

Looking for Bowe

Elie Piha

Vacuum sealed pouches are scattered on the dirt and rocks in front of Sergeant Moss. Beef stew with mashed potatoes, cheese spread, crackers, lemon pound cake. Pork rib with raisin-nut mix, peanut butter with tortillas. The beef patty. Spicy penne pasta. Lying just in front of Sergeant Moss's knees, the French toast cookie.

"The human body can survive without food for weeks as long as it has water," he tells us, "but, without water, you'll be lucky to last two days."

He has us count our food in calories. Each MRE is about twelve hundred. I packed nine and stripped them of their utensils, drink powders, and deserts to save weight because, if something goes down—an ambush, or if we just have to get up and go—I want to be able to run as fast as possible.

Sergeant Moss drags his palm across his forehead and lets out one of his deep, low sighs. "HQ checked in. We're going to be here longer than we thought."

Stamper looks up from an MRE he's holding. "How much longer?"

"They didn't say."

Raine, the new guy and my new roommate, strokes his chin. "No chance of a resupply, Sergeant?"

"I wouldn't count on it. With everything going on, we're not exactly a priority."

"Wish I would've brought something other than tuna," Stamper groans.

"Want to trade?" Griggs asks, holding up a dark green package. "They all taste the same to me."

After Sergeant Moss releases us, we gather our newly-sorted MREs and head back to our post. I tear open a pack of crackers and take a bite, and the cracker cures into something like mortar between my teeth while I look around. The rest of the platoon is pulling guard, or cleaning their weapons. Some talk, others play card games. Everyone's beard is starting to come in. Our Medic, Dom, walks out to the slit trench with a pack of baby wipes, Private Villanova following as his guard. I rub my neck. It's sore and sunburnt. This is our third day in this valley. Charlie Company over in another part of Afghanistan has reported one of their soldiers missing, and now the whole Army is out looking for him. I stuff the remaining crackers into my cargo pocket and sit down with my squad behind our machine gun.

When we first landed, everyone had a focused intensity about them, like we were actually about to get to do our job. Range maps were drawn and redrawn. An adobe farmhouse, the sole structure in sight, was surveyed, its owner, a feeble old man with teeth like boiled corn, interviewed and constantly monitored. Recon teams scouted the area and guard rosters were held to the highest of standards, and, not to mention, talk about the missing soldier was optimistic, worried, and compassionate.

But, by yesterday afternoon, after the old farmer was deemed harmless, and after every rock and bush in a three hundred meter radius was IDed, ranged, nicknamed, and forgotten, chin straps started to appear unclipped. Uniform tops were abandoned from underneath body armor. Foxholes got dug deeper in vain attempts to escape the sun and, just like Sergeant Moss had us do, food supplies were carefully measured.

This morning, Raine, legs stretched out and leaning back on his elbows, said he's going to think of this mission as an exercise in boredom management. Stamper asked him what he's

been doing for the past six months, which sent Raine into a tangent about perspective. Some nights in our room, Raine speaks in a way that makes me wonder if he knows I'm actually there, or if I'm the new guy and he's the senior squad member. "Morgan," he'll say, "*you* should *really* read this book when I'm done," even though he's never seen me read anything other than a technical manual.

Looking out over the valley, I finish my cracker—fifty calories—and I bet myself that I'll be full until nightfall.

The farmhouse is three hundred meters away and directly in our sector of fire. The owner, the little old man, comes and goes from his one room house, rarely regarding our makeshift base of ponchos and foxholes with anything more than a glance and a shrug. He works in his fields and we sit and watch, and we try not to guess how much longer we'll be out here.

Griggs stands up and reaches his arms into the air and yawns. He twists side to side and hugs his knees to his chest one at a time, then he starts doing jumping jacks.

"You're getting dirt on the gun," I say, covering the gun's feed tray with my hands.

Stamper scoffs. "Not like it matters."

"Got to keep the blood flowing," Griggs says, still jumping. Suddenly, he drops to a knee. "Oh, shit," he says. "Hand me the binos."

"What is it?"

