The Last Deployment

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Bobby has the perfect poker face—demure, innocent, emotionless. He doesn’t give anything away with his pale brown eyes, his cherublike face, his thin lips. Words tumble from his mouth in a monotone like bricks slowly falling from a wall. He’s still a boy; baby fat clings to his young face. Yet when you look at him, he stares back with those sad eyes, and you instantly feel cold, as if you are looking at an old man who’s spent his entire life holding everything in.

During our last week in Kuwait, we switch from pinochle to poker. We shuffle cards around a makeshift table—two MRE boxes—and wait to move north into Iraq. We spend our days sitting on stuffed duffel bags, betting on flushes and pairs of brooding queens, and our nights lying on green army cots pretending to sleep. We lie awake at night wondering who, and what, awaits us.

As much as Bobby’s face is made for playing poker, his fingers never touch the cards. Instead he sits on his cot playing his Game Boy, his fingers swiftly pushing the buttons as he stares into the tiny screen. Occasionally, he looks up at the troops around him, sometimes over at the table where I am playing cards, before turning his attention back to his game. In between hands of cards, I watch his fingers move. His fingers and thumbs are in full motion, forcing the black buttons down into the blue plastic Game Boy shell. His feet are firmly planted on the dusty wood floor, boot next to boot. But his face, that wonderfully naïve face, never changes. He never cringes at the thought of his game ending. He never yells when he loses or smiles when the game goes his way. He remains stone-faced through all the fun.
Bobby is reserved to the point of being somewhat suspicious. I look at him and wonder where he came from, who he really is, why he never speaks. While I was able to gather information from most of the other men in my platoon, Bobby remains a mystery, an enigma. He never reveals anything about his life back home. His quietness makes me wonder if he even had a life before the army, if he had career ambitions, desires, crushes on girls. With little to go on, I recast Bobby’s past, placing him at a lonely gas pump along a North Dakota highway, staring off into the tall wheat fields before someone yells dumbass, forcing him back to work.

But Bobby’s family is what puzzles me the most. I imagine an alcoholic stepfather who pushed him out the door when he turned eighteen, a man who always called him boy or fuck-up but never son or champ or, God forbid, Bobby. I see a loyal housewife, Bobby’s mother, whose two failed marriages left her with no love for Bobby. And maybe because of all this, Bobby finds himself with a future he has no idea what to do with; a future with the army is his only option.

Bobby is the only person in our platoon I refer to by his or her first name. In a way, I feel a need to protect him, to call him by his first name like his father never did, or his mother had a hard time doing, because I know he has real emotions—real desires, real hopes, and, most importantly, real fears.

On May 1—the night before we’re scheduled to leave Kuwait—Bobby and I lie on our cots, staring at the white canvas tent above our heads. My cot meets Bobby’s at the center of the tent, our heads inches apart. Around us the platoon is packing gear. Troops stuff equipment, uniforms, boots, and other necessities into olive-drab bags while chatting about our upcoming move into Iraq. We are leaving Camp New York in the morning and traveling 480 miles north to Anaconda Army Airfield near Balad.

King runs around the tent shirtless, his dog tags slapping his chest as he jumps on cots, hooting and hollering. Lake is telling jokes to whomever will listen. Cole is farting on people. Rogers is walking around the tent with a cardboard sign reading IRAQ OR BUST around his neck. They are men eager to leave, excited to reach beyond the tent they’ve been living in for almost three weeks.

“Bronson,” Bobby says.

He doesn’t move from his cot, get up, or even turn his head toward me. He continues to stare up at the ceiling like he’s trying to see the stars beyond the canvas.
“Yeah?” I reply.
“You alright?”

Staring at the ceiling of the tent, listening to Rogers and King laugh, I become aware of the similarities between the army and the circus. Both organizations travel from location to location, pitching tents in a clearing, a city park, the desert. These tents are the same, white canvas stretched over wooden support rafters and propped up with poles. There are no windows and no doors, per se. Instead, the doors are curtains, so from outside the tent the ringleader can pull back the flap and reveal the freaks inside, men dressed in camouflaged trousers and scuffed-up boots, dog tags dangling over bare chests, as they make jokes and laugh. These people—these clowns—are us, and this is our show.

