

Happy Birthday



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Congratulations. You're twenty-one years old. Finally. How does it feel? Your first vote for a US president is coming up. You can drink legally now, which of course is a sore topic because no booze is allowed in Iraq, at least not on your FOB. And you can own property now. There's a sobering thought for you. Jamie says you two are going to buy a house when you get back, somewhere in Fayetteville, a cozy little love cave. This idea both delights and terrifies you. But you trust Jamie more than you even trust yourself, and much more than Momma, for whom trust was never a factor while growing up.

"Medic!"

You see a girl nearby. She is about nine, maybe ten. It's hard to tell. Her blue dress has tiny birds on it. Her dark hair and eyes make her look like a doll. She is too cute to be real. You ignore all of the Hajis running around and over her, and wonder why none of them stop to pick her up.

You wish Jamie was here. You want to see Jamie, feel and touch Jamie, just his hand. You've only had two lovers in your short life, Jamie and one other. You wonder if that is enough. You wonder how many it takes before you really know what you're doing. Back in high school, you remember Alex saying, "the more the better," but always in a shrill, brittle voice that was not convincing. You felt sorry for her for fucking her way through the marching band and football team.

Twenty-years-old is confusing enough without being in a foreign country, where it seems like half of the country wants to blow you up. You've said it many times, that when you get back to the States, you will never again drive anywhere. You will only walk. Everywhere. No one will force you to ever load up into a vehicle, especially if anyone mentions the words "patrol" or "convoy."

Where is your rifle? You don't know. Bad high. A soldier always knows where his or her rifle is, at all times, especially on patrol, outside the wire. Even back on base, you have it with you always. You like that M-4. It is shorter and easier to handle than the M-16, which you carried when you were first in the Guard. Sergeants Howard and Rodriguez still argue about whether or not the M4 is just a shorter 16 with rails. You love those arguments and those guys. They always crack you up.

"Medic!"

The pain is bad. Gut wounds. Worst kind. At least in the head you are unconscious, or go quick. Gut pain reaches way down into the core of you, like a religious experience, or what you have read about religious experiences, not that you've ever had one of your own yet. This pain shakes you, muddles your thinking. But keep thinking. This blood is so slick. Is everyone's blood this slick, you wonder, or just yours? And the smell. It smells coppery. Why does blood smell coppery? You want to ponder these things, but something, an urgent, pressing impulse, tells you that you don't have time for slick, coppery musings.

The little girl in the blue dress, lying near you in the road, has an angry red hole in her neck. You wonder how you didn't notice that

before. You can see the glint of life still in her eyes, but can see it slipping, growing dimmer. She is looking at you, into you. There are several adult bodies lying near her. One, you can tell by the clothes, is a woman. You think that must be her mother. There is no telling which of them is her father. Most of the faces are so gone and bloody that the little girl could probably not identify her daddy.

“Medic!!”

It’s so damn hot. You feel like you could combust. The sun is like a hammer.

You try to tell those around you to help take off your body armor, but they are so focused on your wounds and blood that they seem not to even know you’re here. But time is short. You’re tired. That drumming in your ears is growing louder.

“MedicGodamnitMedic!”

You hear boots running up to you. The sound makes you smile. Our boots. Army boots. You can tell simply by their sound. Boot camp. Boots on the ground. A boot up your ass. An army can operate without tanks, but not without boots. You can’t feel your boots or your feet. Before the blast your feet were killing you. Now, for some reason, they don’t.

“Stop yelling. She is the medic.” It is Top’s voice. You always like the sound of his voice, the timber and pitch, the way he pronounces certain words, like “gair-own-tee” and “con-stab-you-larry.” Top, once in Special Forces, is a total badass. No one fucks with him or his people. As First Sergeant, he takes care of his people, everyone in his company. He especially likes you, says you remind him of his daughter. His voice is very calm as he says, “You’ll be OK, Kate. You’ll

be OK.” That’s good. Top would not lie to you, or let anything happen to you. He swore he would bring everyone home.

The drum beats are slower. It’s not a rock beat anymore. It is more like a slow jazz beat now, like a slow Miles Davis riff. You know the words to this, remember when Larson got hit and bled out into a big, dark stain on that road just outside Tirkut as you worked feverishly to try and stem the flow of his blood, tried hard not to look into his eyes, as you kept telling him, “You’ll be OK! Stay with me!” You only managed to look in time to see his lights go out. He was there, looking at you, and then he wasn’t.

You hear Jamie’s voice and frantic boots, his ragged breathing, which you know so well. You hear Top’s urgent voice telling someone to “Keep him back!” You wish you could look over at Jamie, give him a wave and a smile. But, you cannot raise or turn your head. All you can do is keep looking at the little girl and those tiny birds on her dress.

It is getting harder to focus on her, the little girl. You can’t tell if she is still there, in her blue dress and her tiny birds, and her dark eyes. A pool of her own dark blood has spread around her head, like a red halo. Her cheek sits in it. You want to reach out to her, tell her to close her mouth, not to sip on her own blood.

You feel your own blood. It has become more sticky than slick. You want to wash your hands, to feel clean, but there is no time. You want to tell Jamie you love him. But there is no time. You want to call home, tell Momma that everything is OK, that you love her. But there is no time. You want to pull the little girl in the blue dress to you and hold her and rock her and sing her a lullaby that your grandma used to sing to you, *The Missouri Waltz*. But the light is gone from her eyes.

Soon you'll be dead too.

That realization puzzles you. You know it should shake and shock and rock you. It should terrify you. It should make you want to scream and cry, to curse God. But your mind just can't seem to get a handle on the concept. Of dying. Today least of all. After all, it's your birthday, and there's no more time. Time, that's all you want. But even though it's your birthday, you can't have anymore. Time is not cake. You can't bake up another batch, slice up the pieces large into longer days. You feel cold, in spite of the heat. You shiver, feeling your own icy sweat dance on your hot skin. You see figures instead of faces all around you—shadows indistinguishable. There is so much you want to say, to feel. You want Jamie's hand. Just his hand. In yours. Just that. But no. No more. No beat. Time. Gone.

Happy birthday.