

ANDREW SLATER

The Cold

There wasn't much left to say at final formation, our last before Iraq. The hundred and twenty of us made a four-rowed rectangle in the dark and the outdoor lights winked on as First Sergeant emerged from his office carrying a notebook. He was about to start reading from a piece of paper when the post Retreat started playing in the distance and we all dutifully saluted the colors coming down as the first wisps of snow blew in sideways. Then he began.

"I know everybody's eager to spend their last weekend with the family, but I have a few brief reminders to put out."

By the time the reminders were done the blacktop was bone white, without a footprint.

"And lastly," he said, over the sound of the growing wind, "As if I need to remind any of you yard birds. Anybody blows a DUI this weekend I will choke you to death inside the drunk tank. And if you miss movement I will find your ass and string you up by your little pencil dicks."

That was as much of a St. Crispin's Day speech as we were gonna get.

All us joes from the company had been bullshitting for a solid day in the headquarters building, huddled in the damp stink of the locker room to keep warm, and we were just bullshitted out. Everybody was in a rush to get home before the roads got worse. During the drive back to my apartment I remember doing the

math. It was 7:37 on the clock in my car, sitting at the red light at the gate. I had 109 hours to close up my whole life.

So Friday morning I shook off my hangover and threw on my Army parka since I had no other clothes made for that kind of Kansas, mid-February cold. I was a California kid—the first snow I ever saw was on a layover at the Denver airport—and I had the brainstorm that morning of boiling a pot of water to melt off my windshield ice. There I went with it steaming in my hands to the sidewalk and as I threw it down, the glass cracked loud enough to turn heads across the parking lot. The fissure ran in a smooth bending arc from the driver's side to a two-pronged fork beneath the rear view mirror. My storage space scheme depended precariously on my trade-in for my already-missing-its-back-window Civic, which was now steaming and cracked, like a loyal child I had just carelessly struck. I wondered why no one had ever told me this would happen, but I guess they shouldn't have had to.

I drove mittened to the bank, hands ten and two, staring out at the half-plowed, sooty streets of Manhattan in their new, sorry, split view. When I pulled into the Kansas Credit Union parking lot, there was a bank lady in a beige trench coat with cheap pearls spilling up from the collar, shaking out a couch-cushion sized salt bag on the front walk. She shot me a glance, looking out of breath and flushed as I came up. I was about to ask her if she needed help when I slipped on the ice, barely catching myself. With her left arm she snatched me by the wrist to steady me with her white gloved hand—terrifyingly powerful and tiny.

“Careful,” she said, which was the kindest word I got that day.

There was a college girl with big hoop earrings working my teller window who gave me a big grin like she recognized me as I walked up. Maybe a little bleary-looking like she'd tied one on the night before, but who knows how I looked to her just then.

“Just cashing a check,” I said. “Closing things out to go to Baghdad.”

She looked over my deposit ticket, “Would you like your withdrawal in all twenties, sir?”

“Sure, Sure,” I said. “Whatever I don't spend by Tuesday I can use over there, I guess. They take American cash everywhere, so I hear. From guys in Baghdad.”

“Could you just put your account number under the signature, Mr. Thib-ah-doo? Right here?” she said.

“It's 'Tib-uh-doe'. Yeah, sure, sorry about that. Say, is there any problem with my account being dormant for a year? Since I'll be in Iraq. For a year.”

“No, sir. Not a problem at all. Your withdrawal is in the envelope. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I said no.

Paying off my parking tickets and phone bill took most of the afternoon. When I pulled into the downtown library I remembered that they closed at four on Fridays so I was too late to see if Helen from Indiana was at the AV desk and ask if her mother’s thyroid was getting better and if maybe she wanted to go get a coffee or something maybe. If she had even been working that day anyway. The return slot was frozen shut so I had to warm it with my bare hands and breathe on it just to get it unstuck. I wrote a note on the back of a Subway receipt and stuffed it in *The Best of Shark Week* video case—this was ’04 and I still had a VCR/TV in one—that said:

“Dear Helen,

I know I am not allowed to put videos in the return slot, per your notice on the outside of the box, but I am leaving for Baghdad directly and would not be able to return this video during your regular hours.

Respectfully,

SPC James Thibodeau”

I regretted the note—regretted the ‘directly’ in particular—as soon as it fell, irrevocably, into the warm, bright room behind the slot. The feeling passed.

When I paid off my late fees at Blockbuster with my last fistful of laundry quarters, the pimply kid made me wait there at the counter with a line forming behind us while he angrily counted out the sweaty, linty coins one at a time.

“I’m leaving for Baghdad,” I said.

“Good on ya,” he said.

