

C . L . M I L E S

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## Duty

I

Everyone in the division who was not on duty was there in the white sand on the nearly empty beach drinking from a bottle of gin. We were back from deployment, the first one, on our way to New Orleans. This was before Katrina. Chief Waylon kept saying, “We shouldn’t be drunk in public like this, but we are, so fuck it.” We walked along the sidewalks and past the fruit-colored nightclubs and Herb kept looking around and saying, “I don’t get it. I thought Florida was supposed to be pretty?” We returned to the beach and took off our shoes and removed our pants and laid there knowing we had to return to the ship soon. That was dreadful. A woman wearing a necklace of cornflake pearls walked by, not smiling, but watching our display as she displayed herself. We raised our heads from the sand and looked at her and she looked at us and nobody said anything. That was before I became a petty officer, when I was only a fireman.

2

There were always jellyfish in the oily water around the moored ships, rising and coming gradually into view through the oakish brown, fanning out their long threads, ballooning their bodies, then contracting and sinking. The trick was to hit them with the ash of your cigarette.

“Did you get him?”

“No,” Herb answered.

“Let me show you.” Charlie tried.

“You didn’t get him either,” Herb said.

“Look how fat he is.” Charlie pointed at the jellyfish; it was like a tablecloth in the water, heavy and white. Herb’s ash was falling. “I think you did it.”

“Got him.”

“Good job,” Charlie said.

He used his Elvis voice: “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

They looked out at the bay. The water was walnut-colored. There were two tug boats tugging a frigate out past the buoys, their diesel engines hammering. They sounded like frustrated clocks.

“So Herb. What is the purpose of this game?”

“The purpose is that there is no purpose.”

“I’ll write that down.”

“Also write down that you receive no prize for winning.”

“And what is the no-prize?”

“You feel good a moment, the greatest prize of all. If you hit the jellyfish you feel good. No different from when you throw a basketball and it goes through the hoop without touching the rim.”

“Swoosh.”

“Ash on the jellyfish.”

“A pure shot.”

“Bam.”

### 3

He saw the carrier group fanned out in the water, each ship was making a wake of milky turquoise. In the sky, jets careered, maneuvering beyond sound and gravity. Helicopters hovered in the air; like spiders, they lowered a thread, leaving boxes of parts, mail, canned food.

To his west, far off, he saw the shore, a faint gloom of buckeye brown. The smell was clean, the air lightly chilled. The claustrophobic feeling of the engine room dissolved into the colors around him. The fierce sunlight made him squint. His vision seemed to reach further than it ever had, meeting the sky, returning along the sea, then jumping out to touch the border where the sky and the sea met.

“Hey asshole what are you doing out here?”

It was Chief Waylon. His black mustache was trimmed perfectly except for a single hair that was reaching into his left nostril. Burning in his hand was a white cigarette that was twice as long as his fingers. He looked at Charlie.

“Chief?”

“No. The Captain. Of course it’s Chief. Why are you out here?”

“I got my last vaccination.”

“That is not an answer to my question.” Chief stepped closer now and studied Charlie’s face.

“Why aren’t you in the engine room Fireman Nelson.”

“I was just going to have a smoke.”

“Then why aren’t you smoking?”

“Because I haven’t lit my cigarette yet.”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

Charlie lifted his cigarette to his mouth and reached into his pocket for his lighter, but Chief already had his zippo out and he held its flame to the tip of Charlie’s cigarette. Charlie sucked till it began to burn.

Chief turned and grabbed the lifeline and leaned on it.

“Goddamn beautiful out here,” Chief said.

Charlie grabbed the lifeline.

“Fireman Nelson, don’t grab the lifeline. You know that’s against regulation.”

“Aye aye Chief.”

Charlie let go and stood straight. The other ships were within a fifty yards. “How long do you think we’re going to be out here, Chief?”

“No telling. Could be a year. Could be six months.”

“We’re already running out of stores.”

“They’re just having trouble getting supplies to all these ships out here. Operations are messy. We haven’t done anything like this since the first Gulf War.”

“What was that like?”

“Long.”

Chief Waylon took the last drag of his cigarette and tossed it into the ocean. He looked at Charlie.

“Get your ass in the engine room.”

“Yes Chief.”

“I’m coming down there with a slice of ham, and I’m going to drop it in the bilge. You listening to me?”

“Yes Chief.”

“Or are you looking at the water?”

“I am listening Chief”

“And, when I eat that ham, if I taste oil, I’m going to kick your ass. You understand me?”

“Understood Chief.”

4

The inspection lasted longer than the time it took us to get ready for it. We were standing at attention. The lights did not buzz with a sound, but with how they looked; you could hear them by seeing them. I'd shaved real good that morning because I failed the last inspection and had made the whole division do a second five mile run that day. They didn't hit me with soap-filled socks like in *Full Metal Jacket*. They looked at me, and I looked back. Their look said don't do that again, and my look said I won't. The inspector was a Senior Chief with long fingers and marbles for knuckles. He took his time with each of us, nearly slow motion, ratcheting up our discomfort. If any of us tried to shift our stance, or scratch our face, he'd say "Fail" and walk out and we would p. t. all day and shine brass all night. He came to me and spent a long time underneath my chin, looking. He smelled like coffee. "Pass," he said, and scored a mark on the paper he was holding and moved on.

5

I heard a squeal. I saw sparks missile from the turbine break between the module and the reduction gear. The ship rocked. The sparks fell onto the burlap bags of rags we had strapped to the bulkhead, and the smoke started rising, the smell of it like wet leaves burning. Before I could reach the mic to call it up to the control station, the flames were rising. I called it up. I went to the hose, but my gasmask carrier strap snagged on the stanchion on the bulkhead and, when I tried to yank at it, it snapped. I held my gasmask carrier in one hand and the hose in the other. I walk-jogged to the fire. I got to it and understood the hose was limp; I hadn't activated it. I dropped the hose. The smoke, a thick cloud above the burning rags, was spreading in gray scarves in the atmosphere of the engine room. I had my gasmask carrier in my hand now. The fire was burning. My lungs hurt. I went to where the fire hose was screwed into the pipe and tried to activate it but one hand wasn't enough. I threw my gasmask carrier. I activated the fire hose by opening the feed valve. The hose went wild. A thick canvas snake, thwacking. I shut the valve. The fire party came down. They fought the fire. One of them dragged me out.

