6. The Mustache Race

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The curtains are the color of blueberries. It’s difficult not to notice them. They sway hypnotically with the warm air rushing into the bus, and because it is hot, all eyes are on the undersized windows. The air cycles in, pushing the curtains back and forth in a game of tug-of-war. It’s as if the curtains sense the nearby turmoil, and through their constant shifting, they help the wind communicate with us. *This breeze will be the last gentle thing to hit your face.* Swoosh. *There’s nothing gentle about war.* Swoosh.

We are in Kuwait and it’s hot—miserably hot. At four o’clock this morning we moved from a cramped tent in Camp Wolf to a cramped bus headed for Camp New York, one of several U.S. military posts scattered throughout the Kuwaiti desert.

Sweat drips from our brows, splashing onto the seats in front of us, our chins, our weapons, our BDUs. This is my first big sweat during the deployment and will certainly not be my last.

Jones looks exhausted. His head, like everyone else’s, is covered with a shell of Kevlar, and he rests it on the seat in front of him. His weapon points awkwardly toward his boots. At nineteen, he is the youngest member of our company. I can only imagine the things running through his mind: *Why Iraq? What’s happening back home? What if I need to kill a man? What if I’m killed? How does my mustache look?*

My father has a mustache. For as long as I can remember, he’s had one, a row of straight dark hairs piled on top of each other like lumber. When I was a kid, he’d come in from outside—the cold midwestern wind blowing another snowstorm across the Dakotas—and there’d be ice hanging in shiny, clear strands below his nose, coating the bristly hairs. In the basement, as he removed his snow boots and the plastic bread bags that kept his feet
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dry, my father slowly warmed, sitting on that green vinyl chair placed awkwardly among the furnace, deep freeze, tools, and other amenities that cluttered the unfinished basement. My brother and I watched from the stairs as the ice on his mustache thawed, and the slick, dark slash of hair under his nose reappeared. We wondered when our own lumber pile of hair would sprout.

Like many young boys, I wanted to be like my father. I wanted a mustache. However, I often romanticized my mustache, thinning it out and curling it, like Peter Sellers’s in the Pink Panther series, or growing it dark and thick, letting it sag like Wyatt Earp’s.

Every now and then, as if he wanted to create this huge surprise, my father shaved it off, paying little regard to what people said. My mother thought its absence made him look younger. But for me, it made him look strange, deformed, or deranged. It seemed as if his mustache had walked right off his face, leaving a blurry substitute to the thick hairs that complemented his rugged appearance. My father’s mustache was like a crooked nose or dimpled chin—strangely alluring and somehow oddly appropriate.

I have no idea which direction we are headed. I don’t even know if we are still in Kuwait. This is what I do know: We are on a well-paved highway; there is garbage everywhere; and we all look like wet seals, drenched in sweat, with long, confused faces. Not only do the few people we see along the road look unpleasant and sad, but everyone on this tiny bus senses the misery and lets it consume them.

My face is damp from sweat, my eyes stinging. My head hurts from the helmet, and my muscles ache from traveling. Yet my ass hurts the most. The half-inch cheap cushion between me and the iron seat provides little relief.

The blueberry curtains are proving to be more harmful than helpful. They get in the way of the air, but if we pull them aside, the Kuwait sun comes down on us with vengeance. So we just sweat.

Kuwait is all sand. The country, with the occasional clump of trees or cluster of gray, windowless homes, looks like nothing more than a giant sandbox. In fact, that’s what we began calling it—the Sandbox. We first heard the term from some sergeant in Fort Carson before flying over, yet we refused to believe it. He’d say, “When you’re over in the Sandbox, you’ll understand the importance of cleanliness” or “You better clean your gas mask daily, because once you’re in the Sandbox, that thing will fill up in seconds. And if your gas mask is full of sand, it’s going to be hard fitting your head in.”
This sandbox is nothing like the sandbox I had when I was a kid. My parents created three sandboxes on our farm—one for my brother, one for my sister, and one for me. Each was made out of an old tractor tire and positioned throughout our farmstead. Thinking back, playing in my childhood sandbox—making those roads and cities, filling up my Tonka dump truck with load after load of sand, or creating houses out of packed, wet sand in the shape of a bucket or a cup—was simply preparation for what I was going to do over here.

