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## What Do You Do?

I drop a plastic bag on the picnic table and sit across from Cass. A few guys wander around the grass in blue V.A. hospital robes and stop to listen to the cars on Clement. Trees block the noise, although you can hear the cars like something far away. Small hills slope up to a crowded parking lot, and I see some old guys wearing sunglasses and sitting in wheelchairs beneath trees with canes across their laps, waiting for I don't know what. A ride, probably.

"Cass, ice cream and cookies after the AA meeting," this guy says, stopping by our table. He leans on a walker and bums a smoke off me. Nicotine stains his gray beard, and his hospital gown slips off one shoulder and gauze pads cover spots on his thin arms where a nurse must've stuck him with an IV.

"When's the meeting?" Cass asks.

"In an hour."

"OK."

"You'll remember?"

"I'll try."

Cass sips on some coffee and watches the guy walk away with a thousand-mile stare that sees through him and beyond to places I can imagine. I take two cellophane-wrapped packages out of my coat pocket and slide them toward him.

"I brought you fudge grahams, too," I say, "and some fruit-flavored wafers."

"How'd you find me?"

"The nurse from the ninth floor told me you were out here."

When I returned from Iraq to San Francisco, I fucking drank. Anniversary of an attack, I drank; anniversary of a buddy's death, I drank. I hid a lot behind the

bottle. I put the bottle up only when Katherine threatened to leave me. I came here to the ninth floor, the psych wing of the V.A., for two weeks and dried out. I still wasn't right. I was still forgetting shit but I wasn't drinking, which made the forgetting that much harder to take. But I didn't know it was a problem. Not at first. I was just glad to be home and out of the V.A. During those two weeks on the ninth floor, Katherine'd visit me once a day. She brought bags of chocolate chip cookies. She liked to bake cookies but these were store-bought. Said she didn't have time to bake. Should have known then she was already gone.

"Got some Twizzlers here too in the bag."

"All right."

I open a package of pink wafers and bite into one. The crunching noise fills my head like breaking glass. I want to ask Cass how he's doing but decide to leave it alone. The way my brain is, I'd probably forget what the fuck he said anyway.

"I like the strawberry wafers. You ought to try one, Cass."

"OK."

I watch him take one, wonder when I go home if I'll forget I was here.

"In Iraq, we used to give Skittles to the kids of hajis building our bunkers. You have Skittles when you were there?"

"No," I say.

"None of those haji kids were bad. I don't hold anything against them" Cass says. "They just see their daddies fighting all the time and do like them."

I didn't deal much with kids over there. They lined the road sometimes when we went out on a patrol. They'd throw rocks at us, tink, tink, tink against the vic. Just when I'd think, fuck it, it's only rocks, one of them would chuck a grenade and the explosion would toss us around like bowling pins, not hurt so much as pretty god-damned roughed up.

We had a guard tower. Tower Three. This kid and his mother lived right outside the tower in the middle of the line of fire. I'm talking snipers and mortars, and they lived with it day in and day out like people in Seattle who say it ain't nothing all this rain.

I mean they didn't have armor or a weapon of any kind. Nothing that I knew of. I don't know how they made it. The kid was small. He had a narrow face, black hair. Maybe thirteen, fourteen. One round in him and he'd've busted in half. His mother was dressed in black. All you could see was her eyes like some Ninja warrior. They never acknowledged us. The kid threw rocks. Not at us. Just liked to throw

rocks. I got to wondering, though, whose side were he and his mother on? Do they lay IEDs? Fuck rules of engagement, why hadn't we wasted them?

Cass is a hell of a lot more generous than I am. Do like their daddies do. Shit, the way I see it, hajis aren't people. They're fucking hajis. That's what we called them. Fucking hajis. Some nights, I watch haji-made videos on YouTube and wish I still had my weapon, the bastards. I was in Target the other week maybe, one in Oakland, I think it was Target, and I saw a guy, this guy with a turban. Fucking towel head. I don't go to Target now. Goddamn hajis. When you give up so much for people you don't even know and they try to kill you—did kill a shitload of us—fuck them. I don't even know what haji means. If I did, I might think differently about calling them that. I'd call them something worse if I knew something worse but I don't.

