

ELLIOT SANDERS

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## Far From Kansas

Levi squinted and pressed his face to the glass, peering through the oily impression of his nose and forehead into the Tastee Freez. Formica tables were littered with crunched up straws and speckled with dried ice cream. Behind the register, a paunchy girl in red and white stared back at Levi through the window. She said something and shrugged with her arms, but outside the only sounds were the air brakes on a semi and the pealing drone of cars on the interstate.

“You comin’ in or stayin’ out?” the girl asked when Levi opened the door.

“I thought you had a help wanted sign up,” Levi said. “I saw it from the bus stop last week.”

The girl rolled a piece of gum around in her mouth and fiddled with her bracelet. “Already been filled,” she said.

Levi sat down in one of the booths and flipped through a menu, loosening each sticky laminated page with a pop. The girl at the counter was now talking to a pubescent-looking kid at the register. He poked a few keys and the girl shook her head.

“No,” she said. “This one. This one here.” The kid tapped a key and the drawer zinged open. “Alright, now do it again.” The kid sighed and plucked at the keyboard.

Levi approached the counter.

“Welcome to Tastee Freez,” the kid said. “Can I interest you in our—”

The girl nudged him with her elbow and lifted her eyebrows at the menu on the counter. Front and center was a toy dump truck with scoops of chocolate ice cream piled in the bed. Spilling onto the cab were marshmallows, whipped cream, and a sprightly looking banana.

“Our Mega Chocolate Mounds. It comes in a truck. You can keep it,” the kid said, beaming.

“Nah,” Levi said. “Give me one of those Oreo shakes.”

The kid whisked away from the counter. Register girl crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, looking at Levi’s tan and brown uniform and the cap scrunched in his pocket.

“You in the Army?” she asked. “Is that what ya’ll wear in Iraq?”

“Yeah,” Levi said.

The kid emerged with the shake, cream dribbling down the sides of the cup between his knuckles. There was a new smear on his name tag. He handed the shake to Levi, who grabbed it and made for the door.

Around the corner was a park with a willow tree. Levi seated himself on the bench and watched the kids ride the swings and shimmy up and down the metal slides. He sat there and sucked his ice cream and watched them play. These weren’t like the Iraqi kids that swarmed his convoy when he left base, pleading, chasing through the dust. Candy! Candy! Candy! Levi would throw a pack of M&M’s from his MRE and the victor would scamper back across the street to devour his prize away from the other boys. These American kids were pudgy and full of reckless energy. No sunken cheeks and empty eyes. The American kids made him smile.

He would stash these images away for later. Like Tic-Tacs. Save them for when he needed them most; toss one into his mouth and bite down with a satisfying crunch. Trade them for all the bad shit. Green grass for sand. Blue sky for tawny desert. Warm fleece for Kevlar.

“Excuse me. Sir,” said one of the kids’ moms.

She stopped short of the bench.

“Thanks for your service,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Levi said. He was never quite sure what to say at moments like these. *You’re welcome* just didn’t sound right. It sounded like he had just handed her a Latte at the Starbucks drive-through, not spent the last fifteen months in the sand and the muck, driving a Humvee through Sadr City and thinking every dead dog on the side of the road had a ticking bomb rammed up its ass into its intestines. The Army had even given it an acronym. DBIED: Dog-Borne Improvised Explosive Device.

“Is your kid here?” the mom asked.

“Not exactly...”

“Why are you hangin’ around the playground?” Her expression was part genial, part cornered bear defending her cubs.

The woman's gaze made Levi uncomfortable. He got up and dumped the rest of his shake into a garbage bin and left.

He walked down the sidewalk. Roots had pushed the concrete up in places and made it uneven. Levi examined a multi-story abandoned warehouse, its windows broken out high at the top. Beside it, an empty grain silo loomed monstrously—a grey ghost ringed with rust. Scattered at its base was bent metal and crumbled brick. The unlatched door of a small operators' shack opened and closed as the wind blew. Once, like this town, there had been life here—progress, money. Slowly these had receded, like blood from slender capillaries, to America's core. These empty buildings were frostbitten toes. The cold was creeping inward.

At the end of the street by train tracks was a car dealership. *Wagner's New and Used Cars*. Levi stopped and stared out over the lot. New cars were parked around the perimeter; used ones pooled at the center. The bumper of a truck with a lifted suspension shot skyward, its front wheels planted proudly atop a massive boulder. Levi grazed the lot, cracking doors, ingesting new car smell. Without warning, a salesman sprung tactically from behind a row of Kia Sorentos. The perfect ambush point.

"Hi, I'm Larry," he said, pointing to his nametag. Larry shook Levi's hand injuriously. He wore an American flag pin on his blazer and a checkered tie.

"I see you're in the military," he said. "You know, we have some great deals for Veterans. Why don't we check out one of our newer models? And by the way, thank you for your service."

Levi winced.

He walked to a sporty car at the front of the lot and opened the door. Its lines were taut and muscular. It was a car James Bond would drive home after evening drinks. An LCD screen flicked on and displayed the car's logo. Below it was an aluminum shifter without any numbers. How many gears were there?

"I'll grab the keys," Larry said. "If I can have your driver's license, it'll just take me a sec."

