

C H R I S T O P H E R L O W E

Dunn's River Falls

Belinda,

You are in surgery. The doctors, in their Jamaican accents, have told me that your blood clot could cause permanent damage, that your mind could never be the same again. They have told me that when you fell, when your hand, wet, slipped free of mine and you toppled headlong off that little rock step, you were lucky to have landed back first, the crown of your skull making secondary contact. They say that had your body been tilted a little more you surely would have broken your neck. I needed them to repeat these things to me, because I didn't want to believe them and because their accents shadowed their words. I can recall times in Afghanistan, when we would question men who could speak crude English. I remember having to ask again and again, in my broken Dari, "Who are you? What is your name?" and the men tried to answer me, tried to tell me who they were and what they were doing, but I couldn't understand them, even when we spoke the same language.

I am in a waiting room now. It is small, with old wicker furniture. The chair that I'm sitting in is unraveling, bit by bit, and when the nurses come to talk to me, I find myself unconsciously unweaving bits of it. The nurses told me that the surgery should only last a couple of hours, that the process is simple and that since time is of the essence, there will be little delay. They told me this just a few minutes ago, just after they brought me here. They asked questions about our wedding, about how our honeymoon was going, where we were staying. They asked about the Falls, if we

thought they were pretty or if they were too crowded, if the old Jamaican men who sell trinkets and knickknacks accosted us too much on our way in. I didn't know how to answer these questions, so I mumbled yes and no answers. They patted my hand, my knee, and told me not to worry, that we would know something soon. I worked my fingers into the arm of the chair, forcing a gap in the strands of wicker.

On my first day in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Howton took me aside and told me that there would be moments when time seemed to stretch out at a different angle, when my watch would lie to me, seconds taking minutes, minutes taking hours, and that when these moments came over me, on base in Kabul or out in the rocks of some remote watch-point, I should write letters to you. He told me that the other men would harass me, tell me about how you were already sleeping with Jodie, about how only they would be there for me forever, but he said that I should ignore them, that when time seemed to collapse upon itself, I should write you letters anyway.

You never seemed to know how to respond to those letters. At first, I didn't know how to write them, so I suppose it's only natural that there was some disconnect there. Still, in the moment of writing, the lieutenant was usually correct. As I wrote, I could stretch time back to its proper parameters, molding it back into shape. There in Afghanistan, we had to learn to lie to each other, to ourselves. It became a simple equation, really. Time lies to you, so you must lie to time. Some men worked out. Others cleaned their gear. Some men looked at porn and some looked at family pictures. I wrote you letters. They were a lie, those letters, a lie telling you that everything was alright and a lie telling me that things were normal, that time could flow at a normal pace, that if I began writing a letter at 07:15 and I finished it at 07:45, exactly thirty minutes of my time in that country had passed me by.

Sometimes, I wonder how lying became a game for us, you and me, even before I got shipped out. Our first date, I told you that I had a doctorate from Tulane but that I signed on to the Marines to find myself. I said this smugly, mugging for you, and you picked up on the lie. I never had to tell you that I dropped out of UNO halfway through my junior year, not because of a lack of ability or intelligence, but out of boredom. I never had to tell you that I joined up because I didn't know what else to do, because I'd always been a good shot, and the recruiting center down the street from my apartment had a free lunch one day.

And you never had to tell me that you were lying about being in an off-Broadway play with Timothy Hutton. Our smiles and winks and nods told that these things weren't true. It has become, in the three years since, a shorthand for us. There is a logic to the lying. We have discovered that the lie must be both believable and

unbelievable, that it must begin in a place of truth and move out, into the darkness of clear uncertainty. It must be rooted in what we wish we'd done and what we hope to one day do.

Yesterday, when you found the brochure for Dunn's River Falls, I lied to you, saying that I climbed the only waterfall in Afghanistan. You smiled while I told you about moving up the slippery rocks, sliding through a wall of water and finding a cache of weapons and heroin in a cave. I told you how we rigged the C₄, detonated it all rather than requisitioning it. I described the way we climbed back down, how we stood across a little field, watching as Riggins hit the button, the water blowing out, a sudden burst in the smooth surface.

You patted my hand, said how interesting that must have been, and then you told me a lie of your own, about climbing a small waterfall in Arkansas, in a town called Frog Neck. You told me that you climbed it with your boyfriend, when you were 17, that at the top, on the shore, you made love to him, that he died in a car wreck a week later. Your lie reflected mine, the smooth believability of my jealousy, the unbelievability of the timing. I know that you lost your virginity to him, that he died and that you look back on your time with him as being something good, something pure, but I know that there was no waterfall in Frog Neck, that there is probably no Frog Neck at all. Still, beneath all of that, I know the truth of your lie.

