

K A T E Y S C H U L T Z

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## Three Fictions

### WIA

I felt a tiny itch in the back of my brain, like a dispatch from another world telling me to get up and get moving because something wasn't right. The sky? Downtown Baghdad?

That's when Doc Triebold appeared, all sweat-faced and shouting. I watched his lips move but couldn't hear a thing. He grabbed the handle on the back of my flak vest and dragged me over the rubble toward the side of a building. I kept pawing at my stomach, lifting my arm in a slow arc toward the middle of my body only to have Doc swat it away. He looked at me and shouted again, but the world was a black hole of silence. I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat. I felt it though, a platoon of frightened fists pounding inside my chest wall.

Then Connor was there, tossing grenades and hollering "Frag out!" I read his lips but, more importantly, I read his face, the way he turned away after looking at my midsection. I lifted my head to see for myself but Doc moved quickly, slapping his palm across my forehead and pinning me to the sidewalk. His hands were covered in my blood. The sky pulsed overhead like an electric blue ocean. My entire body felt backwards, as though I was falling up—not down—that fantastic sea-sky just sucking me in.

The next thing I remember, sheets of brick crumbled onto my face and neck. Connor fired off a few rounds and I heard shell casings fall like coins to the sidewalk. Just like that—I had my ears back. There was something else, too, a grotesque,

pitiful moaning coming from my own mouth. I felt like a pit of quicksand, pain spiraling through my gut and out the other side. Doc and Connor hoisted me around the corner to a Humvee. I remember feeling guilty, like I should help them carry me out.

I made it to the field station and then onto a cargo plane filled with row after row of hanging cots. The members of my squad were long gone. Most of them I'd never see again. Two men lifted me over their shoulders and set the rungs of my cot in line with a series of hooks. The cot hanging above mine was close enough to touch. I could see the outline of another soldier's body pressing through the canvas. His blood oozed through and dripped onto my legs. I thought that was it; that I'd die in that gigantic steel cave with all our cots swaying like bats.

But then there was a flight nurse. And another one. And another. IV bags, morphine drips, and blood transfusions. The nurses darted like swallows from cot to cot; a silent, gentle army just trying to help us get home.

## **MIA**

Mazar-i-Sharif, 2002. Nothing pretty about it. Block by block, one structure at a time, our platoon and the rest of Bravo Company had been gutting this particular district for three days straight. Raw sewage ran in thick streams down the alleyways. Stray dogs roamed in packs, desperate for food. Once, I watched an old mutt nibble on a dead Afghani's wounds, nosing into his flesh with rabid focus.

It was my turn to provide security while one of our fire teams cleared a house. This corner had two soldiers on the street, myself guarding the doorway, and another two men on the roof opposite the building. I remember watching my team charge into the house: First Smithfield with his boots, kicking that door right off its hinges, then taking a knee so he could cover for the others. Watson moved next, all 6'6" of him. He breezed over the threshold spraying an M16 from his hip, then cut left inside the doorway. Next up, Gunny Menendez: step, step, drop. He pivoted on one knee, aiming his weapon to the right. Last, I watched Nelson hustle straight through the entryway while the other team members provided cover. He came to the stairs at the left end of the hallway, his buddies now at his back, then led the charge up the steps. All four of them disappeared out of sight.

Outside, the sky clouded over, lending a muted haze of browns and grays to the city. I held my post in the entryway, standing on the splintered front door. I looked left down the street. Right and left again. Then up, across, and back down, tracing the line where the foundation of the building met the sidewalk. Other than

looking, the biggest part of providing security was listening. The guys in ‘Nam apparently warned, “If you hear the crickets stop, something’s not right.” In Mazar, there weren’t any crickets and the city birds had long since fled. That day, though, I was listening more for a feeling; a sort of crystal ball suspicion that something wasn’t right.

Instead, what I heard was a single gunshot—not ours—and then a breathless cry from Smithfield. “No!” he shouted, his voice coming from somewhere on the second floor. My entire body tensed in anticipation. I wanted to get up there and help my team, but I couldn’t leave my post. If I wasn’t guarding the entrance, nobody was. Next up, the whole block shook, hunks of glass exploding from the windows.

I heard a thundering of footsteps and peered again down the hallway. A jihadi fighter sprang down the stairs, Smithfield at his heels. The two zipped out the back door and I sprinted after them. By the time I emerged into the back alley, the jihadi had a hold of Smithfield from behind, an M-16 braced against his throat.

Our snipers hollered down and aimed their weapons. “We’ve got him Smithfield, we’ve got him. Just hold steady.” But the fighter shifted his weight and kept walking backwards, using Smithfield’s wide frame as a body shield. Whoever he was, this jihadi knew these streets and he knew our weak spots. None of us could get a clear shot. I stayed low and close along the alley wall, following them as they retreated for another block.