I met Cass at a support group for Iraq War vets at the Vet Center on Polk. He looked like a truck driver, black hair, a big beard. He wore a black leather vest and blue jeans and had a bowling ball of a stomach. He was eating cheese and crackers laid out on the snack table like he'd never get enough. We didn't say much beyond, hey brother, how's it going? I'm Keith. I'm Cass. He spoke slow, his mouth full of cheese and crackers, and I pulled up a chair.

I got in the habit of sitting next to him at the group meetings. I like consistency. There was a morning when the newspaper delivery guy forgot our apartment. I sat by the front window and looked out the curtain where the paper normally landed every morning at six and thought, where is it? What's going on? Why's it late? The barking of dogs behind us on 16th Avenue alerted me that something was wrong. Then the dogs stopped and the quiet was worse. This guy Perez shot dogs all the time, these huge Cujo-looking things. He shot one right in the mouth. This haji farmer came out, asked what we were going to do for his injured dog. I took out my KA-BAR and cut its throat. There's your fucking dog, I said.

But the paper wasn't there and Perez wasn't with me. I stared out the window, watched the gray morning sky turn to light blue and wondered which side of the street would have the ambush. Sparrows flew out of trees. What had frightened them? I felt like I could breathe and breathe and never get enough air. I refused to leave the apartment, refused to leave the window. Katherine got on the phone and demanded delivery of our newspaper. Not this afternoon, she shouted, now! When she brought it inside an hour later, I felt better but then I thought, hold up. Wait

a minute. I held it in my hands afraid to move until Katherine opened it and I saw there wasn't a bomb inside.

Last week, at the meeting, I didn't see Cass. That's how I lost friends in Iraq. Here on Monday morning, gone by Monday afternoon. They'd go on patrol and not come back. I lost five buddies my first week in Iraq. It was all I could do not to scream, where the fuck is Cass!

"You're looking pretty wild, Keith," Ryan, the group leader, said. "What's wrong?"  
"Where's Cass?"

"In the hospital. His father called. He got drunk, went into the basement and started cutting on himself."

Ryan served in Vietnam and did a prison stint when he got smashed one night on a fifth of Yukon Jack and dug a trench in his back yard. He whipshit a neighbor damn near to death—after he asked Ryan a perfectly logical question: What the hell are you doing?

"Suicide?"

"No. Cutting. Like high school kids do. Deal with the pain on the inside by hurting yourself on the outside. I think he might be bipolar."

Ryan took these psychology courses in prison, thinks he's Dr. fucking Phil now. Thinks his head's on right. That day I wanted to tell him it's not on right. That deep down in his guts he's still that fucked up trench-digging drunk vet, and it's that guy that's going to bite him in the ass one day.

Bipolar, shit. I didn't say anything, though. I didn't. I wanted to find Cass before I forgot, and make sure I hadn't lost him.

"I guess I'll go see him," I said.

After the group, I drove to the V.A. I headed toward Elm, took a left on Turk and a right onto Van Ness, and then everything got dark for me and just like that I forgot where I was. I knew I'd been at the Vet Center. I knew I'd talked to Ryan. I knew I wanted to see Cass but it was less of a plan than an idea I'd had a long time ago and that I had now just remembered. I pulled over to a 7-Eleven, bought some fudge grahams and Twizzlers and strawberry wafers and asked for directions to the V.A.

"I see you still have your Army-issue sunglasses," Cass says.

"Yeah. Want some more wafers?"

"Please."

I hand him a couple.

“I have wacky dreams,” Cass says. “I see dead kids. I’m in the dream. I’m holding a .50 cal. Some are dead already. Some I’m killing. The enemy’s firing from all sides, we’re firing from all sides. One kid just stands there and watches me. I call him the one who got away.”

“Do me a favor, Cass.”

“What?”

“Next time you fall asleep, don’t let him get away.”

“Yeah, with a .50 cal.”

“That’ll do it.”

