



*The Blue Falcon Review*

—  
*A Journal of Military Fiction*

*Volume 2*

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# *The Blue Falcon Review*

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MEA is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization whose primary mission is to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork. Our publications include:

*The Journal of Military Experience*  
*Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry*  
*The Blue Falcon Review*  
*As You Were: The Military Review*  
*Blue Nostalgia: A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth*

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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

*The Fundamental Clarity of Light*

**7**

*Minarets*

**26**

*Veterans Day*

**23**

*Southern Grace*

**48**

*Thugs*

**50**

*Dear US Army*

**58**

*Happy Birthday*

**63**

*Green Eyes*

**68**

## ***Editor's Note***

The fallout of trauma remains a brutal inheritance that most veterans share. With the high rate of military suicides progressing at a tragic speed, American society can no longer dismiss the voices of those who served. We must instead embrace new possibilities to help people cope with, and ultimately transcend, suffering. As a college writing professor, I've learned firsthand through my student veterans how the literary arts can function as an empowering means of overcoming trauma. These smart, hardworking young men and women who served in Iraq or Afghanistan consistently expressed a desire to write about their combat experiences, and even share those stories with their civilian peers. Through writing, my students were able to find expression for the traumatic war experiences that haunted them. This inspired a sense of agency over the past, and promoted healing.

As one who has led workshops for other witnesses of war—such as Afghan women through the Afghan Women's Writing Project, and refugees from Somalia, Eritria, Nigeria and Palestine—I deeply believe in the transformative power of creative writing. Needless to say, I am thrilled with the rare opportunity of working with veterans through Military Experience & the Arts. MEA gives people a space to be heard, one not easily found in either the military or civilian world. As

an editor, it is a source of tremendous joy for me to work closely with a writer and witness, draft by draft, the evolution and refinement of a story. The writers in this issue of The Blue Falcon Review have produced haunting literary works that are at once soulful and uncompromising. They encompass the very essence of what great literary fiction strives to accomplish—a rich expression of universal truth through individual experience. The stories of veterans help convey a deeper, more human understanding of war and its consequences, particularly for the larger civilian world. They are an invaluable presence to be heard and celebrated.

Olivia Kate Cerrone

April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015

# The Fundamental Clarity of Light



Michael Eltrich

The smallest thing can trigger a memory. A few notes of music. A certain fragrance. For you, stepping off the airplane in the middle of the night, it's the damp heat that clings to everything and flows into your head while you're sleeping. At least that's how it felt the first time you were here, forty-five years ago. It was October 1969, and you'd just arrived in Chu Lai, South Viet Nam, to join the 198th Infantry Brigade.

For the next year you lived in a state of raw awareness, as though the war was illuminating everything with an acid-etched light that revealed every detail around you, no matter how minute, but that also cast deep shadows that were impenetrable, and disturbing. The contrast between what you saw and what you never thought you'd see was blinding at times.

The light was charged with energy. It was liberating and exciting. There was fear, but your fear was transformed by the light into a kind of power that made you stand up amid the grinding madness and run toward the sound of the gunfire because you didn't want to miss out. Adrenaline coursed through your body like an electric current, and then nothing else mattered, because you were like a terrible young god whom neither steel nor fire nor death could touch.

There was still the darkness; the shadows that held secrets you didn't want to know. It was in those deep shadows that ambushes happened, booby traps exploded, men cried out in brutal death. This

time it was a friend. Maybe next time it would be you. Why not? You knew it could happen. Death was always there, a few steps, a few seconds, a few inches away. It took some and spared others, leaving you to wonder why you were still alive when other men, no better or worse than you, were dead. But there's no logic to death, no sense of fairness. Death is unconcerned.

During your third month in-country – the exact day doesn't matter, because they had all become so much the same – your platoon was walking down an abandoned railroad track. The exact location doesn't matter either, because it wasn't anywhere in particular; just grid coordinates on a well-worn map. The afternoon sun pressed down as you walked along, kicking up a little dust; wary, tired, thirsty, but still scanning the middle distance, trying to recall the maximum effective range of an AK-47. *Four-hundred meters?* This was the kind of thing you were supposed to remember, especially now that you were a squad leader, except the heat and the stress seemed to drive thoughts and memories right out of your head. *Five-hundred meters?* To the west, palm trees and rice paddies were backlit by the lowering sun, an ochre light spreading over everything, obscuring the potential danger that was always there. It was beautiful, you thought, wishing you didn't have to walk so damn much, thinking how nice it would be to sit under one of those trees, with a canteen of cool water beside you, when a 7.62 mm bullet passed between you and the radio man – the antenna was always a give-away – just a slight noise marking its passage, then another bullet eighteen inches in front of you made a sound like a sheet of paper being cut with a very sharp razor, the small



piece of lead parting the air and, like a passing boat, leaving a wake that brushed softly against your face. All that before you heard the report of the rifle and threw yourself to the ground, firing your weapon at the same time you were thinking about the sniper and how he'd led too little, then too much.

A couple of months later you were not quite so lucky. Then it had been the middle of the night. Your company perimeter had been penetrated by Viet Cong soldiers who came in shooting and throwing explosives while from a tree line six-hundred meters to the west, their mortars pounded the village you were defending. They had cut the wire only ten meters from your position. Moments later, at the front of the bunker, you raised your head to fire your weapon and told the new guy, Bill, to watch out the back. By the light of fires and parachute flares, you saw without really seeing a hand grenade land a short distance away, just inside the wire. It exploded in the same instant and hot metal cut your face and neck, then you were sliding back on your stomach as though the force of the blast had pushed you, blood running down your neck and soaking your shirt, all the pounding, smoky roar of war momentarily silenced by the unthinkable thing you never believed would happen. You wiped your face, turned to look back at Bill, blood on your hand glittering in the light of a burning house, started to say something and a 60mm mortar round slammed the top of the bunker, pushing you into the freshly dug earth, the concussion so powerful you thought for one too-long moment that your legs had been blown off. How long were you stunned, unable to think straight or do anything? Time didn't stand still. The war didn't

stop. What did you do in those seconds, lying on your stomach in the dark while dust sifted down on you and Bill from the layers of sandbags above the steel railroad ties and bamboo poles supporting them, deafened, actually deafened by the explosion, until something, some urge to prove to yourself that you were still alive, drove you forward to the opening where, if you'd looked, you would've seen the place on the ground where the grenade had exploded.

You picked up your weapon, and began firing out into the night, beyond the wire, not seeing anyone, not knowing if there was still anyone there, just firing your weapon because that's all you could do. The power flowing out of your rifle could destroy those who had come to destroy you, but it flowed the other way too, through your hands and arms, into your body, giving you strength and courage, pushing back against the reality that death was still nearby, shredding your fear round by round, letting you think you were in control when the truth was that no one was in control. Everything – the night, the fires, the explosions and flares and jets shrieking in from Chu Lai – everything was completely, thoroughly out of control. Random chance governed every second, every minute that slipped past, bringing you closer to...what? Death? Salvation? You didn't know and you didn't have time to care just then. It was enough to be alive. Later, after the assault had ended and the dead and wounded were counted, you left your weapon with Bill and climbed into a medevac helicopter, falling against the bulkhead as it took you and others to an Army hospital to be cleaned up, operated on, and given a Purple Heart.

Sometime after dawn, lying in a bed with patches on your eyes, the unfamiliar smell of clean cotton sheets floating up to join the stink of

blood and fire and Betadine, you're flooded with an exhilarating relief that you're lying in that bed with patches on your eyes, instead of on a table in the Graves Registration Unit with a tag on your toe.

Back with your company a couple of weeks later, beer-drunk or marijuana-high, as you tell the story of that night, how death missed you twice in a matter of seconds, the crystalline rush of fear will fill you again, and you'll understand how the narrow distance between you and death makes you feel thoroughly, radiantly, intimately alive.

You remember other things: men you knew who came home earlier than scheduled – unmoving and silent. Hugh was one of them. He will always be twenty-one years old, and you'll never forget his face, no matter how long you live beyond his twenty-one years. A booby trap killed him, after he'd been here only ninety-seven days. Others died during your time here, but Hugh was different. More innocent, perhaps; not cynical yet, like you. He was killed before he could become cynical. Was that a blessing, or not – that he died in a certain state of innocence? He's still dead, you think, so what good did innocence do him? For that matter, what good did cynicism do you?

You got tired and muddy with Hugh, and terrified sometimes, even though no one ever admitted to being terrified. "Shaken up," maybe, or "had a close call," but terrified was too close to the truth. You got drunk with him, and ate crappy food out of olive-colored cans with him. You dug foxholes, marched fifteen or twenty clicks, got soaked in the relentless monsoon rains – but you didn't die with him.

Why him – and not you? You all knew that every day was a roll of the dice. Usually you rolled a good number. You dodged the bullets,

missed the booby traps, and kept going. But it didn't always work out that way. Some men ended up bleeding and mangled, lying in the dirt of an anonymous field, ten-thousand miles from home; ten-thousand miles from their future.

Hugh went home, and was buried. Closed casket at the funeral. No one who loved him wanted to see him like that – slashed by hundreds of 3.2 mm steel balls that had exploded outward from a stolen Claymore mine marked “Made in USA.”

You were his squad leader. Could you have done something, anything that would've kept him away from that trip wire; kept him alive? You've asked yourself that question many times over the last forty-five years. The answer remains the same: I don't know.

What you also remember: a village burning while old women and young children sat nearby crying. You started the fire, after a man in your company had been killed a few minutes earlier by a sniper. His name was Warren. You hadn't gotten to know him well, and now you never would, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he was one of us, and he was dead. Setting the house on fire wasn't exactly premeditated. You'd just lit a cigarette and were standing there looking up at the palm thatch roof, then idly took out your lighter again and lit a low-hanging corner of the thatch. Just to see it burn.

You couldn't kill the lifers who decided what you were supposed to do each day, not without going to jail, and you were never going to find the man who killed Warren. You'd sure as hell never find the one who killed Hugh. But you could kill Vietnamese, burn their houses, rough them up, take what you wanted and move on. So you set the

place on fire, and it burned quickly, pouring thick black smoke into an otherwise perfectly clear, beautiful blue sky. Someone in your platoon saw the house burning, so he set another house on fire; then more men set more fires, until the whole village was reduced to piles of smoking ash, and the dinks that hadn't run away were standing around wailing and yelling, like they always do.