Yet somehow these men don’t make me feel the same way circus performers do.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lie. “Are you?”
“Yeah, I’m alright.”

I hear him breathing, the slow, steady in and out of air. Around us the platoon settles into cots. King calms down; Lake becomes silent.

A few minutes pass before Bobby speaks again.

“You excited?”

I don’t feel excited, mainly because we live in a constant state of the unknown, from day to day relying on information passed down by our squad leaders, getting only what we need to know now. We don’t get concrete details, plans, or descriptions about where we’ll be in two months or even two weeks. It leaves us with a sense of disconnect, an uneasiness about our own lives. We might not show it on the outside, anxieties making us run around like clowns, but we’re all uneasy inside.

“Yeah. I can’t help but feel this is a little exciting.”
“You bet it is,” Bobby says.

I want to look over at Bobby and see if he means what he’s saying. I want to see if he’s smiling about the possibility of coming upon conflict, of shooting his rifle, of killing a man. But I stay in my cot, looking up at the tent.

There’s another pause, and for a moment the tent seems quiet, as if everyone is thinking about the mission. I hear the breathing of sixty men, and as I tilt my head to the left, and look down the line of soldiers lying on cots, I see their lungs expand and deflate, almost in unison, each man thinking the same thing: What lies ahead?

The clowns are quiet because they have realized that they are being watched. Captain Roar steps into the tent, nonchalantly brushing aside
the curtain door. Captain Roar doesn’t live in tents like these; he lives across the common area that separated the white circus tents we’ve been living in from the air-conditioned green military tents the officers and Headquarters Company live in.

He walks around, asking soldiers if they are ready for the trip into Iraq, joking with the young lieutenants. Bobby and I sit up and watch him as he laughs at his own jokes. He makes one trip around our cots before ducking back out the curtain door.

When he is gone, Bobby and I again lie down on our cots, as if Captain Roar’s visit was the equivalent of being tucked in, and we’re now ready for sleep. Then Bobby asks the question I’ve been waiting for.

“Bronson, are you scared?”

Am I scared? I’ve been betting on straight flushes and pairs of kings for the past two weeks, trying to take my mind off this question, but whatever I do I can’t help but feel this question in the back of my mind, like a song I’ll never forget. There it is ringing through my head when I shuffle the deck of cards between my fingers and thumbs. There it is spelled out in the sand as if a scorpion has read my mind and etched the question into the ground outside our tent. And when I sit down and think about my friends and family back home, it feels like the question is buzzing around the tent like a rumor that floats from soldier to soldier. The question is everywhere because everyone refuses to ask it.

“I don’t know, Bobby,” I say from my cot. “I really don’t know.”

Bobby leans up on one elbow and looks over at me.

“Well, it’s alright,” he says as a rare grin spreads across his face. “I’ll take care of you.”

When we were in our early teens, Brandon and I spent several summer nights sleeping in our pup tent out behind our family’s farmhouse. We pitched the tent just off the back door. We made sure we were close enough to the house in case we needed to use the bathroom or ransack the kitchen for snacks, but also far enough away, so when we told stories our parents wouldn’t yell at us to stop scaring each other with wild tales of headless ghouls and monsters. We lay in that tent during the early evening hours and talked about our day. My brother was a year younger than I, and years later, during high school, he would outgrow me. We fought over who was bigger and stronger, and he always won. But during those years on the farm, when he was twelve and I was thirteen, we shared everything—a
tent, a bedroom, even a double bed with springs that poked out of the mattress like steel worms. It seemed like we were equals.

It was a tent for two: a square of green vinyl propped up in the middle by a pole in the front and a pole in the rear of the tent. We had a tiny window in the back with a flap that exposed a mesh screen to the North Dakota night. I liked to open that window and look out past the clothesline, past the giant willow tree, to the shelterbelt of trees gently swaying at the edge of our farmstead. I sat with my face pressed against that mesh screen and felt small and insignificant. Brandon and I zipped open the two triangles that made up our front door and rolled the canvas fabric up, exposing the mesh screen, so the air blew through our tent at night. I felt so tiny inside that tent, but as long as I had my brother there and the gentle breeze whispering in my ear, I slept like a little boy, content and at home.

Our father had a cautionary tale he liked to tell over and over. He reminded my brother and me of the coyotes beyond our farm. He sat us down and explained the differences between coyotes and wolves, talking like an expert about the animals that howled just beyond the shelterbelt of our farm.

