

When it Falls

Lucas Randolph

In 2009, I deploy to Incirlik Air Base Turkey for a fifteen-month tour. I'm an aircraft mechanic working on the flightline. America is fighting two different wars on two different fronts. The Turkish government is renovating their military base with a new influx of cash. Kurdish locals outside the base are brought in to do the dirty work. They burn everything—black ash rains from the sky above. A burning orange glow can be seen on the horizon. Sergeant Jackson is the one who takes care of us. He enlisted shortly after the first Gulf War in the early '90s—we jokingly call him, *The Old Man*.

"I've seen more wars than any of you fuckers combined," he says.

"Tell us what it was like back during ancient times, Sergeant." Sergeant Jackson laughs with us—he is a good leader. He dares one of the young airmen to stick out our tongues and let a piece of the ash fall into our mouths. I stick mine out and a crystalized star-shaped piece touches the tip of my tongue. The crew of aircraft mechanics laugh. Morale is important when you are overseas, especially when you have tough jobs like ours. Sergeant Jackson teaches me this. Keeping the spirits up of the ones you love—the ones you are willing to die for, is more important than getting a little ash on your tongue. I believe him.

Years after I come home, my wife tells me to drink the green juice. She says that she saw something on social media about tumors feeding off sugar. As she holds the blender down with both hands, the bandage from a fresh tattoo on her shoulder shakes—she has been adding to her collection more and more lately. It's our two zodiac symbols intertwined with the image of a

phoenix rising above them.

"It represents our immortality together—as partners for life," she says. I keep my face serious.

"I love it." I don't believe in any of that zodiac stuff—or what she reads online about health remedies or newfound cures. We have been through a lot together. She is a veteran, too. We met before she shipped off to Korea for twelve months. During her enlistment, she would be gifted a handful of invisible scars that will never heal. The *green machine* smoothie becomes a weekly ritual for her. She smiles like a mad scientist as the ingredients blend together. She is always smiling somehow, despite it all. It tastes disgusting. I drink the juice anyway.

"I love it."

The surgeon suspects it is some type of slow growing ependymoma. It's wrapped around the base of my brain stem—the type he considers non-operable under most conditions.

He says, "You might have won the lotto of brain tumors, though." He explains that less than one percent of all people will ever develop a brain tumor. He believes the type I have is the one percent of the one percent—a true gem.

"With a little bit of luck, something else will probably kill you before this has the chance to." He shows his teeth with crooked old man lips to let me know he is joking. I have barely escaped my twenties and he is nearly twice my age. I force a small laugh. He stops smiling and so I stop my small laugh. He is also serious. My brain is rotting from the inside out.

We are waiting for the next plane to land. A friend tells me he rented a scooter the night before. He says he followed one of the dump trucks to the burn site. It's located a mile outside the base

on the outskirts of a Kurdish neighborhood.

“What the fuck were you doing out anyway?”

“I was going to *The Compound*,” he smiles. The Compound is a government-run brothel. Women—girls, work off debts that are owed. The debts are often not their own. It’s off-limits to all personnel. I tell him what a piece of shit he is. We will still be friends.

“What did it look like?”

“The brothel?”

“No fuck-tard! The burn pit!” He describes a chain link fence with green tarps blocking anyone from seeing what was inside. A line of trucks was waiting to get in. It takes up an entire city block. There were armed guards outside.

“Were they burning shit, or what?”

“Nah, just a bunch of Turkish soldiers standing around smoking. You could smell it though—fucking cesspool.” We grab our toolbox. The lights from a landing C-17 can be seen in the distance. When it lands the crew will switch out for a fresh one—they have been flying for over twelve hours there and back. We will complete a maintenance check on the aircraft and refuel it for a new flight. Precious cargo needed for the war will be placed on board. In a couple hours, it will take off again. The two of us will repeat this process four more times for the next twelve hours. We are one of six maintenance teams turning planes around.

“Okay—now, tell me about the girls.” I can’t help but ask.

“See, I knew you were fucking sick.”

They first diagnose me during the middle of graduate school. I’m supposed to earn a master’s degree. I fall behind on work. I reach out to my writing mentor and divulge what is going on. We

meet digitally over zoom—it's easier this way. She expresses the deepest of empathies.

