

LATANYA MCQUEEN

Flash to Bang

One of the first things learned in basic training is the importance of flash to bang time, the time between the recoil of a gun and the sound of a shell's explosion. I learned that the shorter the time, the better because it meant that the target had less time to react. Flash to bang began to take on other meanings. We used it to describe the amount of time we had to run after hearing the click sound of a detonated grenade. It was used in reference to the firing range of a gun. No matter its uses, there was always the same underlying meaning. It was the interim, the time in-between, the waiting period between an action and its reaction.

Here I am stuck in Bagdad, part of the 724th Transportation Company of the Army Reserves. It's been two years of the same camouflaged uniforms and Kevlar helmets like the other men, of shooting AK-47's and driving tanks to unknown destinations. We were brought here as part of security to help rebuild the city. After two years, the only thing being rebuilt is our hope each day of soon leaving. A week ago a group of insurgents strapped bombs on some dogs and shoved them towards our camp. Fifteen guys died, six were injured. A friend of mine lost his hearing because of the blast.

So for me, when I hear flash to bang it reminds me of these thunderstorms that happened when I was a kid. I was always scared of the sounds of crackling thunder, the sudden white bursts of light that flashed in the sky. In an effort to console me, my mother would tell me to count the seconds between when I heard the thunder

and saw the lightning. Five seconds equaled a mile, and every time I counted I realized that the storm was never as close as I feared. After that, I began counting the time between other things. Whenever nervous or scared, I counted until the feelings passed. Now when these things get to me I find myself counting the days and even the moments, as if I am still that boy waiting for my fear to pass.

Mark joined for a free meal and a dental plan. Christopher was given a choice, this or a driving a tractor through the cornfields of Iowa for the rest of this life. Sam because his father kept giving him shit about being a hero and serving one's country like he had done. Anthony had dreams of being some hot-shot lawyer and growing up in a single-parent house in the slums of Detroit wasn't going to pay those bills. The way he saw it, he'd pay his debt to our country and the country would pay for his.

We all had reasons. I remember when the recruit came to talk to us about the benefits of being as soldier. He glossed his talk with words like honor and pride and sacrifice but he sold it when he mentioned money, the benefits, and the paid-for education. I signed up when the talk was over, convincing myself that my reasons were good enough.

Sure, some of us came here glossy-eyed and full of purpose. Those feelings may have even last awhile. But there comes a day when you find yourself one afternoon crawling, hands and knees scraping against bloody sand, sweat blinding your eyes, stinging so bad it's like needles pinching your corneas. You hear the anguish of other men amidst gun shots and explosions, and the fear of thinking you're going to die hits. There's no pride in those moments, it's lost there. Your purpose becomes only to survive.

Sam collects junk—little pieces of shit he seems to find everywhere. In addition to all the supplies each of us carries, he collects empty shells, rocks, even sand from all the places we've been. He's got torn clippings of Arabic newspapers and writings, kept in little plastic baggies that his girlfriend Crystal sent him along with the cheap, disposable cameras he takes pictures with. Whenever I see him he's taking a picture of the camp, of the other men as they eat in the dining hall or play cards to pass the time. Mongolian BBQ Thursdays? You bet he's there. A brawl in the barracks? You bet he'll be coming. He has pictures of men posing with their gear and pictures of them with their hands to their faces, blocking out the flash. Sam tells me that he's taken one of almost all the men. He says there's even one of me. He takes pictures of the sky and during the day and night. The night ones almost

all are black, looking at them is like looking at a negative. For whatever reason, he keeps them anyway. He has pictures of each town we've been through. There are some with children playing with makeshift toys and others standing in front of buildings, their emotionless faces staring into the camera. Sam brings this stuff with him wherever he goes, cramming it into the spaces of his already full pack.

"What do you need all this for?" I ask him. We've taken up camp and the two of us have just settled down when I see him pull some items out of his pack to look at them. "What good is it doing you?"

"I guess I need to remember where I've been. What if I get out of here and forget? I want to be able to look back and know."

"You don't need to keep it with you. Why keep it in your pack all the time? Just leave it or mail it back home. It doesn't make sense to bring it with you all the time, on every trip, every convoy."