“You wouldn’t find wolves up here,” our father said. “Those sounds you hear at night, those are coyotes.”

We didn’t know the difference, but we still believed him. He was right, of course; gray wolves don’t typically live in central North Dakota. But coyotes are plentiful in the upper Midwest. They like to roam the sparse prairie, finding their way into farms where they kill livestock, sheep, and smaller dogs. My brothers, sister, and I came home from school once to find our dog Cha-Cha dead, killed by a coyote, my father said. The beast also killed four of our ducks and injured Lassie, our other dog. My father had to raise a shotgun to Lassie’s head and pull the trigger before the bus brought us home.

When the sun set and the sky grew dark, my brother and I closed the flaps to our tent, bundled up into our sleeping bags, and told ghost stories. Late into the night we scared each other until we heard the sound of coyotes howling off in the distance. From beyond the shelterbelt surrounding our farm, we heard the throaty sound drifting into our tent, silencing us. We looked at each other, checked the zipper on the tent door, and tried to sleep through the night, hoping the animals didn’t move beyond the shelterbelt and pounce upon our tent.

Waking Bobby is like waking a baby: you hate to do it but it must be done. It’s time to leave, you must say. It’s time to be fed on warfare and greed.
I wake Bobby at 4 a.m. We rise from our cots, pack our sleeping bags, and fold our cots into the shape of logs. I help Bobby shoulder his bag, holding back the curtain door as we exit and walk toward the line of trucks. A line of seventy-one military vehicles awaits us outside the tent. We’re moving almost all our trucks into Iraq—Hummers, two-and-a-half-ton trucks, five-ton dump trucks, flatbed trailers carrying bulldozers, scrapers, and cranes. They are all here, lined up and ready to go. Floodlights pour generous light over the trucks, and for a moment it looks like a movie set, as troops load duffel bags into shiny trucks, light bouncing off the cheekbones and teeth, faces like ceramic masks.

I help Bobby lift his bag into the back of a two-and-a-half-ton truck, before climbing aboard, next to the bags. The truck is built to carry soldiers, with benches that fold down from the sides, so troops can ride comfortably into battle. The railing along the side also serves as support for tired backs. However, there will be no time for rest on this trip. I’m riding with seven other soldiers in the back of the truck, packed in next to twenty-five boxes of MREs, twelve boxes of bottled water, our bags, and our cots. We line the luggage and boxes along the bed of the truck and sit on top of a layer of packages, everyone leaning against bags and each other in the center of the bed so we can see out the sides. I lean my weapon on the bench, pointing the muzzle out between the wooden slats. I look over at Bobby as he does the same thing. We both look back at the silent tents, now vacant, sad white peaks poking out of the sand.

“This is it,” I say, looking over at him.

He lifts his head and looks over at me, his baby face peering out from under his Kevlar helmet.

“Yeah, man,” he says in monotone. “This is it.”

As Rogers climbs into the back of the truck, he fumbles over our bags and us until he reaches the front of the bed. He places his M249 machine gun on top of the cab, rests his elbow next to his weapon, and thrusts his hip against the back of the cab. He’s our lookout for the trip, while the rest of us watch from the sides. I look up at the canvas tarp covering half of the truck. A wooden beam stretches from side rail to side rail, the tarp rolled over the beam, shading the back half of the bed, so Rogers can watch for possible threats up front. We’re shielded from the sun above, but unprotected from the elements that may come at us from the sides.

I lift my weapon slightly, touching the muzzle of the gun against one of the razor blades jutting out of the concertina wire strapped to the outside of the truck. Concertina wire is a soldier’s best friend. The wire is used as a
barrier, to prevent intruders from grabbing what isn’t theirs. We use it around our tents, around the motor pool, around any place that needs protecting. To build a concertina wire obstacle you grab a roll of wire, which lies flat in a coil, and “bounce” out the coil, until the roll expands like an accordion. Once you’ve “bounced” out three lines of wire, you create a pyramid, placing one line on top of the other two, and secure the obstacle with wire ties.