Levi handed the man his license. Alone again, he squatted on his heels and bathed in the car's warm techno-glow while he waited for Larry to return. There he was already, hustling across the parking lot like a high school football coach. He handed Levi a round silver disc with a single button in the center.

"What's this?" Levi asked.

"That's the keyless," Larry said. "You click it once to unlock the doors, twice to lock 'em. Go ahead and get in."

Larry swung around to the passenger side and jumped in the seat, rocking the suspension slightly. Levi sat down in the leather driver's bucket and closed the door.

"Check this out," Larry said. He reached for the center console and pressed a round dial. The engine woke and settled into a pleasing idle.

"Just watch out for those lamp posts," Larry said. "Take a right turn out of the dealership and then a left onto the interstate."

Levi depressed the clutch and snicked the gear shift into first. Out of the lot they went. Second gear was more reluctant. Crunch. Then it grabbed. There she is!

"Not *too* fast. Take it easy there, son," Larry said.

They hit the on-ramp and Levi mashed the pedal against the carpet. The engine wailed and whined and the fat on Larry's chin jiggled as the back of his bald head hit the headrest. Fourth, fifth, sixth, up went the tach. The landscape blurred and took on unrecognizable forms. The prairie was a green sheet of paint on the window. Trucks could have been horse carriages. A bug hit the windshield like a gunshot and Levi thought he saw Larry duck out of the corner of his eye.

"It's coming up on the right. Better slow down," Larry said. His face was blanched and sweat snaked through his goatee.

Levi eased her down through the gears and lit the turn signal. The engine stopped shrieking and settled into a burble. Man it sounded sweet. They paralleled the interstate on a side road and bumped across the railroad tracks into the dealership.

"I'll park it. Company policy," Larry said, clutching the emergency brake with trembling fingers.

Levi got out and watched Larry scurry around the car like a panicked groundhog. Soon Larry and the car disappeared behind the building.

Levi walked inside and downed two funneled cups of water from the cooler. He went into the bathroom to wash his hands. Recently this had become more complicated than it should be. He soaped his palms, careful not to rub too hard against the tips of his grimy fingernails. He hadn't scrubbed them since he got back. He hadn't scrubbed them since they had gotten really dirty trying to plug the hole in Jones' leg. Blood spurted out of the hole near the femur and Levi stuffed wad after wad of gauze but couldn't stop its flow. The Chinook came in low and fast and dust swirled around them. Levi lay on top of Jones trying to keep the dirt out of his friend's eyes and mouth and the gaping split in his thigh.

At the base, Levi crept through the ER tent's rubber curtains and found Jones lying on a padded table hooked up to tubes and hoses. His body was mangled and still. A nurse came by and gave her condolences and unhooked some of the equipment.

Levi felt something loosen inside him, like the snapping of a tendon. He grabbed the heart monitor from the nurse and threw it against the side of the tent and left. In the barracks he held his hands over the sink and stared at his grape-red nails.

Outside the bathroom, Larry stood by a plastic fern waiting for Levi. When he heard the familiar rush of air from the hand dryer he took out his pen.

“Hey buddy,” Larry said. “Let’s talk.” He led Levi to a clear booth with a narrow table and they sat down opposite each other.

“Well. There’s good news and bad news. Which do you want first?” Larry asked.

Levi stared out the window at the corn field.

“Alright,” Larry said. “The bad news is that with your credit history the bank can’t approve you. But if you put down enough money, say, twenty-thousand, they’ll let that slide and loan you the rest. Whaddya think?”

“Can I see it again?” Levi asked.

“What?”

“The car.”

“Oh, okay, sure. Why not.”

They walked out the glass door to the lot. There she was. Low and skulking in the shade. Levi realized he still had the round silver thing in his pocket. He turned so Larry couldn’t see him slide his hand down and grab it. He clicked the button several times. The trunk swung open.

“What are you looking for?” Larry asked.

Levi groped around the spare tire. There it is. That’s definitely it. He squeezed the cold tire iron in his hand. Then he was standing in front of the car. He lifted his arm as high as it would go and brought the meaty wand wildly down onto the hood. Here we go, you beautiful, magnificent bitch! The headlights popped; the windows shattered, spraying the rich leather with fine powder. He plucked the antenna from the roof like a stubborn weed, then stomped the bumper until it dislodged and fell on the blacktop. A piece of glass had wedged in his thumb and warm blood now trickled over his fingers onto the bumper’s glossy paint.

When the hot-spring in his gut subsided and his vision cleared he saw the ruined hulk of metal for the first time. He paused for long enough to see Larry take flight into the building, then flung the tire iron and began to run.

The corn field wasn’t far away. He ran down the street and over the tracks. When he reached the field he stretched out his arms and disappeared into a sea of corn. He pressed forward and picked up speed. The dry husks crackled and crunched. He lost balance—the flattened stalks rotated beneath his feet—spinning, tumbling—and when he looked up there was only blue.

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**ELLIOT SANDERS** is an active duty Air Force pilot stationed in rural Missouri. His short fiction can be found at *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Hobart*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Echo Ink Review*, *PANK Magazine* and elsewhere.