"True, true," he nods. "But you know, sometimes when you're lost and you don't know where you're going, it helps to have reminders of all the places you've been and what you've done." He sighs to himself, like a deflating balloon letting out its suppressed air.

I don't say anything else after that, but watch him as he slowly gathers his things and stuffs them back in his pack.

Honey don't go, girlfriends will say. *Honey stay*, they'll plead, offering up their hearts like prizes to be won. Here's a medal for staying instead of a medal of honor. The first of your lies begin here. It's just a few years, you answer back. We'll write every day. Your stomach churns as you recite the same recycled lines others have muttered before.

The best sex is always that last night before you go. Her body clinging, arms and legs so entangled together, the two of you an intricate puzzle that won't be undone. There's urgency to her kisses, her mouth forces onto yours in such a way that it's reminiscent of those blissful other times—the movie theater, her hands rubbing your crotch while her tingling tongue played connect-the-freckles on the back of your neck, or that time in her backyard, her sweat mixing with the smell of moist grass. The end finds you both someplace back in the beginning, when all you ever wanted was another lingering moment with each other, and then another.

"You don't have anyone back home?" Chris asks me. He was one of my roommates back during basic training when we were stationed in South Carolina. We both got stationed in Baghdad together, both of us apart of the 724th Transportation

Company of the Army Reserves. Chris is a short, scraggly-looking guy who makes up for his height and physicality through optimism and persistence.

“Nah,” I tell him. “Not really, no.”

“That’s hard,” he says.

“What makes it so hard? Having someone isn’t going to change the fact that I’m stuck here just like you and every other guy here, and anyway I don’t have anyone to answer back to at home.”

“That’s my point. What’s to keep you going from day-to-day? If you got nothing, no reason to keep you grounded than you’ll go crazy, like bat-shit, off the rocker and into the nuthouse crazy. Something has to make you get up in the morning and keep you lasting until the day’s over. You don’t have that—man, I feel sorry for you then.”

“I have that,” I answer back. “I got something.”

“What?” he asks, waiting for me to respond. Quickly, I try to think up something that’s will be a good enough answer to shut him up, but my mind comes up blank.

“Thought so,” Chris says, nodding to himself in a satisfied agreement.

Assignment—convoy through a town outside of Baghdad. Right when we get there there’s a blast in one of the tanks so we rest before getting other instructions. There’s nothing to do so go walking around.

It takes only a few minutes before a couple of kids come up, shouting “Akel, akel” while making hand-to-mouth movements. I reach in my back for an MRE meal and I hand it to one of the boys, the smallest one. He takes it from me and opens the paper package. I had no idea what I’d given him until he rips it open. Using his hands like a cup, he pours the white, dried potato-like flakes into his hand and then into his mouth. I watch as he licks his fingers, crusted with dirt.

As soon as the other boys see what I’ve given him they surround me screaming “Biddi! Biddi!” Then “Akel!” One of them latches on to my pack, hoping to take it from me. I yell for them to stop, telling them that I have nothing else. I cry for one of the men from my unit to help me but no one comes. They’ve all wandered someplace else, too far way to hear my voice.

I try to push them away but they keep reaching for my things. One of the takes hold of the back of my pack and is able to loosen it open. Other MRE meals I was saving fall out as well as my journal and a pack of cigarettes.

The boys see the packages fall out and realizing it’s food yell for more. They attack me. I cover myself with my arms to keep them off but they are on me. Before

I know it I'm on the ground, my arms around my face as the boys tackle me, pulling the pack off my body.

When it's off they tear through its contents, taking whatever they can find. I watch as they open food packets, eating one after the other. Another kid opens the package of cigarettes and puts one in his mouth, smiling as he pretends to smoke. One of them looks at me.

I stand back up, my face hot from the beating sun. I wipe my face with the cloth of my uniform. I reach down with one hand and wrap my fingers around my M-9 pistol. I take it out of the holder strapped to my belt buckle. I turn it over to my side and try to aim. My eyes are hurting from sweat and dirt so I close them, keeping them shut.