We had missed the ground war, but we had our own war—a war against the needy. We knew there were women and children with eager hands that wanted to reach into our trucks and steal whatever was easy to grab. So, we counteracted the actions of the needy by tying rolls of concertina wire to the outside of the side rails, like interlocking rings spread on both sides of the troop carrier. Anyone who tried to reach into our truck risked slicing his or her arm open just for a bottle of water.

When everyone is loaded into the trucks, the convoy of vehicles moves toward the gate. The tents are illuminated by the rising sun, now peeking over the sand. Morning is coming and we are going, and in the early morning hours, we watch the white tents fade away as we leave Camp New York and move across the Kuwaiti desert, bound for Iraq.

It takes us two hours to reach the Kuwait–Iraq border. The hours pass with little activity, few signs of any kind of life. It is still early and the sun is like a mirage off on the horizon, rays of red and orange clouded by a light haze. For a moment, I think Bobby is asleep, and I wonder how anyone can sleep now. I want to poke him, but before I do, he shifts over, leans his elbow on a box of MREs, and looks around the truck. I catch his eye and nod at him, thanking him for not sleeping.

Breakfast today is an MRE. We open a box of MREs and reach inside, pulling out brown bags of prepackaged food. I grab menu 23: chicken with Cavatelli, a fig bar, wheat snack bread, pound cake, cheese spread, and grape powdered beverage. We trade for various items, like we’re back in elementary school swapping the items in the lunches our parents prepared.

“I can’t eat this wheat bread,” I say, holding the package above my head. “Any takers?”

I find none. We create a pile of items nobody wants to eat: three packages of wheat snack bread, two packets of peanut butter, and, of course, Charms, the square version of LifeSavers.

My back aches from leaning on an MRE box, and I wish I were driving the truck into Iraq, rather than riding in the back. But then we see the people watching us pass. When we reach the border, men and children
rush the convoy, standing next to the road as we kick sand up into their faces. From the road we see their one-room stone houses off in the distance, walls sealed with mud, and roofs made from palm branches and sticks. I notice a man hoeing a ravished garden near his house; his head barely lifts to acknowledge us as our convoy of trucks waves at him with a cloud of dust.

Half-naked children run up to the road, bare feet making tracks in the sand as their eyes find the boxes of MREs in the back of the truck. They ask for food, pointing at their mouths or their round little stomachs. One boy lifts his shirt to show the troops his tan stomach, patting his abs in an effort to get food. A little girl in braids, red ribbons tied into her hair, stands by the road holding an entire unopened MRE, clutching the package of food to her chest. She’s already gotten to previous troops.

I stop chewing my crackers when a boy’s eyes find mine. The child’s eyes hollow me out, burrowing deep into my mind. His lips are closed as he does all the talking with those sad eyes. Mee-sta, please. In the back of the truck, a look of guilt spreads across everyone’s faces. We all come to the same realization at once.

Here we are swapping pound cakes for jalapeño cheese, wishing for the “good” MREs, when children, stringy and shy, are forced to beg. The Iraqis we see are so poor, farming or herding animals to make a living, their children collecting the dust of passing Americans while we sit back in our trucks and thank God we have our twenty-four boxes of MREs.

I wave at a little girl on the side of the road, her brother clinging to her leg. When she sees me looking at her she gives me a thumbs up, smiling as she thrusts her arm out at the soldiers. I want to believe she’s happy to see us here, in her country, but in reality she only pays attention to me because she knows I have food. A group of young boys stops their soccer game to wave at us, and when they see us eating, they stop thinking about scoring goals and start thinking about scoring food. Our chewing mouths start their racing, hands jutting up into the sky in hopes that food will land in the open palms.

I watch it all from the reclined comfort of the truck. Then, impulsively, I reach into the pile of unwanted food items and toss the packages into the crowds of children, like candy at a parade. The food bounces off their heads, hits their arms, and falls to the ground; a half-dozen children fight for a package of crackers or Charms. We drive on, leaving them scurrying like dogs. Outside a town, three women stand along the road, as if they’ve been standing there all day. When we approach they flash us peace signs with both hands. They cheer as we pass. One of the women holds a small American flag and waves it as we glide by. She smiles weakly, and I see the
joy in her face, and I believe that we are in Iraq for a reason and that Iraqis like these women are the proof.