With everything else closing by that time, I spent the dregs of the night at the Best Buy off Leavenworth Avenue, enjoying the light and heat and staring at people until they flickered the lights to encourage us to leave. There was a new kid from my unit that I spotted there, just two weeks out of basic. Newcomb—but I couldn’t remember his name at the time—was wandering through the aisles with his family in tow. He was holding his mother’s hand in a grudging way. He seemed pleased with himself, please to be the center of attention. His girl and his dad were walking a step behind, each with an empty plastic basket.

I was thumbing through the discount CD bin, wondering why I'd insisted so sternly to my grandparents, who were all the family I had, that they not come and see me before I left. New Year's had been our goodbye even though they hadn't known that at the time.

I imagined my Gram sitting in the passenger seat of their Cherokee Wagon outside my apartment, crying and listening to NPR, not wanting to bother us in the apartment with her tears, but not wanting to be any further away. I imagined my Pap, letting me win game after game of chess on the coffee table and me trying to seem still interested in it and him saying over and over all weekend, "You know, Jimmy, if you have something more interesting to do, don't worry about us..."

But that was an exaggeration. I knew they were stronger people than that. It would have just been another weekend and it was something they probably deserved. I realized at that moment—as I tried to determine if a dollar was too much to pay for the Gin Blossoms' greatest hits and my knees felt like buckling—that I had unforgivably deprived them of something.

Saturday was a blur of packing boxes and bagging trash, mostly empty six pack containers and fast food wrappers. The actual packing should have taken about four hours. But most of that day was spent sorting photos and mementos one at a time, putting them in garbage bags then pulling them back out again. Also I polished off an entire bottle of Cognac I'd been saving since Christmas which I meant to last through Monday. Even drunk I somehow kept myself from making any unfortunate phone calls—though I came close a couple times—and I had to settle for a long, rambling group message on Friendster, which wasn't the most dignified place for that sort of thing either.

By noon on Sunday, the dumpster outside my apartment was propped open on one side from the mound of my discarded teenage regrets and the Civic had just enough space left for me to fit inside and drive it. It felt like I couldn't go ten minutes without having to take a piss. I sidled inside and sat there in a cloud of condensing exhaust, waiting patiently this time for the windshield to melt off and unable to reach the mix CD I wanted to stop listening to. My dented filing cabinet was blocking my access to the CD changer under the passenger seat. There were no other CDs in it so if I tried to change it, it would just cycle back to the mix a few seconds later, track one, which was, inevitably, Morrissey.

When I had enough of a hole to see through, I drove slowly to the storage space with my prepared speech.

“—so in conclusion,” I said at last to the storage clerk. “I have to drop off all my stuff, then go sell my car, and I’ll come back with the money. I just need a storage space for like an hour, in the mean time.”

“I’m real sorry, son, but our shortest rate is monthly with an extra month deposit, which’d be ninety dollars. If you got ninety and a credit card, we can get started. Otherwise, I’m afraid I can’t give you nothing.”

I didn’t have ninety dollars left.

“Can I just leave it on the ground inside the fence until I get back?” I asked

“I could call Mr. Reynolds up, but I’m sure he’d say no.”

“Can I leave it in the parking lot?” I asked.

“Oh no, we need to keep it clear for customers. I guess you could put it in the snow bank. That’s about all I can think of.”

“You want me to leave all my stuff—with my cardboard boxes and suitcases—in the snow bank next to the highway?”

He shrugged, “I could watch it from the window here. No promises.”

So that’s what I did. He was kind enough to give me a tarp to throw over it which I pinned down at the corners with dinner plates. It started to snow again before I was finished.

The dealership I had contacted was on the other side of town and the cab ride put me dangerously low on cash. Carrying the cold in with me, I shivered hands between my legs in the plush seat of their poorly heated office, the dealer and his assistant sharing sly grins, as I clearly appeared like some witless private ready to sign anything put in front of him. My numb fingers could barely work the pen to sign it away. They handed me a large check with a small amount on it.

Suddenly carless, I felt a pang of dislocation as I watched them move her out of sight to the rear lot of the dealership to hide the eyesore of her missing back window. Ten months of plastic tarp and gorilla tape, but I somehow never got out of the habit of locking her. My loyal lemon. It was my Gram and Pap’s graduation gift to me and it had 80,000 miles on it already. He kept telling me at the time how he wished he could have got me something better. We’d been living on his teacher’s pension and the garden store wasn’t making money anymore. I was heading to Cal State Chico that fall on financial aid. He said he was sorry it wasn’t a better car so many times it started to make me uncomfortable, and I played up how excited I was about it as best I could.

It was only then that I realized my bank would be closed, since it was Sunday, and I could not wait a day on account of my life’s possessions sitting in a snow bank.