Maybe you thought it would feel good, or that you'd avenged Hugh's death, or that somehow the fire would burn off the silent anger you felt almost every day, but couldn't quite talk about. You didn't feel avenged, though, or righteous or vindicated, nor did it feel that somehow the balance of the world had been set right; as if one dead soldier weighed against one burned village would make it all come out even in the end. It didn't come out even, and you still felt angry and tired and dirty, and the whole fucking thing was still pointless.

That day and many others play over and over in your head, year after year. That night in the bunker when death almost found you. The bound and blindfolded Viet Cong prisoner you slapped around a month later, and threatened to kill — not that he understood what you were saying; not that you cared. The house you watched burn, not concerned that it was someone's home, just thinking that it was a miserable little bamboo shack, and how pissed off you were, how tired, how violently you had been disabused of your illusions about war and justice and death. Thinking that none of it mattered.

But some things did matter. There was the little girl brought to your unit out in the field by her mother, who thought that, surely, the GIs could do something about her daughter's burns that were caused

by napalm – that greasy, viscous gel that stuck to things and people and animals, burning at eight-hundred degrees. Only Americans had napalm. Only Americans had the means to drop it wherever they wanted. You'd been out in the field for ten months by then and thought yourself immune to the ways in which human bodies could be broken or destroyed. Until the child was brought in. Six or seven years old. Burns on her arms and chest. Maybe elsewhere too. You didn't know, because you couldn't make yourself look.

It would be years before you would have children of your own. Daughters, in fact: three little girls you hoped would never experience the horror of war or the pain of napalm.

You remember it all, like newsreel footage that can't be edited or erased. You can't pretend it didn't happen to you and the men you knew, and you can't forget how quickly everyone was reduced to an almost feral state of existence. Shocked at first, stripped of your naïveté and your thin covering of civilization, you felt revulsion at what you saw and did. Then, little by little, living with careless destruction, walking past long-dead bodies as if they weren't there, the air strikes and leeches and jungle rot all became commonplace elements of your life, and the revulsion turned to rationalization and denial, and deeply buried fear. By the time you saw Hugh's blood soaking into the earth of a barren field, you'd been in an almost mindless state of casual brutality for what felt like years.

The memories are like furniture scattered among the rooms of an otherwise empty house. You keep moving the furniture around, hoping to find some arrangement that will be comfortable, that you

can live with for a while. Maybe the rest of your life. But it never works out that way. You keep bumping into things in the dark, opening old wounds that never really healed. As you kneel down to wipe your blood off the floor, you remember other blood, other rooms, other years, and you know then what it feels like to be nakedly, painfully alive.

You'd cry, if you had any tears left, but you don't, not today anyway, so all you can do is give thanks, to whom or what you don't know. You utter words of gratitude, because you're fortunate to have lived through it all, to have arrived at this day, forty-five years later, despite not knowing why or how; despite the young man's voice, deep inside, asking you the same question again and again: *Is it truly fortunate to survive and then have to live with these memories, year after year?* Your answer is always the same: *I don't know.*

# Minarets



Kyle Larkin

The desert is not what we thought it would be—it's colder, grayer, indifferent as a corpse. Everything is ravaged. There's a thin film of dust that covers this entire city, but it's more like ash than sand. Even the palm trees are muted and dull. Buildings that have been blown into piles of rubble look like scorched crumbs in the bottom of an old oven. The devastation is permanent.

“Two hours left,” Bronson says lazily, and then spits a yellowbrown stream into his empty plastic water bottle.

The night is quiet. We've built a small fireplace out of loose bricks, and what's left of our coffee boils into a thick, tarry sludge as the flames die out. Lennie is downstairs smashing the small desks apart. We can hear him snapping the wood off of them for our fire. The sounds echo through the empty rooms in this building and spill out into the empty streets.

We are on the rooftop of what was once a school. It's a skeleton of a building, with no doors, no glass left in the windows, and it's painted everywhere with bullet holes. In the sandy field next to us lies an old cemetery, with its rows of dirt mounds all facing the same direction, as if they're pointing toward something. They've been burying people here for centuries, but every day they bring another, these solemn trains of bearded men in long white robes, carrying the body over their heads. We wonder how they can fit so many in such a small plot of land.



Lennie's heavy feet begin pounding up the stairway. He walks over to us with his rifle slung across his back, sweating, and dumps a pile of broken desktops next to the fire. "Wake up, fuckers," he says. He rinses the blood and dirt from his filthy, scraped hands with a bottle of water, wipes them on his pants, and then slumps next to us on the worn out couch we've brought up here. I get up to scan the streets again.

Nothing is happening, of course. The curfew keeps everyone inside, and the rutted, pockmarked roads and labyrinth of alleyways remain completely abandoned until sunrise, aside from the occasional pack of roaming wild dogs that howl and fight over piles of garbage. Sometimes we shoot them. The city is dark except for the long strands of green lights that hang from the mosque near the center of town. They shine and reflect off of its massive golden teardrop-shaped dome.

We often get shot at from the cemetery, so I check that way, but there are only the quiet mounds of dirt. A faint light begins to grow in the east, just enough to silhouette the tall, slender minarets punctuating the skyline like giant candlesticks in the distance. I light a cigarette and lean against the sandbags, watching. Waiting.

Suddenly a sharp *click* snaps the brisk dawn air. We hear a rustling come through the speakers at the mosque. A tired, scratchy voice whispers, "Allah whakbar." A few moments go by, and then he repeats the same words, drawing them out a little more, "Allaaahhh wwvhakbarr."

"Finally," Bronson says. He gets off the couch and begins to pack his ruck. "These nights never end."

The voice comes through the speakers again, a little louder, but still shaky, trying to wake up. He eases his way into a few higher notes, experimenting. We didn't know what to make of these strange, foreign songs in our first few days. There seemed to be a constant warbling that blared through speakers all over the city, shouting in a language we didn't understand, for reasons we didn't understand.

There's another short pause, and then the voice suddenly belts out the words so powerfully and unexpectedly that the explosion of sound sends nestled birds flying from nearby rooftops and palm trees, flapping away into the cold morning sky. His voice slowly grows into a barrage of undulating, melancholy sounds, and now begins to move faster, climbing up and holding onto each note for a fraction of a second before landing on one and blasting it, piercing the air with a painful lament that gets louder and louder. He starts wailing like a dying man, almost crying as he clings to the high notes, straining his voice with his entire being, and then darts back down the scale until he hits a tone so heavy and thick that you can see it pouring out of the speakers in waves.

Now he only pauses to gasp for air, but then jumps right back into the melismatic bombardment, his voice skipping all over the place, flying up and down like a madman in this eerie, esoteric form of desert jazz. And just as abruptly as it began, he ends with a few strong, steady calls that linger and reverberate through the empty streets and alleys long after the speakers have clicked off.

We can hear faint traces of the other ghostly prayers from the mosques spread throughout the city, but when they finish, all is quiet

again. Lennie leans back on the couch, shifting the body armor that's pulling down his shoulders, and says, "That kid's not bad."

"They're all bad," Bronson argues. "I'll be glad to never hear this shit again, once we get home."

"*If* we get home," Lennie says, and we all laugh.

"*If* we get home, then I'm never even thinking about this place again."

The city loses its ominous mystique once the sun is up. It's sprawling, with over 350,000 people, but organized in such a haphazard way that it has become a maze of crisscrossing alleyways and roads and tangles of power lines and sandstone buildings that all look identical. Generations of war and the brutal desert sun have seared everything into such a faded, desolate wasteland that our panoramic view from this rooftop is like a black and white photograph.

The only patches of color are near the mosques. Next to the shiny golden bulb is a second dome, a little smaller, but covered with an incredibly complex, swirling mosaic of vibrant blues and teals and pinks and yellows and greens, arranged in intricate, repetitive geometric patterns like a massive Faberge egg. Everything else is the color of sand.

The Spiral Minaret towers hundreds of feet over the northwestern part of the city, with its winding staircase wrapped around the outside all the way from its wide, round base to the narrow top, where we have snipers. It can be seen from almost anywhere in the city, like a giant upside down ice cream cone along the skyline. Mueller claims that its design is based on the original Tower of Babel, spinning and

climbing toward heaven like Doré's *Confusion of Tongues*, but none of us actually know a thing about it.

So we sit up here on the school and watch the city. In front of our position, half a block past the concrete jersey barriers and snarled strands of razor wire, is the busiest part of town. There are shops and restaurants and vendors of all kinds. We see donkeys pulling carts full of dates, barefoot kids riding double on bicycles, open-air butcher shops with skinned carcasses hanging from hooks and fresh blood running down the sidewalks. Most of the shops are garages, and the merchants begin each day by rolling up the large metal doors, cranking open their awnings, and setting up their tables. We watch shadowy women in long black dresses with their faces covered float down the sidewalks like apparitions in mourning, starkly contrasted by the men in bright white robes and sandals walking the streets smoking, always gesturing and animated.

Since we don't know the Arabic name, and haven't tried to learn it, this is now Market Street. We've renamed the rest of the main roads after professional basketball teams—Clippers, Jazz, Lakers, Heat, Celtics—and all of our maps are labeled this way, so you can tell someone, "Head west down Knicks, take a left on Bulls . . ." and they'll know exactly what you mean. It's easier that way.

There are traffic checkpoints controlling access to the city on these roads, and this morning, like every morning, eternal snaking lines of vehicles are backed up for miles almost immediately after the morning call to prayer: beat up old Mercedes sedans stuffed with passengers; semi trucks with people clinging to the sides and back; hordes of cars spray-painted bright orange and white to let everyone know that

they're taxis; rusted motorcycles with two, sometimes three, guys riding on them; snub-nosed blue Bongo trucks with the flatbeds packed full of men standing shoulder to shoulder.

