The Last Deployment

Lemer, Bronson

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We leave Wahpeton thinking we are heroes. As the sun comes up on January 28, I hoist my rucksack over my shoulder and board the bus headed for Fort Carson. The other soldiers take their places behind the wheels of our trucks or in the vinyl bus seats. They look like statues, all straight-faced and angry from a busy week of preparing and packing, and little sleep. The bus is quiet, funeral quiet, almost too silent.

We leave the parking lot and I immediately see them, the well-wishers and family members along the side of the road. The streets are lined with people as we make our way to the highway. Some hold signs and flags. Children dressed in parkas, scarves, and mittens brave the cold to see off their brothers, sisters, neighbors, mothers, and fathers. A half-dozen senior citizens—veterans who’ve seen this happen before—sit inside warm Oldsmobiles, honking their horns like geese, proclaiming their support. I don’t know what to do, so I just stare back at the people in the streets. I smile at the children, nod to the men outside the welding company on the edge of town who salute as we pass. Some of the women are crying. They wave and hold signs and whip around flags like any red-blooded American would do, but they also wipe away tears and cling to each other. I imagine they realize that the men and women passing before them, the same men and women who used to help sandbag during flooding, who stood guard at the armories after the 9/11 attacks, who were always ready to step up and help their communities, are now stepping up to help their country, and they won’t be returning the same. Or maybe they don’t. Maybe they think some of us will never return, and the life they are building inside their heads—a life without us—is too much for them to handle. Either way, we leave the city on a high note, thinking that we are invincible, strong, and
brave, but also knowing that we can return to the people who love and respect us, the people we leave behind.

Outside the city, a firefighter waves a huge American flag near the highway. His arms are thick and strong, and he waves the flag back and forth as if this deployment is a NASCAR race and he’s signaling the start. I put on my headphones and let the Icelandic band Sigur Rós play me out of North Dakota and away from home. I feel nostalgic leaving the place where I was born and raised. I’m uneasy being among people I hardly know, headed to a place I’ve never been, for a length of time that has yet to be determined. Mostly, I’m confused. All that flag waving made us feel like heroes, like we’d done something brave just by answering the call. It wasn’t a bad feeling; it just felt deceptive because I know that the feeling of invincibility I’d felt watching the community wave and salute wouldn’t—and couldn’t—last.

I stare out the window of the bus as snow-covered fields and fence posts whiz by. We’re somewhere in South Dakota, coasting down Interstate 29. The television above my head is playing the movie We Were Soldiers, and I watch briefly as Mel Gibson talks to a young soldier about fatherhood. I watch and listen to the advice—much like a child would—because I never had these kinds of talks with my own father. I never had a heart-to-heart conversation about the birds and the bees, about how to trust another man, or what it meant to serve your country. Our hearts never talked in those ways.

My childhood is filled with examples of lessons taught through my father’s actions, not his words. I learned to trust by watching him interact with angry neighbors and other ranchers. I learned to love by watching how he treated other living creatures, whether braving North Dakota blizzards just to feed our horses or helping ewes through birth. I learned what it meant to put in a hard day’s work by watching the man construct a barbed-wire fence or fix a bailer. There’s a silent admiration in watching a man work, and as a child, I was always my father’s biggest admirer, even if at the time I didn’t fully realize the lesson he was teaching me.

The day I learned about fate I realized that my father was wise beyond his years.

My family used to raise cattle on a small hobby farm. I don’t remember how many acres of pasture we owned, but out beyond the hill where I went sledding with my siblings every winter was a patch of prairie along a tiny branch of the Sheyenne River. It was the pasture farthest from our house,
and we used to herd cattle out of the pasture and back toward the barn. I remember one trip where my parents loaded my brothers Brandon and Bo, my sister Nikki, and me into our old blue Ford pickup and drove out to the pasture to bring the cattle in.

