7. All Sand and Stars

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The thing about Kuwait is that it’s all sand and stars, and we’re stuck somewhere in between.

I wake to the sound of somebody snoring. I sit up, wipe the sleep from my eyes, and look around. The tent is midnight black, dark, and full of shadows. Across the wooden floor I see bodies laid out like corpses in a mass grave.

As I stand a layer of sand slides off my uniform and sprinkles onto the floor, bouncing around like miniature marbles. I brush the remaining sand from my sleeve, and look around at the motionless men, trying to figure out what time it is or even what day. It was ten in the morning when we arrived at Camp New York. It was a Saturday and we were tired from traveling—from Fort Carson to Kuwait City, then into the desert. I remember hitting this floor pretty hard, and even though the plywood offered no cushioning, I slept soundly through the afternoon.

Across the tent I see an opening, a rectangle of deep blue with a couple of low-hanging stars, and I walk toward it, thinking, *This could be home.*

Tuna is sitting outside eating diced peaches from an MRE sleeve. He looks disheveled. His uniform is a collection of wrinkles and salt stains. Particles of sand stick to the inside crook of his arm. His face is wet with sweat, and I notice the tiny particles of sand that have wedged their way into the corner of his eye and up along his hairline. He looks like he’s just crawled out of a bomb shelter.

“Woke up hungry,” he says, pointing at an open box of MREs with his spoon.

I grab an MRE from the box and sit down next to him. He offers me his canteen, and I pour water into the heating sleeve.
“What time is it?”

“What time is it?” he says between bites. “And all is silent in Camp New York.”

Above us a blanket of stars spreads across the sky, shining down on us and all this sand. I look out across the land and watch the wind whip the particles into a fury. Four Porta-Johns are lined up across from our tent, and behind them a concertina wire barrier runs like a river in both directions. On the other side of the wire, the wind plays with the sand in an empty lot, and beyond that, off at the edge of camp, a single floodlight shines down on a guard tower poised at the top of a berm, an observation point peering out into the desert.

The sand covers everything, and oddly enough I am reminded of the snow-covered North Dakota prairie, where I could look out across the land and see white for miles. Here, even at night, I see sand piled upon sand, extending beyond sight.

The camp looks almost magical in the early morning hours, quiet and motionless, lit by a million stars, only the wind keeping things moving. I feel the cool night collecting around me, taking me in, and I think that maybe this wouldn’t be so bad; maybe Kuwait will be more like home than I realized. Tuna and I sit in silence eating our MREs and thinking about the tranquility of the night. After a few minutes he looks over at me, notices my pathetic attempt at a mustache, and says, “I see you haven’t given up.”

“It’s a race,” I say.

“How do you know who wins?”

I set down my MRE and smile back at him.

“When somebody says ‘Nice mustache’ and means it.”

I started running for candy.

When I was a child, my parents would take me to the track behind our local high school for children’s running competitions. The competitions were hosted by Hershey’s chocolate company, and since I have a really big sweet tooth, the events were an easy sell for my parents. They told me that at the end of every tournament the organizers and coaches handed out candy. Jackpot.

Eventually, I grew to love running because it was such a solitary sport. Unlike basketball or football, I didn’t have to be part of a team and I didn’t have to rely on others. I didn’t have to spend time sitting on the bench, dreaming about playing or fetching water bottles for the exhausted players coming off the field. I only needed my own two lungs and the skinny little
legs that took me around the track. It was perfect. There was nobody to blame but myself.

But that all changed when I became part of a relay team in junior high school. I was particularly strong at sprinting the 100-meter dash, and my coach asked me to anchor the 4 x 100-meter relay race at the regional track competition. If I did it, I couldn't be on my own. I would have to rely on others and others would have to rely on me; there would be three other runners counting on me to run the last 100 meters and cross the finish line in first place. Plus, I would be forced to work together with the other runners during training. We would have to practice handing off the relay baton over and over until we each knew how to hold our hand so the baton could easily be placed in our grip and what to do once our fingers were firmly wrapped around it. It would take us all summer. I eventually agreed to be on the team, but only because I was the anchor, the final runner in the race, and the thrill of crossing the finish line first motivated me all summer long.