But there are also miles when nobody greets our passing convoy. Instead, the sand stretches over small dunes and whips up into our faces. Off in the distance, squat bungalows pop up out of the earth like corn, each home surrounded by a cluster of palm trees and children who either don’t notice us passing or are sick of seeing traveling soldiers.

Bobby is silent through most of this. He takes it all in the way he takes everything in, absorbing the environment, the people, the neediness, and holding it tight, keeping everything close to his chest. I want him to react, to reach out and shout at the injustice of it all, but he doesn’t. He watches from the truck as the hands reach up and beg for his attention.

In the afternoon we come to a river, and dip down into the valley to meet a bridge. On the other side of the bridge, an old man stands by the side of the road in a long, white robe. Three small, wooden crates piled with shoes and sandals lie at his feet. Bobby notices the man and points to him. The man notices Bobby and walks toward our truck.

“Look,” Bobby says to me, “an Iraqi shoe salesman.”

He laughs shyly like he’s not sure if the man is funny-comical or funny-sad. I watch Bobby’s face, his eyes taking in the man and his situation. He watches the man until he’s out of sight, then turns back to the position he was in, staring off into the desert.

“I swear,” he says while looking out at the sand, “he wanted my boots.”

Around 11:30 p.m., we pull into Checkpoint 8, our stop for the night. We pull the trucks into the military compound, past the lines of concertina wire surrounding the facility, and line the vehicles up so the spaces between the vehicles look like aisles in a grocery store. It’s dark, and we’re tired from traveling all day. We don’t have tents to sleep in. Instead, we pull out our cots and assemble them wherever there is room. Bobby and Elijah set up their cots on the ground between the trucks. Rogers and King curl up on the luggage. I grab my cot and climb onto the top of the truck. From here, I see the dark night stretch into the desert, a wall encircling our trucks, moonlight bouncing off the razor wire, and soldiers busying themselves with creating a place to sleep. I set up my cot on top of the cab, my weight slightly denting the hood, and watch everyone settle in for the night. We’re scattered over the sand like drunks who’ve decided to sleep wherever they fall. I pull out my sleeping bag and climb into the folds of the camouflaged fabric. I lie on my back, looking at the few stars that dot the sky before drifting off to sleep.
I am awakened by the sound of barking dogs. I hear the faint howls, first above my head, the distant cries of lonely animals drifting into the canyons between the trucks. The noise echoes off the vehicles and climbs into the night sky. Then the howling stops. I hear the animals creep around the checkpoint. Then I hear the low moan again, this time to my right. The howls shift location, now coming from beyond my feet. It’s as if the dogs are circling the compound, pacing the ground before taking their prey. The howls get stronger, closer. Then I hear the barking on all sides, as if they’re just beyond where the trucks are parked. I stare into the night sky and wait for the howling to stop, thinking about how the howling sounds so much like North Dakota coyotes. Ten minutes pass before the barking eventually settles and I drift back to sleep. But later I find myself dreaming about the dogs. I dream that they’ve broken into the compound, black-haired and bare-toothed, drool foaming at their mouths, their eyes red and fierce. I hear them coming toward us, running through the aisles between the trucks, tearing at the soldiers that sleep below. There are no tents to shield us, no barriers between us and the beasts. They sink their teeth into our uniforms. They take an arm, a leg, someone’s foot, whatever they can grab, pulling until we scream, as they drag us off into the cool desert night.

In the morning we wash up quickly, eager to get back on the road. I climb down from the top of the truck and pour water over my face, the water splashing recklessly into the sand between the trucks. Bobby stands next to me, brushing his teeth.

“You hear those dogs last night?” he asks after spitting into the dirt.

“Yeah,” I say. “Damn things wouldn’t leave us alone.”

We prepare the trucks, packing our cots and sleeping bags. I climb into the back of the truck, taking the same position I was in the day before. Outside Checkpoint 8, we pull the vehicles to the side of the road to make final preparations before our day-long trip further into Iraq. An old man is steering a wooden cart down the road toward us. The cart, full of sticks and branches that reach out like hands ready to grab onto people or soldiers passing by, is being pulled by a gray donkey. In the ditch, a young boy rides a white donkey up next to our truck. Lake walks up to the boy, his weapon in one hand as he pats the mule with the other.

“Bobby,” Lake yells, waving Bobby over to him. “Come take my picture.”