"Morgan," Stamper hisses, "get behind the gun."

I jump into a prone position behind our machine gun, grab the charging handle and watch Griggs from the corner of my eye.

"The farmer," he says. "He's waving."

"Let me see," Stamper insists.

"Think he knows where our missing guy is?" Griggs asks.

"He probably just wants us to leave," Raine replies.

Stamper hands me the binoculars. I sit up and focus the glass. The farmer is standing by his front door, waving towards us in an overhead sweeping motion. He has a white beard and no mustache, and a small, brimless cap that fits snug over grey hair. His back is bent like a fish hook. I turn and yell, "Sergeant Moss."

"What?" Sergeant Moss says, still busy sorting his MREs.

"The farmer wants something, Sergeant."

Sergeant Moss squints in the farmer's direction, then gets up and walks over. "What's up, Morgan?"

"The old guy, he's waving, Sergeant."

Sergeant Moss motions for the binoculars and we wait silently while he scans the distance. "Faatin," he calls out. "What's this guy want?"

Faatin, our interpreter, comes strolling over and takes the binoculars from Sergeant Moss. After a moment, Faatin says, "He is just waving."

Raine lights a cigarette. "We're probably freaking him out."

Griggs stands and cups his hands around his mouth. "Do you need some help?" he yells.

"Sit down," Sergeant Moss snaps. We stare across the field as a gust sweeps over the valley and makes the old man's crops bow. "Well," Sergeant Moss says, "I'll see what Lieutenant

Leighton thinks. Bored as hell sitting here anyway." Griggs watches Sergeant Moss walk away, then turns back and waves to the farmer.

After a radio check, Lieutenant Leighton decides he'll take a few of us and head over. We file out from our security perimeter into the open valley, Lieutenant Leighton and Faatin walking point, and the rest of us spread into a wide V-formation. I'm on Sergeant Moss's left with Raine and Stamper, and a sniper team from fourth squad is on his right. The cracked valley crumbles beneath my boots, and my rifle, helmet, and body armor, twenty-five pounds of gear, feel like twice that. Looking back, I see Griggs flip me off while stuck manning the machine gun.

When we are within twenty paces, Faatin calls out, "As-salamu alaykum."

"Wa-alaykumu as-salam," the old man says back.

"Salam," Lieutenant Leighton says.

The old man speaks and Faatin turns to Lieutenant Leighton. "He welcomes you to his home."

"Tell him, thank you."

"He asks if we are lost," Faatin says.

"Tell him, we are not lost."

The old man speaks and walks up to Lieutenant Leighton. "He says for us to come inside," Faatin translates.

Lieutenant Leighton reaches for the farmer's hand and follows his lead into the small house. The rest of us trail in behind, and the old man waves for Sergeant Moss, the last one in, to shut the door. Sunlight pouring in gets cut off. I squeeze the grip of my rifle and lightly thumb the safety. A match gets struck and is followed by the hiss of a kerosene burner and the

smell of gas. Then a blue-orange flame swamps and bubbles over a small stove, and two candles held in a dull metal fixture are lit. Light grows from the center of the room and up the walls.

There are no chairs, just a few folded blankets, and the old man motions for us all to sit. The floor is the same ground that is outside, only worn smooth. Exposed beams dotted with knots and holes brace the ceiling, and shelves are carved into the clay walls where they hold plastic containers, more blankets, and cookware. Wrappers and wadded up paper are swept into a pile in the corner.

The old man grabs a warped, metal pot full of water, and he grabs a sack from a shelf and squats down and scoops out three handfuls of dried leaves. He smiles. Faatin makes introductions, naming each of us and our rank, then himself, and then he asks our host his name and pronounces it to us, and to me it sounds something like Omaha.

The old man begins talking. Faatin translates. "He does not know why the Americans are here. This is farming land."

"Can you ask him if he has lived here long?" Lieutenant Leighton says.

Faatin translates and before he finishes the old man starts speaking, stirring the steaming water with a stick. The rich smell of tea fills the room, and I breathe it in and hold it in my lungs.