It took every ounce of me to learn how to work together with my team. I wasn't used to running with others. Everything had to be timed just right, otherwise we could risk dropping the baton and being disqualified from the race. I knew that, because I dropped the baton a lot. But in the end, it all paid off. We came in second place and advanced to the state competition, where we placed first in our heat. It was the only time in my life I’ve ever crossed a finish line first. I remember busting the white, plastic tape with my scrawny junior high chest, and feeling overjoyed as I stood on the podium, proud to be part of a team. It was a great moment, something I rubbed in my brother Brandon’s face every chance I got.

I’ve been thinking about that relay team lately, only because I’m once again being forced to be a part of a team. Since coming out, I’ve gotten used to being on my own. I’ve gotten used to not fitting in with these men and not sharing information about my personal life because I’m not allowed to talk about being gay. But now I’m forced to live with these other men like I’ve never had to before. As much as I want to believe that I can get through this deployment on my own, I have to accept that I’m going to have to let down my guard a little bit. If I don’t gain their trust and friendship, this will be a long deployment.

*Keep running*, I have to tell myself. *Keep running*.

We are forty-five miles from the Kuwait–Iraq border. The higher-ups want our battalion to move into Iraq in six to nine days, but we must first
wait for our equipment—the trucks and Hummers that will take us over the border. It is April 14, and the weather is already unbearable; during the day we’ve taken to sitting shirtless inside the concrete bunker near our tent, waiting for the unforgiving sun to set. In the early evenings, just before the sun goes down, we climb atop the bunker and gaze out across the desert, watching as the orange ball sinks into the land, gobbled up by the sand . . . like everything else.

I settle onto the roof of the bunker, thankful to be just a little farther from the sand. In the desert there is no escaping the sand. I find it everywhere—up the sleeve of my uniform, pasted to the inside of my thigh, stuck to my scalp, coating the firing pin of my M16, and inside my sleeping bag, making rubbing up against the fabric feel like my whole body is being dragged along fine sandpaper.

“I don’t know if I can take another day like this,” Trønsrud says, staring off at the setting sun.

Beside him Elijah is drinking from a canteen, and at the end of the bunker Tuna is finishing a letter to his wife. For the last week we’ve met atop this bunker to philosophize about the war and complain about the weather. It’s our own desert version of gossiping over coffee.

“I stayed inside the bunker all day,” Tuna says, looking up from his letter. “The damn thing was packed. Couldn’t fit another person inside without making it just as bad as out in the sun.”

When we arrived at Camp New York in the middle of the day, the place seemed nearly abandoned. Few soldiers wandered the grounds. While a good portion of the troops had moved north into Iraq, the people who remained had learned to stay hidden during the day. When the sun began to set, everyone came outside to enjoy the air dropping from triple-digit temperatures to more bearable conditions and to celebrate the sun’s disappearance.

Beside the bunker, three guys from Charlie Company are tossing around a football and goofing around. Others are taking down the laundry they’ve laid out on the tent ropes to dry in the midday sun. At the end of our tent, a group of soldiers from our platoon is lounging around in folding canvas chairs they’ve purchased from the PX (Post Exchange, a commissary), smoking, joking, and playing cards.

“You know,” Elijah says as the sun’s final rays turn the tents red, yellow, and orange, “these tents look familiar.”

He points at the tents behind us, the ones next to our large, circus-style, white tent, where the officers and Headquarters Company sleep.
“I think this is where that soldier threw that grenade at those officers. I recognize the tents from the pictures.”

When we were at Fort Carson, we heard about the soldiers waiting in the Kuwaiti desert, poised on the border to a country we were ready to invade. On a weekend pass, I watched *MTV News* reporter Gideon Yago talk with soldiers waiting out here in the sand, on the “launching pad,” and I couldn’t help but wonder how it felt to be waiting so close to war. We heard about the soldiers struggling with the stress of such a situation, and saw the photos printed in *Newsweek* and *Time* when a soldier threw a grenade inside the tent of his fellow comrades, killing two officers.

I look closely at the tents and remember the pictures from the magazine, but I can’t tell the difference. All the tents look the same to me. And that seems to be the theme in the desert—everything looks the same. The tents look the same, the bases look the same, the sand looks the same as it covers everything and everyone. Even the soldiers look the same as they traipse around with their light-weight desert boots and pathetic, scratchy mustaches.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” Trangsrud asks Elijah.