Brandon and I were six and seven, respectively, old enough to help out on the farm. My father turned to us when he needed the ice chopped from a water tank or help catching our family’s sometimes-wild horses. My parents parked the truck on the top of a slope, fifty yards from the river, and Brandon and I got out to help my parents herd the cattle. Below the truck were a dozen short crabapple trees dotting the bank of the stream. My parents had gathered the cattle together and were herding them toward the gate. Brandon and I stood along one side of the herd, the side nearest the river, while Nikki and Bo stayed in the cab of the truck.

I don’t remember how it happened, but as my father and mother were ushering the cattle toward home, I noticed the truck slowly inch forward and start to roll down the slope toward the river, with nobody behind the wheel. In my mind I saw what was about to happen. I saw the truck crash into the river, the bumper dipping into the stream and sending my siblings flying from the vehicle. Bo would slowly sink below the water. Nikki would scream and scream until water filled her lungs. At the time I remember the stream being a large gushing river, but in reality it was probably a thin ribbon of dark, murky water. Regardless, as the truck rolled forward I knew that if I didn’t do something, somebody would end up injured or, even worse, dead.

So I stepped in front of the truck; I put myself between the truck and river. I childishy thought my body could stop the vehicle from rolling. I saw the truck coming toward me, picking up speed as it rolled down the slope. I saw the eyes of my brother and sister. I heard my father shouting at me to get out of the way, to step aside and let the truck roll. My father knew there was nothing he could do. If fate was going to take his two children then fate would take them. But he knew enough to save my life. He knew that it was better to lose two children than three, even if both scenarios where undesirable. Before the truck could reach me, I listened to my father and stepped aside, letting the truck continue to roll.

I like to believe that my father knew a tree would stop the truck. I like to think that he knew the inner workings of fate, that by stepping in front of that truck I was interrupting my brother and sister’s destiny. That truck was meant to hit that tree; therefore, my father knew he had to get me out of the way and let destiny run its course. I stepped aside and watched as the
truck rolled past me. Ten yards before the river, the truck slammed gently against a tree, causing my brother and sister to start crying.

There was nothing I could have done to stop that truck from rolling. Yet I refused to give up that control. I thought that if I tried harder I could always control the course of my life. If my life was that pickup truck, I wanted to always have control over the direction it was taking, to never let go of that wheel. I decided which direction to go. I controlled the turns and dealt with the consequences. It’s the same feeling gay men and women get when deciding to come out of the closet; they take the wheel and turn their lives in a new direction. I did that when I came out to my friends, and now, I never want to let go of that wheel because I fear what will happen if I do.

When I joined the military, I thought I still had control over my life; I thought I was making the right turn. It wasn’t until years later that I realized it had been a wrong turn, and I was staring straight at a no-U-turn sign. I was stuck in an organization that stripped me of control. When I signed that contract, I signed my life over to the U.S. Army, and my fate was in their hands.

The night before I boarded the bus for Fort Carson, I shook my father’s hand and gave my crying mother over to him. He knew I’d be all right, that I listened when I was younger and picked up on the things he’d taught me. And I knew that he couldn’t always protect me. He wouldn’t always be there to pull me out of the way. He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t really have to. He looked at me in a way that said he was proud of me, nodded, and turned to escort my mother out of the armory.

We pull into Sioux City, Iowa, as the sun sets. On the outskirts of the city we find an old brick armory, where we’re scheduled to relax and eat. I walk into the building and sit down at one of the half-dozen long tables set up in the gymnasium. Across the table is Hackman, one of the new soldiers in my platoon. I got to know him a little on the ride down because we were both sitting at the front of the bus. He looks so young, still a kid with a pudgy baby face. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of playing cards.

“Wanna play a game?” he asks. He takes the cards from the cardboard box and shuffles them between his small hands.

“What game?” I ask.

“War.”

I laugh at the irony of playing War while headed to war. Hackman is silent as he deals out the cards, puts his hand together, and starts the game.
He gets into it, flipping his queens over my jacks, his tens over my twos. I’m losing at War and for now, I’m alright with that.

“Call me Bobby,” he says as he looks up between hands.

I nod as he lays an ace atop my queen.

