

JAMES MATHEWS

Silence All Who Cry Out

“I didn’t think you’d show.”
“I said I would, didn’t I?”
“You said you’d keep in touch too. That was a year ago.”
“Do you want me to leave?”
“No. Sit. You look good. Like a good little civie.”
“We’re all civies now.”
“And honorable.”
“What’s that mean?”
“Nothing. Just that some took to civilian life better than others.”
“It’s not hard. As long as you understand it’s a two-way street.”
“What is?”
“Forget it.”
“I was thinking that when we saw each other, when you walked up, that we’d share one of those long-lost war buddy hugs.”
“You said you didn’t think I’d show.”
“If you did. If you did, we’d hug it out. Like war buddies do. Like honorable war buddies.”
“You really want me to leave, don’t you?”
“That’s not an option for either of us. Besides, you’re already here. You’re already sitting.”
“Did you order?”

“I told the waiter not to disturb us. I told him I’d call him over if we needed him.”

“And what did he think of that?”

“You don’t see him around, do you?”

“Let’s just get this over with, okay? Say what you’ve got to say.”

“Rules of engagement first.”

“Don’t fuck around.”

“Seriously, you were always the stickler for ROE. With one notable exception. I just want to make sure what we say here is the final word.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“That once we start, we finish.”

“Fine.”

“Because I don’t think we’re going to get another chance.”

“I said fine. Jesus, say what you need to say.”

“Balad Theater Hospital, Iraq. POW ward.”

“Okay.”

“Prisoner 127.”

“Okay.”

“You know who I’m talking about?”

“I know. You know I know.”

“I dream about him. He screams in pain all through the dream. And then he stops.”

“Why?”

“You know.”

“I know I know. I’m asking you to say it. That’s why you wanted to meet, isn’t it?”

“He stops because you put a pillow—“

“Someone. *Someone* put a pillow over his face.”

“I was there. I was standing right next to you.”

“So maybe it was you.”

“It wasn’t. I was watching the door.”

“Doesn’t matter. We were there together. Prisoner 127 stopped screaming. He’s with his 72 virgins and every American and Brit kid in that hospital got their first good night sleep in days.”

“I didn’t think it would matter. I was wrong.”

“I’m not sure what I can say to you to help you. I never had any dreams about what happened. So I wouldn’t know how to stop them. That’s what you want, isn’t it? A way to stop the dreams.”

“Yes.”

“Like I said, I don’t know what I can do to help.”

“I guess I just don’t quite understand how you can go on without a second thought about it.”

“I never said I didn’t think about it.”

“But you seem to be doing alright. You got a good job after the army. You got a wife. Maybe even a kid. Do you have a kid?”

“Stay on topic. You want to know why I can handle it and you can’t.”

“I think so.”

“Because Prisoner 127 was going to die anyway. Half his face was gone. He had no arms. He was a hot mess waiting to die. About the only thing he could do was scream and he would have kept on screaming for another three or four days.”

“They should have drugged him better.”

“They drugged him fine. I was on duty when they pumped him full of all kinds of shit just to get him to shut up. I was there when the doctor called him a ‘bad kill’ and a waste of pain meds.”

“So you put a pillow over his face.”

“Someone put a pillow over his face. And somebody else stood by and watched.”

“He didn’t fight it.”

“No, he didn’t. That says a lot. So you need to ask yourself how much worse your dreams would be now if you let him live those three or four days.”

“I don’t know if they’d be worse.”

“I don’t know either. All I know is that I do think about it every now and then but I also sleep okay.”

“I don’t.”

“Then you need to give it some time.”

“How much time?”

“How would I know? Look, I read about this research they did on families whose sons died in the war.”

“They?”

“People who research those things. And they found that the first year is the worst, that families can’t get over certain images in their minds, of their loved one dying, body all twisted up, shot up, blown up, in agony or whatever. But after a while, two or three years, those images slowly get replaced by nice memories, memories when the person was young and happy. Before the war. Before the army even.”

“This is different.”

“Of course it is. But not by much.”

“I never knew Prisoner 127. I never knew what his face or body looked like before we blew it all apart. I never heard his voice when it wasn’t screaming in pain.”

“Stop. He was a ‘bad kill’, nothing more. And *he* blew his own face off. Trying to build a bomb to kill one of your other honorable war buddies probably.”

“The doctors. They—”

“The doctors didn’t give a shit what happened to him. Do you think they didn’t know how he really died? They knew.”

“They didn’t know.”

“Listen to me. They knew. I’m telling you they knew and they didn’t care.”

“Look at me.”

“I am. You look like shit.”

“I don’t sleep. I fucking live at the VA clinic.”

“Does it help?”

“We wouldn’t be here if it did. They tell me I need to find the answers by talking it out.”

“With them?”

“With you.”

“So you tracked me down so we could talk it out and now we’ve talked it out. I don’t know what else there is to say.”

“I guess there isn’t. I just wanted to know if you felt the same way I do. The fact that you came tells me maybe you do. Maybe you hear the screams when you’re awake and I just hear them when I sleep.”

“I’m leaving.”

“Back to your wife? Your kid?”
“Stick with the VA. Things will get better. In two or three years, you’ll remember it all very differently.”
“I’ll have happy thoughts about Prisoner 127?”
“I never said that. Take care of yourself.”
“Seriously, will I even be here in two or three years?”
“Don’t try to put that shit on me.”
“Will I have to be silenced? Will the doctors know how I died? Will they care?”
“I can’t help you, man. You have to help yourself.”
“A two-way street?”
“Sure.”
“I’m going to try. I’m going to look for those happy memories.”
“Or just different ones. Settle for that.”
“Like you?”
“Sure. Like me. Just like me.”

JAMES MATHEWS grew up in El Paso, Texas and now lives in Maryland. His stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *The Pacific Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *The Florida Review*, *Northwest Review*, and many more. His short story collection, *Last Known Position*, received the 2008 Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and was published by the University of North Texas Press. He is also a retired Air Force/Air National Guard Chief Master Sergeant who has served overseas numerous times, including two tours in Iraq (in 2003 and 2006). His website is www.jamesmathewsonline.com.