“Just shoot him through me,” Smithy said. He was starting to turn purple from the pressure of the gun against his carotid artery.

“It won’t work,” I hollered.

“Just shoot him. Shoot through my leg and into his,” Smithy pleaded, then he passed out. His body went limp, then rose slightly as the fighter twisted into a low crouch and started running, Smithy’s body draped over his back like a gigantic rag doll.

“Call for backup,” I shouted to the snipers. The jihadi lumbered through a narrow back door, crashing Smithy’s limbs against the frame. It wasn’t more than ten seconds before I reached the door and sprinted inside. Look left. Right. Light filtered through a broken window, illuminating a looted living room, some old blankets, and cushions. I remember looking left again. Up. Across. Down. I’d never heard a silence as loud as the one filling that swollen moment, the moment my team leader Smithy completely vanished.

Backup arrived almost immediately, busting into the building from all directions. It didn’t matter. Wherever that jihadi took Smithy, we weren’t finding him. We

dug up the entire district; every alley, building, doorway, closet, and mouse hole. Four blocks south of the initial firefight, I found Smithfield's helmet in the middle of the sidewalk. I remember hoping it was a trick. Like if I touched the helmet Smithy'd surface through the concrete with that square-jawed, smart-ass smile of his and we'd be back in the game. But when I bent to pick it up, there wasn't an ounce of life left in it.

I radioed the location to our platoon sergeant, but back at headquarters they were already filling out the paperwork. Missing in action. Last seen? Taken hostage. Estimated location? Some place so horrific, even if I had a crystal ball I couldn't bring myself to look.

### **KIA**

Camp Taji, Iraq, bunkroom 8B. Inventory of personal belongings, Specialist Donald R. Swarignon, Battle Roster #SW4982:

#### *Walls*

1 Seattle Mariners calendar. 2 postcards from "Sunny Hawai'i." 4 Christmas cards. 9 birthday cards. Approximately 17 photographs. 1 wooden cross. 1 small, pink teddy bear. 3 illegible, children's drawings in crayon. 1 Post-It Note with the impression of a woman's lips in red lipstick. 1 Slim-Jim beef jerky wrapper tacked to the wall (presumably for sniffing). 1 door-sized pinup of J-Lo (likely also for sniffing). 1 miniature American flag.

#### *Supply shelf*

1 tube Blistex lip balm. 3 tubes Asics chafe-free sports performance gel. 5-pack Bic disposable razors, unopened. 8 packages baby wipes. 1 *Rolling Stone* magazine. 1 pack Clearasil face wipes. 1 bottle True Pleasures lube with cutout of Cameron Diaz taped to the back.

#### *Closet*

1 half-eaten bag Doritos Cool Ranch. 1 flat of Peanut M&M's. 4 tubes Pringles. 2 packages Chips Ahoy. 6 cotton undershirts, 1 pair Nike running shoes, 6 pairs Under Armor athletic socks, 2 pair Army-issued black running shorts. 1 pair women's striped panties with the words "Love You!" scrawled across the front. 1 Eastern Washington University sweatshirt.

*Bookshelf:*

*Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. Baseball Trivia, Volume 3. *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. Canon digital camera. Care package sent from Seattle dated 08 MAR 2010; stuffed with Kudos snack bars, Hanes briefs, small jar of stones labeled “Puget Sound,” and 1 prepaid phone card. *There’s Something About Mary*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and *Being John Malkovich* DVD’s (starring Cameron Diaz).

*Duffel bag:*

1 stone-carved elephant, 4 wooden bowls, and 1 hand-woven rug, each individually wrapped and labeled: Dad, Mom, Tiffany. Two children’s t-shirts. (One for Justin, the newborn he hadn’t met yet, and one for Sarah, the little blonde who sings in the bathtub and practices her step-ball-change on the coffee table.)

*Inside pillow case:*

King James Bible. Sealed envelope addressed to “Tiffany Swaringon, a.k.a. My bodacious babe.” (It’s what he called his wife when they were fooling around. They’d go back and forth like that. My slapstick sailor. My hell’s bell’s bride. My hubba-hubba husband. My maiden of mayhem. My too-hot, don’t-stop, can’t-live-without-you kind of man.)



**KATEY SCHULTZ** grew up in Portland, OR and is most recently from the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Her stories have appeared in *River Styx*, *Fiction Daily*, *Calyx*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and more. She is the recipient of the Linda Flowers Literary Prize and multiple flash fiction awards. She is currently seeking a publisher for her manuscript of war stories, *Flashes of War*. More information at [www.kateyschultz.com](http://www.kateyschultz.com).