

HOLLY AUTEN

Collision

FOUR SURGERIES ON THE BASE IN LANDSTUHL. From Germany he was flown to Bethesda. Two months of rehab blink past, then a two-day bus ride, the miles unfurling as slowly as you'd expect, and Fletcher's sitting on a bench outside his hometown Veterans Affairs hospital. Left leg kicked out in front because it's more bearable—or less unbearable—that way. Working a toothpick around in his mouth.

The quantifications of his Army career pile up like paperwork. Seven years in the National Guard, then three deployments across eight years of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the NATO-coalition invasion of Afghanistan, the number of successful field missions etched in groupings of five hash marks along the inside of his right forearm. A stupid location, in hindsight, since he can't avoid looking at them daily and doesn't need to be reminded of the tally, but there are bigger regrets to ponder than tattoos.

Fletcher was here on Thursday, but he forgot the "Service 2" copy of the form known as DD 214, so this time he's armed to the teeth with the proper documentation:

- DD 214, Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, specifying "Disability, Dependency, or Hardship"
- "Member 4," "Veterans Affairs 3," and "Service 2" copies of DD 214
- DD 215, Correction to DD Form 214, updating the PLACE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE DUTY (Salt Lake City, not Seattle)
- DD 256A, General Discharge Certificate, suitable for framing
- DD 2697, Report of Medical Assessment
- Form 1569, Transcript of Military Record
- Form 7131, Information Exchange Between VA Regional Offices and Medical Facilities, which concludes with a discharge determination of "Honorable (for medical purposes)"
- WD AGO 0729, Honorable Discharge from the Army of the United States of America

- U.S. Army Purple Heart certificate, also suitable for framing

All this in a backpack at his feet, plus his semi-automatic Walther P99, for which his license is expired. In the time since he last went overseas the state legislature changed the concealed carry laws, so he doesn't have permit for that, either. It doesn't make him feel safe; in fact, it makes him feel dangerous. But the gun at the bottom of his backpack confers a sense of control, which, at this stage of his life, being generally at the mercy of things he can't control, outweighs his otherwise consistent propensity for obeying the law.

Fletcher isn't thrilled about going inside. Processing all the forms will take a while, then he has to wait for a doctor to see him, then he gets to recount his medical history despite all the forms he already filled out. Despite his records consuming however many bytes in their database. Even though Army medical personnel see every kind of trauma imaginable, it's still difficult for Fletcher to appreciate why his injuries render him unfit for combat but not, evidently, for passing as a civilian. Perhaps it's just as well, he muses for the thousandth time, since he'd been feeling like the odds were starting to stack. Guys in his battalion went home with fewer body parts. He saw vets in the rehab hospital with no movement in their eyes, no lights on in the house. Like that old war song he heard once: *Never knew there were worse things than dying.*

Even so, Fletcher's last combat position had been Field Artillery Tactical Data Specialist, not easily transferable to the civilian job market as there are not likely to be any rocket launchers in the valley farmland behind the speedway or flood plains along the river. Probably no armored tanks needing his support. He's wading through medical issues now but sooner or later will need to figure out how to earn a paycheck.

Fletcher answers his phone with grunt once he sees it's his sister calling. "Five minutes."

"Okay, okay. Why don't you come to the house for dinner, Fletch? I've only seen you once since you've been back. The kids are asking about you."

"It's kind of a long drive. I don't know what time I'll be done here."

"Stay the night, then."

"I have a motel room already."

"God, you're stubborn."

"I need to be close to the hospital in case the medic orders tests."

“I want to fill you in on the stuff I found out about service dogs. What about this weekend?”

“Maybe.”

“Fine. Be sure to talk to the doctor about a dog, all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Bye, Fletch.”

“Bye, Laney. Thanks.”

He shoulders the pack on his right side and heads for the automatic doors. Twenty minutes later, Fletcher shifts his lean on the counter to ease the tingle behind his knee as the PFC shakes her head again.