So I waddled my way to the Quik Cash, just praying they were open. They were. I left there with barely enough twenties to make bending my wallet hard, but I knew it would be enough.

By the time the cab got me back to the storage unit it was dark. I had a moment of panic when I thought that my stuff was gone, but it was just snow-covered. Needless to say, they gave me a storage space in the very back. The manager leant me a dolly, but it didn't work in the snow, so I just walked it all back, one piece at a time. I tried to put my feet in the same foot prints every time. By the time I was done, my cell phone had died, and the office was closed, so I walked that last three miles back to my apartment and as exhausted as I was, I still needed a drink to get to sleep.

I spent my joyless, anxious, last day in America trying not to freeze to death. Which was also my fault. I got the departure date wrong with the electric company so they shut off the heat and power to my apartment Monday morning, an entire day before I flew to Baghdad. In fairness, they might have turned it back on for me with a phone call, but I had two months' balance overdue, and I spent the last of my enlistment bonus Friday night at Best Buy on a six hundred dollar GPS, which I had yet to discover had no maps of the Middle East.

The power snapped off around seven. I only noticed because by eight it was cold enough to wake me up from the travel pillow and poncho liner I was using for bedding, since all my belongings were now smashed into a 5 x 5 self-storage space by the highway. There are few sensations more miserable than being woken up by the temperature nose-diving. You become helpless and desperate. This feeling was strong enough to bring me out of a deep, alcohol-driven slumber, and I woke still slightly drunk, meaning I had gotten no real sleep at all.

My only friends from the platoon that I knew well enough to help me out, Potter and Rasmussen, were still getting back from a last, debauched hurrah in Mexico for which I was too broke to join in, but I told them I was being visited by some sympathetic ex to save face. I couldn't call an NCO about something this stupid, and I didn't feel like bothering anyone else with it, so I lay there awoken, bladder-swollen miserable and disappointed on my bare mattress, hung-over and shivering. I'm sure I had something else planned for my last day in America.

My final cab would be there in 21 hours.

A bleak light came in through water-stained blinds, sepia painting the room to the strangulated sound of a sewage truck pump at work outside my window, its cold, stricken engine at a gasping idle. Leaning over from the bed, I pushed a pair of blinds aside and ran my fingers over the condensation freezing on the window. The

sewage worker had a wool hood up over his knit cap and he was holding the long, ribbed hose running underground with mittens thick enough to be oven mitts. I watched him shuffling foot to foot for warmth.

Behind the sewage truck, a minivan and a Silverado passed through the nearest intersection just after the light turned red and the traffic camera flashed twice. Whatever day's pay they were headed to earn just got mailed to the bureau of traffic enforcement. Should've stayed in bed assholes, I thought. But then I glanced over at the frost rim on the open top of a Nalgene bottle I had filled with Gatorade and Everclear the previous evening. I decided then that I should probably lay off judging people for a little while, maybe until I got to Iraq. So I curled back into a ball on the mattress and thought about disabling the smoke detectors and perhaps warming myself with a wastepaper fire in the bathtub.

Staring up at the busted-out ceiling panels above my bed, I had the stunned sense that America itself was closing down with my impending departure. There was no point dreading my inevitable arrival in Iraq, my inevitable introduction to war, because there would be no here to remain in anyway. It would all just freeze up out of view while I was gone, like something passed off silently into deep space.

During that last afternoon, when the temperature in my drafty apartment was still modestly above freezing and I was in the middle of needlessly unpacking and repacking my last duffel bag for about the tenth time in a week—the repetitive, anxious shit you do with your empty time before deployment—I decided on a whim to stuff in this chlorine-discolored, neon orange bathing suit. It was hanging stiff where I had left it to dry over the tub spout, like an orange mitten punched through the wall. While I was in Iraq for that whole year those trunks were the only piece of civilian clothing to my name.

It made me think of the long shoreline at Sonoma Coast, where my grandparents used to take me every summer. It was just the three of us. That was the silent edge of the world.

I woke up at least six times that final night, stuffed into the bottom of my winter sleeping bag with the sound of Mountain Dew cans exploding as they froze in their plastic six pack rings next to the front door. I was too cold to get out and toss them in the dumpster outside. I woke up for good to the horn of the taxi. I put my boots on, threw on my DCU blouse, shouldered my rucksack, and walked out with a duffel in each hand.

There was a four-foot wide, yellow ice sheet by the door and the pipes about to freeze which I couldn't do anything about, because for fuck's sake, I was on my way to Baghdad anyway so peace out to the student loan collection agencies, and my

overcharging storage space, and the burnout professors refusing my community college transfer credits, and ex-girlfriends with your cryptic, passive-aggressive e-mails, and my overachieving, married high school friends buying houses already, and the whole mountain of petty bullshit I was certain that I was leaving behind for good.