I was stationed in Balad. The C-130 carrying us in from Kuwait couldn’t land—the base was being bombed. The pilot had to maneuver like a motherfucker to avoid getting hit. I saw flames below us and I thought, if an RPG nails us, that’s it. A guy next to me started crying. I was shaking, felt like puking. It seemed like we circled a long time before we got the OK to land. When the doors opened, we put our heads down and ran. The guy crying got hit. Lost an arm, a hand and both legs. He lived.

Balad was shit. Nothing but sand and heat like someone had left the oven on broil overnight and you open it in the morning and the heat blast melts your fucking face off, and dust storms and diesel exhaust that layered you brown and black and more tanks than I’d ever seen. My unit occupied a girls’ school. Guys collapsed on the floor passed out from dehydration. Mortar fire and snipers every night got them up. As soon as it got dark, that was it, the hajis opened up on us. We called Balad Mortaritaville. A real kick in the teeth, I can tell you.

My third month, I was part of a supply convoy to Forward Operating Base Concord. The LT assigned me, Perez and four other guys to a four-seater Humvee soft top, double-armored, third from the rear. I rode shotgun, Billington drove. Jones, Perez and McGuire sat in back.

We left Balad at 0800 and bounced along a wadi heavy with rocks, the land like the bottom of a driedup forgotten ocean with villages bleached beyond white scattered here and there but a ways off, Nowheresville, Iraq.

The IED was a remote detonator mortar round. I was listening to radio traffic and Katy Perry on my iPod when, wham! my door blew the fuck open and the Humvee blasted off the ground like a rocket, dropped back down and filled with smoke so dense I couldn’t see my hands. My ears rang like someone was banging pots and pans inside my head. I turned around. Jones, Perez and McGuire glued against each other, fried black, their bodies ripped open red and spilling guts. I yelled, No! and reached for Perez and his skin came off in my hand and Billington

grabbed me and hauled me out screaming. Shrapnel had totally bent the Humvee's frame but I still had my weapon. We crawled on the ground, scrambling like snakes, and shot at anything that moved. I was shaking, dizzy, my throat raw, my hands sticky from Perez but I could shoot, god dammit, I could shoot. I saw a woman walking a cow, my heart beating so hard I had a hard time breathing, and thought she had better get under that fucking cow.

She didn't. The cow blew up. Just this big fan of fucking red and the woman disappeared into it, swallowed, sucked into another dimension, gone, and I just kept firing at that spot, plowing under whatever pieces were left. We ripshit houses and trees, anything standing, anything someone might hide behind. When we stopped shooting, the sound of our breathing and thudding hearts consumed the silence and the nothingness we'd wasted.

Back at the base, I couldn't stop shaking. I puked and puked. My LT told me to see the medic and followed me to the clinic. The medic shined a light in my eyes. I blinked, felt spear tips jab through my temples. He told me I had a mild concussion. He asked me if I could still handle my AK, still walk, still drive.

I've forgotten a lot of things, but not the soldier's motto: I will always place the mission first, I will never accept defeat, I will never quit and I will never leave a fallen comrade. When other guys had lost their arms and legs, I wasn't going to complain.

I told him yes.

"That's good enough for me," the LT said.

I didn't know I was all screwed up. The next day I had a hard time concentrating. I understood just bits and pieces of conversations. Mouths moved but only a word or two stuck in my head. I rambled. Guys called me on it. What the fuck, man? You retarded or something? No, I got a concussion, douchebag, I said.

Weeks went by. A ringing in my ears kept me awake. Food lost its taste, the air its odor of sand and wind. I'd see that kid and his mother near Tower Three and I'd scope them with my AK. Why do we let hajis so close to the walls? Why do we hire them to work on base? After what they did to me, three guys in my vic vaporized, why?

Then I started forgetting to Skype Katherine, forgot to email her too. When I did call, she told me I sounded stressed. What kind of a thing to say is that? I said. It's a war, you know. I didn't tell her what happened. I asked if she had sent my Christmas care package. It's only March, she said. Really? Bullshit. I thought she was fucking with me. That's not funny, I told her. I don't appreciate it.

“When’d you join the Army?”

“Two thousand two.”

“Because of 9/11?”

“Yeah.”

“Two thousand two for me too,” Cass says. “Because of 9/11. It was like instinct. The thing to do. I thought I’d go to Afghanistan. Who were you with?”