We watch the police at the checkpoints in their bright blue baggy uniforms as they dash back and forth with AK-47s, patting down civilians, looking underneath cars with mirrors attached to long poles, arresting people, waving vehicles through. The uniforms are all one size, and therefore large enough to fit anyone, but since they're all poor and thin they look like children in their father's clothes. Kids playing cops with their belts pulled tight and shirts ballooned. Everyone is trying to get to work, or, in most cases, trying to get into the city to look for work. Car horns blare, sirens wail, the police yell through megaphones, gunshots ring out through the city at random.

All of this commotion begins to stew as the sun rises higher in the cloudless sky, and it permeates everything with a disgusting potpourri that is Samarra. Spiced meats are grilled by the vendors as flatbread cooks in clay ovens and falafels are deep fried in grease. Stale cigarette smoke wafts through the air. Giant heaps of rotten, months-old garbage are burned. Sweat blends with tremendous body odor. There are the sweet, strong spices from chai tea being brewed, the bitter fumes from burnt gunpowder that you can sometimes taste, a mixture of exotic incenses and perfumes, car exhaust, open sewers, and the putrid decaying stench of death.

We sit and watch all of this, exhausted, waiting for our replacements and fantasizing about sleep. Far in the distance an explosion makes everything tremble and shudder, and the city becomes quiet for a moment. We all instinctively scan the horizon for

the plume of smoke, wondering if anyone we know has been hit this time. Eventually we see it, a few miles to our north, stretching up toward the sky with its tall, thin column and round puff on top, like a desert flower. It looks like a big one. “Shit,” Bronson says, but then nobody talks anymore. We only watch the city, waiting. And another day begins.

# Veterans Day



T.S. Kay

It was Saturday morning, November 2. I was sitting alone, as usual, in "Oswego Gold," a coffee shop for the town and college that shared the name.

I was catching up on the news before doing some work. I wasn't in any rush; it was the weekend but I usually coded here after having my morning coffee. I scanned my usual news sites, learned about the congressional dead-lock of the day, weather events meteorologists were hyperventilating over, and local events that were theoretically of interest.

One headline caught my attention - a Veterans' Day service in my hometown. There would be a service honoring all of America's heroes, with a special ceremony for Bill Caldor. I groaned to myself. Bill and I went to school together. He was the town's fair-haired son. Curious despite myself, I read the remaining details.

It was on Veterans' Day, at three. There was a picture of the high school principal and the head of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars association shaking hands in front of the school's trophy case. Behind them were the two state wrestling trophies the team had won when Bill was the captain. I smiled thinking about another trophy Bill won but no longer had.

When I looked up from my screen I choked on my coffee. Bill Caldor was standing in front of me wearing his Air Force dress blue uniform and hat.

I looked away, not wanting to attract his attention, meet his eyes, or see the admiring looks he was getting from all of the women and a few of the guys. I guessed he was in town for an ROTC event, back to impress his former classmates and probably get laid.

I stared at my computer screen, tried to start writing code, and realized it was useless. Bill Caldor strikes again.

I gulped the cooled coffee in my to-go cup, shoved my laptop into its bag, and shrugged into my winter coat. I bought a refill and poured it into the mug, added extra cream and sugar, and replaced the lid. Bill walked over and stood silently beside me all the while. I contemplated spilling coffee on his perfectly pressed uniform but didn't want to cause a scene.

When Bill didn't move, I went around him, passing crowded tables to get to the front door, mumbling apologies to the people I smacked with my bag. I stomped out and wished I had just shoved the oaf out of my way.

I decided to go to my work cube in the Information Systems department. I started there part-time my first year in college but since I didn't mind working weird hours for a ridiculously low wage they offered me a full-time position.

I would work unmolested until the 5:15 bus came and be home within fifteen minutes. That would give me enough time to order pizza and get ready to watch the "Aliens-among-us" movie marathon. Thinking about that put me in a better mood than remembering all the attempts Bill had made to get me to say or do something to make me look stupid.



When the wind blew the Lake Ontario frigid air into my face, I decided to use the underground tunnels connecting the campus buildings.

It was early enough for Saturday morning classes to still be in session, so the doors were unlocked. I went inside and took the first set of stairs down to the lower level. I knew my way around the campus but checked the signs by habit. The first hallway or "tunnel" to the left led to the Liberal Arts building. The second hallway on the right led to the Information Science Department and my office. As I approached it, I saw Bill Caldor walking toward me.

I kept my head down and watched the floor as I walked. My breath sounded loud and huffy in the confined space. My shoes squeaked loudly with each step. I stopped and listened and realized Bill made no sound as he approached. Naturally. Everything was always perfect for Bill Caldor.

Rather than have him behind me, I took the next stairwell up to the ground floor. I would have to go outside again to get to my building but once there I knew I wouldn't run into Bill; only employees had the pass code to get in.

At the top of the stairs I exited the door and was greeted by another blast of icy wind. Still aggravated by my repeated run-ins with Bill, I pulled my hood up and stomped across the open space to the nearest door of the Information Science building. I punched in my code and the door unlocked with a buzz. My computer bag slid down my arm, I hiked it up, and yanked open the door before it locked again.

Bill was blocking the doorway.

"Excuse me." I said without thinking.

Bill blinked down at me and smiled. I backed away, remembering that smile from junior and senior high school, and slammed the door shut.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and realized I wasn't going to be able to focus on work at all now. I was too upset and afraid. There was absolutely no way for him to know what I did, no one else knew but me. Besides, it wouldn't make sense for him to be chasing me down about it while in uniform. I checked my cell phone for the time. I could still catch the next shuttle home. I hurried to the bus stop in front of the building, looking over my shoulder for Bill.

I was just in time for the shuttle.

Winded, I flopped into the first empty seat ignoring the inquisitive looks from the other passengers. As I caught my breath, I wondered why Bill was back after three years.

I first met Bill in my seventh grade advanced math class. His family moved back here when his father retired from the Air Force. He quickly became one of the popular kids. Everyone liked him, even the geeks and thespian wannabes. So, of course, I took an instant dislike to him. He had rolled high numbers for every attribute in his life and didn't understand what it was like for those who hadn't. He tried to charm me like everyone else, but I saw right through his laughter and jokes.

In high school, Bill became the varsity wrestling team captain despite being a junior. He led the team to the school's first state championship and did it again the next year. Each time teachers, students, and the town went nuts. They couldn't talk about anything

else for weeks. The rest of us were forced to attend school rallies where the head coach and principal ridiculously embellished his achievements and their importance to the school. At the end, they presented each wrestler with their own trophy. Bill's was the largest. His picture as well as the rest of the teams' was installed along with the team trophy as the centerpieces in the school's trophy case. Each time I walked passed it, my teeth gritted in frustration because no one else could see Bill for what he was.

After graduation, I thought I had seen the last of Bill, assuming he had gone on to a big wrestling college. When I saw him walking across the campus on the first day of classes it was like a punch in the gut. He spotted me and waved but I pretended I didn't see him. I ran into him several times over the years but he joined the ROTC program and majored in Aeronautical Engineering while I went into Computer Science. Our paths, thankfully, rarely crossed.

One day, the wireless system in Bill's dormitory building stopped working and my boss sent me to handle it. To fix it, I needed access to student rooms, including Bill's. I saw and recognized the trophy immediately and without thinking about it, I stashed it in my backpack the moment I was alone with it – a little bit of payback for all Bill put me through. Not sure what to do with it, I brought it to my apartment, gloated for a few weeks, then forgot about it as other things I collected covered it.

The shuttle stopped at my apartment complex. I stood up and caught my computer bag on the seat. The woman behind me chuckled. Embarrassed, I went down the steps without looking up. Bill was

standing beside the shuttle stop sign. Startled, I fell awkwardly to the ground.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled at Bill, who stood laughing. The woman behind me stopped to help.

"Are you OK?"

I nodded at her, glaring at Bill beside her.

The woman glanced curiously over her shoulder. "Are you OK?" She asked again. "Do you need help getting up?" She added, turning to the shuttle driver with a look.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you," I said, lumbering to my feet. I brushed down my clothes. The woman shrugged and walked away with a wave and pitying look.

"Happy now?" I asked Bill. "You made me fall and look stupid. Congratulations. Now go away." I was hunched over, upset, and he was towering over me.

"I need your help," Bill said, surprising me.

"With what?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"I'm not sure," he said, a confused look replaced his smile. "I want to sleep but I can't."

"Then take some pills." I looked at him more carefully now. His confusion reminded me of my mother on one of her "bad" days.

"Something isn't right and I have to fix it." A chill went down my spine. He sounded out of it. His uniform was clean, pressed, and immaculate.

When my mother was feeling bad, she barely remembered to comb her hair let alone look this put together.

"If you can't fix it, what makes you think I could?"

A cold blast of wind blew off the lake and I pulled my coat tighter around me. Of course Bill's crisp white hat didn't budge. He didn't even blink with the wind blowing in his face.

The wind blew again, catching my bag and I nearly dropped it. When I looked up, Bill was gone.

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I pushed open my apartment door and threw my coat on the stack of boxes next to it.

Rather than think about Bill, I let myself get distracted by the electronics, old computers and peripherals that lined my hallway. I picked up an old portable PC, knowing I was going to fix it soon and give it to a local elementary school. Next to it was an almost perfect portable radio that just needed the rust removed and new dials. I could give it to one of the night security guards. I had been planning to do both for months but never got around to it. I didn't want to think about that.

I moved a pile of papers off the table and powered my computer up to find out about Bill Caldor and why he was in town this weekend.

First, I looked at his social media page. He was a First Lieutenant in the Air Force and currently lived in Dayton, Ohio. His relationship status was blank, so there wasn't a girlfriend. I was surprised, given how popular he was.

I was also surprised to see charities among his interests, even the food pantry in our town. My mother went there when she ran out of money, which, given how much junk she bought at yard sales and thrift shops, was fairly often. I shook my head. Bill volunteered to boost his academic resume, nothing more.

I scrolled through his online pictures. Each showed his smiling face alongside any number of individuals and groups. Some were at the beach, others skiing, a lot of them were of him doing something silly. I paused when I came across a picture of him next to my mother in the food pantry. I had no idea they knew each other, let alone well enough to capture their relationship digitally.