6

We were looking at a big magnolia tree in Rota. People were in the streets putting up tents and chairs, not talking to each other, their eyes quiet as they worked. The music in the cabs was techno. Outside the town the peanut-butter-colored hills were scored with threads of shattered rock. Most of the roofs were red. The old man, gaunt as a cornstalk, circled us and I could see he had a snarl about him. He worked up to

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Scratching scratching scratching. Our wire brushes were toothbrush-sized and their brass bristles wore quick. We had boxes of them. One of the others started cleaning the chips up with a handbroom and a dustpan. Nobody moved very fast. Puffs of red rose where the bristles kissed the rust.

## IO

Herb and Charlie brought their boon over to the workbench on the lower level of the engine room. There, in the steel sink, they washed the finger. Its exposed knuckle shone like ivory. The thumb was stiff as pipe. The piece of flesh was pliable as a worm. They dried them with clean rags.

“You think there’s more?”

Charlie thought. “I don’t know. Maybe. I hope not.”

“Where did they come from?”

“Hell if I know. Something explains it.”

“Something?”

They were laying each item down when they heard the whistle over the main circuit, then: “General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battle stations.”

They knew it was another launch.

“Here,” Charlie said, opening a locker storage door, “put them in here.”

They threw in the finger and the flesh and the thumb, three slaps against aluminum. Herb left the engine room.

Charlie donned his gasmask and put on his fire retardant gloves. He went to the top level of the engine room. He sat on a stool before a back-up propulsion council. He became dizzy and fell over. The stool went bouncing. He picked it up and set it down and then sat on it. He was before the council, watching it.

## II

The forward engine room is number one, the aft number two. Each engine room is the starting point of one of the two shafts that propel the ship. The starboard shaft begins in the forward engine room, the port shaft in the aft engine room. Each shaft emerges from a reduction gear. Each reduction gear is turned by two main engines. Each of the main engines is contained in a separate module. The engines are gas turbines. My rate is Gas Turbine Technician, but I never get technical with the engines. The turbines’ output is high rpm and low torque, which the reduction gears transfer to low rpm and high torque. The aft engine room, where I work, has three levels, and spans the complete width of the ship, hull to hull. It is the largest space on the ship. On the lower level there are fuel purifiers, fuel pumps, seawater pumps, lube oil pumps, a network of

pipes, grates over the bilge, the bilge itself, and the foundations for the reduction gear and the engines. On the second level I can get a good look at the bulk of the reduction gear if I walk behind the electrical generator; but on the upper level, I can get a better look from above, on a narrow catwalk. To me the reduction gear has always looked like a medieval torture device. It is as wide as it was tall, a squat block, with several window-like flaps along the top ridge that are shut and sealed with oversize padlocks. The Chief Engineer keeps the keys. Sailors have been known to toss a wrench in the gears to prevent deployment. Captains are known to send sailors to the brig for life for doing so.

## 12

We met the tanker in the Arctic. I didn't think dolphins went that far north, but they were there, following us, playing in our wake, eating our garbage. It was cold. The water was blue. It looked gelid. The foam on it was something alien, soap on marble; it slipped around, wiped itself down the angles of the waves, gathered in the troughs, got mixed in the water; it brightened the brine.

The tanker pulled up next to us. They shot us the line through the air. My crew heaved the cable over. The tanker guys hooked the fuel line up to the cable. The two ships kept pulling apart in the quick waves, and the lightness of us aggravated it. We should have refueled earlier, but we were caught in a storm. If my guys were heaving and holding to the rope when the tanker pulled away, they would be jerked into the ocean, most likely chopped up in the prop, or drowned in the wash, or would die from hypothermia. I told them exactly when to let go of the rope, and exactly when to heave.

It took all day. All damn day. Finally, we got the fuel line over. They started pumping. Five thousand gallons a minute at both stations, forward and aft.

Halfway done, the seated fuel line broke from the coupling. They didn't have their hand on the off switch over there, that's for sure. It rained fuel oil on us and on the dolphins for several minutes, a hard spray that sheened the water.

After a time, we got the lines back over and finished refueling.

Fuck it was cold. We finished, and when we sailed off, I looked back. The spilled fuel was a lake of melted armor, plates of reflection giving back the light.

## 13

"I'm here for my last shot, Chief."

"Sit down sailor."

The padding on the table was cool, the office clean, the light white.

"I kind of don't want it."

There was no reaction from Chief Doc, so Charlie pushed him further.

“They make me feel sick. Like I’m going to throw up. But I never do. I’m left on the edge of it. I can hardly move after. I was reading a letter my cousin sent me. He’s a big-time reader. Said anthrax shots are not approved by the FDA. Said they give you bad side effects for life. Make your babies have frog feet.”

Chief tossed the needle in the disposal. He stared at Charlie, his face twisted with disgust.

“So fucking what? Are you bleeding? Is it that time of month again?”

“I’d rather not get anymore shots, Chief.”

“Rather not? Who are you? Bartleby? It’s an order, not a request. You will receive these vaccinations. You understand me sailor?”

“Yes Chief. Understood Chief.”

Chief Doc’s nose was an inch from Charlie’s.

“Who do you work for sailor?”

“Chief Waylon, Main Propulsion Division.”

“So you’re a fireman.”

“Yes Chief.”

“Do you want me to tell Chief Waylon you’re being a pussy, so he can keep you up all night cleaning the bilge while you’re shipmates are sleeping?”

“No Chief.”

“That’s right. Now leave my space before I kick you in the balls. Actually,” Chief Doc turned to him, “I can’t kick you in the balls. You don’t have any. So just get out.”

“Aye aye Chief.”

