a show stopper. It could fall in my favor that we would be doing a joint operation. The added chaos would bring opportunities. There wasn't much else to do but wait. I knew my rifle was ready, and my pistol. I didn't know if I was ready, but I felt ready. After my fifth smoke my lungs seemed like they were filling slowly with tar so I went inside and laid on my rack.

The barracks themselves were buildings used for businesses prewar. There were three big rooms on the first floor and three big rooms on the second floor, along with a few smaller rooms. The bigger rooms were used to house a squad, and called squad bays. Machine Guns had around fifteen people in it. We lived on bunk beds that were only a few feet apart, and kept all of our belongings either underneath them or overhead on storage shelves we'd nailed to the walls. Three window AC units ran constantly. Their low hum gave the illusion of quiet. But if I sat very still I realized it wasn't quiet, but brooding—the same sensation of mid-west forests before a storm. My bunk was the lower one, transformed into a cavern by nailing standard issue blankets on all four sides. I drifted off to sleep and woke to the sound of Marines getting ready to head out on our operation.

We didn't do patrol briefs, or any kind of briefs anymore. The Standard Operating Procedures were borderline fictitious in how they thought events would unfold in anything but a maelstrom of hate and discontent when a Marine went down.

Eighteen year old kids in turrets would be expected to watch their friends get shot, listen to them die over the radio, and then remain calm instead of turning powerful weapons on everyone that wasn't a friendly. We all knew what would happen if a sniper popped a turret gunner's head, or if an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) made Swiss cheese of a vehicle; mass chaos would ensue. People would shout into the radios and shoot at everything in sight. We hadn't so much stopped caring to do patrol briefs as we'd lost our imagination.

Going through the vehicle and gun checks flew by, *Gun up! Truck up! Let's roll!*, and before I knew it we were rolling through the front gate, *Echo Four you are cleared and good to go*, and leaving the wire. It was a scorching hot day, just like all the rest of the days that summer. The sands would burn your eyes if you stared too long. The breeze was hot and coarse, carrying with it dust and sand. I tried to make myself comfortable in the sling the turret had for a seat. We were moving quickly along a Main Supply Route towards wherever the roadblock was to be set up at. It turned out to be a bridge in the middle of nowhere.

We set up on one end of the bridge, facing some of our gun-trucks across it so they could use the bridge as a fatal funnel. Some trucks faced the other way down the road, the way traffic wouldn't be allowed to pass through at all. This traffic would just back up for the next few hours. I stood on the sling, pushing my head out above the top of the turret. Lounging back, using my gear as a buffer between myself and the hard edges of the turret's armor that came up about a foot and a half all the way around except where the gun faced outboard, I smoked and watched the set up.

"Hurry up Marines, we don't have all day!" Sergeants screamed into the desert with eyes wide, tendrils of spittle quivering between their teeth.

My MRAP was the main truck blocking traffic from advancing across the bridge. Granted, we weren't actually blocking it, but we were parked just to the side of the road facing down the bridge, meaning our fifty caliber was doing the same. This would be enough to stop most traffic from advancing. The Corps had been controlling the Al Anbar province for awhile and it was readily understood that noncompliance could get you killed. Twenty or so meters in front of us was a Humvee from the other unit that had tagged along. I didn't know who was in the turret, but he was behind a 240 Bravo medium machine gun. From what I could tell from watching him pick his nose and joke around he didn't seem like a killer. On the other side of the road, right across from the vehicle that belonged to the other company, was another Humvee. This Humvee belonged to Echo, and the turret gunner was Larkin, a member of Machine Guns. Larkin was dependable,

and had been the point man to my second man quite often during the first half of our deployment when we did foot patrols.

Flicking the smoking butt out into the wasteland I dropped down into the MRAP. I glanced around the inside quickly, then grabbed my rifle. I turned to close the open back door of the truck to see Terrones looking in at me.

“Hey, I think you are supposed to be in the turret,” Terrones said.

He looked exhausted, having ridden in a Humvee with no air conditioning. Terrones was a Mexican and we were about the same color since I got so bronze in the sun, but there was enough dirt on his neck to make a dark ring. The breeze carried enough debris to coat a sweaty person in a few seconds; I was thankful to be stuck in a turret.

“I was just grabbing my rifle,” I said.

Terrones hustled off to help signal vehicles across the bridge so that drivers and passengers could be hauled out and have their irises and finger prints put into a data base. I rose back up in the turret rifle first. It was a squeeze, until I situated the rifle to the side of the fifty cal. The action was just getting underway, with Marines signaling cars forward and then pulling them off to the side of the road at gun point, then extracting the occupants. After watching for a few minutes I realized how badly it had been set up, and how confusing it was to the Iraqis.

