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from *Dust to Dust: A Memoir*

**A**t Vassar there were no physical challenges to overcome. I needed to seek the greatest possibility of my destruction in part to prove my invincibility. A friend gave me a pamphlet, and I sought out the Marine Corps.

My parents came to visit me at school near the end of my junior year and took me out to lunch. My father asked me questions about classes, and my mother asked about my plans. She always carried a calendar and obsessed over exactly what was happening, and when. I said, rather casually, that I would be spending the summer at Officer Candidates' School. My mother asked if it was some kind of corporate training program, and I replied that it did have Corps in it. I told them about signing up to be evaluated by the Marines, and there followed the longest silence in parenthood. My father had stopped chewing, eyebrows raised almost over his forehead, and stared at me as if I had spoken well of Hitler. My mother took a deep breath, her hands clamped to the edge of the table as if she were watching an accident happen in the street. Her father had been a Marine, had gone to war and almost not come back. I said that it was no big deal. If I graduated from the program, I was not committed to joining the Marines. I was further interrogated about the contract, and then they left for what must have been a terrible drive back to Sherburne.

I arrived in Quantico, Virginia, in June to the undisguised delight of my recruiter, who had become a minor celebrity for signing the first Vassar student in

history. No one thought that I would show up. He greeted me with the last smile I would get, and I went inside to yelling and a shot of every inoculation known to medicine. From that moment on, every question was delivered to me in anger, and every response I gave was wrong. This was to continue for ten weeks. We referred to ourselves in the third person and became merely “the candidate,” our names lost to us, and unlike enlisted boot camp, where the Corps hoped to break everyone down and then build them all up, retaining as many as possible, OCS was designed to burn us out, hoping to emotionally and physically wear us down and make us quit. This was 1989 and the Marines didn’t need any more men for wars. I had found the right place.

One day they showed us slides of lieutenants killed in Vietnam. They were taken by coroners for records of some kind, and the images were macabre. Just dead men laid on a white cloth somewhere. The pictures were flashed as a slide show given near the week when candidates were allowed to quit. The images were meant to scare us, and they should have. An instructor paced as the dead appeared on the screen behind him.

“This is the consequence of your job,” he began. “These Marine lieutenants were all leading their platoons, and this was their reward. You should expect no better. There’s a bullet waiting for every one of you . . . and it’s up to the one shooting it to miss, because you can’t dodge it when it comes. You’ll be in front. First to go and last to know.”

An image came up of a man who had been hit in the face with an RPG, a softball-sized hole clean through the middle of his inflated head, his cartoon features ballooned to each side of it.

“His last words were, ‘Follow me,’ and those will be yours, candidates.”

The mangled bodies continued to appear, one with a young peaceful face that showed no trauma. He looked to be asleep and unharmed. Below his shoulders, there was no body.

We ate without speaking, carried telephone poles on long runs through the woods, waded up to our necks in miasmic mud, climbed ropes, polished brass, cleaned rifles, marched. We could not eat enough to keep up with the exertion, five minutes per meal, and we began to consume ourselves. We lost weight, and our limbs got slim and hard. I didn’t shit for twenty-two days. Candidates were injured, went down as heat casualties, quit. Anyone who went to the infirmary was not likely to return, and the next day his bunk would be empty, the candidate gone without ceremony. We were told that pain was weakness leaving the body. I had twisted my ankle in the fourth week and was worried that my injury would

be discovered. We were running five to seven miles a day. There was a roll of duct tape in the cleaning-supply closet, and I made a brace every night after lights out. I remembered my father's lesson: Anything could be repaired with duct tape.

On our last forced march through the Virginia forest, it was in the high nineties and saturated with humidity. My ankle hurt but the boot kept it supported. I was severely dehydrated, heatstroke rising in me as we got to the end and caught sight of the parade deck, the last place I had to stand. Several candidates had already fallen. My heart was racing with blood that must have been thick as oil. I got dizzy, and everything was too bright. I thought of the lights as I went into surgery for my knee in high school, the dead lieutenants, how I was about to fall, and how I couldn't.