You can take my rental deposit and shove it up your ass.

The cab smelled like morning breath cigarettes, but the cabdriver put in a piece of gum like she was aware. She looked about fifty but probably wasn't, with gray hair down to her waist under patches of orange highlights. When we got to post she had to wake me—or make me sit up and open my eyes rather—to give the gate guard my ID. She nudged me again when we got to the barracks, and I gave her a whole twenty.

“Last one,” I said. “Thanks for the ride.”

I tried the door, but the company building was still locked. There were other guys in their idling trucks in the parking lot, waiting with their wives and girlfriends. I stood there shivering, but I saw that the cab driver had waited to see if I could get in. She flashed her lights at me, so I climbed back in the front seat.

“Why don't you wait in here where it's warm,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“You boys must be replacing my husband,” she said.

“Oh yeah?”

She laughed, “I ain't eager to see him.”

I didn't know what to say to that.

“How old are you, son?” she said.

“Twenty three,” I told her.

“Guess you're old enough,” she said.

“How's he like it over there?” I asked her. “Your old man.”

“Loves it, or so he says.” She said. “Like a woman wants to hear that.”

“Well.” I said, and I couldn't think of anything else. “I'm sure he's missing you.”

I guess I was doing something distracted and fidgety with my hands. She grabbed one with hers.

“You're just twitching like a rabbit, aíncha?” she said. “Your hands are freezing. You poor little thing.”

I let her rub my hands with hers. It felt nice. I could feel calluses along her palm like she did a lot of yard work and the smell of hand lotion and nicotine came off them. We sat there for a couple minutes listening to Bonnie Tyler and then Shania.

Then I saw the CQ making his rounds come by our company door with the keys to open it up.

I reached for the cab door, “Well I guess I’ll be going,” I said.

“Just a goddamn minute,” she told me and snatched my shirt by the chest.

She kissed me hard on the mouth. It was greasy with cherry lip balm and her lips felt ridged like a pair of salted slugs. I could taste the plug of Kodiak in her lip—she must have put it in after her last cigarette—when she pushed her tongue past my teeth. And then for a moment I kissed her back as she planted a hand on my crotch.

“You keep safe,” she told me with a leer.

I nodded, open-mouthed and speechless, my lips burning, and I closed the door behind me. Rasmussen was standing at the front of the company building when I got there.

“Were you just kissing that cab driver?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

My grandparents raised me by themselves and my grandmother had a flower shop downtown that everybody knew. Sometimes I helped her out after school, cutting flowers and making arrangements. She made me aware at a young age that there is a boutique vocabulary for people that like to smell delicate things, but it’s about as appropriate for describing Baghdad as a ballet lexicon at a boxing match. I guess the best way to start describing Iraq is with the smell.

The deployment stink begins before you even get there. Stuffed into the belly of a military cargo plane—in my case it was a C-17—there is a thin sour-sweetness from the engine exhaust. I have strange emotions about that smell. It feels like an anxiety headache in your sinuses. With your ear plugs stuffed in you can be alone with the long silence of your thoughts on that cold metal floor.

If the entirety of your life before the war equals a known quantity x then you inside the war equals this unknown quantity y you keep underlining with your pencil until it wears through the paper.

So when you walk out toward the lowering back ramp of the plane, like I did, into the Martian air of an Iraqi Spring—and that Martian scene emerges of dust-reddened sun glare over a ragged tarmac cluttered with containers and pallets, and the dead, lusterless white of fine sand and concrete and the dust-white date palms and weeping eucalyptus trees—that strained thread of exhaust fumes becomes a wall of mood-fouling nausea and disconcerting heat that you know will only get worse in the coming weeks. Whatever wonder you had about what the first

moments of the war would feel like—or in the years to come, what it was going to feel like coming back again—it all gets lost in that stink.

The plane exhaust passed away and the eighty of us on that flight walked down the planeside steps without fanfare, and some flight line kid in his blue air force duds and reflective vest said ‘Welcome to Baghdad International’, like it was a layover in Duluth. It was hard to see in the sudden sunlight, but I tried to take it all in, as I fished through the outer pouch of my rucksack for sunglasses.

“Looks like Arizona,” Potter said. “Looks just like Arizona.”

“I’ll bet you planned on saying something stupid like that on the ride over here,” Rasmussen said. “It don’t look like Arizona.”

I asked Sergeant Gordon, my team leader, if we should put our helmets on and he said, “Sure, why not?”

We all took a moment to put our helmets on and waddled away from the plane.