There was nothing on the other side of the bridge to let Iraqi drivers know what was going on. Essentially they came up on the bridge doing anywhere from fifty to sixty-five miles an hour, saw my truck with the fifty pointed at them and slammed on their brakes. After stopping they would either be signaled forward and get their identifiers harvested, or they would be waved through the roadblock. There were two vehicles ahead of mine with Marines in turrets that were signaling people forward across the bridge and it was confusing not only to the Iraqis but to the Marines waving them forward as well. The Iraqi drivers were having a hard time seeing the two Marines. The haze of dust cut visibility to about thirty meters. The situation was optimal, I decided, blowing dust out of the optic on my M-16 that magnified things four times and allowed for easy aiming through the luminescent chevron floating inside.

I waited and chain smoked. It was kind of like all the other mind numbing times I had sat in a turret and waited, except this time there was a purpose. The breeze picked up and brown haze filled the air. Beneath me and off to my right was where Marines took Iraqis to get their fingerprints and iris scans. From what I could hear it was a slow and tedious process. The machine that took pictures of the iris wasn't in a box and didn't have a shroud; meaning that the blazing desert bore down on

the person trying to look into the machine. More than once I heard a Marine tell someone to “Just hold your eye open,” and it made me chuckle when the Iraqis protested about the sand in their eyes.

About forty minutes had gone by when a beat up red car didn't stop at the other side of the bridge. Instead it kept going, doing about fifty miles an hour. The bridge spanned about sixty meters, and a fourth of the way across the driver must have sensed something was wrong, slowing to twenty or so. My body went cold and mechanical as I grabbed my rifle from beside me and steadied it on top of the fifty. I tried pressing the butt stock tight into my shoulder but couldn't get it seated comfortably. My body armor kept getting in the way. The stock felt cold against my cheek as I peered down my optic.

The driver was a middle aged man in a business suit with a lousy haircut and deep wrinkles creasing his face. The desert had left a heavy mark. His eyes were flashing back and forth from one Humvee to the next as he slowly approached our side of the bridge. The Humvee in front of me from the other company had its turret gunner waving the man back. At least that's what I thought he was trying to tell the driver by jumping up and down and flailing his arms wildly. Larkin, across the road, was waving in a vain attempt to get the driver to stop moving and focus solely on him. Neither one of them did much but ensure the driver would continue forward with a confused look on his face.

I centered the glowing chevron on the man's face. His eyes darted wildly. He signaled to the two Marines with his hands. I put my finger on the trigger and moved my thumb downward in a sweeping motion as I had countless times before to take the gun off safety and move the fire selector to single shot, but I didn't feel anything. Canting the weapon to the right I glanced down quickly and saw that at some point I'd switched the rifle to single shot already. Often times things like this would happen; my body would go through an involuntary response and I'd operate on autopilot. The fire selector switch looked alien when I glanced at it, like it had never been there when the rifle was first designed but was slapped on by someone who wanted to neuter the weapon. My brow furrowed for a second as I struggled to remember if I had ever seen it there before that very moment.

When I looked back into the scope the man was beginning to dart his car to the left, towards the Humvee in front of me. The turret gunner was yelling, “No, no, no, stop!” over and over. Larkin had his rifle out but didn't look like he was going to use it anytime soon, except maybe to neutralize the Marine across the street from him screaming incoherently. The driver brought the car to a stop for a second, but

the kind of stop all three of us could tell was just a stutter. He kept going. He did it again, and I started to put pressure on the trigger.

The man looked frightened. He couldn't understand what we wanted him to do. I couldn't tell where he worked, but from the way he dressed it wasn't outside or with his hands. He probably had a family somewhere, kids and a wife. I was cleared to kill him though. I could "smoke" him, as the saying went, and he would have been like smoke; there one second and gone the next, leaving behind a corpse. I would explain how he failed to stop, how he continued across the bridge and defied both of the forward Humvees when they waved for him to halt. For all I knew the car had 155 rounds in the back and he was going to ram a Humvee.

I couldn't take the chance. That's what I would say. I'd talk about how I feared for myself and my fellow Marines, how the fog of war set in when the first Humvee's turret gunner had started to act like a child, causing communication between all three of the vehicles blocking the bridge to cease. I had to end the threat the man in the car represented. The shot would ring out, his head would snap back, a fine pink mist would cloud the back seat and his rear windshield would be covered in the black and red gelatine of brain matter. Somewhere his wife and kids would be completely fucked. We'd have to pull his car off to the side of the road and take care of the body.

I'd like to say something along the lines of "I couldn't do it" or "I didn't have it in me," but that would be a lie. I could have done it, and I did have it in me. It would have taken just a few more pounds of pressure on the trigger and the world would have one less Arab. It's not that simple of course; I'd be dealing with the aftermath of it every day, and the fact that it wasn't a "righteous" kill would probably haunt me. My dreams would be filled with that man and his family. I'd hear his wife weeping, their children sobbing. Maybe I'd run into him again on the other side, if there is anything over there.