We assembled on the paved lot in ranks, exhausted, exultant, above ourselves. One of our instructors walked the lines. I kept my knees slightly bent as I had been told, to avoid toppling. I closed my eyes for a moment and opened them to find him staring into my face.

"You can sleep when you're dead, Women's College," he said, and stepped away.

I forgot to pass out. He was uncharacteristically pleasant. It was his last wasted day of yelling at us. We were not being trained, we were merely being thinned out. The instructors probably had a feeling of diminished returns on their time. But they played their role, and we never knew how much of it was an act. He stood and did an impersonation of the instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*.

"What makes the grass green?!"

At the top of our lungs, and with true elation we screamed, "Blood, blood, blood!"

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By the end of May 2003, we had been told that the war had transitioned into security and stabilization operations. This was a post-hostilities phase and we were to focus on hearts-and-minds projects. General Mattis had ordered our focus to be on school rehabilitation and that required me to go to the city of Kut, capital of the Wasit Province, for which my unit had become largely responsible. It was the only place that I could purchase electrical wire, paint, concrete, pipe, and plaster.

In a back street, my patrol came across the Kut war cemetery. It had been found covered in several feet of garbage by Marines in Task Force Tarawa during the invasion, and they had cleaned and rededicated it to the British. Turkish and German troops had laid siege to Kut Al Amara, now simply known as Kut, from December 7, 1915, to April 29, 1916, and the British casualties were astounding. Over 22,000 soldiers had been killed or wounded; 13,000 captured; and here in

this small plot submerged from the street by four feet lay the remains of 450 of them. I stepped down into the graveyard and was surprised to see the intricate carving on the headstones. The dead here had not been killed during the siege but rather two years later, when the British and their Arab allies had retaken Kut. I was pleased to see the equitable burial of supporting troops from the British Empire lost in her efforts. Beside infantry and artillery soldiers lay a man with the title, "FOLLOWER." F. X. D'SOUZA, INDIAN LABOUR CORPS, 21ST AUGUST 1918. His name appeared below an image of a rifle crossing a shovel, bound with a wreath beneath the crown of England and a banner with the Latin motto LABOR OMNIA VINCIT (hard work conquers all). Service was what had brought him from India to Kut, following troops with the toil of carrying ammunition and supplies. I had to wonder where the men lost in the siege had been buried. We had not heard of any other cemeteries and had to guess that they had gone into mass graves somewhere nearby, somewhere just beneath us. This place, full of people tossing trash onto the graves, had been the site of a desperate battle, this soil soaked with blood, this ground heavy with lead. The blood and bullets were still here, and so were the dead.

I had been wearing my flak jacket all day in the Kut market, and hours of negotiating for electrical supplies had left me exhausted. The last purchase I had to make was paint and I was directed to a disgusting street in the meat market, thirty feet from the war cemetery. I brought two locals to negotiate for supplies and they had a long list of paints and plaster needed to restore several children's schools around Jassan. The store was a catacomb of rooms stacked with cans and bags of paint. It was a dark place, brick exposed up to the waist as if worn away by years of flowing water and yellow dirt-rubbed plaster above. On the surviving plaster, finger swipes of paint samples covered the walls at shoulder level like frescos in a cave. Blood-red, grass-green, and sky-blue smudges. The floor was uneven with compacted clumps of dirt, caked paint powder, and clots of oil colors. I politely declined the metal chair offered as the men began to count cans and argue prices. They bent over a calculator converting square meters of paint to dinars and then dinars to dollars. I told them I would come back.

Away from the chalky cavern filled with powdered pigments, the air was difficult to breathe. There was a crooked gutter cut down the center of the meat market that oozed a puss of waste from slaughter, and the street was a blood-darkened orange that looked permanently wet. Wheeled carts of filthy chickens lined the passage and the shit-coated pens showed the success of recent sales with small pools of bright blood around them. Skinned goats hung from doorways. It was hot and I

was boiling in my flak. My boots were filling with sweat that had run down my legs. Flies hurried by, wild with the vast supply of death, and their buzzing had a loud electrical sound. I had to repress the involuntary urge to cough and I tried to hold my breath as much as possible. The street opened into a large souk and two flats of fly-coated carp marked the end of the meat market. They drained into a bucket and a man would occasionally pour the water, orange with blood, back over the fish as if to keep them fresh.