“I’m sorry, Sergeant, but there’s no appointment listed in the outpatient clinic schedule. Are you sure you don’t remember the name of the person you talked to?”

She summons her boss. The guy plays around with the keyboard, composing a goddamn sonata, and regrets to inform Master Sergeant Damon Fletcher that there’s no record of his having called the VA in the first place.

“Can I at least get these prescriptions filled?”

“The dispensary’s closed, Sergeant. It opens at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow, if you can come back then?”

Fletcher gives the guy his *I outrank you* stare, though it’s technically not true anymore, and holds out a hand for his papers. One more stop—whatever fast-food chain has the shortest drive-thru line—and he can hole up in his first-floor room at the Super 8 until oh-eight-hundred.

As if leaping from an airplane Fletcher fell hard for Beth, a teacher working on a graduate degree in English. When they met she was seeing someone else—not to mention the terrible timing of his impending deployment, hence her answering his Craigslist ad for a subletter—but it didn’t deter him. Fletcher asked her what she was going to tell the other dude, if she would let him down easy. Tried to make it sound like a joke, but he wasn’t joking. For months she sent him increasingly X-rated e-mails, only one of which his CO managed to see, and upon his return they crashed into each other like exploding stars.

He figures she doesn’t want to hear from him, but he texts anyway.

<Hey I’m back stateside. Banged up a bit but finally out.>

<who dis? dont know you>

Fletcher lugs his backpack with the papers and his medals and all the proof of his aborted career into the waiting room again. He's feeling shit-fucked all over, prepared to unleash his worst, to become someone's customer service nightmare, but the Marine private behind the desk greets him with such warm recognition that he can't do it. He pulls a paper tab from the dispenser and claims a chair by the window. The corresponding monitor displays a number so far removed from his, orders of magnitude smaller, that he wonders if it's a mistake—if a couple of vertical bars are burned out so what should be an eight looks like a two. His hypothesis turns out to be wrong.

In the desert he dreamed incessantly of junk food, but now that it's all he's been eating he can't stomach another bite. Burger King, Jack In The Box, Quizno's, even Arby's has lost its appeal. Fletcher clicks off the TV and stares at his duffel disemboweled across the room. Looks like he's lost his penchant for tidiness as well.

Laney calls again, offering up her washer and dryer. She's worried he's not making progress with the VA. "Josh knows a producer at KTVQ. Maybe they can get your story on the air, drum up some publicity, you know?"

"Jesus, Laney, I don't want to be on TV."

"Well, they could bring some attention to the foot-dragging bureaucracy. Surely there are other vets going through the same thing."

Fletcher belches and opens another beer. His gut feels hollow. He does not allow himself to think about other vets. "I can't be a poster boy. Not with this mug."

"You're impossible."

"Next topic, please."

"Okay, the service dog. I talked to a volunteer with a charity here in town. You don't have to have a physical disability, like a wheelchair or prosthetic, to qualify. A doctor has to vouch for you, explain what kind of therapy you need and why a dog."

"You mean PTSD."

"Well, yeah. Isn't that your problem?"

When he doesn't answer, she tries a joke. "I hear they use monkeys as service animals in Central America. Wallabies in Australia."

Fletcher's first deployment lasted eight months, during which he was bored into stupefaction on a daily basis. Set up some equipment, tear it down, clean it, move it to another location, set it up again. Apparently his perseverance in carrying out those tasks elicited a recommendation from his commanding officer because on his second tour, he was given leadership of an armored cavalry patrol. On his third, they gave him the same job but with additional firepower. At the time he assumed he'd proven his value. Now, though, he thinks they were testing him: Would he or would he not fuck up again?

The beer tastes metallic, or maybe the taste is on his tongue and it's affecting everything else. "Wallabies, huh? They must be highly trainable."

"Sure," his sister spitballs. "They carry your stuff in their pouches."

"Well, shit," he says. "Sign me up."