"He says he has lived here his whole life. He was born in this house. His father and his grandfather and uncles built it. He says he has other homes that belong to his family in the mountains, but that he has not been there for years. He says that his children have all moved to Kabul for work and that he has grandchildren he has never met."

"Is he aware of the upcoming elections?" Lieutenant Leighton asks.

Faatin translates. The old man nods and replies. Faatin says, "He says that is for Kabul."

"Faatin," Lieutenant Leighton says, "ask him if he has noticed any increased activity of foreigners here?"

The water in the kettle begins to roll and the old man removes the heat. Faatin waits as the old man stands and moves over to a shelf and returns with a stack of rattling cups. He sets them, one next to another, in front of him and pours the tea, then passes them around.

"Faatin," Lieutenant Leighton begins again.

Faatin takes a sip of his tea, then speaks to the old man. But the old man holds up a hand, causing Faatin to pause mid-sentence, and he stands and retrieves a plastic bag off the wall. He reaches into the bag and mimics dropping a handful of whatever is in it into his cup.

Raine takes off one of his gloves and dips his hand into the bag. He drops a powder into his tea, takes a drink, and announces, "Sugar."

"Thank god," Stamper says, grabbing the bag next.

"Sugar is very expensive," Faatin says.

We all say, "Thank you," and nod and smile, and the old man seems pleased.

Lieutenant Leighton clears his throat and looks from Faatin to the farmer.

"Lieutenant," Faatin says. "The question will seem rude."

Lieutenant Leighton shifts his jaw.

The old man leans towards Faatin and speaks.

"He wants to know what America is like."

"America," Lieutenant Leighton says, his eyes widening. "America is... a country where anyone who works hard and follows the rules can have a productive life."

Stamper scoffs and looks like he is about to bite his tongue in half. The rest of my platoon looks either bored, or hungry, or like they're wondering if this farmer has any daughters or nieces nearby.

The rest of them, that is, except for Raine. The look on Raine's face is not stressed nor bored, but it's not his typical confident stare either. Raine seems to be—his lips slightly parted, his brow dawning—the most curious person I've ever seen.

Stamper nudges me. "Can you believe this shit?"

"What?" I whisper.

"What?" Stamper repeats, his mouth hanging open, eyes narrowed in on mine.

I scratch an itch under my chinstrap. "At least we're not sitting in the sun anymore." I look at Raine, then take another sip of my tea.

For the next twenty minutes, the farmer speaks and walks us back in time to the days of his youth, before the Russians, when life here, in this valley, promised a quiet and peaceful setting. When Faatin translates for the old man that he, the old man, believes he owns not just this house and these fields, but the dirt and the air and the sky, and when it rains he owns the water that feeds his crops, and at night he owns the stars above him, Stamper says aloud, "Jesus Christ." I admit, I think the sentiment romantic and naive, too, but, as we continue to listen, watching the old man tell his story, it is obvious that Stamper is sincerely angry. My focus goes back and forth between the old man, Stamper, and Raine, and while Stamper stewes, Raine, on the other hand, smiles. I think it is the first time I've seen him do so. He is entertained, and I find his curiosity, his acceptance of the old man's story, to be contagious; because I start smiling myself, and I can't remember the last time I did that—really smile from some unmanageable

warmth, and not just in response to a joke, or in defense. I try to imagine what Raine is thinking. The farmer *does* own the sky and the land and the rain and the stars. He really believes this. I watch Faatin turn his head side to side, back and forth between our host and Lieutenant Leighton. I listen, notice my chin is jugged out, just like Raine's. Nothing comes to mind, and then my stomach grumbles. I think of Sergeant Moss, and I remind myself that I don't know this old man, what he wants from us, or what he is capable of. I don't know Raine, either. I remember the missing soldier, and that we're all armed to the teeth.

Lieutenant Leighton tells Faatin to tell our host that we have to be getting back. The old man rises, still speaking to Faatin who talks back but has stopped bothering to translate. Once outside, we automatically reform our V-formation.

"Tell him, thank you for the hospitality," Lieutenant Leighton says. Faatin translates.