What stopped me was the realization, *This guy is just trying to go to work.*

When that realization hit me, the world stopped for a second. Not the way the world stops when your heart skips a beat, but the way it stops when the concussion of a nearby explosion hits you, or when the shriek of rockets fills the air; when everything is done moving, the little snow globe of reality frozen with the suspended snow looking like sand and there is nothing else but stillness. I recoiled back in the turret, the back plate of my body armor softly thudding against the Humvee's metal. It was a completely original idea, new and pure. I had never thought it before about anything or anyone in my entire life, not just the words, but the meaning, and everything they represented. I felt that man's struggle to provide, thought of

the commute and how shitty it must have been, knew his frustration in not being able to make ends meet, saw him at the table with his wife and children talking about how they would have to tighten their belts to make it through the troubled times.

I carefully put the fire selector back on safety. And then double checked that it was on safe as I watched a couple of Marines haul the man out of his car and slam him on the hood. The guy babbled some stuff I didn't understand and an interpreter hustled over. As I watched the scene I unloaded my rifle, slowly pulling the magazine out, racking the bolt back, and catching the round that popped out in my hand. Pushing the round back into the magazine I wondered if I should feel sick, I wondered if I should feel anything. I checked my rifle over once more, looked at the man getting sternly talked to, and threw it down into the truck.

"It's your lucky day," I muttered as I stared at the Iraqi man being released to continue his commute. I wondered how much longer he would be tied to this world and if he would depart from it at some other checkpoint or roadblock in the future.

I spent the rest of the operation sitting in the turret smoking. There really wasn't much for me to do if I wasn't going to do my job. Ignoring the rules of engagement in order to avoid engaging civilians was a weird paradox. I considered that maybe things were just broken over here. Maybe Iraq really was never never land, as some people joked. What were we supposed to do? The person in the turret behind the gun would most likely be pay grade E-2 or E-3, Private First Class or Lance Corporal, and fall between the ages eighteen to twenty-one. The worst part was eventually the car would be a VBIED and I'd watch a Marine get blown out of the turret and slide around on the pavement in his own blood as he tried to get back up.

"Not today?" Rose shouted up at me as he walked by to jump in his Humvee as the roadblock got ready to leave.

"It was close," was all I said. It was all I needed to say. He gave a single nod in understanding before closing the Humvee door. He stared out of the ballistic glass at me for a second, then down at his hands.

The broken telephone poles, sand dunes, palm trees, Iraqis, and time all rhythmically passed us as we headed back to our barracks at Camp Habbaniya. I felt numb. The kind of numb you feel when one of your appendages finally starts to wake up. I tried to think back to the point when I'd first gone numb. Maybe it was when I had first rationalized pulling the trigger on someone? How long ago had that been? Years. I thought about the Iraqi man who hadn't stopped, who I'd almost murdered. I tried to envision the family he may or may not have had, how

his wife reacted to another story of Americans hauling him out of his car, how his kids would deal with the tension.

I imagined my own father driving to his job at Pioneer, getting stopped by the military, almost shot, and then hauled out of his car; or I tried to at least. I couldn't really imagine it because it was such a foreign idea. The phantoms I could conjure up in my imagination were something that would have filled me with anger and hate if they ever manifested in the real world. We created "terrorists" by the dozen with our pointless little roadblocks, I was sure of that. Years later I would try to look back and envision myself in the turret, gazing out over the top of a truck, deciding whether or not a commuter was going home that day. I couldn't. It wasn't possible, because things like that were only possible in Iraq, or other war zones where the "rules of war" collided solidly with reality and left a mangled wreck for kids to navigate while keeping as much of themselves intact as possible.

There wasn't really anyone there to talk to about the way I felt, and I knew it. Maybe Rose, but it wasn't that easy. No man is an island, but we were all peninsulas, and we were all going through the same shit. It would have been like one drowning man turning to another and saying, "Would you please pass me a life preserver," only to hear back, "I don't have a life preserver you fucking idiot, that's why I'm drowning." There wasn't anything any of us could do about it but try to get back home in one piece, but it was going to take more than that. Our survival was linked more to our humanity than our bodies.

When I hit the rack that night I didn't have any dreams; those would catch up with me years later. For the time my mind was burned out from thinking and my eyes hurt from the sun. I would have plenty of time the next day to ponder how "God, Country, Corps" tattooed on my arm conflicted with what we were doing.

I didn't think about it the next day, though. I just fell back into the routine of preparing for combat and being constantly ready to leave the wire. I didn't want to kill a man anymore. I didn't want to kill anything anymore. That isn't to say that I wouldn't, or wanted to not kill a man; I just didn't want to actively seek out the confrontation. I was content with letting violence come to me. It surrounded me. My entire life revolved around it. I didn't see how it wouldn't eventually find me. I could only hope that maybe one day some other kid would pass me up in his rifle's scope. I wondered if it had already happened.

The next day I felt at peace. I felt alone.

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