Once you leave the plane you are surrounded, as you will be for the rest of your tour in Iraq, by the sticky presence of dirty car and generator exhaust. Even in the foulest garage you ever walked through, there is no smell in America like it. It is the gathered mass of a million cheap, abused engines swilling low grade fuel, most of them idling nervously in daylong traffic snarls around bomb craters and militia checkpoints.

It is during this dazed and unbelievably long tarmac walk, with your helmet sweat already pooling under your chinstrap, and your overstuffed carry-on rucksack sliding off the shoulders of your body armor to dig into the meat of your biceps, and your fingers reaching muscle failure under the strain of your canvas duffel bag handles, and a weakness spreading in the back of your legs that seems like it could be your undoing just a hundred yards from the plane, when you perform a horrible math exercise where you multiply the discouraged intensity of this moment into the fullness of an entire year in Iraq. Or again, maybe that was just me.

It was a couple of weeks after we got there that the war went to shit. It was like a prairie fire rolled over Iraq in April of 2004 and we got caught in it like everyone else. Every time we rolled up to the hospital in the green zone to pick up our wounded guys it was a zoo of dumbstruck, bandaged privates: First Cav guys from Sadr City, Marines from Anbar, and Big Red One from all points north. Most kids seemed dumbstruck not about getting hit so soon, but that they weren’t going home now.

The Iraqi police we did our patrols with announced at the end of April that they were unwilling to drive the farm road to the Tigris anymore. This probably should

have rung some kind of alarm bell. Sometimes you can't see the sea change until you are under it. So the battalion operations officer, Major Dunbrooke, insisted our platoon drive the farm road at mid-day to restore their confidence and draw out the Sunni militia—Jaysh Al Islam was what they went by—that was sending out night letters to the villagers around Hor Rajab. Graciously, the major rode in the lead truck, but he did have the only up-armored Humvee in the convoy. There had been mortar attacks on the FOB and pot shots taken at our patrols, but our battalion had been too timid to really get our nose bloody, or that was how we talked about.

On paper, I was the driver for our gun truck, but my team leader, Sergeant Gordon, had a hard-on for driving it himself, mostly because he was pretty shit at giving directions. He was the kind of guy who still made an L with his hand to remember what his left was. He was an all right team leader, even if he did get sulky. Our truck was called Delta Four Two over the radio, but her real name was Freek-a-leak (from the Petey Pablo track that was big back then), which was what we painted on the bumper. The name seemed appropriate to both her appearance and her maintenance appetite.

At first light Sergeant Gordon gathered us around the hood of the Freek where he had a laminated map laid out. Our route was drawn in blue alcohol pen.

“So like I was telling you guys last night,” Sergeant Gordon said. “We’re going to find this farm road on the east side of the irrigation canal—“

“West side,” I whispered and I wasn’t sure if it was more or less embarrassing to whisper it. I meant it to be less.

“—correction, west side, and cross over if the bridge holds. The locals just use it for tractors and mules to get to the fields. The Major’s going over first with the up-armor since his truck is the heaviest. If it holds for him, it should hold for the rest of us. If his happy ass drowns, we pull him out of the water and head home. Otherwise we follow the farm road all the way to the river.”

“Are we gonna save him or something if his truck crashes in the water?” Potter asked.

“What kind of question is that?” Sergeant Gordon asked. “Of course we’re gonna save him.”

“We probably shouldn’t jump in with our body armor on. Should we take off our body armor if we gotta jump in the canal?” Potter asked.

“Of course you take your body armor off,” Rasmussen said. “Why you always hold shit up with questions?”

“Cause I don’t want to drown, is all.” Potter said.

“Nobody jumps in the water unless I say so. Anyway, Four Four is in front of us and Sergeant Frasier will probably take care of it,” Sergeant Gordon said.

“None of those mother fuckers in that truck can swim,” Potter said.

“We don’t need everybody jumping in the goddamn water. How about we don’t worry about playing lifeguard? How about we just worry about the bad guys on the far side of the canal? Captain Mutassim says we’re gonna get jumped somewhere between here and here.”

Sergeant Gordon stuck his fat finger at two points on the map about three kilometers apart.

“Does the Major think we’re gonna get hit?” Rasmussen asked.

“Yeah,” Sergeant Gordon said. “He thinks it’s really likely.”

“So why are we driving out there?”

“He said something about the battle space. Extending the battle space. The point is, these guys can’t just do whatever they fuck they want out there.”

“Should we plan on staying overnight then?” I asked. My imagination was running wild.

“Hell, no,” Sergeant Gordon said. “You think the Major’s gonna camp out overnight? He’s got all kinds of meetings. We’re just gonna stir it up and roll back.”