“Fifteenth Brigade. Fort Sill.”

“Oklahoma?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s where I’m from,” Cass says. “That wind down there throw off artillery shells during basic?”

“A little. Not dramatically.”

“I think I already asked you this. Have we had this conversation before?”

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“I was hit by an IED several times,” Cass says. “One blew up eight feet from my face.”

“I got hit once by an IED. That was enough. Were you wearing arm guards and everything?”

“Yeah, that and more.”

“More? Fucking hot for more.”

“I was in a combat unit. I wanted to fight. You heard all the stuff going on and didn’t want to miss it. I had two big machine guns. A .50 cal and an M249. My first time out, we were just passing a village. I was in the lead gun truck. The hajis started firing at us. I turned the turret to seven, eight o’clock and unloaded on them. It was night. I couldn’t tell if I killed anybody. I felt like I had twenty cups of coffee.”

“I remember this one time,” I tell Cass. “Eastside at the gate. Sitting there, I had a .50 cal in the bunker. It was real quiet. Bunch of haji laborers waiting to come in. I heard a hiss right over our heads and then a whole wall blew to shit. Rocket or mortar, I don’t know which. A loud hiss, then boom! That was my first time, first taste. Where were you at?”

“F.O.B Concord.”

“That’s how I got all fucked up,” I say. “Going to Concord. Just outside Baghdad?”

“Yeah.”

I look at Cass. Had I seen him in Iraq? I feel myself drifting, the memories crowding each other out. Cass’s voice slows and fades to a whisper like I’ve turned down the

volume. I understand what he's saying, but his words come to me in bits and pieces. I can no longer concentrate.

"Maybe we have had this conversation before," I say.

One minute I'm in Iraq for nine months, the next I'm discharged and back home with Katherine and nothing in between. Our friends had this nonchalant attitude. They said, hey good to see you, what's up? as if I'd never left. The closeness I'd felt over there, the you're-in-Iraq, I'm-in-Iraq, we're-in-this-shit-together-bitches, that was gone. I plastered Operation Iraqi Freedom bumper stickers on the back of my car. I wanted people to know but I didn't want to talk about it.

I couldn't sleep. I felt dark, depressed. At night, I lay on my back without moving so as not to disturb Katherine and stared at the ceiling without blinking until my eyes watered. She'd get up in the morning but I'd stay in bed and think about Iraq. Like this one patrol. We go into a building, barely make it through the door when we see grenades dinking down the stairs. Six of our guys try to get out the door and bottleneck themselves up. I see a little bathroom and get in the stall. Dink, dink, dink, boom! Those six guys, they didn't make it.

Another time, funnier than shit, we were in Fallujah and an insurgent at the top of the stairs of this house shot an RPG and it hit the stair beneath Perez but nothing happened. It didn't go off. Perez yelled, I can't die! and charged up the stairs and blew that haji to shit. I laughed every time I thought of it, had to wipe tears away I was laughing so hard, and one morning Katherine heard me laughing and she came into the bedroom and looked at me and started laughing too like you do when you see someone laughing, and wanted to know what's so funny. So I told her about Perez, how pissed he got when that fucking haji tried to waste him, I can't die! and how he sure did the fuck die on our way to F.O.B Concord, and she stopped laughing but I couldn't. She didn't get it. Then I stopped laughing. I wanted to grab and shake her, do you know what the real world is like? And then I started laughing again.

When I finished my alcohol program at the V.A., I stuck pretty close to the house. I'd drop Katherine off at the supermarket and then drive away forgetting about her. I took us to the movies and when she asked me to buy her a Coke, I'd walk past the concession stand and wander outside and get lost in the parking lot and miss the movie. I'd go meet her for lunch at Buster's in North Beach where she waitressed but then I'd turn down the wrong street and drive to the Mission. I'd stop at a Mexican joint and call her and ask where the hell was she.

After I botched our fifth attempt at a lunch date, she ripped into me. This time gone all the way to Oakland and called her from a pizza joint. A co-worker gave her a lift to come get me. One look and I knew she was in no mood for pizza.