Fletcher was leaning against the M1 Abrams, not in nonchalance but because his knees were liable to crumble under the weight of what he'd experienced hours before. His squad hadn't been in the tank that day. They were driving fuel trucks and stopped for a stalled car in the road. The sergeant in charge of the armed support vehicle agreed with him on an impromptu inspection, so a couple of his guys climbed out of the lead truck at his insistence. Roadside bomb, a phrase strewn about the media as though the average American has any idea. Half of his squad incapacitated to sufficient degree as to get them the hell out of the Middle East. Two men dead. Himself unscathed except that he was responsible for them. So that night he furtively smoked a joint on the side of the tank facing away from the floodlights, reasoning that when he broke down it wouldn't be in front of his command. The remainder of his command, that is.

The weed must have been effective, since he didn't at first notice the other soldier who ambled around the shadows of the M1. He saw her when she sank into a crouch and covered her face with her hands. One of the medics in Charlie Company. She'd been among the first on the scene, rushing from a helicopter as his guys mewled all around him. Arteries opened like Christmas presents, he remembers thinking—shiny, ravaged, not what you asked for but what you got anyway.

Fletcher pushed off the tank into a stance resembling attention. "Captain," he mumbled.

She waved him off and stood. "Sergeant."

After they finished the joint, she observed simply, “That was some shit today.”

Within seconds they were going at each other. But fatigues and boots, the whole getup, are not easily or quickly dispatched, so like the seasoned combat soldiers they were, they improvised in the field. It was more of a mutual getting-off, more utilitarian than anything else, but Fletcher suspends it in his memory like a hammock between two trees, a moment of respite amid the sandstorm of human frailty around them.

It was the only time he’d been unfaithful to Beth, but that wasn’t what compelled her to break up with him. It was his death wish, as she called it, when he departed for his third tour. He tried to explain the difference between being stop-lossed and volunteering; he tried to explain extenuating circumstances. “Just go,” they sighed at each other.

“I’m sorry, Sergeant,” the private commiserates. It’s the same young woman who’s been helping him, or trying to, all week. *Winchell* her name tag says.

“If I had a dollar for every time you said that,” he replies coolly. “I could afford to go somewhere else.” A shadow shivers in the periphery of his impaired vision. Despite the sterile, institutional setting, it takes a second to remember he’s in a hospital, not on patrol.

She bites her lip and exhales. “The next available appointment is on the twentieth. That’s the best there is.” Indicating the other patients behind him, she points out, “Everyone is waiting.”

Fletcher feels like arguing. “Have you ever been deployed, Private?”

PFC Winchell shakes her head. “It’s an honor to work with veterans like yourself, Sergeant.”

He’s nearing the end of the meager Diclofenac prescription they finally, reluctantly filled yesterday. They won’t give him more than six doses until the Bethesda doctor calls back to confirm. So he feels like being an asshole. “Why’d you join the military, Private? Nine-eleven?”

She reddens. “No, sir. I mean, no, Sergeant. This is how I’m paying for college.”

“Happy with your desk job?”

She looks beseechingly at Corporal Douchebag, who wanders over to shut him down. “Thanks for waiting until your number’s called, Sergeant.”

Although he'd rolled away at the moment of detonation, the impact overwhelmed the left side of Fletcher's body. Three hundred and sixty-seven pieces of shrapnel pulled from his flesh, one for every day of the year, on a leap year, plus one—this is how he quantifies it. Some were small, some alarmingly large. The surgeon showed him the metal pan containing the pieces they'd pulled during his first surgery. It weighed three pounds not counting the pan. "What the fuck is this, Doc?" he'd asked. Later, in a haze of morphine, he laughed to himself about calling the surgeon Doc, as though they were characters in a World War II drama and he was the hero delivering a witty line to demonstrate his fortitude in the face of great distress. The surgeon explained the physics of a fragmentation bomb, which Fletcher already knew in theory before he learned firsthand, and poked at the scraps with a giant pair of tweezers. The explosion had occurred in a junk yard, so besides material from the bomb itself, a bunch of other shit got embedded in his body. The one that looked like a spring was from a mattress coil. The one with a circular edge like a soup can lid was a fucking soup can lid. These pieces translated into scars of varying shape and size; doctors said these things could take years to play out, for the nerve endings to heal, for the body to figure out what it can and can't do. Infections. He'd had a tetanus shot before deploying, as the Army tried to make sure all soldiers were in peak shape before being blown to bits. Or, alternatively, having bits blown into them.