Sergeant Gordon drove the Freek that morning. Freek-a-leak was one of one of our ‘local fabrication armor’ or ghetto-armor Humvees, which looked like something the A-team might weld together during a montage; sheet metal held together by rusty spot welds and bent bolts. Until they got enough real up-armor Humvees in country we would have to make do with the Freek. She looked so slapdash I never sent any pictures of it back home to my grandparents, because I knew it would only make them worry. Instead I sent them a picture of our sturdy-looking Bradley that we never took anywhere since the roads of Baghdad are too narrow for it.

We lined up our eight Humvees in a row in the gravel staging area, loaded the guns, and drove off. I was sitting shotgun beside Sergeant Gordon with my feet on a pair of sandbags and my rifle between my legs. I was a righty, so there was really no way I could shoot my musket length A2 out the window and hope to hit anything more than a couple yards off. There wasn’t much to do but enjoy the scenery and hope Potter was keeping an eye out on the big gun.

Something seemed just so plain about our slow ride out of the FOB that morning, just like all the days since we got there. The same old shuffling line of soldiers outside the beige, big tent, chow hall rubbing their fingers with hand sanitizer. The Bengali contractor cooks walking in and out of the back to the smell of the same

old bacon and eggs. The same bombed-out Iraqi office buildings we built our base around with their walls crumbling around the same twists of rebar. We drove the same old serpentine of sand-filled, shoulder-high Hesco baskets to roll out into the highway traffic circle, where the day workers gathered in squatting circles by the FOB wall to share bread and cigarettes, keffiyahs pulled down to hide their faces, even from each other.

We drove the open highway of Route Irish past the outskirts of south Baghdad. The patchwork of half-built row houses and brick hovels making up Abu D'sheer marked the outer ring of the city. We got up enough speed for the breeze in the window to feel good. The land flattened out into farmland and we took a left off the asphalt onto a meandering dirt road. A skinny pair of teenage boys got off their bikes and stood watching our trucks pass by. I wasn't sure what to make out of their surprised looks. Should've stayed in bed assholes, I imagined them telling us. Date palms lined the road and the footpath berms above the irrigation canals as we crossed into Hor Rajab, and I wondered how any plant could crawl its way out of that dust to grow. I thought about my grandmother's temperamental hibiscus, how she had to fuss over them.

The major's truck arrived at the bridge over the canal and crossed without stopping. The rest of us followed behind him. There was about six inches clearance on either side of the tires and we held our breath until the tires gripped the far bank. I leaned out the window and saw that it was a dirt-filled shipping container, punched through by an improvised culvert. It made a disconcerting, metallic warbling sound as our wheels touched it and we held our breath until we were safely on the other side.

The road took a slow curve around an abandoned, mud brick house before emerging to a wide stretch of elephant grass on either side. The wind rose over the grass and rolled it in waves as we drove through. I felt it drift through the truck. There were long fields of fire around us. That was when that angry popcorn sound started in the treelines.

There was a machine gun team using a cut-out from an irrigation ditch for a bunker. In the spot where they hit us—which was a great spot for them—the embankments on the sides of the road were too steep for any of our trucks to turn around, so we were just stuck there ducks-in-a-row eating bullets. I saw the first rounds hit the truck two in front of us, which slumped onto its right side on flat tires. There was a beat, and then bullets hit the truck in front of us, with the sound of a hammer on aluminum siding, and ricochets knocking up dust trails. There was

another beat with us shouting at the truck behind us to back up. I remember that long beat, that pause in the gunfire, and then we got hit.

It was just four PKM machine gun rounds that ricocheted off our hood into the cab. The rest of the shots went high, but those four bullets turned the windshield glass into an opaque mess. The Freek had an old school, non bulletproof glass windshield, so even though nobody in our truck got hit by actual bullets, we had torn-up hands and faces from shards flying around the truck.

I felt a dull sting all over my face and I winced and ducked down instinctively. I looked over my shoulder and saw Potter and Rasmussen in the bed of the truck hunkered down too, peaking up just enough to see over the cab. A moment passed and the bullets stopped hitting us. Sergeant Gordon was holding his face.

“Potter, you see anything?” He shouted out. “Who’s shooting at us.”

“I don’t see shit,” Potter said. “I heard them shooting. I can’t see shit.”

“Thibodeau why’m I bleeding?” Sergeant Gordon asked. “Check out my face. Why’m I bleeding?”

I looked over at him and he had gone sheet white. There was blood coming down his forehead on both sides. Any other time I would have known right off it was just shallow cuts, but we had always been told that wives’ tale about how maybe you don’t know you got shot with the adrenaline and all. Everybody I ever knew who got shot said that getting shot feels like getting shot.

