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ROY SCRANTON

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Dedicated to the interpreters

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night.
—WALLACE STEVENS

babylon

rage forth, bold hero & man of war, you have no

flood documenting her lament, no legal recourse in re:
administrative decisions on the matter of

torture TV rage the

rockets red not singly but in global consensus: vanquished
by my spear, the highest levels of the Department
beginning a world with no tomorrow

such is the word of man. We lurch to a halt. “Humvees!”
Abu says—electroshocks about a half mile off, down the
end of a wide, empty

bombs bursting dawn country victorious unless

Draw your wound. Defend the gun.

The will to prevail. God’s blessings upon you—the impor-
tance Arabs place on honor cherished and protected above
all else, sometimes circumventing even the need for survival.
Even the need. Even constructive criticism can threaten or

damage an Arab's honor; it will be taken as a personal insult. The Arab must, above all, protect himself and his honor from critical onslaught. Therefore, when an American is confronted with criticism, you require a yes or no, such as

FIGHT EVIL

peace merciful, most compassionate, the government agreed: made of values to kill God in remote deserts

FULL STORY

Allah does not desire soldiers committed to patrol the day of calling out, sniper police under no savior for you from Allah devised a way to get them masters in Washington for the least of those who arrested them in the first place: suicide bombings killed hundreds, GWOT authors of the latest detainee to be released for fear that any and all the world sees America themselves
the heart of the TV and

sizable Kurdish, Assyrian, Palestine. The Kurds farm in the north and these groups' inability to reconcile their differences prevent them from forming a unified front against the Arab population forced
blood

yet he believes in the possibility of goodness and the triumph of ideas, believes in the father of democracy and the leader of nations, like he believes in the natural pairing of compassion and discipline, love and

images become

electroshocks

which will, with the muj behind us and trigger happy

have come today therefore pointless to question the political shrapnel not only nails and patients believing that

assailants, victims of IED attacks can exsanguinate not trusting the next level could even

those

have therefore learned during the first few months of the war, it took not knowing who or what is past in what feels like her lament, no recourse, how things are done: luckily, the Red Cross jumped right to some real-time global consensus—“That was not the sound of a world with no tomorrow.”

does there not pass over man a space of time when his life is a blank?

strange hells

(columbus day, 2004)

Lifting the flowers, letting them drop. Asters and chrysanthemums, zinnias and goldenrod—extravagant for a barbecue maybe, but fuck it. A little reckless beauty my mark on rockface. Remember you're the one who got your shit together and you're the one who changes tires. You're the one who rode out here with him and now you're the one who's waiting. I was all-state soccer once, MVP. I can read stress lines in bones dug from mass graves. We know what comes next: we fly home, I teach and go back to school, I have his baby. That's the plan. But here I am killing time and going a little crazy. Why are we still here?

Dahlia fussed with the flowers, their separate stems, the whole bouquet. That friend Wendy was bringing—Aaron—had just come back, she'd said. What would it feel like, do something like that? Break a world in two and walk away?

Would it change you?

Had it?

She looked at Matt out through the window, sitting there in his lawn chair drinking beer, his face in the fading sun so kind, his wounded eyes, his belly. He doesn't see her, lost in thought like he is so often. And just who is this man of mine? Who's this guy desiccating in the scrub grass, who

brought me to the desert like a Mormon wife, who's come this far for what, who's doing what, and what is he, this man, what kind of man?

The questions a cool black stone. She washed her hands, took the parsley from the colander to the counter and daubed it dry, then picked up her Wüsthof santoku and cut.

Kerosene's sweet tang, barbecue shimmering, watching the sun sinking slow behind the edge of the redrock. Matt checked his watch, wondering how long till he could justifiably open another beer, then heard the screen creak and turned, watching her cross the yard: summer skirt brushing her legs, the lean muscles in her arms tense with the weight of the food, the firm curve of her breasts under her blue tank top. Here was beauty—a form compact and efficient, round at the edges yet taut, small and smooth and sleek. Then he looked in her face, her pale lips frowning slightly, the tiny wrinkling at the corners of her eyes, her clenched jaw.

The scherzo came to an end. Toom, toom, the march began and Dahlia squinted at the boombox: “What the heck you listening to?”