Wooden carts of carefully piled fruits and vegetables huddled together under draped cloth canopies, the colors luminous and beautiful. Seeing them reminded me of my mother's garden with its yellow squash, tomatoes, red onions, and zucchini. Along a covered alleyway were bowls of ground spices, red and rust-colored chilies, and mustard-yellow curry powders. There were knives and lines of prayer beads on blankets. Sandals were strung like fruit on lines, cloth was wrapped in piles, and black burkas hung in rows. There was order in the marketplace, a ritualized presentation of everything, a daily museum of transient objects that were endlessly replenished. It is AD 500 and an old man sells cucumbers grown on the banks of the Tigris and brought to market on a donkey. It is AD 2003 and he is still here. I was out of place, like the British war dead left here to be covered with garbage. I turned and walked back up the street of blood through the flies.

By July 2003, the insurgency had begun in Iraq, and we were sent to protect supply lines being attacked near Yusifiah, a small city just south of Baghdad. It was not far from the Euphrates and felt humid. The nights were warm, and in the morning a mix of smoke and moisture hung over the town. The sun rose and immediately illuminated everything standing aboveground. Women were already cutting grasses, and men were preparing shops near the road. Vendors covered ice blocks with cloth, the melting water evaporating through the fibers keeping it cool during the day. They had little to sell: small cages with sickly white chickens, some vegetables, stacks of canned soda, and packs of cigarettes. Two sheep lay dead on a slab of concrete in front of the butcher's hut. Their blood was thinned with water and swept off into the dust, like so much blood for so long here, and the meat hung, skinned and headless, for view. Another sheep stood tied to a stake nearby, but it appeared unaware of the process involving the killing of sheep in the hut beside it. That was a useful thing about sheep—they just didn't seem to notice death.

The region was farmland, fed by a grid of uncrossable irrigation ditches, and tall grasses grew close to the road. We arrived from the apocalyptic Iranian border and were not used to seeing vegetation. The walls of marsh reeds turned some road

sections into claustrophobic passages, and we felt vulnerable, even more so than when we had been in the open, because the enemy could easily remain hidden right beside our routes. A few miles to the south was an immense Iraqi ammunition-storage base that was being looted for explosives to use against us. It was too large to defend, and we could only hope to capture vehicles hauling away artillery rounds called in by aircraft doing reconnaissance missions. We patrolled from an abandoned refrigeration facility that had kept bananas, potatoes, and other imported crops chilled for distribution. The space inside was filled with oversized bays, and Marines looked miniaturized on their rows of cots. It was dark and still somehow cool inside, despite its dereliction. We received mortar fire on our first day there as a welcome, and the nearby town, Mulla Fayed, was a planned community built for retired officers of the Republican Guard. We were in a snake pit.

IEDs began to appear as terrorists taught insurgents new methods of attack against our supply routes, and we could only respond with increased presence patrols. Nights were surreal, Iraqi men gathered in courtyards discussing crops and us, few lights on, the grass black as we drove past it. We moved using night-vision monacles, 7-Bravos, our vehicles blacked out to disguise our convoy and make it harder for insurgents to time the detonation of roadside bombs. As cars appeared, we turned on our headlights to avoid collisions, then went dark again. One evening a car hurried to pass another in the opposite lane and smashed into the front of one of our LAVs running blacked out. The car was wrecked but there was only some paint chipped on our side.

The sun had been down for a while, and the moon had not yet risen. I hadn't slept in almost three days and was glazing over standing up, sweating into my flak vest. Cars passed slowly, their headlights catching the shattered glass spilled on the pavement. They looked like crystals spread out on a black cloth, a reflection of the moonless sky and its accident of stars. Locals gathered around the damage. If they felt they could get money by complaining, they were certain to arrive at our gate in the morning. More cars crept past, wondering if they would be stopped, wondering, also, if we knew what they had done. Everyone there knew something about the insurgency. I had enough and signaled to press on back to our forward operating base. As soon as I put my comm helmet on and started to move, one of my patrols reported contact. I halted the convoy and the night went to shit.