The old man nods and waves, then says something as we begin to walk away.

"He says," Faatin informs Lieutenant Leighton, "you will not find anything in Afghanistan. But, he is glad to have met you."

Lieutenant Leighton nods, bows almost, and heads up to the front.

On the morning of the fourth day, the old man walks over to our encampment with a plastic bag of cooked beans and a few sheets of flat bread. It's barely enough for all thirty-plus of us, but still Sergeant Henderson, our platoon sergeant, gives the order for minimal security so that the bulk of us can eat. Faatin and the old man speak and, for a while at least, there is laughter among the platoon. Then Lieutenant Leighton asks Faatin to translate.

"Ask him if he has connections to important people around here."

Faatin asks and the old man replies. "He says this place is controlled by tribes."

"Ask him," Lieutenant Leighton says, "*again* about foreigners in this area."

Faatin turns to the old man, and the old man waves at the mountains around us. "He says this place has always been filled with people coming and going." The old man points into the distance and leans from side to side, making eye contact with Lieutenant Leighton. Faatin translates, "This land is very dangerous and he does not know why we are here. He wants to know how long we are going to stay. He wants to know where we're going next, and after that if we are going back to America. And he wants to know how we like the food."

"Better than MREs," Sergeant Moss says.

Lieutenant Leighton stares at Faatin. "We're not telling him anything about how long we're going to be here, and we're certainly not going to tell him anything about what we're doing. Operational security is of the utmost importance. Besides," Lieutenant Leighton says, taking off his helmet and setting it upside down in the soft dirt, "I don't know anything."

Griggs slaps me on the thigh. "You going to eat, Morgan?" he asks.

"You go ahead," I say. "I'll pull security."

"It's really good," he says.

"I'm not hungry."

On the fifth day, the old man does not return, but we watch over the few hundred meters of land between us as he wanders between the stalks of the high grass in his fields. He seems to be

checking each plant, one by one, inspecting. Every once in a while, he waves to us and those of us who are watching wave back. Griggs gets a great amount of joy from these exchanges, and, I admit, I too enjoy his presence.

I relieve Raine from his guard shift behind the machine gun and he makes a comment about feeling like an actor waiting for his cue. I don't know how to respond, and then it seems like hours of silence quietly pass.

In the afternoon, Stamper confirms that cigarette supplies are running dangerously low and have become a much sought after prize in the ever-going card games that mark the epicenter of our pathetic circle of security. The beating ping and rattle of rocks being thrown into a helmet mark the tempo of the day, until the sun tracks the width of the valley and settles, once again, behind the distant blue-brown mountains.

Day six, and Private Lish, from first squad, stands from his position and calls out: "Enemy, enemy." He fires four rounds through his M4, stirring the whole platoon, before he falls face first into the dirt. We flip him over and drag him back, and our medic, Dom, hooks him up with a saline solution as we frantically undress him and do our best to keep him cool. Sergeant Henderson radios for a MEDEVAC, but HQ explains that resources are thin and orders Sergeant Henderson to watch Private Lish's condition over the next twelve hours. Sergeant Henderson then requests a resupply of food and water detailing that our supplies are almost spent, and HQ orders him to ration what we have left, which we've already been doing for three days.

I show Sergeant Moss how much food I have left and he shows me that he too has still been eating as little as possible. He takes out the French toast cookie and says, "If you see me eat this, it means I've lost all hope."

"Hope of finding the soldier, or that we'll ever get out of here?"

Sergeant Moss tucks the tightly sealed cookie into his chest pocket. "Everything."

For the past few weeks, Griggs, who rooms with Stamper, has insisted on keeping the squad informed about the status of Stamper and his longtime girlfriend. Last Griggs told us, the day before the soldier went missing and we were sent out here, was that Stamper came back to their room one night from the phone-bank red-eyed and cursing. Stamper apparently wouldn't explain to Griggs what happened. Then, this morning—day seven—Griggs got the idea in his head to openly nag Stamper about why he was crying, to come clean and tell us all what's going on.

"He has to want to talk about it," Griggs says.