Bobby goes to Lake, takes his camera, and sets up the photo. Lake stands next to the mule, his rifle propped against the inside of his elbow and pointed into the morning sky. The boy sits on the donkey, a smile
spread across his face. I watch the boy, wondering if he fears that Lake will open fire on him and his pet after the picture. Instead, after Bobby snaps the shot, Lake asks the boy if he has any Iraq currency—dinars. The boy exchanges currency with Lake, dollars for dinars, before turning his ride around and galloping away. I imagine he’ll take that money to his parents, show them the crisp green picture of George Washington, and say, *He paid me for my photo.*

We climb back into the trucks and travel down a dirt road until we find a hardtop highway with signs pointing to Baghdad. This is the highway that takes troops to Baghdad, up through the sandy dunes, around tiny farms and begging children, into the heart of the capital city. Before leaving Kuwait, I overheard Grayson telling Newman that the route to Baghdad had been cleared of any war symbols—no charred bodies, no burning tanks. We all declared it a disappointment, Grayson even mentioning how discouraging it was going to be if he didn’t get to see one dead Iraqi.

But we see very few people, dead or alive, along the highway. Occasionally we notice a man watching from a distance, hands clasped behind his back, silent. We come upon road signs, in Arabic and English, pointing us toward Baghdad, a faded white arrow pointing up.

It doesn’t take us long before we see the remains of the war. Rogers, our lookout, yells, “A tank, a tank,” and points off into the ditch; we all lean over to one side of the truck, our cameras ready, as we pass a wasted Iraqi tank. The tank is black, destroyed by flames, the broken tract laid out like a snake’s skin. There is no man, burned beyond recognition, sprawled next to the tank, only the machine. A few minutes pass before Rogers yells out, “Here comes another one,” and we again lean over to get a glimpse of another tank, this one in the same condition, each tank interesting and terrifying at the same time.

By the seventh tank we’ve lost interest, Rogers not even notifying us when we approach. We still look—another destroyed tank, no body, nothing special about this one. It won’t be long before children will be climbing on the tanks as if they are jungle gyms, swinging from the barrel of the canon. Passing by the tank, I wonder how the children of this country feel about the machines, lying along the road as they pass. What do their mothers say to calm their questions and fears?

Bobby and I are sitting near the edge of the truck, settling back in after seeing the tanks. Ahead, I see another sign for Baghdad as the convoy takes the center lane of the three-lane highway. Bobby shifts over and I watch, as if in slow motion, as a magazine of ammunition slides out of his cargo
pocket, falls onto the folded-down bench, and slides off the side of the vehicle, through the concertina wire rings. The magazine makes a sharp noise as it hits the pavement and bounces into the right lane of the highway. Our convoy continues up the road.

I look over at Bobby, who shrugs his shoulders, not worried that he just lost a magazine of ammunition, thirty rounds he is responsible for.

“You just lost a clip of ammo,” I say to Bobby. “Don’t you care?”

Bobby doesn’t seem to understand responsibility. He doesn’t understand the magnitude of his actions, as he looks down at his boots, avoiding my question. His actions and silences tell me that he has never learned these things, traits children learn from parents or older siblings: how to be responsible, how to admit your mistakes, how to speak up. I tap Rogers, explaining the incident. Rogers knocks on the cab and relays the message to Newman.

After Newman turns the truck around to retrieve the ammunition, Bobby is quiet. He watches the sand, the few people that dot the landscape. He doesn’t speak, too embarrassed to make a sound. I watch the convoy snake up the road, vehicle after military vehicle, maneuvering up the highway. Then, as if out of nowhere, a blue van appears in the right lane of the highway, between our convoy of vehicles and the metal railing along the road. The rusty van pulls up next to our truck, four Iraqi men sitting in the back. The men notice me watching them. One man, with a young face and black eyebrows, pulls back the window and sticks his torso out of the van, a clear glass bottle filled with copper-colored liquid in his hand.

We immediately recognize the liquid. We’ve been sober for almost a month, ever since we set foot in a combat zone. The Iraqi man holds the bottle up, points at me with his dark index finger, before showing five fingers.

“Is that whiskey?” King asks.

“I think so,” I say. “And it’s five dollars.”