At Dunn's River Falls this morning, you complained about having to make a human chain with the other tourists to climb the falls. You told me that you'd rather use your rock-climbing skills, that you were certified. I didn't ask what imaginary certification you had come up with, because as you told me this, our group began moving toward the foot of the falls, preparing for the climb. I wonder now what you would have said. Sitting in this waiting room, I find myself wondering about the lies you haven't yet told me.

The nurses just came back to check on me. There are three of them, and when I told them that I was writing you a letter, they patted my hand again, told me how sweet I am, how much you'll appreciate this letter when you read it in a few hours. I am beginning to understand that it is the nurses' job to lie. Like the physical trainers who worked with me after I got back, they are here to coddle and reassure, while the doctors dole out truth.

You have never asked me about Afghanistan. I have told you lies, have described assassinations of top Taliban figures, have told about pulling my friends out of destroyed Humvees, about climbing falls that probably don't exist, but I've never told you a true thing about the war.

Last month, when Riggins came into town, you left us alone to talk, to catch up. You didn't stay to hear the true things we were going to say to one another. Instead, you kissed me, hugged him, told us that you'd come back in time for dinner. You didn't say anything when you came home to find us drunk. You never complained about how dangerous it was for me to drink that much on top of my pain medication. Instead, you cooked us Hamburger Helper and put us to bed. In the morning, when Riggins left, you hugged him again, told him to come back anytime.

For my part, I never tell you about the pain in my elbow. Some nights, laying in bed on the edge of sleep, I feel your fingers tracing the missing piece of me, but I don't tell you that it hurts when you do that. I see the fierce anger in your eyes when you notice people looking at my elbow, at the divot of flesh that is gone from my arm. Still, we do not talk about these things.

In a little more than thirty minutes, it will be one week since we got married, since the justice of the peace pronounced it. We told him that you are a ballet dancer and that I am your manager. That we fell in love while touring with the New York Ballet company. He tried to sound interested in the ballet facts that we spun for him, but his eyes glazed over as you told him about pirouettes and toe-spins and leg-presses.

After, as we drove to Houston for our flight, I remember feeling that in some way, we had just staked a claim to that day, that it would be ours, a possession for us. When we arrived in Jamaica, got to the resort and realized that every other couple also had claimed that date as their own, I saw the look of disappointment in your eyes.

An old man has been brought into the waiting room. He is sitting at the other end of the room, really only a few feet away, and the nurses are now clustered around him, patting and coddling, lying to him about someone who's in surgery. His eyes are red, but I can't tell if he has been crying or if they are naturally this color, the effects of a long life.

I am wondering if you and I will be this old, so old that the missing piece of my arm may be misconstrued as an effect of old age rather than the by-product of my service. I can picture myself stooped, my figure narrower, my muscle gone to loose hanging skin, but I have a harder time imagining you as anything other than what you are. It seems a cruel lie to picture you as less vibrant, less alive than you are now.

In your lies you have told me enough truths about yourself that I understand some of the things that haunt you. You have, buried in your lies, told me about being raped when you were 20. You have told me about keeping that secret from

everyone you knew. I have burned with anger, wanting to know the name, the location of the boy who did that to you. I know that you have found some truths in my lies as well. You know about my father, about why we no longer talk. We circle these things with our lies, skimming their surface but never diving into them. We know each other from context, from the things that surround and fill our lies. We have created a system of explaining ourselves that takes the burden off of confession. We do not have to speak in facts to tell the truth.

Still, I want you to know a true thing about me, something that I have not told you before, something unadorned by embellishment. The day that I lost a piece of myself, my unit was situated at a watch point about fifty kilometers from Kandahar, out in the middle of the rocky pasture land that seems to fill up that area of Afghanistan. It is at the foothills of the mountains that stretch north, toward Kabul, and there we'd positioned ourselves in an alley of rocks, along an old goat path. Somehow, someone up the chain of command had gotten intelligence indicating that this path was being used by the Taliban. It was a back-road route from a couple of small villages. I wasn't a sniper, as I've told you before, though I was in a Scout/Sniper unit. I was Riggins' spotter, and sitting in those rocks, I used my binoculars to scan for anyone suspicious. According to the intelligence, the men we were looking for were supposed to be passing through on that day.

We were midway up the shuffle of rocks, positioned behind an outcropping. I was the only one exposed at all, and even I was nestled deep enough that it would be hard for anyone to see me. All day, we sat and waited. Every few hours young men with herds of goats would move down the rock alley, going from one grazing spot to another. In that area, the grass is sparse, brown and brittle, and the herders have to constantly move around so that all of their animals get enough to eat. Each time these groups came in sight, I'd motion the lieutenant over, and we'd try to figure whether these boys were really goat-herders or not.