Tuna and I turn from the sun to look at Elijah, who’s shaking his head. He brushes the sand from his pant-leg, sighs, and peers out at the setting sun.

“Who knows,” he says. “We may be here a while. Waiting.”

When the sun finally sets, Elijah, Trangsrud, and Tuna climb down from the bunker, leaving me alone to stare up into the early evening sky. I lie back and focus my attention on the emerging stars. A nearly full moon takes shape, almost winking at me as the light disappears from the sky; its shape becomes more visible as I wait for the sky to fill with stars. The night sky makes me nostalgic and romantic, and I start remembering everything that brought me here to this desert, every turn I fought against, every excuse I tried to use to get myself out of this situation. As the stars multiply and the moon grows brighter, I feel small and insignificant, like I did back in Fort Carson. I’m just another soldier sitting on the “launching pad,” and as much as I want this place to feel like home, it’s far from it.

But when I see the constellations, I am transported back. When I was a kid, we lived on a farm five miles from our tiny hometown, where the stars were magnified by the absence of city lights. My father used to work nights for an ice-cream warehouse in town, and on the Fourth of July we’d wait until he came home at two in the morning to set off our fireworks. Earlier in the evening, my brother Brandon and I used to climb atop our farmhouse, lie on the roof, and watch our neighbors set off theirs, observing the
shapes and colors but also contemplating the stars that twinkled between the flashes. Our father had taught us how to pick out the Big Dipper in the night sky. He told us to look for the brightest star—Polaris—and trace a line down to the corner of the Big Dipper’s cup. He then drew the shape of the cup with his finger, pointing out the handle. That was the only constellation we knew, and every Fourth of July we’d try and find it.

I easily find the Big Dipper above Kuwait. I also find Orion and the two bright stars Betelgeuse and Rigel that make up Orion’s right fist and left foot. On our second night at Camp New York, after another day of sleeping through the afternoon as our bodies adjusted to a new schedule, I walked with Rainman and Roach to the telephone trailer and stood in line to call my mother. I overheard another soldier describing the night sky, how bright the stars are when there isn’t anything to block them out. I gathered that he was talking to his wife when he said, “As long as we can see the same stars, we aren’t that far away.”

I think about this now as I look into the sky, and I am a child again. It is the beginning of July, and Brandon and I are pointing out stars while lying on the roof of our house. I hear my father’s truck coming down the gravel road, a cloud of dust drifting over the twinkling stars, and I climb down off the roof, excited.

Let the fireworks begin!

Lake stands above me wearing goggles and holding his weapon. He points at the deep blue opening we call a door. Across the wooden floor I see bodies laid out like corpses, a few of them rising and wandering out the door, weapons in hand.

As I stand, a layer of sand slides off my uniform and sprinkles onto the floor. It is early morning, and ten of us are headed to port to retrieve our equipment. The military has strung us along for three days, telling us to be ready to leave in a flash. All we’ve been doing is waiting, and that is about to change. I watch Jones and King rise from the floor, gather their gear, and walk toward the door, like zombies beckoned to another world. I brush the remaining sand from my sleeve, grab my goggles, helmet, and weapon, and walk toward the blue, thinking, This could certainly be purgatory.

I walk across the sand to a two-and-a-half-ton truck with an open back. We load a couple of boxes of water and three boxes of MREs, and climb atop the boxes, the cool morning air blowing sand into our faces. The stars aren’t as bright this morning. I look up to see a few clouds drifting across the sky, blocking out my memory of home.
When the truck pulls out of the gate, we all almost simultaneously lower our goggles from our helmets to cover our eyes. A couple of the guys have brought scarves to cover their noses and mouths; as ten men riding in the back of a truck with weapons gripped in their palms and scarves over their faces, we look like thieves. We speed back the way we entered the desert, kicking up dust and sand. We move toward the sun as if it’s a beacon drawing us closer. We zip past piles of garbage and abandoned trucks, half-swallowed by sand. Near the highway, a group of women wave despite the fact that we look like bandits, and we wave back, happy with our celebrity status. At a checkpoint along the highway, Kuwaiti soldiers shout our praises as we pass through their gates, and we smile and nod back at them as if we’re all together in the cause.