Charlie left. He came to the hatch of the engine room, but instead of going down, he walked aft, out onto the flight deck, to have a smoke and see the ocean.

#### 14

Vulgarity and cursing were an art. Their every conversation was laced with words like pussy, cock, ball-sack, titties, asshole, cocksucker, motherfucker, cunt-mouth, faggot, homo, anal-lover, ass-licker, ass-fucker, shit-lips, tampon-sucker, dick-wad, pussy-fart, fat-ass, baby-dick, bitch-ass, and several others.

Also popular was the practice of singling out a vulgar grunt or odd turn of phrase in a pornographic video, then repeating it until it was embroidered into their daily language. If two sailors were walking down the passageway, saying: “Oh yah bay-bay, oh yah bay-bay,” you would know from where they derived the idiom.

In Charlie’s berthing, where twenty-two men slept on padded shelves, they had no shame taking turns in the shower, tugging themselves free of lust. At one point, they logged the drain.



This was possible because the crew was all male. There were two female officers who worked administration in the officer's ward, but smartly, and under the advice of the executive officer, who was rumored to be bedding them both, they remained clear of the lower decks.

## 15

The sky was greenish. It was so warm they had to take their shirts off. An officer walked by and recognized them. He said they were in a foreign country, representing their nation. He told them to put their shirts back on. Right now, he said. Herb wanted to say that they'd already been told to go home. So screw the people here. But instead he waited until the officer was far off and then said it to himself.

They found a cab and paid for a ride to the brothel.

It looked like a bar. The lights were purple. There were a few old men there who ignored the sailors and the girls. The sailors ordered drinks. Some of them knew Spanish and could say cervaza, so that's what they drank.

The girls strolled out dressed in lingerie and see-through shawls. One of them, she was short and angry-looking and had black hair in a braid that reached her knees, played the stereo and began dancing. She drew a pole down from the ceiling. She produced a banana; it was a show. A tall girl with black hair and pale skin began playing with her breasts before Herb. She said she was from Romania. Said her name was Charlie.

"No shit," Herb said, "I have a buddy named Charlie."

In the room where they went there was a small sink. She washed them both before she put the condom on him. She laid on the bed, very business-like. He was too drunk to care what she said. She didn't seem to care either. The sheets were white and unwrinkled. On a shelf in the wall were dildos, most were pink, some blue, and there was a big orange one, thick as a squid, and shaped like one, with a finned head that fanned out into an arrow. There were other sex toys he had never seen.

## 16

Charlie was wiping up beneath the fuel pump they had repaired when he found something that felt like a wet eraser. It was a piece of flesh, about the size and shape of a band-aid and about the same color of wet clay. There was no blood on it. He held it in his palm. He imagined keeping it a secret, putting it in the pocket of his coveralls. At first he thought it had come from himself. But it was not his. His skin was peach. And it was not Herb's because Herb's was ink. So it was a cross, a mixture of the two. He wondered if a piece had fallen off from each of them and fused. It sounded absurd. No

one else entered this bilge except Chief Waylon. But Chief's skin was sunlight, a white so bright it nearly burned your eyeballs. He put it in his pocket. He continued to clean.

He looked forward. He saw Herb interposed between a firewater pump and the stanchion of a floor grate, rocking back and forth, scrubbing. He retrieved a screwdriver from the tool chest that was welded into the far corner on the second level. He went back down to the lower level and unscrewed the deck plates from their support bars. He put the screws in his pocket. He knew they would fall out, so he went back to the workbench and found a ziploc bag and put the screws in there. He sealed the bag and put it on the bench.

Back on the lower level, he lifted the deck grates. Carefully, slowly, and feeling with his balance the movement of the ship, he carried the grates to the other side of the lower level, and set them in a narrow space between the bracings of the main engine modules and the stairwell. The ship was amazingly smooth in the water, barely listing, which he was happy about. He could hear the water sliding by on the other side of the hull. He looked in the bilge. It was no dirtier than usual. In a deep wedge, created by a triangle of bracings, his shadow lay. There, in the cloak, he saw a human thumb.

## 17

The heat bore down from the sky like a drill. The sidewalk glowed. A short rain shower had passed over the base in the early morning, leaving the air thick. At the gates, the guards were nestled behind sandbags, gripping M-60's; others were in fatigues with rifles, walking around cars. Their uniforms sagged. The pushed mirrors on wheels. Sweat pasted their skin. History meant nothing to them; their lives were in the present; they had to be ready, alert, in the moment. They stood watch for twelve hours. They hungered for sleep and were starved. They smiled dumbly, or dumbly smiled, but not because they were dumb, and not because they were happy.

## 18

They ran out of fruit. Then bread. Then the food came from cans. Bone-pale ravioli in salty red sauce. Spongy carrots. Little styrofoam beans in wet cement. A dark spinach the men called leafy diarrhea. Each food item was dumped from a can to the serving tin without being cooked. On the messdecks, the soda and juice dispensers broke, and the lament of their loss passed through the crew like a plague. The milk stores went bad when a refrigerator unit started on fire. As they ate, bunched together in small tables, huddled over their trays, they stirred their food.

"You going to eat that leafy diarrhea?" Herb asked.

"Oh hell yes," Charlie said. "Going to gobble it up."

“Tasty. Isn’t it?”  
“Delicious.” Charlie nibbled at a spoonful.  
“Tastes nothing like shit.”  
“Nothing like shit at all.”  
“Like cake,” Herb said. “Like chocolate cake.”  
“With little nuts in it,” Charlie said.  
“Nutty chocolate cake.”  
“Shit-colored nutty chocolate cake.”  
“Tastes nothing at all like shit.”  
“Just looks like it.”  
“Just a little.” Herb scooped a spoonful and held it in the air a moment and closed his eyes and ate it.