After dinner, as we load the bus bound for our hotel, I notice a pair of black combat boots dangling from a power line above the parking lot. I point at the boots and nudge Elijah.

“What’s with the boots?” I ask.

“You’ve never seen that before?” Elijah replies. He then explains that soldiers will toss a pair of boots over power lines for three occasions: once they’ve completed basic training, when a soldier leaves one post for another, or when a soldier gets out of the military. Oftentimes, the troops will paint the boots orange or yellow to make them stand out. *Shoefetti*, they call it.

I watch boots swing in the breeze and fantasize about the time I’ll get to toss my boots over a power line. I get this grand idea of painting the boots bright pink and gathering my friends for a sort of shoe-festooning ceremony, where I’ll gladly fling the boots over a power line and then proceed to the Red River, where I’ll dump everything in military camouflage into the water and watch the gear sink into the muck. If nothing else, I get by just thinking about the day I’ll be able free myself from this organization.

It will be the day I reclaim control of my fate.

When we arrive at Fort Carson on January 30, we are eager for a warm bed and place to settle down. The journey to Fort Carson had spoiled us. We spent three days on the road, traveling from Wahpeton to Fort Carson military base, outside Colorado Springs, Colorado. Along the way, we stopped in Sioux City and North Platte, Nebraska, where we refueled both our trucks and our bodies. We slept in queen-sized hotel beds, ate fancy buffet dinners and continental hotel-lobby breakfasts, and nursed hangovers on reclined bus seats.

We walk into maintenance bay 8142 with great anticipation. We expect beds, clean sheets, showers to wash away the days of traveling. Instead, we see an open room filled with cots, troops from Headquarters Company lined up across the bay. They look like flood victims forced from their homes, people in transit. The building used to house military Hummers, two-and-a-half-ton trucks, and maintenance equipment needed for repairing vehicles. Base personnel wiped oil from the floor, rolled barrels of gasoline and grease elsewhere, and moved trucks and equipment away
to allow us to sleep. Each soldier has a five-foot living space between his
cot and the next. Duffle bags and gear are stuffed below the cots; pictures
and children’s drawings hang above the cots near the walls. The line of
green cots stretches down the entire bay and across the hall into two
other bays.

Grayson leads Second Platoon—thirty-five soldiers—to the rear of the
building. Here, we set up camp, unpacking our gear, settling into our new
home. We construct a wall with our camouflaged ponchos and hang it from
the rafters, curtaining off a section of the bay. Relics of our former lives
appear out of duffle bags. First come pictures of loved ones—wives, children,
parents. Then come things to take our minds off the deployment. A couple
of soldiers pull out huge black binders full of CDs. I notice books being
pulled from bags. Elijah takes out his Risk set, and I smile, fondly thinking
back to Kosovo.

Once unpacked, we lie on our cots, resting and laughing at the circum-
stances we are in. Our cots are so close we could reach over and lock arms
right now, forming a human chain stretching across the bay—links in a
military defense force. But we don’t; we’re not that comfortable with each
other yet.

We spend the next couple of days attending briefings and prepping for
the deployment. We receive the small pox vaccination and spend hours
scratching our armpits like gorillas. I watch the scab on my arm form and
eventually fall off. I start reading Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 and become as
paranoid as Yossarian. When Yossarian states that even his lymph nodes are
out to get him, I feel my own lymph nodes, then check myself into sick
call, believing (like Yossarian) that I have cancer. I find out that the swelling
is just a side effect of the small pox vaccination.