"He doesn't," I say. "He's said that numerous times."

"Stamper—man—did she cheat on you?" Griggs asks.

"Not everyone is an open book like you, Griggs," Raine says.

Griggs scoots closer to Stamper, puts his hand on his shoulder. "Can't bottle this stuff up. It only makes it worse."

In a flash, Stamper swipes Griggs's hand off him and then dives at Griggs over the machine gun. The two of them roll over each other in the dirt before Griggs mounts Stamper and pins his arms to the ground.

"Calm down," Griggs yells.

"I'll fucking kill you," Stamper screams.

The rest of us run over and pull the two of them apart. I hold Griggs under the arms and watch over his shoulder as it takes three guys to drag Stamper away, his feet kicking up the dirt and spit flying from his mouth as he cries curses at Griggs.

"Mind your own fucking business," Stamper screams, and, "I hope you go missing next, you faggot."

At night, Sergeant Henderson, who is thirty-three years old but looks to me like a bald, shaggy faced old man, gathers the platoon together at the expense of security. He reminds us all that this is what we've signed up for. "We will all make it out of this," he says, "but we need to remember we have another five months of missions when we get back to base." He calmly goes on for a while about how we all need to focus and think of the task at hand. To stay present. "That is the only way any of us will make it," he says.

Day eight. Sitting, squinting. Beyond bored behind the machine gun. We guard ourselves from the valley, from the sun. We stink like animals.

"Is it wheat?"

"Grass, I think."

"Is wheat a grass?"

"I think grass is a family. I think wheat is in the grass family."

"I know weed is in the grass family."

"Actually, I believe weed is in the weed family."

"When you say family, do you mean like scientific family?"

"As opposed to nuclear?"

"No, jackass. Like genus, kingdom, family—all that shit."

"It looks like grass."

"What's he doing now?"

"Mowing his lawn?"

"Does he eat it?"

"Probably grain."

"For animals?"

"What animals?"

"I'd eat some. So damn tired of MREs."

"You think Stamper's going to be OK?"

"Are we assuming that his lady left him?"

"I can't think of another reason he'd be so upset. He's usually pretty in control."

"You mean *mature*."

"There's a difference?"

"Mature people have been upset enough times to know that most experiences aren't worth kicking and screaming about."

"I think you're confusing mature with robotic."

"Not robotic. Mature. Experienced."

"So you're telling me that if your girlfriend of six years—"

"Eight. They've been together eight fucking years."

"—Even better. Eight years, then, and she left you for someone else while you were half way around the world, you mean to tell me you wouldn't be upset?"

"I don't play the hypothetical game. I just know most things aren't worth kicking and screaming about."

"You never get upset? You never overreact?"

"First of all, if I had a girlfriend for as long as Stamper did, I wouldn't up and leave the country to fight a war. In my opinion, Stamper left her. I don't know—maybe I'm just more sensitive to the distance between us and everything we've left behind. You guys think life back home is waiting for you. Well, I hate to break it to you, but it doesn't work that way. Brief moments. That's the best thing you can hope for. Your girlfriend, your friends, your family—doesn't matter. Maybe once or twice a day they'll think about you for a second. That's the best they can do."

"..."

"So, you didn't have a girlfriend."

"..."

"..."

"What's that he doing, now?"

"Looks like he's massaging each plant."

"Give me the binos."

"He's harvesting."

"Massage the shaft!"

"That's going to take him forever."

"How much longer do you all think we're going to be here?"

"Who knows."

"This is depressing."

"It's more interesting than what we're doing."

"One down, five thousand more to go."

"You got a cigarette?"

"Want to split this one?"

"OK."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Well," Raine says, "I'm going to go."

"Number one or number two?" Griggs laughs.

Raine stands up and dusts his hands off on his pants. He stares off at the farm, over the three hundred meters of cracked and rocky ground before him, and the look in his eye and the thinness of his lips sends a shiver up my back.

"Raine," Griggs says, "want me guard you?"