I turn away from the window and the endless desert. The bus is loud—not from talking but from driving down the road, windows wide open and the old Marco polo bus engine coughing up years of sand as it goes along. We are quiet. Rainman sits next to me, his hands cupped in his lap, his forehead dripping, and his expression blank. He stares at his boots. We sit in the back, on the long seat that stretches across the entire bus. The seat is raised slightly, and Rainman is in the middle, as if at the head of a grand table, staring at his boots, which stick awkwardly out into the aisle.

“We were just at an airport. Why couldn't we have just taken a helicopter there?” he says without looking up. His cheeks are flushed, and there are bags drooping under his eyes. Anyone could gather from his face that we'd been traveling for days.

“You forget. This is the army,” I respond.

“Well, it would have been a hell of a lot quicker than this shit. Where the hell are we?”

I scan the rest of the bus, looking for an answer. Rogers is reading a magazine—Newsweek—that he brought with him from the States. Beaming on the cover is Jessica Lynch. When I heard the story of her rescue in Iraq I stored it in the back of my head, along with thoughts about home, friends, and family. Stories like that only make heading to war more painful, and pushing them out of your mind is the best solution.

Roach and King are both asleep, resting on their rucksacks, piled like bags of coal next to them. Roach is softly snoring. Viv is anxious or has to pee, I can't tell which. He keeps shifting around in his seat, alternately looking out the window and watching the rest of us. The curtains don't seem to have the same calming effect on him as they do on me. Everyone looks on edge. Even Johnson's whistling, which drifts quietly around the bus, has little calming effect.

The driver seems like the only completely calm person on the bus. He's a Kuwait native. He wears a long, white robe and a deep blue scarf wrapped around his head. The only visible part of his face is his eyes, dark
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and darting. He fits in here in a completely different way than we do. We are camouflaged with the land. He is camouflaged with the people. Our new desert camouflaged uniforms are the perfect shade of nothingness, which is exactly what the U.S. military is going for. Get in and make it look like we aren't even there. The driver’s white robe is clean and pure: the color of peace, surrender.

It’s something the military forces upon people. The Kuwait natives surrender to our neediness. We need them—to drive our troops to outlaying posts, to find the land mines, to translate the words, to pump away our waste. But do they need us? What benefit do we bring to these people?

I notice Jones looking up, almost as if to answer my unspoken questions. With his forefinger and thumb he gently smoothes the fine hairs above his lip.

Have you ever grown a mustache?” Jones asked me one morning.

He was standing by the mirror. We’d been packing, and there was a sense of excitement as we stuffed DCUs (desert camouflage uniforms), boots, and gear into the olive-drab duffle bags. It’s like sifting through the remains of a tornado, separating the useful from the useless.

“What do you mean grown? Like petunias?” I replied, looking up at him.

It seemed odd to talk about a mustache as something you grow. It was as if we were two old women comparing gardens, one asking the other if she’d ever had success growing Blue Hubbard hybrid winter squash.

“Yeah, grow. How else would you say it?”

I didn’t know. I doubted I could grow a mustache or a garden, so I had nothing to say.

“Do you think I’ll need these?” I asked, holding up a pair of mittens with fur on the cuffs.

“It’s the desert, not the Arctic.”

Earlier that morning we’d been told that we were headed for Kuwait. After being strung along for two months, we were finally headed somewhere. Now it was time to sort out the stuff we needed from the stuff we could leave behind, with our families, our friends, and our country.

Jones and I had been roommates ever since they moved us into the barracks. He married before we left, one of several rush weddings to reap the benefits married couples receive, such as extra money for your wife. I’d met his wife once, the day before we left. They were headed to the courthouse following formation. During the family time the following day, they sat in the corner of the auditorium, enjoying each other’s company and their
new titles—husband and wife. In between talking with my parents, I watched them. They talked as if they were the only people in the room, ignoring everyone else and the upcoming goodbyes.