Racing across the sand, I am amazed at how calming it feels to be riding in a truck across the desert. There is something soothing about the way the sand rises up from our tire tracks, creating a cloud of dust that collects around us, swallowing us into the sand. Coming back later in the day and again being consumed by the sand, I realize that the sand is sending us a message. I steer the truck I’m driving across the sand, but at times the dust becomes so thick I lose sight of the truck in front of me. Instead of slowing down, I push through the dust, trusting in the sand and hoping for the best. We’re being welcomed into this place, not only by the women and soldiers along the road but also by the sand itself.

It’s as if the sand is saying, We’d love to keep you here.

I wake to the windiest day in Kuwaiti history—our Kuwaiti history anyway. I sit up, wipe the sleep from my eyes, and look around. The tent is pitch black, darker than usual. The winds are shaking the tent, causing a few people to shift and stir. I hear the rain sharply pelting the canvas. Across the wooden floor I see bodies laid out, again like corpses, a few of them sitting up as if they’re rising from the grave, listening to the wind and rain. I shake the sand from my sleeping bag. The wind whips up again, and I hear the LT whimper. I look over and see that two boxes of water have fallen from their stack near the door and landed on top of him. I smile a little bit and try to go back to sleep.

In the morning, the wind is still going strong. I stick my head out the tent door. I should be able to see the chow hall from here, but instead I see a curtain of moving sand, whirling and whipping its way across the desert. I sigh because I have guard duty today; I have to stand outside enduring this sandstorm all day. No need to brush the sand from my sleeves; it will
just find its way back. I grab my goggles, helmet, and weapon, and walk toward the closed curtain door.

It seems odd that engineers should have to guard the front gate, but so many people have moved forward into Iraq that there aren’t enough troops left to keep this base running. Plus, in the army, everyone does guard duty.

I sit in the back of a truck on my way to Camp New York’s front gate with the fifteen other soldiers from our battalion. The gate is a double-lane entrance into the post with a guard shack on one side and cement barriers making vehicles swerve left, then right, to get past the gate. I gaze out beyond, into the rest of Kuwait. I see sand and nothing else. I can make out the faint haze of the sun still rising before us, but beyond that all I see is a tan curtain of sand.

Our job is to check in and search all vehicles coming onto the post. I am in charge of the check-in sheet, taking ID badges from the Kuwaiti civilians entering post and checking them against the record of names and occupations in the binder. The vehicles start to appear out of the cloud of dust and sand, rolling up to the gate nonchalantly, as if the sandstorm poses no threat to them. I stand in the wind and sand, watching these vehicles appear out of thin air. I peer through my goggles, first at the badges, then the Iraqi faces, most of which are covered with scarves to block out the sand. Another soldier searches the vehicle. Once the vehicle has been checked in and searched, a third soldier must ride with the Kuwaitis as their escort, just to make sure they don’t run amok and start doing wheelies around the post or steal the underwear the female soldiers have laid out in the sun to dry.

As the day wears on, I become more comfortable in the sandstorm. At first I can feel every sand particle hit me, piercing my uniform like tiny needles. The wind seems to be torturing me with its insistent bombardment. But the wind forgets where I come from. I’m an American boy from the Midwest, from North Dakota, a state known for its snowstorms and harsh winters, and I’m used to the brutality of weather. I’m used to the way wind can make a man feel lonely; how gusts can make everything invisible; how wind can turn you blind, drive you crazy. I know the effects of wind that can wrap around a man, spinning him into confusion because everything looks the same. In North Dakota, winters are white. But as I’m now finding out, winters in Kuwait are tan and sandy, and just as deadly.

At the end of the day, we catch a ride in a truck back to our tent. Across the truck from me, the only woman in our group starts to describe her day.
She was tasked as an escort and spent the day riding around with Kuwaiti truck drivers.

“I was in this truck with three other guys, squeezed into the end, riding to the chow hall,” she says. “At one point one of the guys starts licking his finger.”

She laughs and tries to brush away the sand from her cheek. She looks like a raccoon—two ovals around her eyes where her goggles used to be and the rest of her face black, covered in sand and dirt.

“He’s twisting a ring on his finger, licking, trying to loosen it,” she says. “He does this for about twenty minutes before the ring finally slides off. Then . . .”

She pauses and looks around the truck.

“Then he gives the ring to me, along with a carton of juice, an apple, and Kuwaiti money.”