I pulled off my glove and touched the sticky side of his temple. I could see little pieces of glass dusting his face, with little red beads welling around them, and I said it was just glass.

“Yeah, you too,” he said. “I can’t see shit out this windshield. You gotta bust it out.”

I pulled up my rifle and got as much of a wind-up as I could in the cramped space of the cab. I hammered the butt of the rifle into the glass, but it took a number of blows to bust through. Each blow knocked more glass into the cab, and I forgot to put my right glove back on, so that hand was cut up and bloody by the time I knocked the last of the glass out. Sergeant Gordon had his hand up over his eyes to keep the blood out. He spit into his hand to wipe the blood out of his glasses, before giving up on it and pulled them off his head.

“Lean back, so I can see the rear view,” he shouted, like he was parallel parking.

And I guess we would have been a funny sight to see if we hadn’t been us. Bullets flying all around and we had to drive reverse at about 5 miles an hour tops on our flat tires to keep from rolling a truck down the embankment.

Somehow we managed to crawl the whole convoy backward with the fifty cal in the front truck raking the berm on our right side back and forth like he wasn't sure what he was shooting at. Mortar rounds began to land in the far fields in little gray blossoms, which added more drama to the situation than actual danger. We reversed back about a half mile before the ground leveled off and we circled the trucks in a field. The four of us didn't get off a round in the whole thing, which was probably to our credit, since we didn't get a clear shot at anything. It felt more like surviving an industrial accident than something to be described as some kind of war story.

Sergeant Gordon picked up the hand mike, "Four Six this is Four Two, I think we got some light injuries in our truck. We're gonna need the medic to take a look at us."

The lieutenant's voice came over the radio speaker, "Medic's wounded. Put your truck to the middle of the perimeter and help the platoon sergeant set-up the HLZ for the medevac. Platoon Sergeant will take a look at you."

This was the first we knew anybody got hit. We drove our truck up next to four four in the middle of the perimeter and saw Newcomb pulled bloody out of the bed of the truck. Doc Botts, the medic, was sitting next to the truck with a giant swaddle of bandage around his left hand. Someone had already sheared his sleeve off at the bicep and there was blood streaked from his hand down to his elbow. I'd say we rushed over to help, but part of it was just that needing to know.

"He'll be fine, just don't touch his tourniquet," Doc Botts was saying.

I walked up to where Doc was sitting and he grabbed me by my pant leg. I squatted down.

"Look at me," he said. "You gotta make sure I don't pass out before the medevac touches down. I gotta tell the flight surgeon where he got shot."

"Where'd he get shot?" I asked.

"Through his arm. In his shoulder. Just under the armor," Doc said. "I got a dressing and a tourniquet on. There's an artery on his arm."

"I'll make sure you're don't pass out," I said. "Do you think you're going to pass out?"

"Yeah," he said. "I don't know. Yeah"

"Botts!" the platoon sergeant called out. "He's looking pale. Are we giving him an IV bag?"

I tapped Doc on the cheek. "Hey, wake up. Should we give Newcomb an IV bag?"

He nodded. "Right arm."

"He said, yeah!" I called out.

Somebody ran to their truck and came back with a pair of IV bags. I helped Doc stand up and walked him over to where Newcomb was laid out. The lieutenant had taken off his helmet and was sucking from his camelback. He had the hand mike in his ear and he was staring down at Newcomb's shoulder.

"The bird's ten minutes out,"

I stared down at Newcomb, laid out on a poncho. They had cut off his DCU top and his t-shirt was soaked in sweat. There was a small pillow's worth of field dressings around his shoulder that were half bled through, but it seemed to have stopped. His skin was pale but his eyes were quick and alert. I had a sudden rush of relief as it occurred to me that he was going to be all right. He looked up at me and I remembered this chinless clown had lost my only Leatherman that I lent him the first week of the deployment and wouldn't own up to it, and I had a grudge against him to that very day which had only grown for the fact that I could never in good conscience voice my resentment toward him again just for the stupidity of getting himself shot. I had a very powerful feeling just then that I needed to say something to Newcomb that he would find funny. It felt desperately important.

"How do I look Newcomb?" I asked. "I got a date tonight at the MWR tent."

"You got glass in your face," Newcomb said. His voice was soft. He was staring at me.

"Botts says you're gonna be all right. Medevac bird'll be here in less than ten."

Sergeant Delmar from fourth squad stuck his right arm with the needle near the inside of his elbow and Newcomb didn't move. He plugged in the IV and held it over his head.

"You're looking good, Newcomb," Potter said. "The worst of it's over."

"Yeah," Newcomb said.

"That's badass taking a shot like that, Newcomb. You got some iron balls, man." Rasmussen said.