When I hear the string of shots it takes me a minute to realize that it is not me. "Hey," a voice calls. "It's me. It's only me." When I look I see that the voice is John.

It consumes us, this waiting in-between, because that's where we all are. We're all stuck in a place none of us wants to be, and after awhile our entire life becomes waiting for that moment when it's over.

Twice I've been told my request to leave has been denied, even though I've served my time. Reasons given—there aren't enough troops to fight, I'm still needed to do my duty. Give it six more months, they tell me. Then again they say six more. They do this until you forget how long you've been here, until you forget that you ever even asked to leave.

I'm not the only one. Most of the men here, including John, have had their requests delayed or rejected. When I tell John he shows me a torn article from a newspaper. A soldier, suddenly deciding he objected to the war and didn't want to fight anymore, left. He was reported missing, convicted of desertion.

"What a coward," John says. "What did he think he was signing up for? As if he's the only one who's been through something. Look at all of us. We're all in this."

I read the article. In the clipping there's a profile picture of the man's face. The image is blurry, smudged, but I can still see him. He looks young, like he could be any of the guys here.

"That's what he gets for trying to cheat his way out. One way or another he'll serve his time, just like the rest of us."

A group of boys were hungry and had wanted food. John shot them because they attacked me. For him, it's a good enough reason as any.

“They’ve all run off, it’s okay. Get up.” His hand reaches out and I grab it. I get to my feet. “I heard you yelling and I came to see what happened. You’re okay now aren’t you?”

He looks me up and down. “You shot one of them,” I say, pointing to a few yards away.

The two of us walk over to where the boy lay on the ground. The bullet had hit him in the side of his stomach, and blood trickles out, making a pool around his body.

“What should we do?”

“Nothing,” John says. “We could get in a lot of trouble for this. No one knows we’re here. We should just leave.”

“We can’t leave him here like this, it isn’t right.”

“Yeah we can and we’re going to. Get the rest of your stuff.”

John helps me gather the contents of my pack that haven’t been stolen or damaged. I try not to look at the boy but I keep glancing back at him. He doesn’t cry or say anything at all. He only stares at me, his brown eyes following my actions, waiting to see what I will do, if I will really leave.

“You got everything? Come on, let’s get back to the group.” John starts to walk away.

As I turn to catch up to John, I know that always after it’ll be a little bit easier to do the wrong thing, to make the wrong decision. This is a moment where it changes. Every soldier has one, when afterwards it becomes easier to find ways to take out one’s vengeance, to find excuses to act on anger. The finger pulse of the trigger just a bit quicker. Everything easier, until one day shooting a child becomes reason enough for anything. Until one day I find that any one of us will kill for even less.

The desire for simple things is crippling. The other day Mark wouldn’t stop talking about the coconut pies his mother used to make. He spent almost an hour talking about it, getting the group’s mouth watering so bad they all looked like those dogs one sees sometimes in run-down neighborhoods, their wet noses pushing through chain-link fences begging for scraps.

Mark going on about it got the other guys talking about what they missed. None of what they mentioned were big items or even luxuries—the cool air of an air conditioner, for one thing. An ice-cold soda, McDonald’s.

Mark asked me what I missed from home. I had told him the usual things, some of the stuff the guys mentioned. I listed some names from popular television shows I could remember. I said I missed the taste of home-cooked food.

Mostly though, I miss the things I know I'll never get back—the sight of my father, for one thing. A Vietnam War veteran who after dinner would always sit in his recliner in the living room and fall asleep. I remember his face each evening as I'd look over at him from the sofa. His look was always one of peace, as if he'd forgotten everything that had happened to him in the war.

Even now I remember his face and wonder what it must have taken for him to get there. I know it will never be the same for me, even if I finally leave here and that's what I miss the most—the ignorance of not knowing, but more than that, I miss what I know I'll never get a chance to have.

There are days when the heat is so oppressive that I can hardly breathe. The heat itself becomes another endless obstacle, something else to be suffered through. Yesterday there was a sandstorm so great that it blocked out the sun. I remember standing in disbelief as day turned into night. I watched as dirt smashed into the camps, tearing what it could apart. I watched until everything familiar was buried underneath the airborne sand.