## 19

Herb asked Charlie: “Can I get a courtesy flush?”  
“A what?”  
“A courtesy flush.”  
“I’m not following.”  
“Just flush it.”  
“But I’m still shitting.”  
They were side by side, in the stalls.  
“I know. But it stinks.”  
“So does yours.”  
“Of course, all shit stinks. Yours probably smells as bad as mine because we eat the same food. But yours will always smell worse to me because it’s not mine. And mine to you is like that. So we courtesy flush.”  
“You’re fucking with me.”  
“No. We’re stuck here, side by side, on this floating steel banana, in this tiny ass head, and we’re smelling each other’s shit, so let’s do what we can.”  
“So just flush?”  
“Yes. If we flush after each turd, we’ll lessen the stench. It’s a pact.”  
“A pact. I like that.”  
Charlie flushed.

## 20

What the war was all about, why it had begun, how it was getting along, who was fighting it, where the tomahawk missiles they launched went, and what events

occurred when they landed: these were of little concern for Charlie. But he did know their presence in the Middle East had something to do with 9-11. He knew this because he had been scheduled to leave for bootcamp on that day. He was still sleeping on the couch when his mother woke him and turned his attention to the television. The towers were falling. He refused to accept his mother's anxiety; the gravity of the situation had yet to pull him into its orbit.

"What if you go to war?" His mother paced the living room, her bare feet sinking into the shag carpet. There was a marshmallow of dish soap on her wrist bone. Her flat black hair was parted and tied in a bun. She turned her head toward Charlie. Her mouth was nearly shut. "I don't like this. They say it's an attack."

"I'll deal with it."

His father came into the house, feed dust on the backs of his hands and on his shoulders, his flannel tucked into his work jeans. He walked closer to pick up on the conversation. Charlie realized that his father, Tim, had been listening to the news on the radio in the barn.

"Didn't need help Dad?"

"Not today."

"Are you still leaving today?" His mother asked. Now she was gnawing at her nails with her front teeth. She looked like a gerbil.

"As far as I know."

"Maybe you should stay home."

His father jumped in. "He has made his promise, dear. He has signed his name on the dotted line. He is not backing out now. He is going. He has to keep his word. He is a man now. Let him alone and make up his own mind."

Charlie sat up and looked at his father.

His father asked: "You are going, right?"

"Of course."

Not long after their conversation the recruiter called. They were delayed. They would leave tomorrow.

In the early afternoon of September 12, 2001, Charlie entered the government van along with five other recruits. Their recruiter drove. He crawled in the driver's seat and said, "Buckle up kids, we're live." He was affable but quiet. They headed south, toward Recruit Training Camp near Chicago, Illinois. They listened to the radio. They talked of the news. No one knew what would happen. They would have to wait. Stopping only for gas, they arrived early in the morning on the thirteenth of September, about 1 am.

Bootcamp was this: cleaning, running, shining brass, marching, eating quickly, sweeping, being tired, learning rank, shutting up, tooth-brushing the shower, shining your boots, dressing properly, making your rack.

**21**

The pier was packed with kin, dressed real nice. They shouted and waved flags and cried and jumped and trembled and spun around and held their babies and gripped the hands of their children. When they met their sailors, they embraced, squeezing life into each other. You could see the energy; it wasn't in the air, it was in them. Some of them squealed. The ensign billowing from the mast was oversized; it nearly touched the water. The admiral was there, proud of something, walking around and shaking hands and returning salutes. He was clean and kind and his back was straight. The guards that followed him turned their heads like owls. Later, everyone walked away with their arms around each other. I think they went to their cars. I bet they drove to restaurants. I bet they ate good meals.

**22**

On the day of the ceremony, he marched with his division. The warm sun cut through the wind, brightening his face. From their barracks to the long hall, they sang cadence; first the AROC's lone voice, then the division's full echo:

Everywhere we go  
people wanna' know  
who we are  
and where we come from  
so we tell them  
we ain't the Coast Guard  
a boat full of retards  
we are the Navy  
the world's finest Navy

They filed into the long hall as they had practiced, division by division, squares of bodies in symmetrical formation. Charlie stood at parade rest, doubting what he'd done. But something happened.

It was the Secretary of Defense, a man with a professional bearing. What he said in his commencement speech at his bootcamp graduation made Charlie believe he'd found more than an escape from the farm in military service.

He was at the podium, the Secretary, in a clean, manure-colored suit, taking in all the graduates, smiling, his arms out wide, as if astounded, or proud. He did not look at a piece of paper. He spoke from his head; his words came from nowhere. His voice was clear and rich through the speakers. There was no other sound, not even a child crying. It was November, 2001. This is what he said:

“This is a crucial hour for the United States. We are in a time of war. As each person here knows, a shadowy enemy attacked our country. Just last Wednesday, I visited the World Trade Center, where thousands of innocent people were killed, many still lost in the rubble, the smoke still smoldering as they moved the debris. And then we all know that new attacks could come at any time.

“The US Navy is coming to the rescue again. On ships, they’re bringing US aircraft within bombing range of the enemy. We will root out and destroy the terrorists in whatever camp or cave or tunnel or country they may lurk. Some of you may be preparing missiles to launch at the enemy and destroying their deadly weapons. No matter where you are — the Mediterranean, The Atlantic, the Pacific — what you do will matter. You will be an outpost of freedom, helping to strike the enemy there before he strikes here. You will be defending not just the honor of America — that is a worthy mission in itself — but you’ll also be defending your parents, brothers and sisters, friends from high school, neighbors. And you’ll learn a lot about life on the deck of a ship — more than you may think.

“Years ago, Herman Wouk wrote a book called *The Winds of War*, an epic tale of the US Navy. One hero of that story was a career Navy man. He knew the ups and downs of war and peace. He found inner strength when walking the ship at night. On clear nights, no matter how cold the wind or how rough the sea, he spent hours after dinner alone on the flying bridge. The broad, dark ocean; the streaming, pure air; the crowded stars arching overhead always made him feel what the Bible called the Spirit of God hovering on the face of the waters.

“The cause of our country is the divinely sanctioned cause of human freedom. So hold your heads up high, do your duty, know that America is proud of you, and we thank you. We thank your parents for giving you patriotism, courage, and the dedication to voluntarily put your lives at risk. May God bless each of you and our country.”