"I lost my mother to cancer six months ago. I know exactly how you're feeling." She goes into detail—she is still grieving. Her words choke behind tears. I can tell she looks at me different now—darker—sadder. I'm reminded of my own mortality each time I look at her.

"You can fight this." Something behind her eyes looks desperate—maybe I'm desperate. She thanks me for my service to our country before we get off the call. I start to feel guilty for even being alive. She doesn't know I'm one of the lucky ones—the one percent of the one percent—not like her mother—not like the ones who stood face to face with the enemy on the battlefield who would never come home. We will never speak of this again.

An in-flight emergency brings the war from Afghanistan to Turkey late one night. A body covered with an American flag fills the cargo hold. Most that give the ultimate sacrifice go straight to Ramstein Air Base, Germany—not tonight. I'm smiling at roll call—most of us are; morale is good. We all hope to be assigned the aircraft that carries the fallen soldier. We're not excited about death—we're excited for the chance to be part of something bigger. The maintenance officer arrives to roll call—he never comes to roll call. His uniform is pressed with a crease straight down the middle of his pants. Light from incandescent bulbs reflects off his freshly shaven head.

"It's going to be section chiefs only out there—and myself."

"Fucking bullshit," someone mumbles. The maintenance officer doesn't hear it—or pretends not too. He explains they have already cleared the error code that caused the in-flight emergency. Gas and go—it will be a quick turnaround. After roll call, we all gather at the smoker's pit. The sun has just set. The sky is black. There are no stars. Someone passes around a

pack of cigarettes. We watch as our opportunity to be part of the war is taken from us.

"First time in six months this asshole has ever stepped foot out here."

"Fuckers aren't even qualified to be out there."

"Asshole doesn't even have a reflective belt on."

"It should have been one of us out there." An armed escort meets our supervision at the plane. Nobody is allowed on. Our maintenance officer flaps his arms up and down like a bird. He is arguing with the crew chief of the aircraft.

"Looks like they aren't letting Captain Flappy onboard anyway." I tuck my arms into my sides like a chicken. I peck the shoulder of an airman next to me and squawk.

"Squawk—please let me see the dead body—I want to tell my officer friends back home about the war—maybe they will give me a shiny new award for this." Everyone laughs.

"Sorry Captain Flappy, it's protocol."

"Squawk!" A new nickname is born. We laugh and go back inside without looking back. The air conditioning feels good against my skin. For a moment I forget about the body covered in an American flag. I forget about the war. A sour diesel smell that stings when I breathe fills my lungs. The wind has changed. Something is burning nearby.

My brother shows up to my house unannounced—he's never done this before. He's a cop in a major metropolitan American city. The bulge of his work weapon can be seen hidden underneath his sweater—he never leaves home without it, even when he's off duty. I measure my conversation carefully when I speak with him. Once when I told him I was thinking about getting a motorcycle, he pulled out his phone to show me a picture of a crash victim from the night before.

"Dude ran his bike right into the back of a semi-truck—I see this shit every single day." I can't help but look at the pile of flesh. I don't ask him why he has a picture of it on his phone. I try to stick to the basics when we speak.

"What's new at the station?"

"Fuck, man—you'd need a drink if you really wanted to know." I can tell by his face he is serious. The news blares a new homicide almost nightly—women—children—it doesn't matter. He will often tell me about his work without me asking—but only after a drink or two—or more. I learn to stop asking for stories—I don't want his stories anymore. Today he has a case of pH balanced water—9.5, underneath his muscular arm. He said he read online that a perfect pH balance is important to fighting infections in the body, including cancerous cells. He rambles on about the health benefits of it, and how even he is thinking about switching over to it, if not for the cost. It's priced at triple the amount of normal water. I finish the case of water he brings over. I start to buy it on my own. I call to tell him I'm drinking it daily now.

"I think it tastes better."