We relax around our bay or walk to the convenience store at the top of
the hill for beer and junk food. Most of the time we sit around our bay
awaiting orders. Bobby and I play another few games of War. Others break
out the Risk board and battle over continents. Rumors swirl around the
building. The bay is alive with an uncomfortable buzz, whispers of possible
deployment locations, possible assignments, possible threats. We want to
know where we are going; we want to know our future. The buzzing gets
louder as the rumors are passed from soldier to soldier. Someone brings in a
newspaper, and Newman reads out loud a story about Turkey letting U.S.
troops into the country in preparation for an Iraq invasion. When he finishes
the article he looks up to find all eyes on him. We listen because we want
answers, but in the end all we have to hold on to are rumors.
Sitting in a waiting room at Fort Carson, this is what I imagine: The desert is gray. The sand is dull and colorless. It is the clichéd desert of movie sets and television shows, and it is gray because it is a place I’ve never been, never set foot on, never touched. In the dream the desert is the same as the one in the movie *Three Kings*, except there’s no color and George Clooney isn’t kicking ass across the sand.

I am driving an army truck across this gray desert as members of my platoon sit in the back. The sand has pushed itself up against an abandoned truck, charred black by a roadside bomb and now lying lonely in the ditch. I stare at the truck as we pass, before forcing myself to shake the image from my mind. Across the field the children are faceless. They gleefully kick a ball across the sand. They seem to be having a good time, and I want to pull over and play soccer with them, but I can’t. I must move forward with the mission.

Women covered in black sheets walk by with buckets on their heads. There are chickens and goats, even a donkey pulling a cart as a teenage boy whips the animal, forcing it forward. I look at the men in the back of the truck. We have guns and are pointing them out the side of the truck, ready for an attack, or to put that poor donkey out of his misery. It is summer in the desert and we are all hot.

Suddenly, a car swerves into my lane and heads straight for our truck. I crank the wheel to the right, expecting to crash through the rusted side rail and down into the ditch. I swerve just in time to miss the car, but as I steer the truck toward the ditch a rocket-propelled grenade strikes the windshield, splitting the truck like an axe to firewood. Before we get a look at the bastard in the car or even flash our weapons, the truck explodes—straight out. We spin into the ditch and fall open, bursting into flames. There is no time to scream, no time to run, no place to go. Debris shoots into the bright blue sky and there’s a brief meteor shower. The children stop moving their legs and start craning their necks, one by one, to watch the spectacle before them. They scatter like pigeons as the crumbs of debris float down onto their field.

The dream cuts to St. Cecelia’s Catholic Church, where in a creaky old pew an old woman leans over and whispers to her neighbor what everyone already knows: *They had to identify him by his teeth.*

“Lee-mer?”

I blink hard to shake away the daydream. A specialist is standing before me, frowning into a chart. I rise from my chair and follow her out of the room. I look back at the soldiers waiting in the green chairs along the wall.
They’re all staring at the large-screen television across the room. I get a glance of the screen and watch a CNN news clip of the space shuttle Columbia exploding and falling down to earth, and I realize what inspired my crazy daydream.

I follow the specialist through a small room crammed with three desks and three busy specialists typing on computers, and across the hall to the examination room. A tall, broad-shouldered man stands in the corner, almost completely out of sight behind the door, writing something inside a folder. The blinds are up and two large windows cast dull rays of light onto a waiting dentist’s chair. Nothing scares me more than military dentists.

I sit without being instructed. The clear plastic sheet covering the chair slides against my cargo pants, and I feel the cold, hard surface of the plastic rub against my neck as I settle in. Get it over with.

The doctor shuffles over without saying a word. For him I’m just another GI with horrible teeth, needing an inspection before I go to war. This is just one in a number of stations that I must go through today, each with different military personnel waiting to mark an OK on my list, making me deployable to Kuwait, Afghanistan, Qatar, Germany, or Iraq. To them we all look the same—young kids with bad teeth and acne, impatient and nervous. The doctors’ callused faces are indifferent to our situation; there is little need for either of us to acknowledge the other. I ignore him the same way he ignores me.

I recline, grip the hard plastic armrest, and try to relax. I think about both my daydream and the Columbia explosion. What were the astronauts thinking? So much of their fate was entrusted to the shuttle that took them into space but couldn’t deliver them home. They had to let go. They had to have faith in NASA and their mission. And, I have a hard time accepting the fact that I need to let go as well.