After they were dismissed, Charlie was proud to shake his hand.

“Thank you for the speech, sir.”

“No,” the Secretary said, tapping him on the shoulder, “thank you.”

23

According to Montaigne, there is a distinction between telling a lie and lying. Telling a lie “means saying something false but which [you] have taken for true.” Lying “implies going against [your] conscience, and thus applies only to those who say what is contrary to what they know.”

Therefore, if you don’t have a conscience, you cannot be lying.

24

I asked him one time how far they go.

“Tomahawks?” he said.

“No,” I said, “relationships. Of course tomahawks.”

He said he couldn’t say; it was top secret. He was a tomahawk tech, a tall guy with a smart nose and glasses. He was important, privileged, clean. I was covered in fuel oil and grease, a disposable fireman. In the Navy, Fireman means janitor.

I waited till he was pickled. This was in Ft. Lauderdale, at a bar called Hotty Scottie’s, where none of us belonged, being unbeautiful and poorly dressed. He was on his way out, to the civilian universe, that other dimension. After deployment, reenlistments were rare.

“Around the earth three times,” he said.

I knew it was a lie. But I asked “Why three?”

He said, “In case you miss the first two times.”

25

If you were to have hovered slightly above it, say off the port side, filming a recruitment commercial, or a video for a promotional campaign, the ship would have appeared impetuous, dashing over the liquid open, cleaving its way, the hull chiseling, etching a path.

But had you stayed longer, studied the movement, you would have noticed, during those long days of deployment, that the ship only travelled in a circle, a circle within box, a box mapped out and designated by someone in the Pentagon. Inside of it, they went round and round, a naval carousel, waiting for the next launch when they would send nimble missiles into the sky, over the water, and onto the land, spoiling whatever it was they fell onto: persons, buildings, homes, mosques, roads, bridges, date trees, all of it blown, destroyed, wrecked, ruined, shattered.

Sometimes the circumambient rigor was broken by side missions. They transported a few Marine units, carried loads of stores to other ships, gave a SEAL Team a ride.

The most significant of these missions was when they went back to a chokepoint in the Straits of Hormuz. It was the closest they came to combat. They had received a report of pirates, several small fishing boats worth, supposedly Baath Party loyalists. This later turned out to be false. The report said these pirates had been harassing civilian ships, trying to gain a larger vessel, supposedly, to attack a carrier with.

They waited until night to leave their box. The light of the moon was egg-white, and it simmered over the ebony water. The air had cooled. The sky was a dense black dome.

When they came within range, shirtless men were standing on the small decks; some were hanging from the roof of the small cabins, others were in the water, bathing; several were pissing off the back, their streams like sparkling threads.

When these pirates saw the destroyer approaching with its sheer lights and fat guns aimed ahead, at them, they hooted and howled and fired their weapons into the air. Some of them fell over and it was assumed they were drunk. So they gave a warning.

The executive officer's amplified voice travelled over the water, and when it met the fishing boats, the men grew even wilder. Some of their fire whizzed by the ship. A bullet thunked against the hull.

The Captain gave the order.

Their rounds led to split timber, segments of hull, sliced sections of rafts, floating boards. Blood, blooming in the black water. Shards of bodies, bullet-chewed. The wedge of a shoulder, floating like a toy in the kitty pool. A torso, something, its bonelessness stunning. Sheared skulls. Gobbets of flesh. Lumps, pink and floating. Guts. The jellies inside us. Cheers from moments earlier were far away. In another world. Calling to this one.

## 26

(What a load of bullshit. This never happened. The whole killing the pirates thing is much too dramatic, and the violence is cartoonish. The author has obviously fabricated an incident to make up for his insecurities about never having seen actual combat. He has masculinity issues. He is overcompensating. In fact, this whole thing—and what is it exactly? a story? a series of vignettes? a hodge podge of hyperbolized memories?—is vulgar, disgusting, misogynist, racist, and incredibly insensitive. I wish it had not been written.)

## 27

He was certain the war was honorable and just. He was certain of his pride. He was certain of his own certainty. He was certain he was a part of what kept the ship going; that the ship was a part of what kept the war going. And long as they were going, as



long as they were moving and he was working, the energy that environed him cloaked his exhaustion and etherized his ability to think.

But he was looking at a thumb. It was lifeless. There was a marble-sized knuckle on one end, a soft fingernail on the other.

28

“Remember that day they let us off early? Then the next day we came in and we went to the messdecks for that meeting, and all those officers were there, and they were all lawyers, and we all made out our wills? Remember that?”

“Yes. That was about a week before deployment. Those officers were crisp. I didn’t know you could be in the Navy and be so clean.”

“They were in dress whites.”

“I’ve never worn my dress uniform except in bootcamp.”

“Me neither. That day they let us off early. It was that night.”

“What was that night?”

“It was something that happened to me.”

“You know I can’t get serious in this hot ass engine room.”

“Hear me out.” They both laid down their rags and spray bottles and sat on a wide pipe, side by side. “After work that day, I took a shower, got dressed, and walked off base. I had no place in mind to go to, but I felt like getting lost. You ever feel that?”

“Most certainly.”

“So I started going down a road I had never been on before. I think it was Eastern Shore. I had already been to the post office to mail home some stuff, and I had already had supper.”

“Where’d you eat?”

“That Haitian restaurant.”

“Oh.” Herb clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “The one with the curry, where the cute girl with dreads works? That one?”

“Yes. It was delicious. I even like it spicy now.”

“You mean to tell me Snow White Charlie likes spicy Haitian curry?”

“Yes I do.”

“You have changed. How about that waitress?”

“Oh come on. I’m too white for her.”

“You’re a man who knows his limits.”

“I suppose.”

“So what next?”

“Next I got lost. It was dark, but not all the way. You know in the country where I’m from there’s no light so it gets real dark. But the city never really gets dark.”

“You call Norfolk a city?”

“Yes.”

“It ain’t a city.”

“How is Norfolk not a city?”

“Have you been to New York?”

“No. I’ve been to Iowa, Minnesota, and now Norfolk.”