Irritated with my train of thought, I clicked on Bill's main posting page. One posting was from a month ago, from Meredith Singer who went through school with us. "Went apple picking today. It wasn't the same without you. Miss you Silly Billy."

The next posting was from three months ago by a person named Ron. "Been thinking a lot about you this week. If you hadn't helped me, I know wouldn't have gotten into grad school. I start next week. Thank you for your service and sacrifice. God bless you, Bill."

Ignoring the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I searched for Bill's name. There were several hits, each with his name, his Air Force rank, and date of his death more than seven months ago. Bill had been at a base in Afghanistan when he had been killed.

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"You have a lot of stuff," Bill said as the first human in the movie died from an alien disease. He stood, still in full dress uniform, in the narrow space between my couch and a stack of old computers.

"What do you do with it all?"

I hated that question. The few times mother brought someone home, that was the first thing they asked. It was obvious. They made her feel safe. Things never left, never died, never hurt her. She trusted things more than people, including me. After my father died, my

mother took down all of the photos, hid photo albums, and deleted online pictures. She stopped looking at my face. I copied her, avoiding looking in mirrors, knowing I wouldn't like what I saw there any more than she did.

"I like it."

"I bet you don't know what most of it is."

"I know everything I own."

"What's the third computer down from the top of the pile behind me?"

"It's a portable with super microprocessor, a ten gig hard drive, and a mega video ram card."

Bill laughed.

"I'm dead, not stupid."

I blinked at his admission, still resisting the idea.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm supposed to do something but don't know what. I was hoping you knew."

"How the hell should I know?"

"Because you're my oldest friend."

"I'm not your oldest friend."

He frowned.

"Yes, you are. You are the first kid I met when I moved to Vulney. We were in classes together every year. We did homework together and co-chaired our yearbook."

I had forgotten about our high school yearbook club. He did all the photography and I worked on photoshopping them into shape.

"I don't think so. You gave me a wedgie every year in junior high!"  
I reminded him.

"For National Wedgie Day!" He laughed. "I held the record for getting the most in seventh and giving the most in eighth grade."

I rolled my eyes and he laughed again.

"Are you really dead?"

He nodded.

"Why haven't you, um, moved on?"

"I told you, every time I try to sleep I can't. I have something to do."

For the first time in my life I felt bad for Bill. He was the kind of guy that was used to knowing what to do.

"Did you have a girlfriend?"

He shook his head.

"Did you owe someone money?"

He scrunched his face which meant he was thinking. The teachers always laughed when he did that.

"I made her a promise!" He told me, his face lighting up.

"Who? What did you promise her?"

His face fell.

"I don't know!"

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As usual, I woke up on the couch. My routine was to have coffee and scroll through a variety of websites to catch up on news but I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking about Bill's immaculate uniform in this messy apartment.



I hated to admit it but Bill's pointed questions embarrassed me. I started cleaning. I planned to do it before his appearance, at least that's what I told myself as I collected as much trash as would fit into the eight garbage bags I found under my kitchen sink. I realized the place had gotten bad. I ran the bags and more pizza boxes than I wanted to count to the apartment garbage dumpsters and decided to shower.

I took my comic book collection out of the bathtub and turned on the hot water. Once the mirror steamed over, I took my clothes off and showered. I dried off with a towel that hadn't been laundered for months and put on my equally grimy bathrobe before stepping out of the tub. I avoided seeing myself reflected in windows or mirrors, especially naked or without a shirt on. I even grew a beard to skip watching myself shave.

I took my towel and carefully wiped just enough steam from the mirror so that I could see only my forehead and hair. I reached for my comb, knocked it from its precarious perch on the back of the toilet, and caught it before it landed in the water.

Bill was gazing back at me in the mirror. I didn't jump this time, just sighed. I combed my hair and turned to face him. There was something different about him. "Where is your hat?"

"Gone. If I don't keep my promise soon, my whole uniform will disappear and me with it. I'll never sleep. Please help me!"

The fear in his eyes made me want to help him, surprising me. He faded before I could tell him that. I didn't know what his promise was but it had to do with that stupid trophy. What other connection did I have to him?

Afraid that my idiotic moment of victory would somehow lead to Bill's eternal haunting or something worse, I grabbed my clothes from the floor and went into the dining room to look through the piles for reasonably clean ones. I normally did work on Sunday but I couldn't get the trophy off my mind.

I stuffed armloads of dirty clothes into laundry baskets I found hiding underneath them, hoping each time to find the trophy buried there. Not wanting to just move the clothes from room to room, making it more difficult to find the trophy, I lugged a year's worth of laundry down the stairs to the apartment building's washers and driers. Then I cleaned the dining room table where I could fold and keep the clothes out of the way. After that, I used the baskets to carry dozens of things I knew were junk to the dumpster.

I passed Gary, the apartment handyman, on my last trip.

"Glad to see you cleaning, Ryan. You're not a bad looking guy but that apartment will scare any girl away before you can have any fun." He laughed and kept walking while I grew teary-eyed. How sad was my life that only the handyman knew anything about me and was the first person to pay me a compliment in years?

Tired and back on my couch, I felt a sense of accomplishment thinking about the newly straightened dining room with clean, folded clothing. The feeling didn't last. I still hadn't found the trophy.

"I saw you moving all this stuff around. You're pretty strong."

I didn't jump this time but glared at him anyway. Bill just smiled.

"Thanks," I said. "Did you find your hat?" He still wasn't wearing it.

"No. It's gone. So are my shoes." He looked upset and I felt bad for bringing it up.

"So why did you join the Air Force, anyway?" I asked, not wanting him to bring up his promise again, since I hadn't found the trophy. I hoped he'd remember his promise when he saw it.

"My dad retired from the Air Force the year we moved here. He flew B2 bombers. He loved the job and the Air Force. I wanted to be just like him."

"Did you like it?"

"I loved it." He was smiling again. I was glad it made him feel better.

"I don't understand why. The ROTC people were always running, saluting, or getting yelled at."

Bill laughed.

"It may look like that to you but for me it was great. I was in shape, learned how to be a leader, and to follow orders when others were in charge. When I first joined all of us were strangers but as we worked together, we became friends, then family. I could count on them to have my back and I had theirs. I really miss it."

I looked away from his pain and longing, knowing he lead a better life than I did, and realizing I wanted a life like that, too.

"It may sound corny to you, but I loved serving and protecting the United States of America. I loved being part of something bigger than myself and knowing I could count on my team. There's nothing I want more than to be able to continue to serve."

"No, I admire that," I said, then looked away before he saw my face. Too late.

"What?"

"Maybe if you weren't in the Air Force, you'd still be alive."

He shrugged.

"Maybe. But I died in service to my country. I wish I was still alive but don't regret joining and wouldn't change that, even if I could." My envy and jealousy turned into admiration.

Unhappy with the realization that I had misunderstood someone I had known most of my life, I leaned forward to look under the coffee table, in case the trophy was there. When I looked up again, Bill was gone.

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I finished taking garbage out to the bin from the bathroom and the vanity under the bathroom sink. The trophy wasn't in there. Sweaty again and in need of another shower, I shut the bathroom door and looked at the now clean bathrobe hanging on the back. For the first time in years, I left the robe on its hook and took off my clothes without steaming up the mirror first.

Stealing myself, I brought my head up and looked. Two blue eyes, a nose, clear pale skin, thin red lips, and longish black hair. Individually, each feature was well-formed and within normal range. Collectively, they assembled a face that, objectively, was average to, perhaps, marginally attractive.

I was no "Bill Caldor" but I wasn't a complete troll either. I'd even gotten a compliment today!

After I showered, I had to spend time writing code. I had a project due the next day at work. If I finished early, I would look for the trophy again before bed.

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Things went back to normal for a few days. I worked, people asked me to accomplish the impossible on a shoestring budget, and I did it. I found myself meeting people's eyes more often, smiling at their jokes and even greeting them in the mornings. Bill didn't appear but I spent each lunch hour emptying file cabinets and throwing my accumulated junk out, thinking I may have brought the trophy to my office.

During the week I normally eat dinner at a local bar that served wings and pizza but instead I cleaned more of the apartment so I could find the trophy and give it back to Bill before he lost any more clothing.

When I got home Wednesday night I hung my coat on a newly-assembled coatrack.

"You didn't like me, did you?" Bill said from behind me. I jumped and nearly knocked the rack over. I swallowed the lump in my throat. Bill had figured it out.

"No, not really." He was still hatless and missing his jacket now as well. I saw we had the same height and build. I had a beer gut and slouched but for the first time I realized he didn't tower over me, I just thought he had.

"Why not?" He sounded hurt. I sighed not liking or wanting to share what my recent realizations revealed about me.

"My feelings weren't about you. I didn't like a lot of people because I didn't like myself. I was jealous of you and everyone else who was confident and happy."

"Do you like me better now?" I almost gave him a snarky answer out of habit but stopped. He deserved better treatment. He had never been my tormentor. I had been my own.

"Yes, I do," I answered.

Relief showed on Bill's face and the stiffness left his shoulders. "Good." He smiled. "That means you'll help me keep my promise, right?"

"Yes. Do you remember what it was?"

"No, but she needs to know I kept it!"

"Who?"

"I don't know!" Bill simmered with frustration, then shook his head and disappeared.

Bill had transferred his anxiety to me. I tried but couldn't sit still so I finished straightening up the living room. Then I worked on the second bedroom which was just an over-stuffed room full of things from computer store close-outs or office building dumpsters.

It was crap I never needed. I shook my head at my stupidity. I grew up hating my home because of the junk my mother surrounded herself with, then I did the exact same thing. At least my mother had an excuse.

I cleaned until four in the morning. I was exhausted, and still hadn't found the trophy. I called-in sick for the first time ever. After leaving a message on my boss's voicemail, I went to bed.

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I woke up at noon, panicking until I remembered I'd called-in sick the night before. I got up, made a pot of coffee, and wandered through the apartment, pleased by how much room I had. Then I thought

about Bill and wondered what might happen if I couldn't find that damn trophy.