That time his squad fared better, at least in the sense that no one was killed. But everyone was fucked up in unbelievable ways. Jacks, for instance, lost an eye. He sat up across from Fletcher with his eye in his hand, fluids spewing from the socket, and asked, "Sarge, is this what I think it is?" Moses lay nearby, out cold but breathing, with both legs sheared off at the ankles. They never located his feet. Fletcher remembers looking over his own porcupine body, head to foot covered in metal. His helmet, Kevlar vest, even his steel-toed boots were impaled. He remembers wondering what kind of velocity could accomplish such a feat. The next memory after that one is of pissing all over the hands of the medic trying to insert his catheter.

"I wish you'd consider it," Laney presses, after Fletcher gripes about a problem with disability pay. The check got delayed somehow, and now he has to wait another two weeks for direct deposit to kick in. But he can't abide being a guest in her house. His niece and nephew constantly prying and prattling, the ceaseless questions, her husband Josh's disdain disguised

in jolly sports-bro exhortations. He's been out to their house twice in recent weeks, and both times he ground his teeth until his jaw ached.

Fletcher hangs up and flaps his arm around the side of the bed until it smacks the bottle. Two Fingers Gold, the same kind they drank around the bonfire because somebody's girlfriend kept sending it in care packages. The lieutenant made a joke about two fingers and the V for victory. A peace sign. The knife-edge of light between the curtains burns its shape onto his retinas. His sunglasses are around here somewhere—might have left them in cockpit of the tank. It happened sometimes, like forgetting them in your car except you didn't need them inside the tank, which is why you took them off. Sunlight shifts as Fletcher stares at the space in between the window and the bed. Dust motes eddy in a miniature sandstorm. What was it Laney wanted? He worries he's forgotten to complete an important assignment. Scratch that: He knows he has all the right paperwork.

Another swig, and Fletcher's brain switches to Greek mythology. Years ago Beth gave him a book for the long plane ride to the Middle East. Sisyphus is the obvious comparison to his situation with the VA: He wrestles a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down once he's near the summit. It occurs to him now that the book wasn't clear on whether the poor bastard lost control of the boulder or if gravity was just too powerful. In other words, not clear if he was a fuck-up or just unlucky.

The better analogy, Fletcher decides, is Prometheus. The fire-stealer. At least pushing a rock is a workout—it has some semblance of purpose. An eagle devouring your liver every day, on the other hand, is flat-out torture. He finishes the tequila and sneers at his red-tape wit: Form 4890, Liver Requisition. Fill it out, then watch them tear it up.

Fletcher frowns as his tongue probes his top left gum line. The hump he first detected a couple of weeks ago is definitely more pronounced now. Buy your favorite soldier a junk-yard bomb, he chuckles to himself, the gift that keeps on giving!

After a while, maybe an hour or who knows fuck-all how much time at the mercy of the hard plastic seat, Fletcher feels himself crack. It's a controlled fracture of safety glass whose laminate coating keeps his pieces from scattering all over the floor. He leans forward and eases open the backpack. Pain rips along the length of his leg.

Fletcher stands and addresses the front desk in his squad-leader voice. "Corporal," he barks over the private's head to the dickwad behind her. "I've been here for twenty-six straight

days. I'm waiting for a physical exam and a surgical consultation. There's something wrong with my eye." He falters for a half-second but pushes on. "X-rays. Physical therapy. Review of my medications."

The man behind the desk, coffee cup in hand, starts to respond.