“When you go to New York, and you need to go, you will see a city. Then come and find me and tell me that Norfolk is not a city.”

“Okay.”

“Continue.”

“I kept looking for cabs but the ones I saw would not stop. The only thing I could see, the only thing there was to see were apartments, brick apartments with white doors; and they went on and on, forever, as if that’s all there was to the world: brown brick walls, with fences, everything had a fence around it; and there were some parks with people yelling. And music. But the cars were nice, older, but in good shape, clean.”

“You were in the ghetto.”

“I believe so. I was scared. I had to find my way out. I’m white, you know? Then along the street a group of guys came. They were all black, all five of them, and they looked ghetto.”

“What do you mean, they looked ghetto?”

“They had their pants down and they had pantyhose on their heads and chains around their necks. They looked angry.”

“That’s not ghetto.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know? Hip-hop?”

“I was afraid. And that’s what I’m trying to talk to you about. I’m a farmboy. You know I never knew any black people until I came to the Navy?”

“Trust me. I know.”

“But I was for sure they would attack me. Rob me. Beat me up. Something. I mean I was ready. You know what they did?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

## 29

“You have to serve four honorable years for that,” the recruiter said.

“So I can’t sign up now? Go to college on the GI Bill? Finish college? Then go in as an officer?”

“Oh no. You don’t qualify for officer programs.”

Charlie was hurt. “Why not?”

“Your scores are too low.”

“How low are they?”

“So low you can’t get a designation.”

“I don’t understand?”

“You’ll have to go in undesignated.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll be a fireman. That means you won’t have a rating until you make E4. By then you will have chosen. Or the ship will.”

“Look.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll put you where they need you.”

“Are you sure?”

“They will take care of you. You will get to see the world. Trust me.”

### 30

They melted into their routine like butter into bread. Each morning after breakfast there was a fire drill, sometimes there were two if the first went poorly. In the early afternoon, at approximately 1300 hours, there was always a CBR drill. CBR meant chemical, biological, and radiological attack: three threats deflected in a single exercise, during which they had seven seconds to don and seal their gasmasks.

They pushed the engines to full speed, thirty-one knots, then turned at a sharp angle, causing the captain, who was leaning in his chair on the bridge with his hand on his chin, to smile. The Gunner’s Mates fired and re-fired, and fired again for the hell of it, the guns on the ship: the 5-inch on the forecastle, the casings of which the sailors fashioned into ashtrays; the 25mm chain guns at midships that rattled the shooter into euphoria; and the 20 mm’s, mounted forward and aft, used to counter anti-ship missiles. They readied their torpedo tubes, calibrated their harpoon launchers. They groomed their vertical launch systems, preparing to thread the sky over the Arabian Gulf with tomahawk cruise missiles.

Between the drills, they labored. On deck, in the clement sun, with the waters of the Mediterranean spraying around them, the boatswains scoured rust from the cleats and chocks. In certain spaces only those with a top-secret clearances were allowed, coded orders were received, uncoded, passed on. Within the skin of the ship, the lower ranked enlisted men wiped every corner clean, painted every bulkhead and overhead

and deck, deleted all signs of rust, kept the green menace of sea-salt at bay, and swept twice a day, even when not necessary.

As they worked, they argued over which rapper was the best, quoting and performing lines from songs for evidence. When not working, and sometimes when they were supposed to be, they hid and played video games. Sometimes they read: comics, novels, spray bottle labels, whatever was in reach. Others attended the worship services, held in a storage room among boxes of lightbulbs that were strapped down like loads of pipe. Each session was led and concluded by a young black man from Alabama. His words were unclear to the others, not because of his accent, but because of the slug of chew in his lower lip.

### 31

Charlie yelled at Herb from across the engine room.

“Herb! Hey! Come look at this.”

The main engines bayed above them, the generator shrieked beside the engines, the air compressors squealed beside the generator.

Charlie yelled again, and again Herb did not hear. It did not help that both firemen were following regulation, keeping their ear protection, orange plastic stems, jammed in their ears.

Charlie removed the piece of flesh from his pocket and compared it to the thumb in the bilge. They were alike in color.

He grew dizzy. He quizzed his perception, taking into account the last several months, all this time spent inside the skin of the ship. He began to think about the cook’s suicide. It had happened quickly, and no one had seemed alarmed by it. They said he had wrapped a garbage sack around his head and then duct-taped it around his neck. Too much pressure. Charlie had been part of the working party that loaded the body onto the helicopter. On the flight deck, gripping the stretcher, he had brushed the skin of the dead man, and how that felt was how this thumb felt. But the thumb was not the cook’s.

He sat down, was still a moment. He felt a tap on his shoulder, from behind.

It was Herb.

“Charlie, look at this.”

It was a finger, longer than the thumb, and of the same clayish color.

“You found that?”

“No. I made it. What do you think?”

“Where did you find it?”

“In the bilge, beneath a pipe.”

Charlie's head was spinning. "Come on Herb. You brought it down here from somewhere. It's plastic. So is this thumb. You put it down here. You're playing a joke."

Herb's face tightened around his eyes. "What thumb?"

"This one." He held it out to him.

"Are you kidding me?"

"I thought you were kidding me Herb."

Herb wiggled the finger a few centimeters from Charlie's nose. "This is not plastic. This is not a joke. Here, touch it. Does it feel plastic?"

Charlie touched the finger. It was real. Or as real as unreal could be. A flap of skin was understandable, conceivable, within the realm of possibility. But a finger and a thumb were outside the border of that realm, where he did not want to go. Like symbols, they stood for more than what they were; they implied how they came to be: dismemberment, butchery, slaughter, carnage.

They stood without talking, each hoping the other would announce, or at least suggest, the next move. They couldn't hide feeling responsible for these anomalies. The bilge was their duty. They had invested in it, and now it had given them something in return.