She drove us back home to the Richmond. We didn't say a word to each other. She pulled into the garage and I got out of the car and walked into the living room and turned on the TV. I wanted to be alone. Her anger crowded me, boxed me in. I saw things out of the corners of my eyes, turned and they vanished. I heard her throw her purse on the kitchen counter and knock over something and my shoulders jerked at the noise, and then she stood in front of me blocking the TV. I was eye-level to her waist. Her tan legs snaked out of this short summer dress. Her blouse rose up a bit and I could see her belly button. I didn't feel so crowded then. I reached for her. She pushed my hands away.

"Are you seeing someone?" she said. "Is that why you're acting like this?"

"Hell no! I just forgot."

My heart started pounding like I was getting chewed by the LT for some dumb shit and my hands began shaking. She didn't get how I could forget something like lunch again and again, and I didn't either. I got it why she was so upset, but I didn't like her shouting at me.

"Do you remember how we even met? You forget that?"

I remembered. I had stopped for breakfast at Buster's a year before my enlistment. She took my order, two eggs easy, extra hash browns, two biscuits. We started talking. She had short, curly brown hair and a throaty voice I thought was kind of suggestive, and a smile that made me smile. I said we should see a movie. Maybe, she said.

"It was love at first sight," I told her.

"You're such a character," she said and blushed. Then she got shitty again.

"I think you're seeing someone."

"Stop it," I said.

"Don't tell me to stop it? Who is she?"

"Stop it!"

"Tell me her name!"

I'd had it with her shouting. I smacked the end table with my first hard enough to make her jump and back away. I surprised myself, like a power surge had bolted up my ass without even a here-I-come. The word "bullshit" rolled around in my head like a marble getting louder and louder, faster and faster, and I pressed my hands against my forehead but I couldn't stop it, and I screamed, "Bullshit! Bullshit!"

Bullshit!” and pounded the table again and again and the lamp fell and the bulb broke and I imagined all those pieces of glass rising in the air like shrapnel.

Katherine stood so still, eyes wide as plates, I thought she’d crack. I stared hard at her, balled my hands into fists, and laid a punch into the wall by the side of her head willing myself just in time not to put it through her face. I held my hand and stared at it like it didn’t belong to me and ran into the garage. The air clung to me. I got in our car and spun out of the driveway, turned onto Lincoln and floored it for downtown with no idea what I’d do when I got there. I just wanted to go, get away, drive as fast as my heart was racing but I hadn’t gone far, hadn’t even reached the Haight, when I rounded a curve and almost slammed into a line of stopped cars.

I stomped on the brakes and squealed to a stop, my heart a beating drum filling my head. What was the fucking holdup? I shifted into neutral, floored the accelerator to hear the engine whine, to hear noise, to hear it scream. I saw some flashing lights. I followed the car in front of me, riding its bumper with a desire to roll right over it crushing it and hear the metal break, beeping and pounding my hands on the steering wheel keeping time to that marble still bouncing around inside my head, bullshitbullshitbullshitbullshit! A line of orange cones angled us into one lane and a cop waved us forward.

“Sobriety checkpoint,” he said. “Keep moving.”

I got sucked in, squeezed, cars on top of me front and back. One could explode at any moment. I cranked the radio. PSYOP would play Metallica to fuck with the hajis when we did house-to-house searches. Attention, attention, drop your weapons, someone would say through a bullhorn, and then they’d do this evil laugh. Then it was Metallica again on this big intercom thing. To keep the hajis from going to sleep and drive them crazy so they’d come out on their own and we could ripshit them to hell. I turned the radio louder until I couldn’t turn the knob.

I watched the cop in my rearview mirror while another cop checked on the guy in front of me. Then it was my turn. He leaned into my open window and made a face at all the noise. He yelled at me to turn it down. I didn’t touch it.

“Having a good ol’ time, rock star?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He asked where I had come from.

“Nowhere, sir.”

My heart was hammering my chest into splinters. I needed to keep moving. The AC didn’t work. My window was down but sweat soaked my shirt. I opened the door to let more air in, my mouth dry as paste. The cop told me to close it.