Determined to keep trying, I finished cleaning the only part of my apartment I hadn't gotten to yet: the second bedroom closet. I sorted the contents into trash, recyclables, and things I wanted to keep. I put most of into trash bags and ran them down to the dumpster in two trips. As I did, I kept an eye out for Bill.

With one last look into what I thought was a dark, empty corner, I saw a trash bag with a pointy object inside it. I felt a wash of embarrassment and shame seeing it. When I stole it, it had been a moment of triumph, now I realized it was closer to the height of stupidity and ignorance. I dreaded what would happen when I took it out.

"Where did you get that from?" Bill asked. I didn't jump, expecting him to appear.

I looked up. He was wearing a white t-shirt and his dress-pants. His socks were gone, along with the rest of his uniform. I could feel the blood heating my face. Regardless of all the stuff I thought he did to me over the years, I felt horrible for stealing his trophy, especially now.

"I stole it from your dorm room one day." I was horrified when my eyes welled-up.

Bill laughed.

"Sorry to ruin your joke but I didn't know it was missing. I thought it was at my parents' house." He laughed again, not noticing my tears. He looked around the room and then walked into the hallway.

"You've really cleaned the place up. It looks good," he told me, sticking his head around the corner of the door. I knew I could let myself off the hook and not say anything but he deserved better than that. He deserved my apology.

"Bill. Listen. I didn't take your trophy as a joke. I took it to get even with you." My one spiteful act of retaliation against the only person who had considered himself my friend.

"Get even? What for?"

He still didn't understand why I disliked him. I wanted to list my litany of wrongs I felt he and everyone else in school and life had perpetrated against me over the years. I wanted to hide behind all the crap I just threw away and continue to shut the world out but knew, if I did, I'd never have a better life.

"For everything you had and I didn't. You had two normal parents that loved you. My father died and my mother hated the sight of me. You were always happy, good looking, and people liked you. I hated myself and thought no one could or would like me. I was an idiot for not realizing we could have been friends. I'm sorrier about that than I am for being a jerk and stealing your trophy. "

Bill was shaking his head, a small sad smile on his face.

"You're right on some things but still wrong on most. You were a jerk for stealing my trophy. But you are wrong about not having parents who loved you. Your mom has always loved you. She told me all about you every time we saw one another at the food pantry. She showed me photos of you and told me the story behind each one. She was so proud of you and your grades. She knew she was ill and it was



affecting you. I was always trying to figure out how to tell you about it but let's just say you didn't make it easy for me."

"You knew my mother that well?" He smiled.

"Your mom was one of my favorite people. But you're becoming more and more like her, losing yourself in your junk and work." There was sadness in his voice now. I looked up and could see through him now. His spirit was fading. Again I had been an idiot, spending precious time talking about me and not trying to help him.

"Bill! What was the promise?" I got up to grab him, to help him stay and remember but my hand went right through him.

"I don't know. Ask her yourself."

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I paced around my now clutter-free apartment but took no joy from it. I had to figure out who the woman was. Then I remembered the Veterans' Day service at my high school I read about right before Bill first appeared. Maybe she would be there.

I called my high school to get more information about the ceremony and found myself talking to the principal's secretary, Ms. Marston, who had been there when I graduated. I wanted to talk to her and reminisce about Bill, but was afraid to lose any more time.

"I read about the Veterans' Day ceremony. Can you tell me more about it?" I skipped giving her my name.

"It will take place at three o'clock, in the auditorium, and the principal, Mr. Wallander, and Mayor Cannelli will be there. That's all I know for sure. If you want more information, I can give you Ms. Cena's number. She's organizing it."

"Elizabeth Cena?" I asked.

"Yes, that's correct. Would you like her number?"

"No, thank you." I hung up the phone. I already had my mother's cell number.

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I hadn't spoken to my mother for months. I spent the first eighteen years of my life living in the sad, junk-filled warren she created. Between my anger about that and the fact she couldn't stand to look at me, I left the house as soon as I got into college. By the end of my first semester, when I went home for the holidays, my old bedroom was overrun with moldy coloring books, food-stained clothes she found in garbage cans, and boxes filled with melted chocolate-covered cherries. That was the last time I went back. We called each other sporadically at first but over the years the length of time between the calls increased until it wasn't unusual for us not to speak for more than six months at a time.

I wasn't sure how I felt about her organizing the tribute. Before my father died, she had been a normal, happy person who took me to the park to play and the library to read to me. After he died, her depression and mental illness kicked into high gear and organizing anything complicated appeared beyond her.

I called and left a message on my mother's cell phone with a place and time to meet for lunch tomorrow. I picked a place she liked because they served fish on Fridays. I told her I wanted to participate in the Veterans' Day ceremony, specifically the tribute to Bill. An hour later she texted me back, putting the lunch off until Saturday morning.

Frustrated, I decided to take Friday off from work as well. I'd never taken a vacation day and had more time than I could ever use. My boss was shocked when I called and asked for the time. He gave his permission immediately after he made sure I was OK.

I looked for the only other two women I knew of in Bill's life - his mother and Meredith Singer, the girl from high school who posted on Bill's site. I looked up her family's phone number and spoke with her father. He didn't know if she was going to the ceremony but promised to pass my name and number along to her.

When I called Mr. and Mrs. Caldor, Bill's mother answered on the second ring. She was hesitant when I asked to come talk to her but when I told her I wanted to talk about Bill, to keep his memory alive and vital for as long as we could, she quickly agreed. She asked me to come over that night after dinner when her husband would be home.

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"Bill looks just like his dad," I said, uncomfortable using the past-tense when I was still talking with him. I didn't know how to find out about Bill's promise either. They smiled and his father pointed to walls around the table, full of pictures of Bill and the two of them.

"He gets...got his sense of humor from his mother," he said, the sadness showing in his eyes after corrected himself. He steadied himself. "What exactly can we do for you, Ryan?"

I reached down, took the trophy out of the bag, and put it on the table. I took a deep breath to steady myself. "I want to give this back to you. I stole it from Bill when we were in college."

"You stole it?" They were smiling. Just like Bill, they assumed it had been a practical joke. I wondered if I would ever see the world in such a positive way.

"Yes, to get even with him," I told them honestly, hoping it would be the first step in being more like them and Bill.

"Get even? What for?" His mother asked, puzzled. Mr. Caldor frowned.

"Because I was stupid. I thought he was making fun of me. I didn't understand he wanted to be friends. I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry..." To my horror I started crying.

"We forgive you," Mr. Caldor said, getting up from the table to put his hand on my shoulder. "We know you didn't have it easy as a kid."

"I'm sure Bill didn't even know it was gone, he was always misplacing things." Mrs. Caldor said and they chuckled and I choked back a laugh.

"Thanks for understanding but I can't let that be an excuse anymore." I wiped my eyes and pulled myself together.

"Do you know of any promises that Bill made? I'd like to help him keep them, if possible." They exchanged puzzled looks.

"The only promises Bill made were to the Air Force. To have integrity, to strive for excellence in all he did, and to put service before self. He kept all those promises, especially the last." Mr. Caldor's pride and sorrow mixed in his voice.

How could I help Bill keep his promise if I didn't know what it was?

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Principal Wallendar greeted everyone. As "Taps" played, an Air Force honor guard presented the flag to the Caldors.

The mayor, two high school wrestling coaches, and one of Bill's Squadron Leaders from his time in ROTC took turns speaking about Bill's contributions to the school, community, and country. Bill's mother spoke next. Bill was so much like his mother. Her speech was positive and upbeat and filled with funny stories about him. Again, I felt like an idiot for not having him as my friend.

I was amazed when my mother got up to speak. She hated to talk in front of anyone, let alone a room full of strangers. She stood in front of the small podium, keeping her eyes down and holding on to its sides with iron grips.

"I don't like public speaking or getting people together but I owed it to Bill. He was a special person. He was kind to me and didn't judge me like everyone else. He listened to me and helped me more than any shrink ever did. When I was broke, he helped me get food at the pantry. When I was sad, he made me laugh." She spoke quickly and in one breath, then paused and looked up and at me for the first time since I arrived.

"When I cried because I was making my son Ryan crazy like me, Bill would hug me. One day, when they were older, I went to the Pantry after Ryan and I had a big fight. It was about all my stuff again. I knew I was driving my son away, ruining his life. He was ashamed of me and lonely. I didn't know how to stop or help him. Bill promised to be Ryan's friend, to help him be normal, not like me. He kept his promise. Ryan is here now, from his job at the university, nicely

dressed and handsome, just like his father, to talk today about Bill." She looked at me the entire time and even smiled a little.

My eyes welled again, but I didn't care.

"Thank you Bill Caldor, you were a good friend to me and my son." Then she walked away from the podium and sat down again in the front.

The principal waved to me. It was my turn.

"I made this for Bill," I told them, then turned on the computer and the projector which others had used and put in the DVD I made. I went back to my seat to watch.

Songs began to play and glimpses of Bill in junior and senior high school, his ROTC days, and afterwards appeared. Some showed his sense of humor and others his focus and determination in everything he did. They saw his pride of being in the Air Force, his love of the United States, and willingness to defend and serve it despite any cost. As the pictures and music played, I kept watch for Bill.

I worried it was too late. I knew now what his promise had been - to do whatever he could to help me live a normal life. He had come back from the dead to keep it, visiting and prompting me to know my life could be more than it was. Because of him I changing already and reaching out to people, something I never did. I knew I wanted more, a sense of meaning in my life, of fulfillment and family like Bill had.

"Thanks Bill, you really are a good friend," I said quietly to myself.

He appeared in front of the first row of people, next to the podium and the American flag. He was in full dress uniform, hat, and shoes. Expressionlessly he saluted the flag. Then his look softened looking at his mother and father. He gave a short wave to my mother, who

jumped as if someone had tapped her shoulder. Then he smiled at me. It was the same broad smile he used to give back in high school and for the first time I gave him one back.

I blinked to clear the tears from my eyes and he was gone.