"Can I get a blanket?" Newcomb said, and his teeth were chattering.

"Yeah, sure you can," Sergeant Gordon said. "Raz, get a poncho out of the truck."

Just then we heard the birds.

"There's no time!" the lieutenant shouted. "Just get him ready for the helicopter."

Sergeant Delmar unfolded the stretcher on the ground next to Newcomb. Potter grabbed him under the neck and right shoulder while Rasmussen grabbed his legs. They sidled him up unto the stretcher and he was shaking. I looked away from him to see that Botts had passed out. I put my shoulder under his armpit and stood him up, but he was just dead weight. I gave him some light taps on the face and he just tossed his head side to side fitfully.

“Botts,” I said. “Botts, the birds are here. You gotta wake up.”

“I’m ready,” he said.

The Blackhawk landed in a cloud of grass debris and dust. Botts walked up to the crew chief, but I don’t know what he told him. There was too much sweat and dirt in my eyes and I couldn’t keep them open. I felt the helicopter take off in a great billow. When I finally got my eyes open, Newcomb and Botts were gone. We took the drive home slowly. It was a long uneventful drive. I stared out at the farm fields as the sound of the highway got closer, the way it had all changed.

When we got back to the FOB, the medics told us to strip down to PT shorts and walk over to the aid station to let them pick the rest of the glass out. The first thing that occurred to me, as my thoughts finally started to settle, was to pull out those orange trunks from the bottom of my duffel bag, and I walked across half of the FOB in all my gleaming white, sweat-rash pimpled skinniness wearing just that gaudy bathing suit and flip flops, black blood drying all over my cheeks and neck.

While they were treating me, I got the incorrect early news that Newcomb was all right. In reality, he was dead by the time they got him to the hospital in Baghdad, from cold IV bag and blood loss-induced hypothermia. The IV bag he got stuck with had been kept mistakenly in fourth squad’s ice chest. It might as well have been a bag full of arsenic. At the memorial they had a picture of him in his little league outfit that his mother sent the chaplain, because somehow in the two months we had been in Iraq, no one had bothered to take a single picture of Newcomb. Most of us never learned his first name until that day, which was Linus. After his grandfather, it said. He didn’t look so bad when they got him onto that medevac, I thought. He just looked a little rattled, but I meant to tell him later that he looked pretty tough out there whenever it was I saw him again.

I was sitting in this ratty old beach chair, whose existence on the FOB was never explained to me, outside the aid station when my platoon sergeant told the lot of us that Newcomb was gonna be all right. It barely penetrated the skin after passing through his body armor. What a relief that was. We passed around a smashed pack of Camels and I wasn’t a smoker, but why not. I was slouched down in that seat, watching that sunset with this terribly impressed female staff sergeant pulling tiny flecks of glass out of my face. That adrenaline come-down just then and that everybody-made-it-out-alive feeling was like the biggest, baddest blunt you ever put lips to. I sucked that crooked Camel down until it singed my finger hairs.

Later that fall, after I watched a truck full of my friends hit a six-pack of artillery shells dug in the road—and there wasn’t a piece of it or them too big to fit in your

cargo pocket that came out of that mushroom cloud—I put those magic shorts back on and sat in the port-a-john with my knuckles in my mouth, but they didn't make me feel one bit better about any of it.

And as I sit here trying to remember their faces, nothing comes to me. All I can picture is Newcomb for some reason. I remember leaving Best Buy as it was closing with that stupid GPS in my hands, and he was right there in front of me with his mom and dad and his kid sister. He had that sweet-looking redhead girl who should have been out of his league clutching his side with her makeup gathering down around her chin. They all must have come down from Oregon to see him off. And I remember his mom in her Army sweatshirt she must have bought that day at the PX, walking to her yellow-ribboned minivan, with two overstuffed bags full of Gameboy cartridges and CDs and a new iPod and anything in the world he could have ever wanted in the store she had stuffed in there. She was asking him about his jacket. And he was looking so pleased with himself for all the attention, like it was amusing to him all the fuss they were making. That's how I remember him and he told her, "It's not that cold. I just left it in the car."

I was parked next to them and as he was brand new, I was trying to remember his name, but it didn't come to me. I saw his dad fumbling through all his pockets for the keys with the family standing around anxiously. He had a salt and pepper mustache and was giving them all a good natured dad-type shake of the head, like 'where did those darn things run off to.' They were all standing there shivering when the parking lot lights turned off.

ANDREW SLATER served in the US Army as an infantry and Special Forces officer from 2000 to 2010. He deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq as an infantry platoon leader with the 82nd Airborne Division, followed by three additional deployments with the Special Forces. He currently teaches high-school English in Iraq.