“Chopin,” Matt said.

“Oh Lord,” she said, putting the tray of steaks, salmon, and tofu on the picnic table, stepping to him and laying her palm on his chest. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” he said. “Just thinking.”

“Well, knock it off. We're supposed to be having a party.”

He shambled up and jabbed at the machine, cutting the

piano into silence. “Here,” he said, handing her the wallet, “pick something.” As she flipped through the discs, he asked: “Who called earlier?”

“Wendy,” she said. “What about Jolie Holland?”

“What’d she want?”

“She wanted to know if she could bring a friend. *Catalpa* or the new one?”

“We don’t have enough steaks.”

“He can have my steak. I’ll have the salmon we just bought.”

Matt grunted. “So what is he, another one of Wendy’s lost boys?”

“A friend of hers from college. Aaron. He just got home from Iraq.”

“No way. Was he in the shit?”

She put in a new CD. “Don’t be all . . . She said he’s a little sensitive.”

“Maybe he’s got pictures,” Matt said, snapping his fingers and pointing them, thumbs up, across his hips.

“That’s what I’m talking about. Seriously. And if you’re done moping, help me bring out food.”

He swallowed the last of his beer and the music started up with a jingle and Rachel yelled “Hey” from the gate all at once, causing Dahlia to spin and wave and bang her ear on the bottom of Matt’s bottle with a plonk and “Yowch!” The bottle whacked back into Matt’s teeth, sending him stumbling and gripping his mouth. Dahlia turned as Rachel came through crying “Oh” and a bright-eyed black Lab in a red kerchief bounded into the yard, followed by Mel in her leather jacket with Tupperware in both hands and Johnnie

Walker dangling from her fingers. “You kids okay?” she asked, bumping the gate closed with her hip, taking in the scene: Dahlia holding the side of her head, Matt covering his mouth, Rachel sweeping toward them blinking, hair in her eyes, with Xena cavorting along, whirling and barking, thinking it’s all some game.

Then Dahlia laughed and they all started talking at once, Matt petting Xena, Mel cramming the whiskey in the ice chest and pulling out two Fat Tires for her and Rache, who was already complimenting them on their music, she just *loved* this album, it had such a *real* sound, you know, like her voice was just uncanny, wasn’t it great and did they know it was all just four-tracks?

Matt said, “Gotta check the grill,” and Mel followed, telling him all about their fridge crapping out. She explained to him the difference between the compressor, the compressor relay, and the overload, and how she hoped it would just turn out to be a bad circuit, but if they had an airflow problem around the condenser it’d mean tearing the whole goddamned thing apart and replacing it. Matt nodded and rubbed his sore lip. Condenser? Compressor? He asked about their plans for Halloween.

“We’re gonna spend the weekend with some friends down in Flag,” Mel said, “one of them big pagan-hippie things for Samhain. Like a naked dancing bonfire kind of deal. Rache loves that shit.”

“You sacrifice a goat?”

“Naw, man, vegetarian. Sacrifice a huge block of tofu.”

“Gotcha. Seitan worship.”

“Audible groan. You guys got plans?”

“You know, what if we just stayed home and handed out candy this year? Somebody has to, right? I feel too old to dress up, anyway. They say twenty-seven’s the new thirty-five.”

“Don’t stop believin’, bro. I think you’d make a great Bush. Hey Rache,” Mel shouted over to the picnic table, “wouldn’t Matt make a great Bush?”

“A what?” Rachel peered back, confused.

“Bush. Wouldn’t he make a great Bush?”

“You mean like a vagina?”

“No, like the president and shit.”

“He’s very photogenic.”

Mel shot her a thumbs-up and turned back to Matt: “See? Photogenic.”

“So Bush, huh? Not Kerry? You switch teams?”

“Aw, man, fuck that shit. Don’t even get me started. Fucking Democans and Republicrats. This is what democracy looks like, huh? At least Kerry feels bad about his war crimes. Me and Rache, we’ve been talking, man, and if Bush wins again, we’re moving to Canada. I don’t want to be hanging around when they start lining people up for the camps.”

“I’m already worried the school board wants to fire me,” Rachel said, coming over to the grill as Dahlia went inside.