# Southern Grace



Frederick Foote

I wanted out of the South in the worst way. I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1934 to good, God-fearing and hard-working parents. They provided for their children as best they could and better than most colored folks could do in that time and place. When I was seventeen, I jumped up and joined the Army just to get out of the South. That did not work out too well. I got stationed at Fort Benning, deep down in Georgia. I'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire. I was deeper in the South with white Southern officers, who were as bad as plantation overseers.

When I finally got shipped out, I just traded my swampy South for hilly South Korea. I was an infantry man in the Eighth Army under General Ridgeway. A week or two into it I got captured up around Pusan with a young Chinese GI. We thought we was dead for sure.

There was this North Korean officer we called Flat Face. He was as stout as a brick, cotton-mouth mean and just as deadly. An interrogator. Some of us came back from interrogation in some sad shape. Them boys walked in and had to be carried out.

Others never came back at all.

When my turn came, I pissed on myself when they came for me. Flat Face just sat me down and talked about jazz, wanted to know about Miles and Stan Kenton, wanted to talk about Oscar Peterson. That was all. He sent me back in the same shape I came in.



That night around midnight, he came and pulled me and the Chinese GI out of our lean-to and walked us past the barbed wire and out of camp. We knew he was going to kill us. We both prayed as hard as we could. It was so damn cold that I was afraid I would freeze to death before he shot us. We must have walked miles through snow covered hills that frozen night.

He stopped us. He told us our lines were about four hundred yards over the low hill directly in front of us. We froze. We didn't know what to do. We didn't understand what was going on. He kicked us ~~each~~ in the ass and boy, we flew over that hill.

I never understood why he let us go. I think about it a lot lately. I wonder what happened to Flat Face. I hope he made it through the War. I hope he got to listen to some good jazz.

# Thugs



Frederick Foote

On this cold December evening in 1962, we're in North Philly again on another dubious mission. Walter, Houston and me, Teofilo Jackson. Memories of our last SNAFU weigh heavy on me and Houston's minds—we got lost, our dates gave up on us, and someone lifted Houston's wallet. I'm beginning to doubt there's very much brotherly love in this city for us GIs. It's a quick bus ride from the McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, some thirty miles outside of Philadelphia. And, once again, we find ourselves running late.

We're off to see three sisters: Anhinga, Tern and Teal. These names don't inspire much confidence at all. Who, in their right minds, would name their daughters like that? These are, according to Walter, "truly red hot foxes." The problem is Walter has strange taste in women. I mean, he dates one of the finest women I have ever seen, but he also dates some skanks, and just strange, odd, off-the-wall type women. We've never even seen a picture of these women. Walter met Anhinga on the bus coming from the City. On the basis of that slender contact, we're expending time and money to check this out. Houston and I don't have high hopes, but Walter's cool, and he has rolled on some crash and burn missions with us before. We owe him this one.

"Man, if we cut across there we can save about ten minutes," he says. The "there" Walter's talking about is the projects. Walter's good with maps so we rely on his navigation, but the projects are clear danger zones.

We all know better. These projects are gang turf. Intruders are not welcome. The men are not in uniform and projects gangs are leery of all outsiders. But the reward is worth the risk—even if Anhinga and her sisters are as ugly as homemade sin we need to redeem ourselves and make it there before they give up on us too. That shit could become habit forming.

We enter the enemy space, stepping quick, but not running, as we proceed across the no-man's land of high-rise concrete canyons. They let us get halfway through before they show themselves—a handful of gangsters block our path and surround us. Shit, they the most dangerous thugs of all, not the adult full grown gangsters or the fifteen to eighteen year-old apprentice gangsters, no these are the twelve to fourteen year-olds. Wild-ass kids out of control of parents, school and God. Even the older gangsters don't know what to make of the wild young ones. These little monsters probably kill and maim just to past the time of day. There are eight or nine of them. They look as happy to ambush us as regular kids do on Christmas morning. They herd us off the main path to a patch of bare ground invisible from the street.

“You lame ass niggers must be crazy. What you doing up in here?” The small, thin and very black, gang leader, with a head too big for his body, approaches us. He's not so impressive except for the open switch blade he tosses from hand to hand with ease and confidence.

“Faggot social workers come to take somebody's kids,” says a tall, skinny kid with a letter jacket, a do rag and tennis shoes so raggedy that his rusty feet show through.

“Jack, you fucking blind. These ain’t no damn social workers. They selling insurance or some shit,” says a short and stout thug with a big natural, and thick brutal bruised knuckled hands.

Houston tries to speak. “Look fellows we mean no harm. We—”

The boys dissolve into laughter, and mess with Houston for a while.

“Man you sound like you got a mouth full of shit.”

“That boy from way down yonder.”

“You talk too sloooooo Negro. You got dropsy or something.”

“Where you from dufus?” A good looking brown skin boy in a sweatshirt and leather jacket, turns and starts talking to me.

“California.” I say it offhand without any sense of pride.

A visible wave of disbelief passes over the boys.

“That nigger lying. He from Newark. Shit, I know his sister.”

“Shit, me too. She sucked my dick last night.”

“Who you trying to fool suckers? We’ll beat the black off you Jersey fools.”

“If he from California, I’m James Bonds”

“That nigger can’t spell California.”

“He ain’t got no surf board. Where your surf board, nigger?”

When the boys finally quiet down a bit, I continue. “I’m Teofilo —”

I have to wait for a new round of laughter to subside. “And this is Walter. He’s from California too. And this is Houston. He’s from Texas by way of Alabama. And, you right about me being from Jersey. We stationed at McGuire Air Force Base in Jersey, but my homes in California. I was born and raised there.”

The boys have a hundred questions about California, Hollywood, and my home town, "Oak Land." They demand proof that I'm from California. Walter and I show them our California driver's licenses. Each of them has to look at both licenses, twice.

The key questions Walter and I always get are: do we know any movie stars? Have we seen any movie stars? That kind of stuff.

"Sure, I know a movie star. I know Harry Belafonte," I say.

None of them believe me. Even Walter and Houston grimace when I say that. I banter with the boys for a while and finally I pull out my wallet again and remove a picture of me and my moms with Harry Belafonte. The gangsters are almost hysterical with glee. They keep passing the picture around, but they're very careful with it. They won't let one snotty nose boy touch the picture. They hold it out in front of him for inspection Shorty, the switch blade boy, says he going to hold onto my Belafonte picture until we come back. Shit, my moms has the negative of that picture. I think of Shorty's picture as paying a toll. But, I think I'll not be using his toll road again anytime soon. My uncle works as a set builder in Hollywood, and got us the picture with Mr. Belafonte. I also have a picture with me and Marilyn Monroe, which I keep at home. But I don't tell anyone about that picture. That's too special to share.

We soon arrive at a warm, comfortable row house full of good cooking. At last a place in Philly where GIs are welcomed and appreciated. Anhinga is a lovely, tall, coffee colored, twenty-year old woman with straight hair, a long face, huge eyes and sensuous lips. She's smart and claims to play a mean boogie woogie piano. Tern is

eighteen, a bit shorter with brown skin, curly, close-cropped hair and a face designed to laugh and smile. She plays flute and sax and believes that she's a better musician than her big sister. I claim her on sight. She don't object. I give Walter the thumbs up sign when the sisters aren't watching. Teal is seventeen, light skinned, with hair that's a blending of straight and curly. She's the shortest and stacked like a brick house. She's the family percussionist, but she plays just about any instrument. She's hot. They all share large eyes, a gracious manner and a southern Louisiana accent. We have hit the jackpot.

Their mother's a school teacher, the family piano instructor, and lead vocalist. Their father's a postal worker and a big thumping bass player. We eat gumbo, rice, baked country ham, greens, cornbread, sweet tea, apple and peach cobbler and pecan pie. After stuffing ourselves, we move back the living room furniture, roll back the rug and they get their instruments. The family plays up a storm and shake the rafters. We dance, talk, joke around, laugh and laugh and eat some more. I can't remember the last time I had such a good time without liquor or weed. By the time we have to go, I'm in love with the whole damn Durant family. What I don't understand, is how the local brothers cannot be all up on these girls. In my neighborhood there would be a line of guys stretching down the block to talk to these music making, booty-shaking women. We ain't had nothing stronger than tea to drink, but the three of us are high as we can be as we leave our new favorite place.

We barely clear the stoop when they come at us—five young black men dressed in dark dress pants and heavy dark coats with spit-shined Stacy Adams on their big ass feet. They're about our age but

look to be ten years of prison hard knocks tougher. They try to surround us but we keep the stoop at our back.

“You gentleman lost? You don’t look like you from around here.” The speaker has his coat open. He has on a sharp, pin striped dark blue suit, a black shirt and a maroon tie. He smiles like a shark looking at a tuna fish.

Walter looks at each of the gangsters in turn before responding. “Deacons, brothers, you didn’t have to come out here on a cold night like this just to welcome us to the neighborhood. We thank you for--”

A heavy set gangster cuts Walter off. “We ain’t no deacons chump. We here to put you poachers in check, send your punk asses to the emergency room or the morgue.”

Walter smiles at the interrupter and points at him. “Baptist, I was just telling my friends you guys don’t dress good enough to be Methodist or Episcopalian you got to be Baptist.”

A tall, skinny yellow Negro with gap teeth spits out a response. “Shit, who you talking about you Salvation Army-dressing Negro?”

Houston answers him immediately. “Brother I’m gonna pray for you, for God to heal your color blind ass, mixing that garbage green shirt with that piss colored tie.”

“Hold on, hold on now, where you niggers from? Tell me now because I want to know where to send the bodies of you trash talking fools,” says Pinstripe Suit, holding out his hand to quiet his boys and take control.

It’s my turn to get in on this. “Whoa, whoa, yourself Reverend, that’s classified information. We can’t tell you that, right?” I look to Houston and Walter for conformation.

Walter shakes his head and responds. “It’s OK. I think it’ll be OK. They’s men of the cloth and he old enough to know.”

I shrug OK. “Well, last night I was with your mama.”

Houston quickly adds, “I was with your girlfriend. She told me tell you, goodbye and so long.”

Walter dashes in with the last word. “Shit, I was with your sister. And it was OK once I got that sack over her head.”