People dying of cancer surround me in the waiting room of an infusion center. I wasn't there for my brain tumor, not exactly. I'm there because I've become addicted to painkillers and benzos. They diagnose me with medication overuse. I think that's a nice way of putting it. The military pays for everything. I'm already considered a disabled veteran. I was medically retired and rated as 100% disabled when I herniated three discs in my lower back. They tack on depressive mood disorder and panic disorder when they separate me from the military. I'm on all the pills for that by now. I talk with a therapist from the Veterans Administration for nearly a year once I'm out. She tries to diagnose me with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

“That’s not meant for me, I was just a mechanic—I’m one of the lucky ones.” She says she understands, but I don’t think she does. They prescribe quarterly Botox treatments to deaden the nerve cells surrounding my brain. The pain in my head is getting worse. I try to align my numerous appointments to be on the same day. It’s easy to forget sometimes. I self-inject a monthly medication into the thick part of my thigh after each appointment.

I come home from a fourteen-hour shift to see Sergeant Jackson standing in the hallway of our dormitory. Turkish authorities are standing outside a room from one of our crew members. They are yelling in a language I can’t understand. I walk up to ask my Sergeant what’s going on. His face is twisted sideways and is all kinds of red. I’ve never seen him like this. He can barely speak.

“Dumb motherfucker didn’t even leave a note.” I push my way to the doorway. My Sergeant’s arm reaches to stop me, but it falls weak. One of our guys is sitting in a chair with his head cocked to the ceiling. Clear plastic bags from the dining facility are wrapped around his skull. They suck in around his mouth and show his teeth like maybe he wanted to bite through. Some type of cord is wrapped around the base of his neck. Emptied bottles of liquor and brown bottles of pills are at his feet. At work everyone is talking about why he did it. Some suspect his wife was cheating and that was why. They say he left a note behind saying as much. That seems to make some of the others feel better about it—knowing there was a reason for it. I know this is a lie. I learn some lies are better than the truth.

My dad watches my three kids whenever I’m gone—I never tell my children what is happening. They’re too young to understand, I tell myself. My dad leaves a three-part DVD set on the kitchen counter without mentioning it. Holistic remedies for fighting disease. It talks mostly

about taking all natural supplements—really, a specific berry from southeast Asia. I look up the doctor who created it and learn he is a certified whack job. He’s been sued numerous times from loved ones when people die after following his advice. I text my dad and tell him thanks, that I watched the DVD he left for me. I order the berry supplement and they arrive a few weeks later. I start taking them in pill form daily.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I think they’re helping.” My parents worry about me constantly. My mother is starting to gain weight. I think her hair is falling out, but I say nothing. I text her to let her know how great I’ve been feeling since I started the new supplement. She says she might try them also. I don’t mention the whack job doctor. I want them to feel better more than I want to feel better myself. I keep ordering the berries in pill form even after I stop taking them. I almost convince myself.

During the first week at my last duty station, we have a Commanders Call. The month prior someone in our sister Flight takes their own life. I don’t know how—or why, or if they left a note—but I know better than to ask, now. A few weeks pass and an Airman assigned to me is put into a mental health facility after he threatens to take his own life. I visit him once a week. The pain in my head won’t stop. The military doctors scan my brain and see nothing. My right leg starts to drag from nerve damage in my spine. They initiate my medical separation. The last doctor is a real asshole.

“You need to learn some coping skills to deal with the pain.” I start to think about death a lot as my separation looms. I try to meet it early once—death. My wife is six months pregnant with our first child. She is now a nurse. After a twelve-hour hospital shift, she finds me slumped over

my computer desk with my own alcohol and pills next to me. Squares from the keyboard have imprinted themselves into my face like a farewell message. She begs me to wake up. I only want the pain to stop. I'm conscious but I won't remember this night. My wife calls my supervisor on my behalf to tell them I can't make it to work that night. They ask to speak with me but she tells them I can't.

"He had a negative drug interaction with some new medication—he is really drowsy." They believe her. It's only a small lie.

When I'm first diagnosed, I call my best friend JP from my time in the service. We met at our first duty station in Alaska. I tell him about my brain tumor. He signs up for a half-marathon for cancer research after I give him the news. He is tall and lanky and was always a better runner than me. He sends me a photo of him wearing a custom-made t-shirt while at the race.

