

# “Something for the Pain”

## Jonathan Burgess

**L**ate one Afghan August night in Helmand Province, my squad stepped off on a night ambush patrol. Even standing still in the dark at Patrol Base Outlaw, I was sweaty and itchy. My armor dug into my lower back, and I couldn't find a comfortable position. I was grateful when we started moving because I could focus on something other than the lopsided swollen muscles above my butt or the molten-dagger-like pain in my spine when I took my gear off or put it back on. My feet went numb sometimes, which was nice because I couldn't feel the blisters.

We walked and walked and walked into the deep ink-black horizon, no light or sounds.

We stopped after eight or nine clicks so the lieutenant could question a few farmers about whether they had seen any Taliban, but I figured he was just giving us a breather and a chance to fill our Camelbaks and canteens from the well, too. Terry the Taliban Terrorist was smart (sometimes) and liked to dump animal carcasses into the streams and irrigation ditches. So, we had to live from well pump to well pump. I filled up while the L-T talked. The water felt like ice down my throat and on my head, trickling under my uniform and armor, but it didn't put out the fire in my back. We flipped our night vision monacles back onto our faces and eased back into formation without any sound.

We kept walking.

At thirteen kilometers and just past midnight, we passed familiar rows of rusted-out blown-up Russian military vehicles on the side of a long, dirt road, shells cracked and bled dry decades before us. I thought I heard a nearby recon unit was in a fight or about to be, and we

were going to help out, join the party. Whatever the reason, I had to get my fire team across a deep stream to the other side of the road. There was an obvious passageway, a downed tree the locals had been using as a foot bridge. It was about a three to five meter drop down to a sloped, shallow creek.

I watched through my green-filtered monocle as my point man edged across the foot bridge. He gave a thumb up on the other side and hid in some bushes on the far side of the road, pointing his rifle down the street ahead.

I looked around the interpreter behind me at Cardy.

"Hey, Beltran made it. Here goes nothing," I said.

I started across with the interpreter close behind me. My body armor felt heavier, and my neck ached from the straps. My M203 was a steel I-beam in my hands. My grip was awkward, and I wished I had kept my gloves on. My hands were slick with sweat.

Behind me, the interpreter gripped the back of my plate carrier and took quick inching steps as I eased forward. The plate armor moving across my back was too much, and I tried to turn and tell him to let go. We looked like two of the Stooges dancing and flailing on a tiny tree foot bridge.

Moe let go, and I dropped, unable to escape the surprise like when there's an extra, unexpected stair step.

"Sorry, Burgess!" he said.

Dirt in my eyes. Water in my boots.

"Burgess! Hey! Burgers. You okay, man?" someone shouted.

Cardy's voice. Softer voices further away.

The radio on my shoulder clicked on. *Apache One-Two Bravo, this is Apache One-Two. What happened up there, over?* The volume was low, and my ears rang, but I heard Denning's voice. I stared unthinking through a green circle at my M203, muzzle down in the mud between my legs.

My arms were over my head resting on the slick clay slope behind me. I reached for my 203 still slung to me and released a jolt of electric pain down my back and legs. I wanted to yell out, but I pressed my lips together to keep quiet.

"Hey, Burgess. Are you okay?" Cardy said. "Say something, man."

"I fell."

"No kidding."

"I think my back is messed up. It hurts. It hurts pretty bad. It's hard to move."

"Okay. Okay, do you need us to get you out? Yeah, just sit tight," Cardy said, looking around, hand on his rifle.

Cardy slid down the steep bank and grabbed me by the drag handle on the back of my plate carrier while another Marine held his opposite hand from the higher ledge. As they pulled me out, my plate slid up my back, and I felt a tense shift in my lower back and a small pop, a relief mingled with knots of electric pain.

After I explained to my squad leader and L-T what happened, we walked another kilometer. It was the longest click I had ever walked. I stopped a lot, bent over to try and relieve some pressure and pain from my back, and everyone just kept walking past me. They were all probably hurting too, even the L-T and platoon sergeant.

I thought of something I heard during sniper platoon tryouts a year before: "We're not going to yell at you. We're not going to help you. You either want it, or you don't. No one's going to push you. We don't care if you're here or not. You're here because you want to be."

I didn't want to be there anymore, but I didn't want to leave either. I missed Kelly. I wanted to see Dominik born. I worried about my fire team and squad. I worried about Cardy and Denning. I wanted to see a doctor about my back and my head. I wanted to see a priest too.