“I’ve always wanted to grow one, but I know Maria wouldn’t even look at me if I did. So I was thinking of starting one now.”

Maria had flown down to Colorado three days earlier. Now, with Maria gone, and not knowing the next time he’d see her, Jones was looking to experiment.

For me, growing a mustache always seemed like a right of passage from boyhood to manhood. Having a mustache meant you were a man. You’d finally proved that you were meant for manly ordeals. Most of the guys in our company had smooth upper lips, including myself.

I had never grown a mustache. I didn’t want Jones to know that. The mustache simply didn’t fit in with our generation. Having a mustache was like rolling your jeans, a fad that eventually faded with time.

Yet we were days away from heading overseas, to a war that required boys to become men.

“I’ll tell you what, we can both try growing mustaches,” I said. “It could be a race. Whoever grows the best mustache wins.”

“Oh, a challenge then? You’re on.”

Jones reached over the boots, uniforms, canteens, flashlights, shampoo, suspenders, gas masks, and other equipment littering our floor. We shook on it, agreeing to begin the next day. Our belongings began to separate into piles and among those piles we started a competition, hoping, I thought, that a pile of hair under our noses would help disguise the fear on our faces.

Suddenly, the reason we’re in Kuwait makes sense and everything is silent. A calm engulfs the bus. The whistling has stopped. The bus has cured itself of its cough, and the wind is still, unwavering. It simply ceases to exist.

This is our equivalent to riding into battle, six beat-up Marcopolo buses charging across the desert. It isn’t gallant. It isn’t elegant. We aren’t the cavalry, the infantry, or the artillery forces. We don’t have the tanks, the guns. We’re engineers. We have hammers and wire strippers and monkey wrenches. For us, cruising across the desert in beat-up buses is as grand as it gets.

We have turned off the paved highway onto a thin, dirt road. The countryside opens up into a field of nothingness, sand for miles upon miles. The six buses form a line, like ducklings, making their way down this sand trail to their home—our new home.
Roach and King are awake now; the bumpy dirt road is simply too rough for sleep. Everyone is surveying the land, peeking out from behind the curtains to get a glimpse of what is in store for us.

Abruptly, the bus jerks to the left, forming its own trail through the sand. I look back and notice that it is barely a trail at all. It’s simply a slightly more traveled line of sand than the one we are currently on. There really isn’t a road, and the buses, instead of following one another across the desert, spread out, side by side, racing across the sand. Six tiny Marcopolo buses are cruising across the Kuwaiti desert. The race has begun.

Rogers puts down the magazine and glances over as two buses glide past us on the left. I pull back the curtain, getting a glimpse of another soldier peering beyond his curtains as another bus passes us on the right. We’ve been traveling for about three days, shifting from one post to the next, and this is the first real excitement of the trip.

The land doesn’t stretch on for too long before we see signs of military life. An old trailer-bed lies wasted and empty in the sand. Other vehicles are left abandoned along the road—an old five-ton truck, tireless and half covered in sand; a broken-down Hummer. I wonder if anything lives in this desert.

Rainman jabs me with his elbow. “Look at Johnson.”

Johnson is two seats in front of us, his back to the aisle, looking down toward his waist. He has a Coke bottle and is peeing into it. When he finishes, he turns to the rest of us, a smug grin on his face as if he’s accomplished something no one else could. We give him looks of disgust, knowing that we would do the same thing if we had to.

“What? I had to go. Who knows where this damn base is!”

Five minutes later, the bus slows and we stop. I glance out the window as soldiers exit the other five buses. Some just stand around, hands over their eyes, looking into the desert, surveying the land. Others stretch, arms jutting straight into the sky, chest bowed out, welcoming the new environment. About fifty yards away, a line of soldiers forms, their backs to the buses, as they urinate into the desert. This is now our territory. We claim this for the United States of America.