As the female soldier told her story, I couldn’t help but notice how, in her story, she seemed comfortable around the Kuwaiti truck drivers. I’ve always been fascinated and a little scared by other cultures, and listening to this female soldier tell the story of her day, I am reminded of my interactions with the local people during my first deployment to Kosovo and the apprehension I’ve always held on to.

Before we ever left the base in Kosovo, we’d been exposed to the variety of local people who worked there. Of these people, we had the most interactions with the women who worked in the laundry tent. The military commissioned women from the nearby villages to do the soldiers’ laundry.

Every week we’d haul a green sack full of dirty clothes to a tiny canvas tent next to the chow hall on Camp Bondsteel. Inside the tent were several women of various ages. There were shy younger women in their late teens, middle-aged women who chatted and snickered like the women who worked at the craft store in my home town, and an older woman who seemed in charge of them all. We’d dump our clothes out before them, and they’d check off the items on a list, ripping off a duplicate of the list, handing it to us, and telling us to come back in a couple of days.

I was nineteen during my first deployment and afraid of women speaking foreign tongues. Every time I dumped out my laundry I felt like I was dumping out something about myself, something I didn’t want revealed. I didn’t like the way they looked at me, the way they looked at my clothes, or the way they snickered and said something foreign, as if they were saying, Look at this scared little boy. Barely strong enough to hold up a rifle. Now he’s begging us to clean his clothes. Poor boy. Poor, poor boy.
When I’d come back to pick up my clothes, while other soldiers in my platoon attempted to chat and flirt with the women, I’d just hold out my laundry list and wait for them to hand back my clothes, thankful to have the items back in my possession. It was as if there were a line drawn between us and them, and as much as my mind desired interaction, my body always slowly backed away.

The female soldier holds up the ring from the Kuwaiti truck driver. The copper band barely shines in the darkness of the bed of the truck, but I see the smile on her face, the satisfaction of knowing her job here in Kuwait is appreciated.

“Really nice people?” someone asks.

Riding back to our tent, it is this question that keeps playing in my mind.

We’re teaching Viv to play pinochle. He’s a little high-strung. He joined our platoon before we left on the deployment, and people in the platoon have since been confused and mystified by the guy. He used to be a student and worked part-time as a waiter at a Mexican restaurant. He has a girlfriend named Pam, whom he constantly talks about, and buddies back in North Dakota, whom he called on the day we heard we were headed to Kuwait. I stood next to him when he said to his friends, “Can you imagine, man? Me of all people. Me.”

In a lot of respects, Viv is like the rest of the young guys in the platoon—Tuna, Trangsrud, King, Jones. But what sets him apart is his odd behavior and general naïveté. He often has a smile spread across his face, and when you ask him what he’s smiling about he’ll just nod and say nothing. He is young and a little innocent, and he often asks stupid questions, sometimes because he simply doesn’t know the answer, other times just to be funny. After a meeting where Newman stressed the importance of not eating inside the tent because the desert is full of rats, Viv asked, “What kind of diseases do rats carry?”


Elijah is dealing out the cards and describing the game to Viv. Viv nods, accepts his cards, and starts to order them in his hand according to Elijah’s directions. Around us the rest of the platoon is relaxing on cots. The Rolling Stones song “Angie” drifts around the tent, and outside I hear the wind and sand dancing to the rhythm and bumping up against the canvas walls. Fly and Cole have started calling each other Battlesnakes, a variation of the “Battle Buddy” term we learned in basic training, and I
hear them address each other that way now. The term was supposed to be a means of camaraderie and brotherhood; no man should be left alone in battle. But Cole and Fly have turned it into a humorous label, and every time they address one another they use this new variation. It helps lighten the mood.

Rainman comes into the tent and tells us that a bunch of women are sun-tanning over at pad eighteen.

“If anyone comes looking for me that’s where I’ll be,” he jokes.

I used to dread days like this because I figured sooner or later, while I was sitting around getting comfortable with the men in my platoon, I’d let slip that I was gay and be ridiculed for the rest of the deployment. But I really haven’t had a problem getting close to these men and still keeping my distance. They are a bunch of jokers and if I did accidentally tell them I was gay, I could always brush it off. Once, while sitting outside our tent, Lake stated that he was going to be gay until he got back home. King chimed in with his support, saying what a good idea it was. I just laughed and shook my head. Something about the desert makes these straight guys think they are gay. I think it may be the sun.