Now, I want out of a future I foresee. My mind goes wild with the possibility of tragedy, the possibility of a fate I have no control over. I could be picked off by a renegade sniper. A roadside bomb could explode under the truck I’m riding in or a spiraling missile could melt the flesh and muscle clean off my bones. I know what must be done—I must put my life in the hands of others. I have to trust these men and women who surround me now and let others take control—be it a dentist, a squad leader, a bus driver, a young lieutenant, a naïve president, or other soldiers. I have to learn to accept that I may die from circumstances beyond my control. It’s a hard thing to accept. How do you come to terms with your own possible
Snow Bullets

death? In your mind, how do you prepare for the fact that you were simply
in the wrong place, at the wrong time, among the wrong people?

I’m so wrapped up in the image of my daydream, I don’t even hear the
dentist instruct me to open up until the instruments are dangling above
my lips.

“Specialist, open please.”

I drop my jaw, opening to the unknown.

You can’t help but wonder how you got yourself into this mess.

At the rifle range on Fort Carson, you watch fat snowflakes fall to the
ground and feel the cold night surround you. You’re at the range for a
night-firing drill. It has been snowing all day—the coldest day since you
set foot in Colorado—and the snowflakes hit you at an angle, pelting you
in the face. The snow reminds you of home, how you drove fifty miles
north to Rugby, North Dakota, one weekend a month for ten months, to
drive with a water purification unit. You remember those drives like they’re
home movies of your youth. You remember how liberating it felt to coast
through rolling hills at 5 a.m., when everything was dark and silent. You
remember that barbed-wired fence with cowboy boots on the posts and
the names of all the small towns along the highway. In the winter there was
a sort of magic about that dark landscape, lit up by a blanket of snow. The
road dipped down into valley after valley, across crusted-over rivers, and
past cold prairie pastures. It was the best part of drill weekend—the calm
before the storm—when you prepared yourself for the day. It was a time
when you had control over your destiny; you drove yourself to those drills,
and you were happy about the direction your life was taking.

You also remember that night you came out to your best friend. You
remember driving your parents’ car through the nighttime streets of Fargo,
how the streetlights cast dark and looming shadows around the vehicle.
You remember a woman walking her dog, the song playing on the radio,
the glow of the Burger King sign as you parked below the neon light and
told your best friend you are gay. You felt relieved because you could finally
live your life the way you wanted.

Now, you look up at the mountains towering over you, large and
looming like gods, and you feel small, so you step a little closer to the soldier
in front of you, and realize that everyone around you is doing the same
thing, huddling together for warmth. You start to understand the magnitude
of this war: how big war can be and how small you can become. You try to
shake the feeling away, the feeling that war is days away, but you can’t. You look around and realize both the eeriness and tranquility of firing rifles at night in the snow. It feels like the beginning of the end, and you remember a recurring dream from your childhood involving a train, millions of spinning clocks, and people screaming about the end of the world. The dreams woke you at night and sent you running for your parents’ room like a little girl. Strangely enough, you get that same feeling now but realize there’s no place to run.

I read somewhere that a lot of Vietnam veterans believed there was a bullet with their name on it. If the bullet didn’t take them out during the war it was bound to do so eventually. To an extent, I believe this is true for everyone.

I try not to think about when my bullet will finally hit me and lodge itself deep inside my skull or rip through a tendon. But on February 9, after nearly a week in Fort Carson, we get some answers, and that bullet starts to inch a little bit closer.

Anticipation and fear hang over the bay like thick fog as we wait to hear the news. We don’t talk much. We sit around our bay thinking about the announcement before climbing out of the fog and walking across the building, to Charlie Company’s bay, where a circle of military brass—lieutenants, majors, sergeant majors—stand welcoming soldiers. We silently drift into the bay, filling the sleeping area with men and women full of questions. We make nervous chatter, shifting from right foot to left in anticipation. Most people just stare at their boots. I watch married men twist their rings around their fingers. The fear, doubt, and anxiety show in our cheeks, our downcast eyes, our furrowed brows. We are a bay full of worry and wonder.