### 32

On the farm where he grew up, an only child because of his mother's unwillingness to face another miscarriage, he had grown intimate with machines: greasing them, fixing them, pulling them from the mud. Whether a tractor or a baler, a combine or a wagon, he could hold the whole of them in his mind. He knew where their gears belonged; knew how their parts moved. But he could not hold the whole of the ship in his mind, even now. And on the farm there was never any feeling of being subordinated wholly to a machine. The machines themselves were subordinated to their purpose, which was either the harvest or the cattle, so that all things led back to life, either animal or plant.

But the ship led, somehow, to the ending of life. He knew that. I knew that. We all did.

### 33

The truth is there was a humming. It came from the pipes. It was around us and it was inside us. And it became us. And we became the pipes. We were everywhere. We were the arteries of the ship. We were liquid and we purred.

The ship was in charge of us. The five hundred foot crescent fashioned from alloy and wire—once inanimate and lifeless, once pure in its need for us to fire its engines, turn its shafts, aim its guns, launch its missiles, direct its sonar, guide its radar, turn its

rudders—had overthrown our command. It governed us. We were its cells. Bits. Tiny portions. Our function was to serve. Attend and care. Nurse and comfort.

### 34

He sweated where the green rubber of the gasmask sealed itself against his face. Looking through the scratched lens, he watched the orange, pixelated numbers on the back-up propulsion council screen. The numbers were temperatures of the bearings in the reduction gear. They were varying within normal range—a bit high, but normal, just over one hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit.

Because the aft launch system was twenty feet behind Charlie's head, he heard the cover over a tomahawk open, the hard eruption as the missile flared, and a hiss as it shot off. It was the twenty-eighth launch he'd counted.

Charlie had two threads of thought going. One about home, and one about the finger and the thumb. And he was trying to untangle them when he saw the reduction gear bearing temperatures spike. He heard a distinct cracking, a splintering, as of dry bone. Pop pop, he heard. Also a squishing. Something juicy being smashed, ground up.

The noises were coming from either the bilge or the reduction gear.

Central Control Station, where Chief Waylon stood watch over the plant, called over the main circuit: "Engine Room Number 2, investigate high bearing temperatures Main Reduction Gear Number Two."

Their voices were muffled through their gasmasks.

"Aye aye" Charlie answered.

He walked out onto the catwalk over the engines. At the seams of the padlocked flaps, Charlie saw the reduction gear leaking blood. Thick and viscous, it ran down the sides, drawing dark lines on the grey box.

The noises were louder. They definitely came from the reduction gear: cracking, bursting, splitting; sounds that could have been the destruction of wood, the felling of trees.

"Main Engine Room Number Two, CCS. Visual status of Main Reduction Gear Number Two."

Charlie replied "CCS, Main Engine Room Number Two. Visual status conducted. The reduction gear is bleeding."

"Say again."

Charlie repeated what he said. He was dizzy now, and holding onto the bulkhead in order not to fall over.

The hatch to the engine room opened.

Charlie heard Chief yelling as he pistoned down the ladder well, but couldn't make out what he said.

Chief met Charlie on the catwalk and looked down.

Chief saw the hot oil.

"I thought it was blood."

They immediately stopped the port shaft, performing an emergency shutdown on both of the main engines. The Chief Engineer was informed. The Captain was informed. In two minutes Charlie's whole chain of command was in the engine room, staring at the reduction gear. He showed them the finger and the thumb and the piece of flesh. He told them about the noises. They looked at him with suspicion and anger. They congregated on the catwalk. They talked intensely, staring at him, now staring at the propulsion system. They checked each lock. They crawled all over the engine room like ants. They had no choice. They had to open it. They had to look inside.

### 35

Was the ship was alive? Not in the way you might think. Sure, it had spirit, it had soul, it had verve. It talked and walked. It swam and shit oil into the ocean. It coughed up garbage. It vomited disks of plastic. It drank fuel oil. It bred whales, chopped plankton.

So it wasn't exactly alive. It was there, and that is the only certain thing about it, that it existed. The nature of that existence, the tenor of its being, its manners and habits of behavior, its coming-of-age, its hunger, its repressed to desire to fuck a river in the mouth until it choked, its grace in the midst of violence, its inability to feel resentment, its hidden compartments filled with alien bodies, its magical ability to transfer the dead it caused (civilian and military) into its propulsion system, and to use that death as energy to move: all of this was only the edge of it.

No one ever came near the core of the ship. No one ever really knew what it was: it was not able to be known. It lived on the other side of epistemology. It protected itself. It knew how to pose, wear the right mask at the right time. It was the voice that told the cook to wrap that sack around his head. It was the missiles the humans thought they launched. It was the Platonic form of kinetic art, high up in the heaven of ideas, right down there on the ocean. Invisible but seen, seen but never visible. The worst monsters are made, not born. What is born is vulnerable. What is made is not susceptible to certain penalties, such as pain. It was a higher being who stayed below. It was a lower being who stayed above.

He walked off base and confronted the street, the flashing traffic. Oil stains dimmed empty parking lots. Children, cut from the umbilical of school, ran around full of mischief and laughter, dodging cars, balancing ice cream cones in their fists. Their tongues quivered between their teeth. He smelled dryer sheets, heard the barking of chained dogs.

“You want to see that?” It was a homeless man, shivering, his front teeth missing. He had come from a park across the road. He smelled like a McDonald’s hamburger.

“Excuse me sir,” Charlie said.

“You want to sell that?”

“Sell what?”

“Your shit.”

“My shit?”

“No. Your shirt. Do you want to sell it?”

Charlie was holding it in his hand, a flannel.

“You want my flannel?”

“I’ll suck you off for it.”

The homeless man frightened Charlie. In that instant, he built a prejudice against the city poor by comparing them to the rural poor. Whereas the rural poor prided themselves on asking nobody for anything, on doing all they could to live independently of civilization, the city poor subsisted only by sucking off everyone else, by begging and bothering, parading their need for what you had.

“No. Just take it.”

He held out the shirt.

The man looked at it, but did not take it; it was not what he wanted.

“I’ll suck you for five dollars?”

“Back off.”

“Two fifty?”

“I said get away.”

“Just let me suck you off.”