I kept walking until we stopped at blown out compound, just four thick mud walls with a couple of holes for doorways and four or five-foot-high grass in the middle. The sun started cresting the eastern horizon, stretching purple and orange rays across the sky above the corn and cannabis fields. Denning set a few Marines on security, and we rotated watch so some of us could sleep. I didn't sleep at all, but I didn't have to stand watch either. The bushes reminded me of a scene from *Platoon*, one of my favorite war movies. I thought about something Bunny said toward the end.

*You know, Junior, some of the things we done, man... I don't feel like we done something wrong. But sometimes, man, I get this bad feeling. I told the Padre the truth, man. I like it here.*

Later in the morning, after we sat in an ambush position to no avail, Denning brought Doc Welsh over to me. I eased onto my knees, laid on my side, and rolled onto my back with my knees up in the high grass. I groaned at the pain and tried lying on my side with my plate carrier undone.

"Ah, Burgess," Denning said, standing over me shaking his head.

"I know," I said, resigned.

"What do you think, Doc?" Denning said.

"I think his back is done, and he says he lost consciousness when he hit his head earlier. Probably has a concussion," Doc said, squatting between me and Denning.

"Oh man, Burgess," Denning said, shaking his head again.

There was some back and forth between Sgt Denning, Doc Welsh, Lt Kosh, and SSgt Castro, and everyone but Doc seemed irritated. Doc came back over to me.

"So, what do you think, man?" Doc said.

"I don't know. I think my back is screwed, but you're the Corpsman," I said.

"No, I mean do you think you need a bird? Do you need a medevac?" he said.

I cringed at the idea of a medical helicopter and two attack helicopter escorts flying fifteen minutes from the FOB just because my back hurt. I thought about the ass-chewing Denning and Kosh and Castro would probably get from the first sergeant, executive officer, and the commanding officer (in that order) back at our company patrol base.

"No way," I said. "I don't even think that's an option, Doc."

"I already talked to staff sergeant and the lieutenant," Doc said. "It's your call, man. What do you think?"

I didn't want it to be my call. I didn't want to decide to leave my guys. I wanted someone to decide for me. I wanted someone to send me home, but I wasn't the only one missing his family, hurting inside and out, falling apart.

Doc stared at me, and a breeze pushed through the shade of the high grass as I gritted my teeth.

"Fine," I said. "Do it, Doc. Call them or whatever. I need a doctor."

"Okay, man," Doc said, edging away. "Okay, just sit tight. We're going to get you out of here, bud. I'll tell Denning."

The bird didn't come right away. It didn't come for a while. Unsurprised, I sat moping in the shade. My back didn't hurt as bad if I sat still with my knees up or rolled to one side. Josh Ibanez made his way over to me.

"Hey, man," he said, cheerful.

"Ah hell," I said.

He let out a belly laugh. "Oh, man. Look at you. How bad does it hurt? Can you move?" he said.

"I can, but it hurts like crazy," I said. "What are you doing? What is that?"

Josh produced a massive, green banana leaf.

"You wouldn't," I said, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

"Sorry, what?" he said in a quiet voice, quivering on the verge of a giggle. He lowered the tip of the leaf onto my face. "Come on. Keep your bearing. Come on."

"You sonuva –" I said, swatting at the leaf. "Ow! Okay. Lame. This is hurting. You're hurting me. This is dumb."

"This is awesome."

"Please stop it. Please. Stop it."

"Nope." He stuck the tip of the leaf into my nostril.

"Dude, my back is messed up. Come on!"

"Nope," he said, dropping the tip of the leaf onto my cheek again. "Say, 'I'm a boot, and Ibanez is the man,' and I'll stop."

I could hear Cardy and someone else nearby laughing. I laughed too.

Cardy and Josh looked into the horizon over the compound wall, and I heard the whir of helicopter blades battering wind, then saw three dots in the sky closing in fast.

"There's your freedom bird, Burgess," Cardy said, smiling.

Doc and three Marines got me onto a litter and carried me out of the compound. As the helicopters lowered, their engines blasted away any other sounds, flattened grass, and sent dirt flying in all directions. One bird touched down while the two larger gunships hovered high above, circling our position. The escorts, AH64 Apaches, looked like coiled bundles of metal muscle, rockets and cannons cocked on either side. Smoke wafted over me, and on the other side I finally saw the inside of the evac bird. They jostled me onto the litter in the helicopter, and I couldn't hear anything but the high whine of the engine. My ears rang, and my lower back tensed with sharp, needle-like pain.