Fletcher, a newly discharged and decorated veteran of the goddamn United States Army, mows him down. "I need to talk to somebody about a service dog. There's still shrapnel in my mouth, Corporal." Sounds more like a plea than a command by this point. People in the waiting room stare and cough nervously.

PFC Winchell evidently has more balls than her superior. She comes around the counter with a hopeful, if nervous, smile and gestures nonspecifically. "Sergeant, can I get you some water while you wait? Or coffee?"

She approaches from his left, opposite the Walther in his right hand. In no time at all, so quickly he doesn't register a complete thought about it, Fletcher has her in a headlock with her esophagus neatly tucked into his elbow. The muzzle of the gun slides along her jawline to her temple. He realizes he didn't scout the room thoroughly, however, as an MP appears twenty yards away with a Beretta in his fist.

"Drop your weapon!" the dude screams.

Winchell paws his arm. "Please, Sergeant."

His left arm is not as strong as it used to be, but still stronger than her efforts to wriggle free. Fletcher glances around for a favorable position. Can't leave his back exposed. He shuffles a few feet toward the emergency exit door.

"Please, don't do this," she begs, struggling to stand because he's taller.

The MP advances a couple of steps. "Drop your weapon now!"

A few people in the waiting room take cover behind furniture; others rush the sliding double doors. When things are still again, except for the private's scabbling feet, Fletcher counts eight heads including his own. A much more manageable number, seeing as how he already controls two of them.

His heel finds the base of the door, his ass the push-bar. She's gasping wildly now, full panic. Fletcher doesn't particularly care for this power dynamic, and wishes her insipid boss had been the one to leave the desk, but the eclipsing emotion in his head is desperation. No, more like despair. Anguish made up of interlocking chains of terror and fear and pain.

“It’s not loaded,” he hisses into Winchell’s ear, his arm tightening around her throat. “I swear it’s not.” She stops moving, she has to, there’s no other option.

The MP repeats his command.

Fletcher repeats his demands.

The corporal, still holding his coffee, is on the phone with the police.

“What’re you doing?” wheezes the private. “Please think about what you’re doing.”

What he’s doing is making a point. Breaking up the stalemate. Forcing action from the other party. He does not, at the moment, entertain additional consequences.

Fletcher knows the MP won’t risk a shot without backup. He angles Winchell so she’s sort of in front of him, further buying him some time. What’s next? he wonders. Will they listen if he explains causes and effects, pins toppling one into the next? How will this action stack up against the rest of his deeds—a spectrum comprising only its ends: accomplishments and failures—when the time comes, in heaven or hell or wherever, to evaluate the punishment he’s endured versus deserved?

Suddenly the private’s weight turns to lead. He loosens his grip and she crumples to the floor. Before the MP can react, Fletcher’s right arm snaps forward with the Walther. **STANDOFF AT THE VA, he imagines tomorrow’s headline. HOSTAGE SITUATION RESOLVED BY HERO WITH COFFEE CUP.** He follows the corporal’s eyes to the door where police cruisers are hopping the curb, jolting to a stop.

Cops—ten, a dozen?—rush the lobby. A thousand commands shouted at once, all at Fletcher. The knob embedded in his gum pulses. He doesn’t need to take a head count to understand he is outmatched. He shows his palms, drops his sidearm, and nudges it out of reach. The MP covers the remaining distance in a nanosecond. They’ve got him on the floor now, his leg wrenched too forcefully, his hand stomped before they jerk his arms backward. His left shoulder twitches in agony.

“Check her pulse,” he stammers as handcuffs lock into place.

They try to haul him to his feet, but his knee won’t cooperate. Without his arms available for balance, the next few seconds serve up a slapstick routine—slip, drag, curse, yank, slip, drag, curse, yank, slip.

“Her pulse,” he says again. You attend to the unresponsive casualties first, since you know the ones screaming in pain are alive as long as they keep on screaming. His view is blocked by uniforms and the persistent haze in his left pupil. “Somebody check on the

private,” he croaks. Their protocol is all wrong. Don’t they see he has a man dow