Somewhere ahead of us I heard shouting. A squad car passed me on the shoulder of the road, stirring up small dust storms.

The cop shifted, moved his feet. "I'm not going to tell you again."

More shouting up ahead and another squad car, going even faster, this one spitting stones from beneath its tires and hitting my car, tink, tink, tink. The dust exploded. Tink.

I bolted from the car screaming and the cop grabbed me and we fell to the pavement and I clawed forward digging my fingers into the pavement. I knew what happened to prisoners. They got their heads cut off and shown on YouTube. I elbow-jabbed the cop and I heard him grunt. I rose to my knees and he knocked me flat with a punch to the back of the head and for a moment everything blazed white and then descended into deep black. He cuffed me. Another cop ran up and they both hauled me to my feet and the first cop shoved me against my car. I felt the hot metal burn my cheek, saw people leaning out their windows, the exhaust and wavering lines of heat making their faces look under water.

"Grenade?" the cop holding me said.

I didn't say anything, listened to him breathing hard against me, my chest heaving.

"You were yelling 'Grenade.'"

I didn't say anything.

"Your bumper stickers, Operation Iraqi Freedom, you a vet?" he said.

I didn't say anything.

"I was in Afghanistan," he said. "Tenth Mountain Division, Khost Province."

I heard the rush of bodies running, descending on us. I felt them collecting in a huddle behind me, heard them blabbering haji mojo. I tensed but the cop held me, his weight against me a kind of assurance. He told everyone to back off. He pressed me against the car for a long while, just the two of us breathing. Then he eased up and pulled me back. He gripped me by my right arm and stood beside me and we walked together to a squad car. I didn't try to run. I was not there, not anywhere. I watched myself from a great distance.

The cop opened the back door and put a hand on my head, guiding me inside. I liked the touch of his hand, the firm grip of his fingers in my hair. He closed the door. The AC blew cold air, covering me like clean sheets. When he got in, I asked him where we were.

"I had a roadside bomb blow up eight feet from my face once," Cass said.

“Remember when it was?”

“No. I was on foot patrol. Shook up my head too bad. I wish I did remember. People ask me and stuff and I can’t tell them. I can remember the kids I killed but people don’t want to hear about that. It’s like saying I killed puppies. Three of them. I’m not proud of it, but I killed as many them as I could.”

“It was them or you. Rule number one, Cass, come home alive.”

“We were getting supplies from one base back to our base. I forget which one. Not even a half hour out and we got ambushed. About seven, eight roadside bombs. The first one hit our truck and I blacked out for a couple seconds. I came to and pulled myself together. It was like Star Wars behind the truck. Firing on both sides, bombs going off and our guys firing back. Jesus, it was loud. I spun the .50 cal in a circle toward the flashes of gunfire. When I got done firing, I looked at the side of the road. Four kids were connecting wires to set off the bombs. Ten, eleven, twelve years old, I don’t know. I know I shot three of them. They kind of exploded from the .50 cal. The fourth ran away. I didn’t get him.”

What I remember of hajis dying I don’t remember as good as Cass does. I see snapshots but details are missing. Like that kid and his mother near Tower Three. One day when I was returning sniper fire, I saw them take cover in a ditch. Then they were dead, blown to shit. Cut down just like that, and I didn’t know what hit them. I want to say the sniper shot them but I don’t know. Maybe it was me. I see them now bursting like popped water balloons. I think I’d remember if I shot them. But I don’t. I don’t remember. I just see them pop.

The cop took me straight to the V.A. I don’t know how long I stayed there but it felt like hours. I had a CAT scan and an MRI. A neuropsychologist asked me questions: Had I been injured in Iraq? When? Had I lost my ability to concentrate? He read something to me out of a magazine about a woman shopping. It wasn’t long and I swear I listened but when he finished and asked me questions about what he had read, I had to admit I couldn’t remember much. He kept on asking me stuff. I told him I needed a break.

“Roger that,” he said, and left.

Seconds later, the door opened and a shrink came at me: Did I get upset when I thought about Iraq? Did I get angry? Did the thoughts come out of nowhere? How did I react physically to those thoughts?