I look around and notice the walls coated with memories—pictures of young children playing outside, photographs of beautiful women smiling into cameras, group shots of friends crowded around a table with glasses of alcohol in hand. It feels like I’ve stepped into someone’s living room. Except here, instead of overstuffed armchairs, armoires, and hutches, we have green cots covered with sleeping bags, cardboard-box tables, and crudely made clotheslines hung with wet uniforms.

At the center of the bay, a sergeant major asks for our attention.

“Troops, we’ve gathered you here to relay the news,” the tired-looking sergeant major says. He looks around the room at the men and women staring back at him. He doesn’t beat around the bush. Instead, he gets right into telling us what we’ve been waiting to hear.
“The 142nd will be attached to the Fourth Infantry Division in Turkey, in support of a possible war against Iraq.” He pauses briefly. “Your mission may involve a number of different things including building a prisoners’ camp and helping build up military bases across the country.”

The sergeant major continues by explaining how proud he is of all the troops. He commends us for deploying so quickly and putting our lives on hold to defend our country. He finishes by thanking us for our service thus far. For the past week we’ve heard about the United States’ desire to enter Iraq from both Kuwait and Turkey, and of Turkey’s resistance to letting us do that. The sergeant major does give us some news we can use—a place and a mission. It helps me visualize what’s going to happen, and I feel better knowing where I’m headed.

After the briefing, Grayson gets the keys to a five-ton truck and thirty of us pile into the back for a trip into Colorado Springs. We drive to a steak house, where we stand around the lobby opening peanut shells and taking pictures. We’re wearing civilian clothes. We aren’t all green, black, and brown, and I’m glad we’re not all camouflaged anymore. As I watch the line of people follow a waitress across the restaurant to a large table near the back, I think, We can finally stand out as individuals.

At the end of the meal, Trangsrud, a young guy who looks like he’d rather be at a grunge concert than firing a rifle, is feeling particularly bold. He has dark, bushy eyebrows, which he raises as he leans into the table.

“Should I ask the waitress for her number?” he asks the group of guys at our end of the table.

Trangsrud smiles and looks around. He looks different in this restaurant, cocky and confident, almost brave. It’s a side of him I don’t see when he’s in the camouflaged uniform; it’s a side I identify with because I feel he also doesn’t fit in with the army.

“Why?” I ask, laughing. “You’re never going to call her.”

The rest of the men return volley, saying that even if Trangsrud did get her phone number he could never see her again. But the comments do nothing but act as bait for Trangsrud’s challenge. It doesn’t matter if he’ll call her or not. What matters is the challenge—the mission.

“I’m going to do it,” he says.

Trangsrud pushes back his chair and gets up from the table. He’s dressed in all black with safety pins lining the collar of his shirt. He’s the kind of kid you’d see at a Marilyn Manson concert—baggy pants, black fingernail polish, thick laced-up boots. He’s probably the only soldier among us who actually wears his combat boots when he’s not playing soldier.
He’s the kind of guy who wears eyeliner and actually looks good in it. He walks up to the waitress, who is standing near the bar. They talk briefly, and when she turns her back to grab a cocktail napkin, Trangsrud looks over at us and raises his bushy eyebrows. He comes back to the table holding a folded napkin in his hand.

The rest of the night continues in a similar fashion. For once I get to see these men and women outside of the military. I get to see who they really are. The three women in the platoon order vodka tonics and talk about their boyfriends. The young guys talk about drinking and getting laid. The restaurant makes me realize that these people aren’t just numbers, like the military makes us feel, but real people. They are people who like to laugh and have a good time, something that is sometimes hard to do in uniform.

I look around the table at the people in my platoon as they finish their meals, and I’m reminded of sitting among another group of soldiers at the beginning of September 1997, when I signed my life over to the military.