But there are other days, days of such beauty that I find myself struck motionless in the midst of it. After a mission, our brigade camps on a hill just a few miles away from the Tigris River. Sam and I are lying down on our makeshift beds looking up at the sky.

"It can't all be for nothing," he says. "Sometimes I think of all the things that happened here. We're so close to the city of Babylon. Babylon, can you imagine? Some of the oldest carvings are there. One of the world's first alphabets."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Yeah," he shifts his body on the ground. "There's so much history and religious significance surrounding this place. Think about it, we're where God destroyed the temple man built for the gods themselves."

"And we're right here smack in the middle of it," I mutter.

"Exactly. You know, nevermind all this shit—the mortar shelling and the IED's and car bombs. Forget about the 110 degree heat and those sandstorms. This morning I woke up and I thought to myself, hey, I'm at the cradle of civilization and I am changing history. Don't we all wait for a moment like this to come along?"

I glance over at Sam. He's looking out at the river in the distance. It's getting dark and the stars are beginning to show. "Sam, where's your camera, you should take a picture of this," I say, but he doesn't seem to hear me. His body is sitting beside me but his mind is someplace else far away. I start to say it again, this time louder, but my mind thinks better of it and refuses to let my mouth form the words.

This is the person I've become: Now, I don't even look at them, and their cries for food go unheard. I've taught myself not to hear their voices. I don't care who they are anymore and I hate them all. They don't matter to me, whether they are young men ready to fight or child beggars crying for food, they are nothing except another reason as to why I'm still here.

I know now that our anonymity as soldiers is both a blessing and a curse. I've learned not to recognize one man from the other. Whether it is the sergeant with the two red-headed twins back home, or the major who helped me carry my pack when I was too tired to go anymore, I force myself not to differentiate. When I see a man fall who I know will never get back up, I tell myself that it is someone I do not know. I convince myself that it is just another crumpled, camouflaged body lying on the blood-stained earth beneath the desert sun.

We are in a holding pattern, all of us. John and me, the other soldiers, we are all waiting for something—our contracts to end, for the war to end, for the next day, or night, for our wives to leave us or our girlfriends to break up with us. We wait for the sounds of bombs going off or shots fired. We wait for the Iraqi militias, for the boys with hate in their eyes ready to kill us. We brace ourselves for the screams of our brothers in the distance.

We wait for the daily things—to eat, to piss, to rest. We wait for the MRE meals, the no-go pills administered when we can't stay calm, the collective birthday dinners of steak and shrimp in the dining hall, and the nights when we can finally sleep and pretend we're someplace else.

We wait for the red sun to set over the horizon, and we wait for dawn.

We wait for our time to walk, always are we walking, in the sweltering heat, carrying our 80-pound packs. We wait for the sounds of bullets and explosions.

We wait for escape, one way or another, to be taken away from what we all signed up for. We wait to die on a land not our own. We wait for what we know is coming but haven't the strength to face.

We are all waiting for what comes next. We are waiting for the bang.

"Ambush!" I hear and I am running. Our fuel convoy is being attacked. The crackling sound of mortar rounds are everywhere. Grenades shoot dirt from the ground. The earth rumbles, orders are screamed but get muddled among the gunfire and the blasts of shrapnel and shells.

Time to fight, I think. Time to find my gun and go, but the moment comes and instead I find myself running for cover. I look for shelter and I find it underneath a broken tanker. Here, away from the heat of the blazing sun, my body shivers. The shots get closer. How long will it take for them to finally come? If they find me I will do nothing. I won't fight back or scream. I'll let them take me for their purpose, whatever it may be. I close my eyes and again I find myself thinking back upon those other moments when I've counted. The sweet rush during the seconds before a freefall from a helicopter. The numbing silence that follows after the death of a comrade. The frenzy of mail days, standing alongside other men, each of us hoping expectantly for a package. And now I find myself counting again, each moment, every second. One, two, three— I count again and again until finally, lastly, there's no more waiting left.



LATANYA MCQUEEN'S stories have been published in *The North American Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Potomac Review*, *The Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories*, and *Monkeybicycle*, among others.