“Diamonds,” Elijah says, “go with spades. Clubs with hearts.”

Elijah looks up at Viv to see if he understands the rules of the game. Viv starts singing “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” and the rest of us just shake our heads. We’ve gotten used to this.

“Do you understand?” Elijah asks.

Viv nods.

“What’s wild?” Viv asks.

“You mean trump,” I say. “In pinochle it’s called trump.”

“Yeah. What’s wild?”

I just shake my head. I feel like I’m teaching one of my toddler cousins.

I learned how to play pinochle from my father. My father’s family used to have a tournament during the holidays. We all got together in my grandparent’s house—my grandparents, their seven children, spouses, and grandchildren. The adults divided up into pairs and seated themselves at three different tables throughout the house. They played a tournament round of pinochle, switching tables between rounds until a pair was declared champions. I often watched from the corner, wondering why the game got my uncles so excited, why my grandfather grinned when a game was going his way, or what it meant when my father folded his cards into a single pile and played off the top, a confident look plastered on his face.
Viv and Elijah are in a bidding war. While I wait for the war to settle, I watch Transrud do his laundry with our new cement mixer. One day, while relaxing in the shade, Grayson dragged a brand-new cement mixer over to the end of our tent. He loaded the mixer with his sand-crusted uniforms, poured powdered laundry detergent into the mixer, and loaded it with the water he’d been warming in the sun. Then he turned on the mixer, and we had our own field-modified washing machine. Ever since then life around camp has been getting better. We used to sleep on the wooden floor, where the desert rats could run across our ankles, but a few days ago Rainman came riding over to the tent atop a Hummer full of cots. I half-expected everyone to come running from the tent, eager for a little luxury in the desert. Rainman began handing out cots to everyone in the platoon. It was reminiscent of a Christmas scene—Rainman was our Santa, delivering cots to all the good boys and girls.

Eventually, Elijah tires of playing pinochle with Viv, and the game ends. I walk outside, where most of the platoon are sitting in canvas chairs under the camouflage netting we’ve put up to block out the sun. They’ve taken out the Rolling Stones CD and replaced it with Jack Johnson. Everyone is a little tired from the sun and from packing. We’ve been working on preparing for our move into Iraq by loading up the trucks and trailers with our equipment. We spend an hour out in the sun before we’re forced to retreat back inside the tent, where we drink lukewarm water from plastic bottles and wipe away our sweat. Cole and King are slumped in their chairs, their heads tipped back, trying to look at the stars through the netting. Yet the stars aren’t really out tonight; they’re blocked out by clouds and dust. I sit down in one of the chairs, tip my own head back, and listen to the music floating out into the desert night. I start to think about home. We’ve managed to make Kuwait seem like a home away from home. We have music, cold Coca-Cola from the PX, and playing cards to keep us occupied (and to remind me of home). A few nights ago, someone in Headquarters Company even acquired a karaoke machine and had a sing-along outside the tents, complete with cases of “near beer.” I felt so at ease singing karaoke with these men and women, like they were my friends. It has taken me two weeks to become acclimated to this place, where sand and wind and stars prevail, but I think I’ve finally gotten used to Kuwait.

I no longer need the stars to tell me just how close I am to home.

I always wondered, Jeremy, why you even liked me. I was just another confused college kid, goofy and
awkward, fresh off the farm. I wasn’t anything special. I certainly didn’t feel different, especially on drill weekends, when I put on a matching uniform and joined the other men and women at the armory north of town. I looked like them, talked, walked, and shit like them, and eventually I even became them, and it was all because of this uniform.

Did you ever see me in my uniform? I like to think that you did, so then you understood why I was so miserable those drill weekends. I like to imagine you lying in bed, watching as I stepped into the camouflaged pants, as I tucked the mud-colored T-shirt inside and cinched up the belt. In my dreams, you were there to button up the blouse, to smooth out the sleeves, to run your fingers across the name stitched on my chest. You were always there when I walked out that door, and you were there when I returned, when I kicked my boots off and tossed my beret aside just to kiss you. But in reality, I don’t remember this ever happening. If you saw my uniform, it was probably hanging in my closet or tossed on the floor after another long weekend of blending in.