“What?” Matt asked.

“It’s the fucking Mormons,” Mel said. “Fucking homophobic, misogynist bigots.”

“There’s concern about my *lifestyle*, but they can’t fire me just for that. So I have to be careful.”

“I’m saying sue their Mormon asses for discrimination.”

“I just have to be careful. I can’t say or do anything in class that could be construed as promoting, you know? So I can’t even really talk about Mel. There’ve been some remarks and the administration’s nervous.”

“I’m telling you, man, fucking Canada,” Mel said. “Or at least somewheres away from all these goddamned fundamentalists.”

Dahlia switched on lights room to room, switched them off as she left, checking to make sure everything was at least superficially neat, no condoms in the bathroom wastebasket, no dirty clothes on the floor. She stepped into the bedroom and went to the dresser, opened the small cherrywood box on top, took the weed and pipe, slipped them into the pocket of her skirt. She turned back and looked across the smooth waves of the comforter over their bed, gray in the gray light, thinking of waking tangled with him this morning, or yesterday morning, or any morning, the comfort of his body in the sun, his pleasant familiar funk, all the nights that had become mornings, could she really let that go?

Sure, he’s good, and soft, and comfortable. We’re all comfy where things are, another summer gone, the wars drag on, tomorrow Columbus Day and nothing changes. He still thinks that project’s—what? The future? And so listless lately, like he’s thinking . . . Wendy? Hardly. He could but he won’t. Anyone could do anything, but he’s too . . . or if he did, she’d . . . Imagine: him reaching, drunk—he’d have to be drunk—her snide laugh, his wounded pride, and would I be hurt? By him doing it? Or by her turning him down?

You're terrible. Don't be terrible. He's a good guy. Not strong, but a good guy. Except for the fact you're drifting in a spin from today to tomorrow, and then what?

She'd have to turn the lights on soon. Something would happen. They'd be here soon and it was important to have a nice party. She put the flowers on a tray to take outside.

"I felt my ears burning," Dahlia said. "Y'all must've been talking about me."

"Naw, shit. We're talking about moving to Canada," Mel said.

"That's funny. We've been talking about moving too," said Dahlia.

"We've been thinking about it," Matt said.

"There's no real work for me here." Dahlia set the tray down and arranged the flowers and tabbouleh on the picnic table, then took the vegetables over to Matt. "Master's degree in anthropology and I'm pouring coffee at Redrock Bagels, sometimes a week running the river."

"I'll get you more days on the river, babe," Mel said.

"Thanks, sugar, but it's not that. I had plans."

"We talked about maybe moving when I finish my project."

"By then we'll be collecting social security," Dahlia said, laughing. "Don't you think you should start grilling, Matt? Start a little something, anyway."

Matt frowned, nodding, as the three women turned to each other and he turned to the grill, focusing on the vegetables and blocks of tofu. Had it really been two years out

here? And four years them together? It was funny to think of, when magical 2000 had loomed so large for so long. And they didn't get any Jupiter space acid, no starbaby, but HAL had grown so vast and powerful we thought a time-stamp glitch could destroy civilization. He and Craig had laid in stores of bottled water, cans of beans, stacks and rows of toilet paper, then themed their New Year's bash Beyond the Millennium! with decorations put together from visions of futures past: fins, chrome, glass tubes, and colored plastic. That night was the third time he and Dahlia had sex. The end of the world came and went.

And what if every decision you made was a mistake? What if computers had been a mistake and college had been a mistake and cyclopcscope.com had been a mistake and now Utah, too? The path had seemed so provisional, yet at the same time somehow fixed—when his parents got divorced and his mom got him a piano, his dad a Commodore 64, what would you expect but that he'd sink into his surrogate parental devices? He wasn't a recluse. You couldn't say he was a recluse. He just spent a lot of time on his own, developing an app whose main purpose was, jargon aside, to predict the apocalypse. Yeah, totally fucking rational.

He lashed more marinade on the tofu. Had he started another beer? Started and finished. The sun was down now for real. The steaks, juicy red, sat waiting.

Somebody watching: a lean man at the gate with black hair cut close, face taut and flat, lips compressed in a line like a trick of the fading light. The man stared with eyes so fierce, Matt's heart hung dry a beat and he stepped back, fumbling his brush and dropping it. Say something.