I sat at a table in a restaurant across the street from the MEPS (Military Entrance Processing Station) in Fargo and wondered how the six other soldiers around me felt about joining the military. That afternoon we went through a series of medical examinations and briefings before we were each escorted into a small room and asked to raise our hands up next to our heads—palm out. We were then told to recite an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” My arm went numb, my knees wobbled, and my toes itched to get out of that room. The light slanted through the closed blinds as I stood in that dark room, and I felt both alone and alive at the same time. I knew other men and women had stood there before me, reciting the same oath I did, and that others would come after me, but I also felt alone—out of my element—like I was getting into something much bigger than myself.

Now, at night, when I hear the breathing of the young soldiers in the bay, I am reminded of the uneven breath coming from my seventeen-year-old lips that day, the gasping sound of a mouth that couldn’t suck in enough air.

As we leave the steak house and walk to our truck, snowflakes cover our tracks. I watch the men and women pull themselves into the back of the vehicle and I realize that I can’t entirely be myself among these people. I can never show them who I really am, like they are doing now. I could never ask another guy for his phone number in front of them, especially now, as we’re getting ready for war. I’d be shunned; I wouldn’t make it through the deployment. The best I can do is to continue putting on the
mask, the one I’ve been using for years to hide who I really am. I don’t like it, but I have no other choice. I settle into the cold, hard seat in the back of the truck, and the harsh realization that I can never really be myself.

Grayson turns the key and gets nothing. After several attempts, Grayson gets out of the cab and walks to the back of the truck.

“She wouldn’t start.”

“So now what?” someone asks.

“We wait,” Grayson says. “I guess we’ll have to call for a jump.”

Grayson walks back toward the restaurant. While he makes the call, the rest of us make our way into a karaoke bar next door to the steakhouse. We’ve already had a few drinks with dinner and are laughing about the absurd Japanese decorations as we walk up to the bar. A few of the guys are still jabbing Trangsrud about getting a phone number. We shake the snow off our shoulders and pull up stools at the bar.

The place is nearly empty. We notice a Japanese couple behind the bar taking orders and a young woman waiting tables. We fill the place while we wait for our jump. Once we’ve settled in and ordered drinks, someone passes around a book full of karaoke titles. I shake my head, refusing to sing, even after Trangsrud tries to get me to. But there is something about their pleading that makes me reconsider. I take their offer to be a sign, an initiation of sorts, a gesture that I don’t have to be an outsider if I don’t want to.

After a couple of drinks, I get the courage to sing. I settle on the Beatles song “Let It Be,” an entirely fitting tribute to my situation. I don’t know if it is the alcohol or just the general good spirit around the room, but it seems like the entire platoon is singing along as I belt out the words. I hold the microphone close to my mouth, my lips finding the right words without the prompter, and I watch as the men and women around me sing along. I watch their mouths move in unison. I think part of my fear of this deployment is being an outsider among these people. But over karaoke and beer I forget about the impending war. I forget about my nightmares about dying and the newsclip of the space shuttle explosion being played over and over. I forget about guns and bullets and firing ranges and everything military related. Instead, I relish a warm Friday night, where every one of my worries can be drowned by another beer and another karaoke song. I relax knowing that I can now put at least some trust in these men and women.

Back at Fort Carson, we stumble into the bay, half drunk from sake, beer, and karaoke. We fall into our cots and drift into a deep, contented
sleep. We have a mission, a purpose, something to look forward to. In the morning, we are so close to each other that we can reach over and slap the face of the soldier next to us, and feel the swift snap of fingers against our skin, almost as if we are slapping ourselves.

We spend the first week of February rushing to get ready for war. By the middle of the month, we still haven’t heard whether Turkey will let us in their country, and instead of shipping out, we spend our days doing field drills on the hills behind the maintenance bay we call home.

The southern edge of Fort Carson is covered in rolling hills and prairie. The land is used for various activities, from land navigation exercises to mock gun battles and field activities. I wait as half the platoon piles into the open back of a two-and-a-half-ton truck before lifting the heavy tailgate, latching the chain in place, and climbing into the cab. Lieutenant Burns sits next to me, his Kevlar helmet already on his head as he peers out the window. He looks like a brainy turtle—hard on the outside but all soft and slow on the inside. We simply call him the LT, and like most enlisted men we make fun of his college-educated naïveté about the world.