Then again, maybe it’s better that you didn’t see me in my uniform. I wouldn’t want you to see me looking like all the other boys, acting like them just to fit in. Everything about my civilian life told me that I was different. Outside the military, I wanted to stand out. I wanted to be unique. But when I put on this uniform I am reminded that I am nothing special. I am just like thousands of other men and women. Nothing more.

And this is what I struggle with now. I used to tell myself that I was different, and you were there to reaffirm these ideas. But now, I can see that I’m nothing more than a name, another pair of hands able enough to hold a weapon and march into another country, ready to fight.

I hear Jones getting ready before I even open my eyes. We have guard duty tonight. I look at my watch. It is April 22, a quarter to midnight.
Jones and I stumble from the tent, groggy from a couple of hours of sleep. I sling my M16 across my back and walk to the motor-pool lot behind our tents. As I walk, I look up at the night sky, bright with a canopy of stars.

Our job is to guard the motor pool where our equipment is waiting for us to move it north into Iraq. Just beyond our tent, beyond the Porta-Johns and concertina wire barrier, our vehicles and trailers are lined up under a couple of looming floodlights. We must patrol the lot from midnight until 6 a.m., making sure nobody tries to take our equipment or run off with one of our Hummers.

Jones and I are almost the same soldier—we both have sarcastic attitudes about the military. At the beginning of our shift, as a way to mock the act of guard duty, we come up with a ridiculous plan to interrogate every single person on their way to the Porta-Johns by asking for ID cards. It’s just one of the ways we like to make fun of the army. Beyond our dislike for the army, we have similar tales of basic training and AIT (Advanced Individual Training). We both know when to be silent, when to sit back and let the “chiefs” run the show. We even look alike, with our ragged mustaches under our noses. We haven’t declared a mustache winner, although I’ve nearly conceded to him and his superior ’stache.

During the first two hours of our shift, we brief each other on our entire life histories as we walk around the motor pool. We share stories about being geeks in high school and attending college parties our freshman years. We talk about the dropouts from basic training and stories from advanced training in Gulfport, Mississippi. He tells me how he met his wife in the military and how they sat in a golf cart in the middle of the course, talking for hours; how they’ve even talked about having their wedding ceremony on a golf course and riding around in carts during their reception. I’ve gotten so used to keeping quiet about my sexuality that I forgot that it was possible for me to make friends. I’ve forgotten how easy it was to talk to the other soldiers, and as the night wears on I enjoy getting to know Jones. I also realize that I don’t have to run this race alone. Actually, I can’t run this race alone. If I want to survive this deployment I’m going to have to get to know these men.

Guard duty always creeps by slowly unless you have something to do. Two hours into our shift, we notice a plump desert mouse dart between two generators situated at the edge of the motor pool.

“Hey,” Jones says, taking off his cap. “Let’s try and catch it.”

We take turns trying to rush the mouse from its hiding place. Jones stands atop the generators, waiting to drop his cap on the creature when it
comes darting out of its hole. I do my part by kicking the generator and
trying to scare the mouse out. We take turns in each role, before finally
giving up. Around 4 a.m. I notice a series of wires running around the sand
in our motor pool. The wires look like communication wires abandoned
by soldiers who came before us. They are spread out across the lot, most
half-covered by sand and running in every direction. I point them out to
Jones and we each take a wire, following it like a finger would a subway
line. My line cuts across the sand and under a Hummer. I follow the wire
farther, under a few more vehicles and trailers. Eventually, I lose the wire
beneath one of our bulldozers and pick up another wire going in the
opposite direction.

It’s easy to get caught up in following the wires. We follow them for nearly
two hours, barely noticing the sun about to peek over the sand horizon
behind us. At the end of our shift we go to the chow hall for breakfast
before passing out on our cots. I dream about the sand and stars, how in
between the night sky and the endless desert, we’re left to wander, often
chasing a wire with no end. I dream that other soldiers are doing the same
thing on guard duty at night. I imagine what it looks like to see us from
above, as if we are mice maneuvering a maze. You’d see thousands of young
men and women, tiny, identical-looking dots aimlessly wandering around
the sand, all looking down at their boots as they walk wherever a wire
directs them. They don’t look up or forward or even behind. They just
follow the wires out into the silent desert, some of them never to return.