

STEVEN MCGREGOR

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## By the Aqueduct

“Hey. It’s me,” Private Hawkins said resentfully, sort of hiding his face with the phone. He glanced back at the line of soldiers waiting and knew he wouldn’t have more than the ten minute maximum for the call.

“Happy birthday,” said Michelle.

“Thanks, baby.”

“Did you get what I sent you?”

“Mail got delayed in Baghdad. There’s been a sandstorm bad.”

“Everyone okay?”

“Oh yeah. Just sand, you know.”

They were quiet for a moment. The room murmured with the conversations of the five other phone calls. Hawkins took his slim black sunglasses off his head and cleaned the lenses on his shirt. The black glass warped in the middle to correct his farsightedness, a custom prescription.

“Your mom called yesterday. We talked a good bit.”

“Yeah?” he turned the lenses in the light to check for scratches. With the sweat and dirt rubbed off they were smooth and clean again.

“Everyone’s doing well at the house. She said the church took a collection for the guys in your platoon... she wants you to call her when you can.”

“I will. I will.”

“Did the guys remember your birthday?”

“No,” he leaned forward in his chair, holding the phone with his shoulder. “I thought they’d get me this morning. Or at least give me the day off from patrolling. They gave it to Vicky instead.”

“Was it a tough patrol?”

“It was alright.”

“Everyone safe?”

“Yeah. Just down the road and back. Five clicks is all. Amateur, baby. Amateur.”

“Any more word on your leave?”

“Hey, Hawkins,” someone shouted. “Gotta go.”

Hawkins cupped the receiver. “No way that was ten minutes.”

“PT, man. Ricardez wants us.” It was Percival by the door.

Hawkins pushed his lips together and took a breath through his nose.

“Everything okay?” Michelle asked.

“Fine. Just PT is all.”

“You remember last year we had a barbeque and we bought that keg of Bud?”

“I remember.”

“You got so drunk you tried picking a fight with the neighbors and someone had to hold you down.”

Hawkins said, “Sergeant Linden stopped me,” and he was happy to remember all of it. He had hit his head on the concrete and had the worst headache then but it was a good night and everyone was with him. It was before his demotion.

“I love you,” Michelle said.

“Yeah, baby.”

Outside it was overcast from the sandstorm. The afternoon was an attic in summer and Hawkins’ shirt stuck to his chest. Rising on the left was the spooky old powerplant where the Battalion office was. It had a gray quiet smokestack. He walked with Percival, going away from the building toward a concrete pad, where housing trailers sat in rows.

“Hope we don’t have to run. I’m still smoked from that patrol,” Percival said.

“Listen to you,” Hawkins said. “Amateur, man.”

“Amateur, man,” mocked Percival. He picked up his feet, trying not to kick up sand.

Hawkins walked normal.

“What’d your wife say?”

“Nothing, really. Sounds all right though. She’s with her folks is probably why.”

They met Vicky and Corporal Ricardez by the pad. Nearby was another team shouting the numbers to a four-count exercise.

“Follow me,” said Ricardez and he ran towards the gravel road that surrounded the patrol base. He was going with that funny way he had of running, his head tilted back and his arms hardly moving. It was bullshit Ricardez was team leader,

really. Only because of the drunk driving before the deployment and Hawkins would never have been caught if that guy from first platoon hadn't wanted to go all the way to Nashville. The road traced the inside of a high brick wall, with the powerplant, at the center, and as they ran Hawkins was steadily hating all of them. Ricardez with his funny run, Percival with his breathing like a horse treading water, and Vicky because he was Vicky and everything had to be explained twice to him.

They ran a wide arc to the front gate, then Ricardez cut towards the smoke stack and turned along a rectangular concrete channel about five hundred meters in length, built by engineers to bring water from the Euphrates to the powerplant. The LT had called it an aqueduct. The soldiers climbed down in there using a cargo net draped over one side.

Sheltered by the channel, they spat and cleared their throats from the dust. Hawkins felt as if it was caked to the inside of his skull and he spit higher on the wall than Percival could.

"On my watch," said Ricardez. "We'll sprint the length and rest four minutes."

Hawkins pushed his glasses against his face and crouched low, ready to run hard. They ran two laps and each time he beat Vicky and Percival but he never caught Ricardez. Their gray shirts became charcoal black, soaked with sweat. Hawkins let himself get carried up in it and he started hating Michelle and how she talked to his foster parents all the time and called them his regular parents and even they had remembered his birthday and sent him a card with twenty-two dollars in it for his age like they did every year. They mailed it a month early to make sure it arrived in time but what the hell was he going to do with twenty-two bucks on Patrol Base Dragon? He ran hard and started to win. It meant nothing though and he hated his whole platoon and wished he'd left the army after his first deployment like Pat Wimer from Tucson. If Ricardez didn't run so funny he'd be faster.

After the sixth lap they were panting all of them and Ricardez said, "Last one up the net does double pushups."

Hawkins scrambled up the wall first, swinging his legs over the top and then, when he looked up, his heart froze.

In a half-circle, surrounding the top of the net, was the rest of 2nd platoon, Angel Company.

"Don't even try," said Sergeant Linden as he came close.

Hawkins planted his feet in a boxer stance.

"He swings, he misses!" said someone. It sounded like Mattingly. Hawkins couldn't tell because his glasses were knocked off.

"Watch my shades," he said.

“Hey you’ll be alright.”

They held his arms and legs.

“Where’s Ricardez? This is one of his Joeys. He oughtta have first dibs.”

“Ricardez!”

“Here he is. Sneaking around like a ninja, climbing up that net there.”

Hawkins felt someone pull up his shirt.

“Happy Birthday, Private,” said Ricardez and he slapped his stomach twenty-two times, counting seriously, like for money.

“Look at those abs, rock-hard, soldier!”

All the men in the platoon took turns.

“Did you see his face today when I gave Vicky the day off?” Lieutenant Kerns asked someone. “I thought he was gonna quit right then!”

“Come on, sir. Your go.”

The LT coughed as he knelt down.

“Aw, man, you stink, Private. Take a bath after this,” he said.

Hawkins growled and grit his teeth because he didn’t want them to see he was crying. Luke Gareth Hawkins. His foster parents had always said they loved him and he had even taken their name. But what did they know about him? This, this was family wasn’t it? They were slapping him and laughing and it hurt so much it stopped hurting and it felt like clumps of dirt falling against his stomach and when they were finished they pulled him up from the ground. He patted himself off and it was Percival who said, “you feel any older?”

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**STEVEN MCGREGOR** was shortlisted for the Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize in 2012 and 2013.