We search our pockets for money. I look back at the Iraqi, nodding my head. The man motions for the driver to get closer. The driver pulls the van right up next to our truck. With the five-dollar bill in my hand, I reach through the side rail, through the concertina wire, and place the bill in the man’s palm before slowly retracting my hand. Pulling my arm back into the truck, I nearly knick my arm on a razor blade, swearing as the blade grazes my uniform sleeve. The Iraqi hands the money to the other men inside the vehicle. He then gently lowers the bottle and tosses the container over the razor blades and into our truck. King catches the liquor with both hands.
King opens the bottle and smells the fumes coming from the container. “It smells like apple juice,” he says before raising the bottle to his lips. He puckers a bit as he lowers the bottle, shaking his head. “Sure as hell doesn’t taste like apple juice.”

I look back at the van and notice that the Iraqi is now pointing at Bobby, trying to sell him a bottle of whiskey. I laugh as Bobby shakes his head. I look into the back of the van and notice an entire box of whiskey bottles; these guys are making a killing off of us. We pool the rest of our money and buy four more bottles, reaching four more times through the concertina wire, each bottle transferred from Iraqi hands to our hands, all while driving down the highway.

I want to pass a bottle around the truck, offer a swig to Bobby, make him feel the burn down his throat, but I don’t. We quickly hide the bottles, knowing that we’d face serious consequences if we’re caught.

Watching the van pull away, off to tempt other soldiers up the line, I realize the extent of our own neediness. We put up these bundles of wire to keep the Iraqis from grabbing our equipment and our gear. But when the roles are reversed, when we are the needy ones, we curse at the sharp barrier that prevents us from reaching beyond our truck. We grumble and yell at our inability to touch a world outside our own, a world full of people reaching out to grab our hands, and tanks that lie destroyed and broken in the ditches. We need these people—the people we’ve started comparing to wolves—just as much as they need us, and looking around the truck, at the smiles on our faces, people pleased with their new purchases, I realize that we are the wolves, every single, greedy soldier.

I’ve always been the big brother. Growing up with four younger brothers, I’ve gotten used to the role and even cherish the fact that I’ve gotten so good at it. But, when we were dating, I liked how you became the big brother I never had.

During Christmas, your protective nature was particularly evident. I remember being invited to ride around in a limousine and look at holiday decorations with two other couples. I didn’t know the other couples very well (they were your friends), and I felt a little uncomfortable because one of the other guys was your ex-boyfriend. I remember feeling awkward sitting next to you, but then you put your arm around me,
and I leaned into your body and felt the warmth of being held, and all that awkwardness disappeared. I hadn’t really felt that before, so when you did it, I remembered.

Then there was the Christmas party we attended, the one with my friends. I took shots of tequila and drank beer after beer while I smoked cigarettes out on the apartment balcony. I think I ignored you for most of the night, and you were probably pissed about that. But at the end of the night, you took my keys and drove me home. You guided me into my apartment and onto the green, shag carpet in my bedroom. I had just moved in and didn’t have a bed, so I passed out on the floor.

I like to think that you lingered in my room that night, watched me fall asleep on the carpet as the moonlight snuck in through the blinds and cast shadows onto the walls. I like to think of you covering me with a blanket, smoothing out my hair, maybe even lying down next to me and curling your arm around my shoulder. In my memory of this event, you stayed. In reality, I know you didn’t. I know I’m romanticizing the event, but when you experience these feelings for the first time you have a hard time letting go. You remember what it feels like to be looked after, to be protected, to always have someone there, and no matter what happens after that, you remember how good it felt that first time.

I realize the magnitude of the world, the extent to which land is populated by millions of hungry mouths, all eager for something different. This world exceeds the half-dozen people I call friends, enjoying dinner and conversation without me; the hundreds of students copying notes from chalkboard to notepad, people I once identified with; or even the handful of soldiers, formerly poker players in Kuwait, now sharing a bumpy ride across the desert.

We stop the convoy just outside Baghdad. In the ditch, scattered among rubble, rock, and trash, someone has discarded a disposable camera. We dare each other to pick up the camera, each of us thinking that
it could be a trap, a trigger to a roadside bomb planted for curious soldiers. Watching King walk up and toe the plastic camera, I imagine all the hands that touched it: the fingers that built the plastic shell, the meaty hands that placed the item on the shelf, the gentle hand of a mother buying the item to send to her son, a U.S. soldier sitting in Kuwait. I want to grab the camera, develop the film, and see the people important to someone else, the soldiers, family members, and landscapes that make other people press the black button.