I’m driving to the back section of the hills, where the rest of our platoon is already waiting to take part in a number of field exercises including a GPS class, a basic combat class, and a course on how to build a wire barrier. It has been snowing all morning and the white powder covers the land, masking the normally gray hills in a clean sheet.

I turn onto a gravel trail. The melting slush fills the potholes in the road, hiding them as the truck’s wheels dip down into the holes. We’re bouncing along the road and I hear people in the back of the truck curse my name. I try to control each turn, taking my time to make it down the road and safely out into the field where the rest of the platoon waits. I come to a one-way sign and turn to the LT.

“Is this road a one way?” I ask.

As I’ve gotten to know the LT over the past month, I’ve become more and more uncomfortable going into this deployment with him as our leader. He shrugs and tells me to keep going, and I realize what kind of man I’ve turned my life over to. I’ve finally started to accept that my life is in the hands of people like the LT, men and women who’ll lead soldiers into battle. The platoon looks up to the LT for leadership, but I’ve found myself trusting less and less in his judgment. He’s socially inept and unable to make a decision, and I feel that if I follow his advice, I’ll never make it through this deployment alive.
Snow Bullets

The LT points to the left, and I turn down a narrow road. The road runs along the valley between two buttes, and as we make our way down the path, I look up at the small hills on both sides of the path. The LT says that the staging area is just ahead. I pull the truck out of the valley, and as we approach the clearing, I see a snowball come flying at us from the left. I look out in front of the truck and notice a half-dozen soldiers with snowballs jump out from behind a bush and block the road. I have driven straight into an ambush.

My first instinct is to run, to whip the truck around and hightail it out of the valley. Instead, I listen to what I’m being told. The LT takes the mock ambush seriously. He tells me to pull the truck off the path and to turn around. I immediately snap into action, listening to the LT like I used to listen to my father, imagining what I would do if this were a real ambush, with real attackers and real ammunition. As I whip the truck around, I notice two soldiers running down the hill, their arms lobbing snowballs at the truck. I hear a couple of people in the back of the truck yell as they’re pelted with snow. I try to drive away, back the way we came, but the ambushers have us surrounded. The group blocking the road has caught up with us and is now chucking snowballs at the cab. I watch as a snowball hits the passenger side window and splatters against the glass. If that snowball had been a bullet it would have pierced the LT’s skull, killing him instantly.

When the snowballs cease, I stop in the grass and turn off the engine. I feel a little defeated as I climb down from the truck. I’ve killed the fifteen men and women in my platoon. The troops in the back are already shaking the snow from their coats and climbing down into the field. The ambushers—the other half of our platoon—are laughing and explaining how perfectly the ambush was executed. They tell us how they had scouts on the top of the hills, and when I drove the truck out of the valley, they had us surrounded. We had no place to go.

We all have a good time laughing at the mock attack. For most of the platoon, the attack helped them relieve stress and enjoy being out in the snow. But for me, the attack was a sign of what is to come. It helped me realize what I was getting myself into. Even when I had control—control over my own life as well as the lives of the fifteen soldiers in the back of the truck—there was nothing I could do but accept our fate. We were doomed the moment we left that valley; our fate was death by snowball.

I like to think that the attack also helped me prepare for this war. But in reality, I know nothing about war. All I know is what I’ve seen in Hollywood.
movies—soldiers storming beaches and charging across deserts as oil fires blaze behind them—or what I’ve read in books like *Catch-22*. That isn’t war. It’s the dramatized vision of what we imagine war to be. We imagine a war where Vietcong soldiers live in ant tunnels and snipe American boys from jungle trees. We imagine wars to be like the ones in *We Were Soldiers* and *Saving Private Ryan*, where tanks rumble through European cities, and soldiers rescue each other from frightful deaths. All the thoughts of impending doom and tragedy that have been running through my head are fueled by these images of war. But no two wars are alike. I have no way of knowing what to expect, no way of knowing what to prepare for, and that frightens me even more.