The voice came in shrill. I got their grid and turned around. One man down, helo medevac requested. The bird would take too long to get to them. I ordered a react force to be sent to their position from our base, another to be sent along a parallel route I hoped would cut off the enemy's escape. Marines on sleep rotation went to

full alert on base. I tried to get to the ambush site but we sped past the small road they were on, and I asked if the casualty was stable enough for ground evacuation. They reported that he was and I told them to take him themselves at best speed while I screened ahead along their medevac route. The attack could have been coordinated with another ambush or IEDs set on the only bridge that crossed the river to the nearest base with a medical aid station. That area had been hit before.

I arrived at the aid station moments after the medevac did. The unflinching corpsman, Doc Negron, was covered with blood and looked drained as if it had been his own. The others were wide-eyed, exhausted, and silent with shock. They were huddled in a group staring at the entrance to the trauma tent, a large inflated portable triage facility. I could hear screaming and ran inside. My Marine had been sitting on the edge of his vehicle hatch when it was struck by an RPG and he was hit in the hip by the blast, a vicious injury that had blown him open and bled him out. He was a tough kid but small, wiry, and fine-boned. His wounds made him appear even smaller, younger than he was. I hurried to his stretcher as medics tried to stabilize him and prepare him for urgent surgery. Negron had saved his life, patching and wrapping him with gauze and tape, enough to get him this far. I stood at his side and he reached for my hand, which I took. He was shaking and breathing strangely, his screaming paused, and he looked at me with complete bewilderment and asked, "What is happening to me?" It was a detached voice, childlike, and I pretended I wasn't worried. I told him that he was hit, but that he was going to be fine. I was sent away by the medical staff, and I backed my way out, watching him as he was carried into surgery.

It was dark outside when I walked out to the crew. They were waiting for me to tell them how it was going to end. I didn't know. They recounted what they knew, which was little, due to the nature of being surprised by an ambush. They had turned a corner near a field, heard the swoosh of the incoming rocket, and then an explosion on the left side of the vehicle, the gunner thrown off, and nothing to shoot back at. The insurgents had fired and immediately run away, using an irrigation ditch as a convenient trench. They were below ground-level and impossible to see. The Marines fired in the suspected direction of attack but with no result. At the time, I could only think of thanking them for their swift response and the rescue of their casualty. I could not think of what else to say to them, though I should have. Storytelling was what they needed most. I went back to my assembly area, sat in a red cloth camping chair, and, believing that my wounded Marine would die, began to compose a letter to his wife. I realized, in the glow of my flashlight, that my hand was dark red with his blood. It was the hand that he had held, and I stared at it. It

was drying and cracking at the creases in my palm. I was not able to write anything and went outside into the desert to will his survival. I had the thought that if I wrote the letter, it would pronounce his death. I washed off his blood with a bottle of water in the dark. I thought of Negron covered with it.

We went for over a week waiting for word of his arrival in Germany. When combat casualties were medevaced from their units, they were essentially severed from them. I was not his next of kin, and, even as his commanding officer, I had almost no access to his medical status as he was moved between field trauma stations in Iraq and surgical wards in Germany and America. Over two weeks later, I finally received confirmation that he had survived.

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I have seen an aftermath photograph of the D-Day invasion at Omaha Beach, bodies of soldiers half-buried in the sand. I have seen men digging trenches and graves, and I keep forgetting how much dirt is composed of the dead and how much the living are subsumed by soil. Adam was made of clay. In the tomb of the first Qin emperor are ten thousand terra-cotta soldiers buried in the edge of the Gobi Desert, the only survivors, and somewhere in the dunes of Arabia are the lost armies of empires that emptied their citadels to vanish into the sand. The human record is filled with soldiers filing into the unknown, so few returning, and no one ever able to convince them not to go.

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