Running for Randolph. I text him: "You fucking asshole." He calls me back and we both laugh together. "You owe me now—so no dying yet." A year later, I fly across the country to visit him. JP is dying. His type of cancer is specifically related to exposure—from what, he's not sure. His diagnosis doesn't come until years after his separation from military service. He completes his four-year enlistment without ever deploying. I encourage him to apply for veteran benefits anyway, at least for his daughter. He applies and gets denied—*not service connected*.

"I told you it was fucking pointless."

On message boards his cancer is specifically known as a military cancer. A rare form near his spine that is moving aggressively toward his lungs. He is not one of the lucky ones. It has nearly paralyzed the right side of his body. They cut huge portions of his back and sides in a fruitless attempt to stop the disease. He will never run again.

They have been scanning my brain twice a year for the last few years. My tumor continues to grow—slowly. My surgeon’s physician assistant has been trying to get ahold of me for the past year. I keep blowing him off. I haven’t made it to any of my follow-up appointments lately. It feels like a death sentence with each visit. It’s traumatic. It stresses my wife out when I don’t go. She isn’t sleeping well. We start to fight about it. I don’t think she understands—how could she?

“There hasn’t been a drastic change, it’d just be a waste of time.”

“Oh, so, you’re a fucking doctor now?”

“You remember what they said last time, as long as there hasn’t been aggressive growth.”

“And what’s aggressive—don’t you care?” My wife falls onto the couch. Her hands cover her face—she never looks this defeated. I sit next to her and move to touch her.

“Just stop!” She is crying now. Her chest heaves as she sucks in heavy breaths of air.

“I promise—I’ll go. I’ll call on Monday to make the appointment. They’re not open right now—but I’ll take care of it, okay?” My phone rings again. I recognize the number as someone from my healthcare team—I don’t answer.

When the pain is too much in my head, I sleep on the living room couch so my kids can find me in the morning. I’ve been out of the military for nearly a decade. I feign returning to work but never do. My wife starts to work nights to support us while also going to school full time. I worry I’ll die in my bedroom alone. I unlock the front door of the house before falling asleep—so the important people can get inside to take my body away. I leave my cell phone unlocked and next to me. I teach my children how to make phone calls. I take the pills I know I shouldn’t take, just for a temporary relief. I put ice over my face. The numbness washes over me. I think about calling

someone—JP, my brother, even Sergeant Jackson if I still had his number—but I never do.

I dream of Turkey when I fall asleep. I'm refueling a C-17. It will carry cargo to Bagram Air Base Afghanistan when I'm finished. The smell of JP-8 is soaked into my uniform. I miss the smell of jet fuel. The sky is dark. Black ash swirls around me like a dust storm. It hugs me like a warm blanket. It feels good to be warm. I miss feeling warm. I look around to see if anyone is watching me. I'm with my fellow airmen. I open my mouth to catch a star-shaped piece of ash on my tongue. We laugh when I do. It feels good to laugh.

It's 2022 and President Biden passes the Pact Act. His son Beau died from brain cancer after being exposed to burn pits while serving combat tours in Kosovo and Iraq. The U.S was doing the burning then. The Pact Act is for service members who have developed certain medical conditions after being exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. The Veterans Administration reaches out to me and conducts a toxic exposure survey over the phone. My medical diagnosis and work history is an automatic qualifier, according to them. I fall into the category of "other." They tell me someone from my medical team will follow up in a week's time. They never do. Still, it feels wrong somehow, applying—I never went to war, not like Beau. I never apply.

I stand at the edge of the tarmac looking out over the horizon. The sky is blood red. The Turkish government is launching F-16s they purchased from NATO. They are dropping bombs over the eastern part of their country dominated by the Kurdish people. The afterburners cry out with each takeoff. Smoke rises from over the perimeter fence. The wind favors us tonight and blows it in a different direction. America is fighting two different wars on two different fronts. I'm

selected for promotion—I'll be a Sergeant soon, the one charged to lead during tough times. I'm grateful to be where I'm standing. I look to my aircraft mechanics next to me, my fellow airmen—the ones I love—the ones I'm willing to die for.

“You know, we are one of the lucky ones—right?” Everyone nods in agreement. Morale is important—Sergeant Jackson taught me that lesson when the sky was on fire and the black ash fell from above.

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