There were two airmen inside, it seemed, along with an Army pilot. The one closest to me held up a needle and syringe, raised his eyebrows, and pointed at my hip. He injected me with the contents of the syringe, and I went up, high in the air, leaving the 'Stan below me, at least for a while. We sailed on, and I drifted home high, light and heavy all at once.

After a couple of days doped up on morphine at a British hospital on Camp Bastion, I was transported on a C-17 with random coalition personnel, assorted hard-plastic cases of military equipment, and a couple of other casualties to Bagram Airbase a few hours north. Our litters were locked into the interior walls of the plane, stacked like the bunks on a ship. It was cold, and I didn't have any clothes besides my short skivvy shorts and a green skivvy shirt.

At Bagram, the crew unloaded all the gear, and personnel debarked. I lay on a litter surrounded by high cases on the tarmac and looked at the blue, cloud-shrouded mountains beyond the airfield. The morphine had worn off long ago, and I squirmed, trying to wriggle away from the deep ache rising in my lower back. I hoped someone would check on me soon.

No one came.

After the sun had dropped low behind the mountains, drops of rain started sprinkling my face and legs.

"Well," I said aloud to no one. "Is anyone there?"

Nothing.

The rain picked up, and I saw a man from the chest up walking by in a Marine utility uniform on the other side of the equipment. He glanced at me, slowed his stride, and looked around the gear. He craned, studying me from the other side.

"Oh, what the – Hey, are you okay, Marine?" he said. As he approached the edge of the cluster, I spotted the caduceus on his collar.

"No, I think they forgot me, doc," I said, laying my head back to stare up at the rain, blinking away the drops. "Can you help me, please?"

"Yeah, I got you, brother. I'm sorry about this. Hold tight. I'll get some help to lift you," he said, trotting away. He returned several seconds later with another Corpsman, and they took me inside.

The next morning, I was transported from Bagram to a hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. When I first arrived, I sat alone in an exam room for a few hours. An older man in a white coat, black slacks, and black orthopedic shoes rushed in, whirled around to face me, and pulled his stethoscope onto his ears.

"Sit up," he said in a low, gruff smoker's voice.

"May I have something for pain, sir?" I said, straightening up, the same electric pain driving up my lower back. "Some British doctor at Bastion said I had something called a retrolisthesis. Is that bad?"

The doctor leaned in and shoved the diaphragm of his stethoscope into the muscles around my lower spine.

"Ow!" I said, pushing him away with one arm.

He parked the stethoscope back around his neck and bent over to position his face a few inches from mine. I smelled coffee and cigarettes.

"I'm going to x-ray you. I'm going to test you, mobility tests. I'm going to CT you. I might even give you an MRI, and if there's nothing wrong, you're going back," he said in a loud, cavalier voice. "Do you hear me, boy? You're going back to Indian country!"

"Roger that, sir," I said, confused and angry but unsure whether he was a medical officer or a civilian.

I watched his coat tails whirl out of the exam room. He kept his word and ordered the tests, but I never saw him again. I made it from a litter to a wheelchair but spent most of my time in bed. The nurse came in to check on me and the other two patients in the room, and I asked her if I was going back. She cocked her head to the side and said I would be back in the states, probably Bethesda, in a few days. I asked her if there were Catholic priests in the hospital, and she asked if I needed to see one. I said yes, and she left a few moments later.

I woke up from a nap and looked out the high, wide windows beside my bed. The smell of saline and hand sanitizer reminded me I was in a hospital, not a sleeping hole in Helmand. The sun rested just above a thick, dark forest. The clouds were streaked in orange and purple. I noticed a reflection in the glass, a dark figure entering the room. I turned to look at the curtain beside me, and a thin man with glasses poked his head around the side.

"Lance Corporal Burgess?" he said, glancing down at a clipboard in his hand.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He stepped around the curtain and dragged a chair by the window closer to the bed. He wore black oxfords, black slacks, a black short-sleeve button up, and a Roman collar. He told me the nurse had sent him as he sat down and leaned onto the bed by my hand. I told him I wanted to make a confession, and he agreed to hear it and made the sign of the cross. I just lay there and started talking about where I had been in Afghanistan, what I had done and seen.

"Yes, but now, what are your sins, Jonathan?" he said, soft and encouraging but emphasizing the word "sins." The monitor beside me began a slow cadence of beeps.

I frowned and listed a few bad habits.