Charlie pushed him. The man went backwards, stumbling.

“Fine.” The man wiggled and waved his arms and walked back across the road to the park.

Around the corner, behind a repair garage, he found a small coffee shop.

He walked in. The walls were dark and the overhead lighting dim. The front window was wide and clean. He chose a soft burgundy chair to sit in. Beside it was a table. On the table were magazines. He thumbed through them. The images he saw he would



never remember. He spoke to no one. No one spoke to him. He felt anonymous. A few hours passed like a single arrow through the air.

He watched the sky through the glass. Thick clouds covered the sun. A burst of rain came, the drops cool as a popsicles. The afternoon opened like a suitcase, a space to be filled.

He walked outside, renewed by the coffee and the quiet.

In the parking lot, a black Cadillac, waxed and gleaming, the windows tinted. The driver's window went down. She knew by the haircut, the walk, the aimless face.

"Hey sailor boy."

He looked but did not respond. She was black. He could not imagine a black woman wanting him. He knew he was a corny-ass honkey. It was not his destiny to be smooth, cool, or composed.

"Hello."

"Nice day out. You're looking good, sailor boy."

"Yes," he said, "it turned out to be fine afternoon."

He leaned in. He could smell weed and alcohol.

"I could use a drink. You twenty-one, sailor boy?"

"Yes I am. Turned it on deployment."

"You were on deployment, sailor boy?"

"I got back yesterday."

"I bet you need some release. Get in, sailor boy."

"For what exactly?"

"For a drink, fool. Come on. Come be my little sailor boy."

It was the cleanest car he had ever seen. Not a single crumb, not one dot of dirt, not one road stone on the floor mat. A blunt burned in the ashtray. The seats were leather, the trim wood, the dash a cockpit of blue lights. From the inside looking out, the window glass was purple. The world on the other side was further away. He stared at the smoke rising from the cherry.

"Don't just look at it," she said, "suck on it."

She laughed, a deep, proud laughter. Her body gave itself to the rhythm of her joy. She was an engine of bliss.

"You like my ride?"

"I love your ride. It's sweet," he took a leap, "like you."

"It's my old man's."

"Oh," he said. "He's not around, is he?"

"Hell no. In Afghanistan. Kandahar. He's a Gunny. A good man. But gone a lot."

"When does his deployment end?"

He recognized they were driving through the ghetto. He could not discern her age. She was short and thick, and devoid of awkwardness.

“As far as I can tell it never ends. It’s like a racetrack. Round and round. He comes home for a pit stop, leaves again. He’s a good man, though. Loves our daughter.”

“You have a daughter together?”

“Moesha. She’s in college.”

They arrived at a bar called Shaft Alley. Along the right wall was a counter, a long series of stained planks. The pool tables were in the middle, resting between support posts that the players were maneuvering between with their cues. They looked like they were dancing, but the dance floor was off to the left. The dancers looked like they were playing pool. Against the left wall was the deejay. Charlie understood that he was the only white person there.

“Is it okay that I’m here?”

“Cause you’re white?”

“Cause I’m the only white.”

“That don’t matter.”

They sat down at a table and ordered a Pig-Out Seafood Platter. They ate clams, shrimp, oysters, deep fried mushrooms, jalapeno peppers. They lubricated lobster tails in butter. She had him drink Red Passion, something called Alizé. She was looking through the window at the end of the bar. She had parked so she could see the car.

“You like my ride, sailor boy?”

“You said it wasn’t yours.”

“What I say is mine, is mine.”

“That’s how it is?”

“That’s the only way it is. Where you from, sailor boy?”

“The middle of a cornfield. Plain and flat. But I miss it. Miss knowing people, knowing what to expect from them.”

“I like the unexpected.”

“But that’s also the difficult part.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everybody knows everybody. So you can’t get away with anything. There is nowhere to hide. Each person keeps their eye on every other person.”

“Don’t they have nothing better to do?”

“No.”

His awareness trailed off. He was stoned and drunk.

They left. The car moved two ways: down the road, and around in his head. Some time passed, he wasn’t sure how much. He had three things: fear, lust, and a wallet.

They walked through sliding doors and were at a counter of some kind, beige and long and curved; behind it stood a woman in a vest, decorated with a small brass pin. She was smiling and tapping on a keyboard.

“Let me see your card, sailor boy.”

He removed his credit card from his wallet. She took it from him and handed it to the lady in the vest.

She helped him up the stairs and he suspected that either the booze he drank was more powerful than he was used to or the weed was. He thought their might be another agent at work in his blood, but that suspicion faded when she entered the door with another card, sliding it through a slot above the door handle. He had never seen that before.

“Well look at that.”

She pushed him into the room and laid him down on the bed. She unbuttoned his jeans and removed him. She used her whole mouth. She made noises. It seemed sudden to him.

“You have to stop that.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going to.”

“Let it go, sailor boy.”

“But don’t you want to too?”

“No. Let it go. Come on sailor boy. Go ahead. Show me.”

It was over.

She went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth for several minutes. She came back in the room and leaned against two pillows and turned on the television. He seemed unable to think.

“You watch golf?”

“I thought you would want to, together, you know?”

“I aim to please. You watch golf?”

In less than five minutes he was asleep.

His jeans were coiled on the chair. In them she found his wallet. She took it all except his military id. In his pocket she found a thumb. Certain it was plastic, she looked oddly at it, wondering if he knew voodoo, or was into magic.

In the morning, he woke in the cloud of a headache. He knew by her absence that his cards and his cash were missing. There was a dryness to his body, an ache that reached from the bottom of his feet to his jaw. The brown room was bare and the furniture glowed in the lamplight. It was raining, drops stabbing the glass on the other side of

the curtain. He heard people in an adjacent room talking about a soccer game. He ignored them and put his clothes on.

The way she looked at him while she did it, the slobber on her lips. He lied back on the bed. He was still for hours, until check out, then left.

He walked toward base, it was somewhere that way, he'd find it. Two months. Two months and he'd be home. The traffic coursed by. He didn't look for her. He just looked.



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