I don’t remember what all else he asked me but it was a lot and I got pissed. Of course thinking about Iraq upset me, what kind of thing was that to ask? And how

do I react physically? What does he think? I shit myself? But I kept myself in check. I didn't want to do another two-week stretch on the ninth floor.

When he finished, I sat by myself, exhausted and ready to sleep for days. I must've given someone my number and they called Katherine because she showed up out of nowhere to take me home. Before we left, the shrink and neuro guy compared notes in the hall. I watched them through a glass square in the exam room door. I closed my eyes, felt myself drifting, Katherine's hands on my shoulders. I heard the door open, heard their approaching footsteps. Then they stopped. I opened my eyes, looked at them standing above me. They said their "preliminary diagnosis" showed I had traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Preliminary diagnosis, shit. What did that mean? I didn't know and didn't care. I was beat-down exhausted and didn't ask questions. They told Katherine I needed to make an appointment for more tests, more questions, their voices rolling in and out of my head like remote thunder. They gave her prescriptions to fill. I heard the paper crinkle in her hand and make a sharp sound as she folded it. She squeezed my shoulder when they said we could go.

Every morning in the weeks and months that followed, Katherine would remind me to take my anxiety, blood pressure and headache pills. At night, she gave me a sleeping pill. Katherine was my rock, the left side of my brain. But when she asked for the divorce a year later she said it was because she couldn't rely on me anymore. She was never sure what I'd do. She understood it wasn't my fault, but still. The meds didn't seem to help my memory or calm my nerves. I saw a rehab counselor but she didn't see him making much of a difference either. She felt alone. So, she decided, she might as well live alone. I told her I'd try harder, but I knew it was too late.

"Yesterday I asked you to go to the Safeway and you drove to your mother's," she said, standing across from me in the kitchen. "You sat on the swing set in the backyard and she had to convince you to come home."

I didn't remember. Maybe I just wanted to be alone. The distant roar of an oncoming headache came on full bore up the back of my neck getting louder and louder. I reached over the pile of dirty plates, pots and pans in the sink and shut the blinds to block the sun. I closed my eyes against the headache. I turned the faucet on and began washing plates as fast as I could, water splashing onto the counter and me, thinking that would make her happy. She stepped beside me, dried the plates I cleaned and put them away. She put a hand out to slow me down. She turned off the water. Neither of us spoke. We had post-its on the cabinet doors with notes about

what went where so I could have shelved them myself, but she was done giving me chances.

A sparrow lands on the picnic table and hops toward the wafers. Cass reaches out with a finger and tries to stroke its head but it flies away. I catch the plastic bag before it blows off the table.

“I can’t believe we ate all this shit,” I say.

“Yeah,” Cass says. “Have to see a dentist, I guess.”

“Go in and say, here we are, doc.”

“Here we are,” Cass says.

He smiles. I don’t expect a laugh and he doesn’t give me one. I get up, take the torn cellophane wrappers, put them in the bag and toss them into a trash can. I’m tired, wrung out. It’s time to go home. I’ve got Katherine’s number if I get lost, if I remember to look for it to call her. She let me keep the house. That was good of her. Finding a new place and dealing with the unfamiliarity of it, well, I’m glad I didn’t have to do that. Yes, I am. Katherine’s a good person I know that. She got tired. I get it. I try to. I can’t forget her. I’m not saying I want to necessarily but given I’ve forgotten so much else, why not her? It’s a little unfair, I think.

I slap crumbs off my hands, watch some guys cutting the grass. They kneel, pull weeds, stand and clip dead branches off bushes. Everybody I know works. That’s how a guy defines himself.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a disabled vet,” I say.

I go back to Cass. He stares at me with a look that says he’s not seeing me or anybody else. I notice some doctors standing around in a group. I guess they’re doctors. I hope one of them’s a shrink and sees Cass. I wonder what they’re saying. Sometimes I overhear people talking about the war. Should’ve done this, they say. Should’ve done that. Had I been in charge this, this and this would have happened.

Had I been in charge, shit. Let them talk. It’s a free country. Everyone’s entitled to an opinion. If they were to ask for mine, I’d say life is full of surprises. Then I’d walk away and leave them to whatever surprises might await.

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