This is the difficult part of situations like this one. You cannot tell if these young men are hiding something. They appear to be farm-boys, not so different from any kid out in Iowa or Nebraska or Kansas, but they could, all of them, also be something more.

We watched these groups move by all day. I cycled on and off watch duty. Occasionally, the lieutenant and a couple of us would climb down from the rocks and head off a boy, ask him a few questions through our unit's translator, and send him on his way. Time began to distort for me, but I couldn't write you letters there, in those rocks. Instead, I waited for my time on watch, and when I took my place at the head of those rocks, I kept my eyes open for any signs that the boys who

filed past us were anything other than what they appeared to be. We sat there all night, watching. At dark, I switched on my N.V. and scanned the green, grainy countryside. No one passed us that night, even after my watch shift had ended.

At seven in the morning, the lieutenant told us that we were heading out, that the intelligence was bad. We loaded up our gear and began climbing down out of the rocks. It was a two kilometer march back to our extraction point, and then another hour ride back to base. We were half-way to the extraction point when we saw another group of goats about fifty yards from a long-low stretch of rocks.

Four young men, all about thirteen or fourteen, were scattered through the herd. They looked like every other group that I'd seen over the past day, but we formed up, Riggins on point, and moved toward them. They'd seen us, so we had to question them. We had a translator with us, and most of us had been in Afghanistan long enough to pick up a handful of phrases. Riggins signaled for the boys to let us come to them. The translator hollered out for them to stay where they were. They kept walking toward us, but that wasn't particularly uncommon. We were ready for anything, had been waiting all day and night.

As we got near them the translator asked who they were, what they were doing. I could only pick out a few words, but goat was one of them, and I let my attention slide. These boys weren't fighters. They were just taking their goats out for a day's grazing. I'm still not sure who in our unit should have been watching the rock outcropping that now stood to our left, but as the translator talked to the boys about where they were taking the goats that day, the shooting started. We were exposed, out in the open, and the two Taliban soldiers hiding in the rocks had free aim at us. Two of us got hit, me and Tweet. The bullet burrowed through the meat of my arm, digging a canal along the upper half of my forearm, my elbow, and my lower bicep. I'm lucky it didn't lodge in me, but it took skin and bone and meat with it.

If this were a lie, I'd tell you how I fired one handed, bravely trying to take them out. I'd tell you about how it hurt so bad that I went into a frenzy, firing until my clip emptied, reloading and firing again. I'd tell you that I can't be sure if I hit either of them, but that in the end, they both died. I'd tell you that I stood and marched to our extraction point, a bandage wrapped on my arm, that with my good arm I helped to carry Tweet's body.

The truth is, I don't remember what happened. I didn't fire a bullet and I wasn't a hero. I have a medal, a purple heart, and I have my discharge papers that tell me I served honorably, but I feel like a kid who gets a trophy for showing up to the soccer game. I woke up in a military hospital in Kabul. The doctors told me about

the wound, that it was clean, but that it had taken enough bone and cartilage from my elbow that I wouldn't have full use of it again. They told me that I wouldn't be able to write for a while, that it would take physical therapy to help me relearn those easy movements. Instead, I called you from Germany, where they tried to reconstruct my joint, and we talked about my arm and our lives, and I asked you to marry me, and you said yes. I told you lies about Afghanistan, and you told me lies about America, and we set the date for our wedding.

Now, months later, you are still in surgery, and I'm in this waiting room, and time has slowed to a crawl. The nurses have left the room, left the old man to his own struggle with seconds and minutes and hours. They had to walk past me, each one smiling and winking, reassuring me that you are fine. I know that they do not know how you are, that they are as in the dark as I am, but for a moment I try to forget this, try to let their attitude infect me, let myself believe that everything is as it should be, that this is a minor situation, that it will be an anecdote one day. "Oh honey," I'll say, our kids with us at the breakfast table, "do you remember when you fell in Jamaica, when we had to go to the hospital?" And you'll say that you remember. Then, we'll look at our children, and with love in our hearts, we will tell them lies.

Your husband,
Jamie



CHRISTOPHER LOWE'S fiction has appeared widely in journals including *Third Coast*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Crate*. His collection of interlocking stories, *Those Like Us*, is forthcoming from Stephen F. Austin State University Press. A graduate of McNeese State University's MFA program, he lives with his wife and daughter in Lake Charles, Louisiana.