We have lit the fuses and we all explode into action. Pinstripe moves in, swinging at Walter. Walter ducks, twist to the side and kicks pin stripe in the gut. It don't even slow Pinstripe down. I see Houston land a quick combination on the heavysset Negro before the tall yellow Negro catches me with a solid right hand on the left side of my head. Somebody kicks me in the side on the way down. I hit the sidewalk hard. I kick up and catch one of them in the balls. He grunts, grimaces and slides away from the action. I know we’re going to lose. There’s too many and they’re seasoned street fighters, but we got no choice here. I’m covering up as fist and feet are coming at me from every direction.

There is a click, a little sharp click that freezes all us sweating fools in the cold night air. A second click and we turn toward the sound of the double-barreled shotgun being cocked. Mr. Durant’s on his stoop with his shotgun at his shoulder.

“Chester, I’m losing my patience with you boy,” he says to Pinstripe Suit. “We can end this here and now or you can walk away from here and never bother my family again, your choice boy.”

Chester starts to say something, but Durant cuts him off. “Time for talking’s over. Walk or pull that little pistol of yours,” he says.



Chester looks at Mr. Durant like he's thinking about his chances. Finally, Chester shakes his head. He and his boys resentfully move on off down the street, throwing evil looks at us and muttering under their breath.

The angels of mercy rescue us from the stoop and help us into their house. We got our bumps and lumps, but there're no broken bones. And the nurses, my God, I would take an ass whipping any day to have Tern hold my head in her lap and nurse me with loving hands and tender kisses. Mr. Durant drives us to the EL. We don't wait for our train. We take the first thing smoking. As the train's pulling off Houston points out the window at the platform. Them same damn Baptist gangsters are boiling up on the platform. Man, I'm sure glad to see these Philly boys are at least fighting for something worth fighting for.

Oh, just to let you know, we never do get back to the Durants. A few days after the Battle of Durant Stoop, Walter gets a letter from Anhinga apologizing to us. She says that she's trying to make things work out for her and Chester before somebody gets killed. Her whole family's now against her and that her sisters were not even speaking to her anymore.

And you know what that damn Walter did? He wrote her back and told her to stick to her guns and do what she needed to do. He told her that her family loves her and that they would come around. Houston and I were furious with Walter for a day or two. Houston still hasn't forgiven him, but he will, and next week we'll be on the road again after payday.

# Dear US Army



Jeffrey Armadillo Forker

Dear Sergeant Slaughter, I need my knife back. It was given to me by my granddad, who carried it in Vietnam. It's only a chewed-up old K-Bar, but actually is much more than that—a symbol of family honor. Do you recall the day you asked for a knife and I handed it to you? Less than a minute later, you were lying in the dirt, in a pool of your own blood, waiting for the MEDEVAC chopper, as Doc frantically worked and cursed over you? I remember it all, and need that knife back, to cut away that and other memories.

Dear Lieutenant Ruphrangier, I need my mind back, or some degree of control over said instrument. I need the ability to think straight and focus on simple tasks, to keep my hands from shaking, and hearing and seeing sounds and images from Falluja and Tikrit—memories that everyone tells me I should just toughen up and forget. But no one tells me how. And you also never put me in for that Purple Heart, like you said you would, or that Silver Star. I don't know if it would help my leg, the way it itches all the time, but it couldn't hurt.

Dear Captain Bludundgutz, I need my dog back. She was just a stray scrounging for food near the FOB, where we found her just outside the wire, looking all emaciated and scraggly. I thought she would have bolted away the first time I approached her, calling out in two alien languages—English and baby-talk—but she was too weak from starvation to run. Our friendship was born of desperation on both sides. She slept beside my bunk for months, in a bed I made for

her out of an MRE box and an old poncho liner, until that morning you ordered Sergeant Nuttsaq to “take it outside and shoot it.” Something tore inside of me then. I heard it tear, *felt* it, whatever it was, as they took her, my dog, dragged her outside, and you ordered me to “stand down!” Johnson held me back, kept saying, “don’t do it, dude! It ain’t worth it!”

Dear Top, I need my boys back—my buds, my friends, the guys I trained and faced war with, those guys, with whom I stood in formation more times than I could ever count, as you bellowed out orders and called off names. We knew them all, every one, better than family. I remember them all, even those who did not come back, especially those who did not come back, as I know you do too. Every one.

Dear Major Payne, I need my sleep back. I cannot seem to find or get anywhere near it anymore. When the sun goes down, no matter what time of night it is, or what I watch or read, no matter how much I drink or fuck, I can’t seem to get more than an hour of restless sleep. I get two hours on good nights, interspersed with several hours of frantic pacing, my mind exploding with torturous images, while packs of cigs disappear in one long marathon drag. I always end up finally falling back asleep sometime near dawn, clutching one of my pistols like a brother.

Dear Sergeant-Major Gunn, I need my morals back, my sense of right and wrong, a sense that there is a right and wrong. I need a way to forget about all the shit we shot, the doors we kicked and all the dudes we hooded and threw in the back of gun trucks for later interrogation and disappearance, often knowing or suspecting that

some were not and had no intel about al-Qaida or Taliban or any other group of terrorist motherfuckers, that we were simply settling some old debt or feud. I need to know, to believe, that our ends, at least sometimes, justified the means.

Dear Colonel Helen Bakk, I need my leg back, or a means to call it out, get it to step forward, to sound off. I'm no whiner, anyone will tell you, and I don't mind these crutches too much, or being on the VA's waitlist so long for a prosthetic. But I can still feel it. So I know it's there, hiding somehow, using the shadow of my other leg to stay out of sight, afraid to show itself. Of the two, that leg always did better at camouflage and concealment, and was a bit more skittish. But if it's gone, why is it still tormenting me?

Dear General Reager Mortess, I need my wife back. I am talking here about the same woman who I have known since we were kids and now claims that she does not know me anymore. I would appreciate it if you would call her parents and see if they would tell you where she is. They won't tell me a damn thing. There are things I need to explain to her about my nightmares and memories, and how sorry I am that I exposed her to all the night screams, the violent revenge fantasies, rifles in the bedroom and pistols in the pantry—my own private hell, which I struggled to keep private. I joined up for her, for us, to make a better life, because freedom ain't free, at least that is what they used to drum into us. If only she would answer my emails or tweets, my prayers or pleas. I just need to look into her eyes and not see that pain and confusion, which mirrors my own, and feel her hold me like she used to.

Dear Secretary of Defense Azhatt, I need the last four years back, years that I cannot seem to sort out or understand, years that were comprised of so many days blended and decomposed into one long presence patrol, endless hours watching Hajis file through the Entry Control Point, the eye of the needle, the front gate. We spent nights watching the surveillance cams, monitoring the radios and standing in the guard towers, watching those wild Afghan stars chase each other across malevolent night skies.

Dear President Layimduq, I need my best friend, Bobby, back. He's the one who should be writing you all of these goddamn letters. Not me. He was a better dude than me—smarter, more educated and honorable. Chicks loved him. But he walked point the wrong day and after that IED disassembled him, we had trouble finding all of him. Most times when I close my eyes, I can still see his shattered, leaking head, and that surprised look on his disfigured face, which seemed to want to say one last something.

Dear Secretary of Veterans Affairs Phucwatt, I need you to stop drowning me in letters, forms and online applications. Give me some meds for this pain, which the doctors say is all in my head, and for the insomnia, for which my physical therapist claims I just need to exercise more, and the hallucinations, which my landlord says I ought to be thankful for—she pays good money for hers. I need someone who cares more about wounded warriors than they do about job security or tribal politics. I need to be able to drive or walk past random bags and clumps of trash, dead animals, or over wires, without having a panic attack. I need new glasses, new boots, a new outlook. I need someone to explain this veterans' game to me, what

exactly a vet is, and how I get my affairs in order, with or without your support, which doesn't seem to be forthcoming.

Dear U.S. Army, or should I call you Uncle Sugar, or Big Green Weenie? I need my life back, or some semblance thereof. I know you get lots of similar pleas and letters. Not from all us former soldiers, but from many of us. And I don't need back my old life, just some semblance of a life, one with a home and a family and a job that I can wake up to each morning, knowing that all of that blood and pain and sacrifice was worth it. All I wanted to do was to be a soldier. No one told me of the loss and pain. Do any of you motherfuckers read my letters, hear my pleas or know that I still exist? I've lost track of how many there've been or even when I began sending them.

Dear God, next time around I want to come back as a dog. But not in Iraq.

# Happy Birthday



Jeffrey Armadillo Forker

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.

# Green Eyes



David P. Ervin

The green of the trees and grass around the brick house was dulled by the hazy, golden pallor of the afternoon. Occasional bouts of laughter and fireworks in the distance punctuated the steady hum of conversation that hung above the gathering. Blue smoke from a grill drifted across the lawn.

Grant stood alone. If not for his sunglasses, his furrowed brow and deep-set eyes would have lent him a brooding appearance. He'd socialized for a while, but the day was a heavy one. The Fourth of July was ever easy. The bottle rockets and firecrackers around the neighborhood reminded him of a lot, but mostly of the last year's Independence Day. Andrea was there.

He remembered standing behind her and holding her when the concussion from the town's fireworks display shook his insides as much as the roadside bombs of Iraq had. He focused on her and buried his face in her auburn curls to remind himself he was far from the war. But eventually he understood that the war was never far from him, and it was a part of him she couldn't understand. So he pushed her away. Now she was gone, just another bad memory on top of the rest. He exhaled and looked around the party.

He knew many of the thirty or so people from the university's secondary education program, like the host, Trevor, who stood at his grill. His shock of red hair was visible because he towered over the people holding paper plates standing around him. He didn't know the

guy playing cornhole who emitted a hoarse shout upon scoring. His shaggy blonde hair mushroomed out from a flat-billed hat. Sunlight gleamed off his partner's shaved head and his drooping cheeks pulled his face into a grimace despite the congratulations he yelled. Grant wasn't really interested in the new faces except for one.

She stood under the silver maple in the center of the lawn. He noticed her first because she was beautiful, but he couldn't look away because she seemed sad and distracted, like him. Her straight, dark brown hair reached halfway down her slender, tan shoulders. Her long dress fluttered. Sunglasses rested on the high cheekbones of her angular face. She kept staring off, uninvolved with the people around her standing under the tree.