Raine starts walking. He passes the slit trench we've dug and then steps over a dry creek bed. Griggs and I watch then look at each other. Raine's fifty meters away before I think to yell—"God damn it, Raine! Come back!" But he just keeps walking, not once looking back.

"He's going to get us busted," Griggs says.

I grab the binoculars and watch. Raine's thin figure shimmers in the burning glare of the sun off the mountains in front of him. Looking farther, I see the old man notice Raine. He waves. Raine waves back. Then Sergeant Moss appears behind us.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Sergeant Moss demands.

"We don't know," Griggs says.

"We were just talking then he got up and started walking away," I add.

"Why didn't you two stop him?"

"He just got up and left, Sergeant," I say.

"God damn it." Sergeant Moss looks back towards where Sergeant Henderson and Lieutenant Leighton are sitting in the center of our base. He curses again then grabs me by the back of my body armor, almost lifting me off the ground. "Come with me," he says, and starts walking after Raine. "Griggs," he says over his shoulder, "go get Sergeant Henderson. Tell him we're checking something out and that we'll be right back."

"What if he asks me what it is y'all are doing?" Griggs yells, but Sergeant Moss doesn't respond. He's picked up into a run. I give Griggs a look, scared and feeling caught in the middle of something I haven't prepared for, then I sprint to catch up. My body armor bounces on my shoulders. I've never felt so weak.

It doesn't take long before Raine looks up and sees us from where he's standing next to the old man. He's stripped down to his undershirt, his armor, rifle, and helmet leaning against the old man's house. As we slow down, Raine smiles—the second time I've seen him do so.

"Raine," Sergeant Moss says from ten yards off. "Put your gear on."

"Can't right now, Sergeant," he says. He runs his hand carefully over feathery shoots coming off the main stalks.

"Raine," Sergeant Moss begins, "Raine, I know this mission is fucked up."

Raine focuses on what he's doing. He looks at Sergeant Moss, then towards me, and he holds out his hand. "They're seeds," he says. "I tasted one. Wouldn't recommend it."

Raine has lost it, I think. Snapped, and we're all going to pay the price for his insubordination. But then Sergeant Moss says "fuck" in a way that changes my mind. He sounds tired, and amused. Sergeant Moss looks over his shoulder towards the rest of the platoon. He says "fuck" again, and then he lifts his hand mic to his mouth and checks in with Sergeant Henderson.

Raine drops the seeds into a bucket then squats and pinches a clot of dirt between his fingers, crushing it and letting the fragments drop back to the ground. My breath finally slows, and Raine looks at me.

"All right, Raine," Sergeant Moss says, clipping his hand mic back. "What're we doing?" Moss starts to take off his gear, first setting his rifle down and then his helmet, then slipping off his chest rig and undoing his body armor. He looks at me. I look back towards the platoon, barely able to see Griggs or Sergeant Henderson, Lieutenant Leighton or the others, and then I begin taking off my gear, too.

Without armor and a helmet and a gun, picking the seeds and moving from plant to plant makes me forget about the missing soldier and that we've been sitting in this valley for over a week. I move between the rows of high grass, making my way up and down one plant, gathering its seeds in the belly of my untucked t-shirt until I can't hold anymore, and I have to walk over to the bucket that Raine carries and deposit them. I taste one, then spit it out.

The three of us quit when the sun sits on the ridge of the western mountains. The old man brings out beans and flat bread and I eat a whole piece to myself and drain bean juice over my mouth. Sergeant Moss grabs a full bag to go. We say "thanks" and "salam."

When we return, Sergeant Moss walks around and parcels out the beans and bread to the platoon. I feel sick from eating so much, and it feels good. The sun is down and the farm and the old man have disappeared behind the curtain of darkness. I think, tomorrow I'll suggest that we go back and help the farmer finish harvesting, then I tear off another piece of flatbread. Stamper sits silently manning the machine gun, and Griggs, with a mouthful of beans, tells us he thought Sergeant Henderson was one second away from ordering him to shoot us for treason.

The next morning, our ninth day, word comes over the radio that we are getting picked up. The soldier from Charlie Company is still missing, but there is work for us to do in other parts of Afghanistan.

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