Then Xena barked and Mel shouted “Wendy!” Matt scanned the ground, found his brush in the grass, bent to grab it, and when he rose again Dahlia was moving across the yard to the gate where Wendy stood with her man in the dusk, now smiling, composed of wholly other stuff. Matt noticed his black t-shirt printed in red—ENEMY COMBAT-ANT—and the way he held himself apart, like he wasn’t sure how he’d be greeted.

Matt observed Dahlia smiling, skirt swinging, greeting the man, Wendy turning back and forth between them, Wendy with her dirty-blonde hair cut short in a feathery mop and high, tanned cheeks and fine-boned wrists and shoulders. She wore Matt’s favorite dark green t-shirt that said:

CUBIC* cube
i think that square
is top of cool shape
in the world

Dahlia shook the man’s hand and pointed over to Matt, who grinned stupidly and waved his grass-covered brush, remembering this must be Aaron, right, standing staring. The one who just came home.

“How you two want your steaks?” he forced himself to shout.

“Medium rare,” Wendy said.

“Still mooing,” the man said. “Thanks.”

“Coming right up!” Matt said, his voice going high and brittle, hoping a fat smile would numb his unease. He cracked another beer and drank deep. He pulled the

vegetables and tofu off the heat and wrapped them in foil, then laid on the salmon and Wendy's steak.

The man walked up and offered Matt his hand. His grip was gentle but strong. "Hey," he said. "I'm Aaron."

"Matt. Nice shirt."

"Thanks. Wendy got it for me on the internet."

"She's good at t-shirts."

"Yeah. She thought it'd be funny. She said you work with computers."

"Yeah, I code. I'm sort of . . . well, what I do now is part-time tech support for the county, but really I'm working on a freelance project, data-processing. Sort of global forecasting."

"Like stock markets and stuff?"

Matt chuckled, hating the self-deprecating note he struck. "Well, sort of. What I'm trying to do is use turbulence in complex systems to predict unforeseen events," he said, waving the barbecue tongs. "The problem with 'unknown unknowns' is that you don't know what you're looking for. Take 9/11 for instance, or the fall of the Soviet Union. The patterns were there but we weren't looking for them, and there was no way to know *in advance* which data points were the important ones. What we needed was a tool for monitoring data systemically, for helping us watch events not as points or lines but as flows and breaks. The program I'm developing uses chaos theory to visualize predictive data as a field. Then we can use those visualizations to shift our frame of reference so that something that *would* have been an outlier becomes something we're looking for: from an unknown unknown into a known unknown. It's about

letting chaos show its underlying order. I mean . . . Whoa, I gotta flip this shit.” He turned over the salmon and Wendy’s steak, then reached for the last two steaks and threw them on. “Hey D,” he shouted. “Just a few more minutes here. You wanna get the stuff?”

“Got it,” she said, handing the weed to Rachel and going back inside. Aaron nodded after her, his look lingering for Matt’s taste a second longer than was really necessary.

Rachel lit the pipe and passed it. They smoked. Chatted. Dahlia came back out with a pitcher and glasses. Time slowed.

When did the porch light come on? Who turned the light on?

“Fuck,” Matt said, turning back to the grill and sliding the salmon on a plate, forking the steaks and serving them up, while Dahlia portioned out tofu for Rachel and Mel and divvied up veggies and spooned out the vegan potato salad Mel had brought. Everyone moved to the picnic table. Matt lit the tiki torches and citronella candles and Dahlia passed the tabbouleh. They tore into their food, washing it down with beer, ripping into animal and vegetable flesh, throats bulging. Their steak knives flashed in the light, flecked with fat and blood.

They discussed: the virtues of cats v. dogs, as pets and generally, how best to marinate tofu, the election, how sick they all were of the election, the curious nature of modern life where it feels like part of you is connected via mass media to this hyperlife that doesn’t objectively exist but

functions entirely as “news,” but what’s news if not events yet the news isn’t the event and you don’t really experience the event but only the “*news*” of it, “yeah like 9/11,” and how sometimes it feels strange when there *isn’t* some disaster happening, like there’s a gap in the matrix, and as Wendy parsed this phrase they talked about *The Matrix* and then other films commenting on Contemporary Life Post-9/11, and also music they’d been listening to like the new Wilco, then Rachel told a story about one of her second-grade girls who’d memorized all the lyrics to “Toxic” and had made up a dance to go along.