We leave the camera in the ditch as we load the trucks. The towers of the mosques climb into the cloudy Baghdad sky as we approach the capital city. Our trucks drive around Baghdad, safely touching the outskirts of the city before connecting to a highway that takes us north, forty-five miles to Balad. Along the highway, reminders of a great empire still exist. On the wall of a compound just outside Baghdad, a billboard proudly displays Saddam, two silver swords crossed above his head. We stare at the billboard until it is out of sight, wondering if it will be there the next time we pass, and silently take in the ornate architecture of the faded buildings and the thick walls surrounding once-flourishing courtyards. Everything is so gray.

We reach Anaconda Army Airbase by early evening on May 3. The base is an old, run-down Iraqi military compound. I notice the stucco buildings dotting the field next to the runway, and the diamond-shaped concrete bunkers. We pull the trucks into a dusty parking lot near the middle of the base, again lining the vehicles up, and are greeted by Sergeant Major. He tells us that we’ll again be sleeping under the stars, and in the morning we’ll start building our new homes.

Bobby and I put together our cots on the ground between our truck and another. As the sun sets, the platoon sits around the trucks, staring off into the night sky. Bobby and I have a flashlight and are making shadow puppets against the wooden wall of the trailer box. I hold the flashlight as Bobby makes a dog with his hand, two knuckles forming ears and the tips of his fingers portraying the pointy teeth of beasts.

King watches the stars while lying on his cot. We’re nostalgic tonight, and every now and then someone will mention family members or something they wished they were doing back home. Tuna is eating sardines, the tin lid peeled back to reveal a layer of stacked fish. He talks about being home, where he doesn’t have to eat fish out of a can. He offers a sardine to King, who takes the fish between his fingers and slides the silver sliver down his throat.

“We all worry so much about our own lives,” King says, “but looking at this night sky makes all our troubles fade away.”
In the morning, we build the floors for the tents. In between building floors, Bobby and I have races flipping hammers. We take hammers and flip them into the air, catching them by the handle. We do this ten times, racing to see who can complete the cycle the fastest. I drop my hammer, dust scattering over my boots, and when I reach down to pick up the tool, I catch a smile on Bobby’s face as he continues the race without me, easily finishing well before I do. His eyes are now a soft, warm brown, and I see comfort in his face that wasn’t there before the trip into Iraq. He retells the Iraqi shoe salesman story every chance he gets, and I see him laugh for the first time in a couple of days.

The funny thing is that I used to be Bobby. I was just like him when I first joined the army. I didn’t know what to do with myself, and I would often sit silently in the corner, waiting for someone to tell me where to go or what to do. But now, Bobby has become my little brother—a stand-in for Brandon. I like talking to him, helping him, or just goofing around with him while we wait to put up our tents. Helping Bobby makes me more connected with these men. I have a purpose—a role—and I’m not just a gay man out of place in Iraq.

And that in itself is an incredible relief. When I started this deployment, I thought the best thing for me to do was to keep quiet and continue to hide behind my mask. Five and a half years of hiding my sexuality from the military had taught me to do that. But now I realize that I can’t do that anymore. I can’t just fly under the radar and expect to survive this deployment. With Bobby, Jones, and a few others I’ve started to make genuine friendships, the kind that are needed among men at war because they are the kinds of friendships that keep you alive.

By the time evening sets in, we have the floors built and GP (general purpose) medium military tents constructed. The tents aren’t the white canvas circus-style ones we used in Kuwait. These are standard-issue military tents, sixteen feet wide and thirty feet long, smaller than the white tents. We immediately roll up the side walls of the tents, tying each side up with green strings, leaving only a mesh screen between our cots and the Iraqi sand.

Bobby and I lie on our cots in the dark. I pat his shoulder, glad to be here, satisfied with our journey so far.

I feel the cool desert air rush in through the mesh screen, the same way it rushed through my tiny pup-tent window, and for a moment I don’t feel like a nomad moving from place to place. I feel at home. Then I hear the swoosh of a canvas flap being pulled back, and as the curtain door opens, I hear the boots of another wandering soldier.