At first they exchanged polite grins, but each glance grew longer. Her lips kept their fullness as her smiles deepened, and a dimple appeared on her right cheek. Grant only returned the smile. Although he wanted to meet her, he didn't think he deserved to.

She said something to the tattooed girl with short blonde hair she was standing beside and walked towards him. Grant took a deep breath and bit his lip. His stomach fluttered as she took delicate steps through the grass, pinching a corner of her long dress to keep the skirt from dragging. She looked down as she walked but her smile was still there. He stood wide-eyed when she stopped a few feet from him.

"Hi there," she said. Her voice was soft. The warmth that had begun to spread through his chest when she walked over intensified at the sound of it.

"Hello," said Grant. He had to look down. She was a head shorter than him.

“I figured I’d come say ‘hi.’ I have this *really* odd feeling I’m way less shy than you,” she said.

“Oh yeah? What makes you say that?” He tilted his head. His voice sounded different to him as it passed through the smile plastered on his face.

“I mean, you *are* standing here all by yourself, silly,” she said.

“Yeah I guess you have a point there.” He saw his sheepish grin reflected in her sunglasses.

“I’m Lucy.” She extended her hand and the silver bracelets on her wrist jingled.

“Grant,” he said. Her hand felt warm and soft in his. It was comfortable to hold and he did not want to let go. “You can insert a ‘Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds’ joke here. I’m sure you’ve never heard it before.” He felt a wince coming on. That was dumb, he thought.

“Only from Beatles fans, and only all the time. It’s cool, I usually like Beatles fans.” She beamed.

“I couldn’t resist,” he said with a laugh.

“So, Mr. Grant who’s shy and likes the Beatles, you know Trevor?”

“Yeah, we’ve had the same classes together for a while. You?”

“In a roundabout way. He dated my friend Jen. She’s the one standing over there with the tattoo sleeve.” She turned and pointed to the short-haired blonde girl looking at them. “Apparently she’s checking on my progress.”

“Right on. I’m surprised we haven’t met before,” he said. She faced him again.

“Well now we have,” she said. Her smile broadened.

“Yeah...” began Grant. The surge of excitement that rose in his throat cut off the rest of the sentence.

“Might not have if I’d have waited on you to introduce yourself.” She cocked her head, her voice taking on a playfully incredulous tone.

“Uh, well...” he stammered. His face burned.

“Relax, I’m teasing,” she said with a laugh. “So, you studying to be a teacher, too?”

“Yeah. History,” he said with a nod.

“Oh, cool. I love reading things people wrote in different times. Well, I love reading anyway, but with that stuff I just get the feeling we’re all kind of the same whenever we lived, you know?”

“Definitely,” he said with an impressed grin. “And, yeah, I love reading, too. Always have. So, what are you going to school for?” said Grant.

“Nursing. My mom...” She paused. Her glow dimmed, and her voice lost its lightness. “I guess I’m following in my mom’s footsteps. She used to tell me how meaningful it was to help people when they were suffering. I could tell she loved it,” she said. She frowned.

“Well...” said Grant. He wondered what to say, sensing the sad note in her voice. “I’m sure she’s proud.”

“Yeah. I think she would be...” she said. “She actually died a couple years ago...”

“Oh,” said Grant. “Wow...I’m sorry. That’s...” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said, cutting him off. “I mean...it’s been a while. It never really goes away, but...I don’t know...”

The rattling pop of firecrackers by the cornhole game pierced the background noises. Grant jumped and felt his jaw tighten and nostrils

flare as a prickly wave passed over his scalp and down his neck. Lucy glanced towards the laughter and cussing around a lingering puff of smoke. Then she turned to Grant.

“Yeah,” he said. “I know exactly what you mean.” He was surprised at the evenness of his voice. His eyes scanned the small crowd looking for the red wrappers of more firecrackers and he listened for burning fuses. He took a deep breath.

“So,” she said. “You and Trevor both going to be seniors?”

“Yeah. Just a year left. Crazy time, a little daunting you know?” he said.

“Yeah. Definitely. I’m in the same boat. So that makes you...twenty-two? You look a little older,” she said, biting her lip. “I mean, no offense. That’s actually a compliment.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. I’m actually twenty-six. I got a bit of a late start in college,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was in the Army. Four years – close to it – long story,” he said. He scratched his head.

“Oh, wow. Well, hey, happy Fourth of July. And thanks. Not to sound cliché or anything,” she said. She looked at her feet and cleared her throat.

“Nah. I appreciate it,” he said. A passing cloud dimmed the sunlight, and Lucy took off her sunglasses. He propped his on top of his head and looked into her eyes. They were bright green, almost the shade of lime. They were intense, and they were just like Andrea’s. He felt a pang of guilt when he thought of her.



Still, they were different from Andrea's eyes. There was gravity and depth. There was pain.

"So what did you do in the Army? Besides listen to the Beatles?" she said. She grinned.

"I was infantry. You know, the guys running around looking for trouble," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "The dangerous stuff." She hesitated. "Did you go overseas?"

"In Iraq, yeah. Just a year."

"Jeez, I'm being nosy. Sorry." She scrunched her face.

"You're fine," he said. "It's not really being nosy. It's a part of my life just like...college," he said. He stopped himself from saying something about her mother. It was the same, he thought; loss and pain that never went away.

"I'd say it was a lot different than college. I couldn't imagine, honestly. So, thanks. I bet it took a lot," she said.

"Thanks. I got through it," he said. She had gotten through a lot, too, he thought.

For a moment she stared into his eyes. Her thin eyebrows lowered as she focused and her smile broadened slowly.

"You have the prettiest eyes," she said in a quiet, distant voice. "It's like they're two or three different colors."

"Thanks. Yours are beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," she said. Her entire brow lifted when she smiled, and the dimple appeared again. She inhaled sharply then blinked and wheeled her upper body and pointed a thumb toward the house.

"Um, you're about empty. Can I grab you another?" she asked.

“Oh, uh. Yeah, I haven’t been paying any attention,” he said. “I can get it, though.”

“I got it. My pleasure,” she said. “Don’t you dare go anywhere.”

“Oh, I’ll be here,” he said. “Thanks.”

She glided through the grass, turning to look at him once. She stopped by the tree and said something in her friend’s ear before hurrying across the yard and bouncing up the steps. Without Lucy to distract him, his thoughts turned to Andrea.

It was one of his last nights together with Andrea. Earlier in the day he was flipping through channels and caught a glimpse of a burning Humvee on a palm-lined road. He kept watching, enthralled. Those images always invoked memories of the fear and the horror and he felt them soon after. He did what he always did and texted his best friend from the Army, Kevin, who could always relate. Even if he couldn’t help, he always understood, and that was enough.

When he got to Andrea’s he knew she sensed something was wrong. She tried to cheer him up. She made vegetarian lasagna – one of his favorites – wore his hoodie, and kept her hair down because he liked it that way. But while they ate he stared into space and was miserly with his words. After he cleaned up he sat on the couch opposite of Andrea.

“Grant,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said as he typed on his phone.

“Will you cuddle with me?”

“I always get uncomfortable.” He glanced over to see her round face drawn into a frown.

“What’s with you tonight?”

Grant stared at the television as the Twentieth Century Fox intro began.

“My head doesn’t feel so great tonight.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“Tonight? It’s not just tonight. What’s going on?”

Grant sighed and set down his phone.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should talk to me about it.”

“I mean...I try. I just don’t know how to explain what goes on up there sometimes,” he said.

I don’t know how to explain it to *her*, he thought. She’s never felt any real pain, never even been to a funeral. At first that purity was a comfort. Now it was an impossible rift.

“So how am I supposed to do to help?”

“You do a lot. Really you do.”

“Exactly. And it doesn’t do any good. I don’t make any difference. You’d rather just play on your phone.”

“...I’m talking to Kevin.” he said. His voice had lowered. “He’s like a brother. He gets it without...” He stopped and looked at the floor, shaking his head. He knew it was the wrong thing to say, even if it was right.

Her eyes closed tight. When she opened them they were glossy and brimming.

“Well I’m the girl you love, and I’m clueless.” She stood and tossed the pillow she was holding onto the couch. She held a hand to her face as she hurried to her bedroom.

He stayed on the couch, hesitant to leave that night but not wanting to talk to her anymore. Doing either would only upset her further. He was done upsetting her. All that would really help was leaving her for good.

The shriek of a bottle rocket jolted him.

He glanced around the yard, then to the porch to watch for Lucy. She looked his way when she got outside. She didn't avert her eyes from him as she crossed the lawn.

She's different, he thought as she walked towards him. *She* might understand.

"Here you go," she said as she handed him the cup with a smile.

"Thanks. I feel spoiled," he said.

"Nah, that's just being nice," she said.

They both looked to the ground for a moment.

"So," she said, looking up at him. She furrowed her brow and her face reddened. "I'm leaving in a few minutes, and, well, uh...hm." She took a deep breath. "I'll just come out and say it: there's something about you –"

Grant listened and felt paralyzed. While she spoke his mind raced. "—it would be really nice to hang out with you sometime. I'd like to get to know you better. You just seem...different..." she said.

"Yeah," he blurted. "I'd love to."

Lucy relaxed her shoulders and exhaled. She was quiet and the corner of her mouth curled into her dimple.

"Well," she said. She laughed and ran a hand over her head. "That was nerve-racking hard and easy at the same time."

“Yeah,” he said. Now what, he wondered.

“Here,” she said. She retrieved a pen from her purse. She grabbed his hand and wrote her number on the back of it. “Shoot me a text. It’d be cool to meet up for the fireworks tonight if you want.”

“Yeah. I would. That sounds really good,” he said.

“Okay,” said Lucy. She was beaming. “Okay...I should get going, but I’ll see you soon?” she said.

“Yeah...looking forward to it,” said Grant.

She only smiled and walked away toward the tree. She glanced at him once more before she started talking to Jen.

Grant walked to the house to speak with Trevor. His feet were light and the commotion of the party faded into the background. He was going to the fireworks this year, too.