We eventually climb back into the buses and continue the trek to our next home. We don’t know where this base is. We’re racing toward an unknown place, an invisible target. I imagine the American camps strategically hidden in the Kuwaiti desert, with secret routes and unmarked paths. There will be no maps, no signs—only a handful of obedient bus drivers who know where the bases are, and they aren’t telling anyone. By
frantically racing toward these unmarked places, the drivers are distracting us, taking our minds off the fact that we are riding into war. Instead, we’re filled with excitement at the possibility of winning a race to an unknown (and possibly secret) place.

We come to a sign, the first sign I’ve seen out here. It points us toward Camp New York to the right. The buses file down to one line again, our bus bringing up the rear. I look up at the bus driver with disappointment. Yet the race isn’t finished.

We pass along a narrow stretch of road, between a small patch of brush and an even smaller sand dune, before the land opens up again. We spread out, each bus taking its own path, separating into its own lane for the final leg.

After a while we pass a line of Abram tanks. They are lined up, like they would be in a military handbook. They’re stopped, silent and beautiful, like geese waiting in a marsh, fuel cans, rucksacks, and gear dangling from their boxy bodies. Soldiers poke their heads out the tops of the tanks. Their faces are dark, covered in sand, dirt, and sweat. I wonder how long they’ve been in Kuwait. How long have they been in the sun, the rays licking their faces? How long has the wind been whipping up the sand and pelting it against their brows? How long will it be before we wear those same bitter, worn faces, and what will it take to get there?

I sense we are close. If nothing else, I imagine the rough terrain is the military’s last attempt at diverting people away from their secret bases. Each time we hit a bump, sending us toward the ceiling, I look over at Rainman, who gives me this look. *How does a helicopter sound now?*

Nothing can explain the relief at seeing Camp New York. We follow the other buses through a gate and onto a base that looks almost abandoned. Coming to a halt, the driver—our savior, our guardian—looks into the mirror above his head. With his eyes, he says to us, *We’re here.*

Three days after Jones and I shake hands, we’re on a plane headed for Kuwait. I splash water on my face and lift my head to the tiny restroom mirror. The weak light barely catches the whiskers poking through below my nose. I turn my head, left then right, trying to cast some light on the few hairs on my upper lip. Laughing, I exit the small bathroom, noticing the people lined up down the aisle. How long was I in there examining my new mustache?

Newark looks so large. Glancing at the city that lies below, I realize that this city, foreign to me because I’ve never been here, will be the last
American city I'll set foot in for quite a while. The seat-belt light comes on, and the pilot explains that we’re landing soon. We need fuel.

They don't even give us a gate or anything. We exit the plane onto the tarmac of the Newark International Airport. We stand in a circle, stretching, smoking, joking, taking in the last American air for a long time.

“So Lemer, does this count?” Elijah asks.

Elijah and I argue about what countries and states we’ve visited. When counting, I don’t consider countries where I’ve only been in the airport. For Elijah, the airports count.

“No, of course not,” I say. “How can it? It’s only the airport.”

“So you wouldn’t even say that you’ve been to New Jersey after this?”

“No.”

It’s almost a game. He argues with me just to argue, and I comply because I have nothing better to do.

“Why not?”

“It’s not real.”

“Well, neither is your mustache.”

That gets everyone laughing. I smile, laughing along, rocking from my toes to my heels, thumbs tucked inside my new BDU pants. I somehow imagine the camouflage spreading from my pants up onto my face, covering the blood rushing to my cheeks. I turn to look at the plane, pretending that the remark doesn’t hurt a little. Jones is standing by the plane with Roach. His mustache looks so much better than mine. At nineteen, he can grow a better mustache than I can at twenty-two. Jealous and embarrassed, I walk back toward the plane.

Once the plane is loaded, fueled, and ready to go, the flight attendant announces that our next stop will be Milan.

“That’s in Italy,” she adds with a sense of excitement.

Elijah looks over at me and raises an eyebrow. He knows I’ve always wanted to go to Italy.