"Is this your first confession?" he said after a long pause and placed his hand on my forearm.

"Yes, Father." I said through tears. "But...we killed a child, a boy. Shot him in the head. And a few days later I searched an old man at knife point. He was really scared. We all peed and crapped in this one guy's bedroom after we found drugs, an antenna, and a rocket in his house."

The priest closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. We were silent for a moment.

"Do you remember your Act of Contrition?" he said, squeezing my forearm.

I paused, blinked hard.

"No, Father," I whispered, tears streaking.

He paused, staring down at the floor.

"I'm sorry, but I can't give you absolution," he said looking me in the eye again, calm and gentle.

He stood to leave and paused at the foot of the bed.

"You need to find a good priest when you get home, and tell him you want to make a general confession," he said. "Good luck, and may God bless you."

He left, and the nurse came back. She studied me with a doleful expression from the foot of the bed, helpless pity in every fiber of her posture. I stared back at her.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“I just need something for the pain.”

The nurse obliged, again and again, until I left Landstuhl a few days later. I found another nurse in Maryland, and she gave me something for pain, too. Another somewhere in central California gave me more, and my ten-day trip back home was an opioid blur of airplanes, doctors, medical machines, and sad chaplains.

The day I came back to Camp Pendleton from Afghanistan in August 2009, a Corpsman and a van driver helped me into a wheelchair. My wife, Kelly, who was at the end of her pregnancy, met us on the sidewalk outside the naval hospital. She wasn’t in her Marine Corps uniform, just jeans and a large t-shirt to cover her protruding belly. The corners of her mouth turned up, but there was a tension in her eyes, small wrinkles at the edges.

There were no streamers or banners, no kids with red-white-and-blue painted faces. There were no photographers or reporters. There were no old Marines from wars of decades past. There was no beer or music.

After all, I wasn’t dead.

I wasn’t a hero either. I was just one grunt, one guy. So, Kelly was there. Her voice was hollow, and I couldn’t decipher the otherness I heard. Her reaction was too much so I kept my head hung. I felt emasculated. I had been stripped of my clothes in a dusty British field hospital in Afghanistan, and I noticed, sitting there in my too-big USO sweats, I had shed a piece of myself too, left it in Afghanistan. I had left my fellow Marines, my brothers. We would never see each other the same again, only able to peer through the killer-kaleidoscope at one another,

caricatures, like distorted reflections in a funhouse mirror. I wondered if Kelly and I would be the same, too.

At the naval hospital, I focused on getting to my room, where the morphine awaited. An hour after the nurse delivered, my body buzz started to peak, all vibrations deep inside, just as the apathy settled in and the drug shooed away all my anxiety and self-consciousness. My ears rang as my eyes struggled against the weight of their lids, and I peered out through thick lashes at a blurry, fluorescent-lit limbo, the smell of saline and hand sanitizer tickling the back of my nasal cavity. I was so thin, but the morphine pushed away hunger, and I didn't need food, didn't care to taste it, but only wanted to waste away there, mute and shriveled.

I was discharged a day or two later with a string of appointments with a physical therapist, a neurologist, and a psychiatrist to go with my new bag of Vicodin and other pills. "Alright, here you go, Marine," the pharmacist had said. "Don't take too many of these close together okay? Stuff'll kill you. Be careful." I could almost hear the permission to get a little loose without going too far.

One pill was for depression and another for anxiety. I had a muscle relaxer for my back, too. The Vicodin nauseated me at times, so I had a pill for that. Opium also constipates, hardens, but it didn't matter how much Colace I took. I was still full of crap. I didn't walk seven clicks a day with a rifle and body armor in sweltering heat anymore, so I had trouble sleeping at night and needed two pills for that: one to put me to sleep and another to keep me asleep for hours. I wasn't sure what some of the other pills were for, but the physical therapist promised they would help as long as I remembered my appointments. My progress eventually proved her right, but I had forgotten my orders to find a good priest when I got home because it didn't feel like home anymore. I could forget anything if I tried hard enough.

**Jonathan Burgess** lives in upstate South Carolina with his wife, four children, and a giant schnauzer named Titus Andronicus. He served four years as a rifleman on active duty with 1st Battalion 5th Marines, and he has an MFA in creative writing from Converse College. His writing has appeared in *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Remington Review*, *Catholic Exchange*, *O-Dark-Thirty*, *Echo*, and *War, Literature, & the Arts*. His 2017 essay, "Chai Party," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.