They compared tattoos: Wendy had a jaguar on her ankle—this was her Aztec horoscope, she said—and a fleur-de-lis on her lower back; Mel, a flaming skull with BORN TO LOSE on her left shoulder, a barbed tribal band around each bicep, and a complex floral design going down from her hip into the joint between her thigh and pelvis that she only showed the very top of, tugging at her jean shorts; and Aaron a crude circled A on his right shoulder, which he laughed off as his first tatt from back in ye olde punk days, an inverted cross on the inside of his left forearm, and then, pulling up his ENEMY COMBATANT t-shirt, sweeping across his muscled back a pair of intricate spiked wings, crested in Gothic script reading LONG IS THE WAY AND HARD. Neither Matt nor Rachel had tattoos. Dahlia had a dahlia, on her hip, which she didn’t show anyone.

How it had gotten dark. How they made a circle with lawn chairs, smoked another bowl, and drank some whiskey out

of plastic cups, the coals dying behind them, the moon rising into the stars. Their bodies hummed, satiated, lips slick with grease. Dahlia got a little cold and went in for a hoodie. Rachel got cold too, and Mel wrapped her in her leather jacket. Aaron lit an American Spirit. Xena chewed a bone. Balinese gamelan banged and gonged from the boom box.

“So, I have a story,” said Wendy.

“Let’s hear it,” said Mel.

“Alright. Aaron already heard this one, but it’s really weird, so I’ll tell it again. Thursday night I was driving to Grand Junction. I was going to a poetry reading there. It was one of those days where nothing seems to quite catch, you know, like Mercury’s in retrograde, like the universe is off-kilter.” Wendy paused, casting her gaze into the distance. “It’s like I wrote once, ‘The fissure between the thought and deed, against the universal, the palsy in the hand of God.’”

“Nice,” said Matt.

“The reading was this guy David T. Greene, who won the Yale Younger Poets prize last year with his book *Emblazoned Arcadia*. He’s at once very classically concerned with craft and meter, but also super experimental, right, and he’s working with hypertext and interactive poetics, doing things with New Media artists, and has a blog. So that’s where I heard about the reading, the blog: he’d gotten a grant to drive across the country and write a sort of cyberpunk-Whitman long-poem meditation on America, blog it, and along the way he organized a series of readings. So he was reading at the Black Cat in Grand Junction, and . . .”

“Why didn’t he read here?” Rachel asked.

“Well that’s interesting. I asked him the same question myself. I told him about Eklectika and Back of Beyond and that there’s actually quite a dynamic poetry scene here, but he said he had to leave early to make it to Salt Lake City in time for his reading there on Friday and then it was up to Washington and yadda yadda yadda. He seemed really edgy—his aura was totally broken up. He’d planned to have the readings be auxiliary to the experience of writing the trip, but instead he’d just been driving like crazy, barreling through to get from one reading to the next, and he hadn’t even really had time to write the poem . . . But first, before all that, I was driving across the desert and do you remember the lightning storm Thursday?”

“Sure,” Dahlia said.

“The sky was a ‘charcoal smear livid with electric fire.’ I watched it as I drove . . . I was halfway watching the storm in the distance, the way the light changed against the mesas, and halfway watching the road. You know how you do, especially when the highway’s empty. I had an old mix tape Aaron made me years ago—I found it the other day and thought, wow, right before I get to see him in I don’t know how long, here’s this mix tape. And it was playing ‘Tecló,’ right, the PJ Harvey song, and I was very much in the moment, the speed and the storm and the rain flicking on the windshield and PJ Harvey sort of moaning right, ‘let me ride on his grace,’ and I flick on the wipers and then there’s a coyote in the road and *bam!* I feel the car hit him.”

“Oh my God,” Rachel said.

“I slam on the brakes. But it had just started raining, right, and you know how all the oil on the road floats to

the surface after a dry spell, and the car skids, slips sideways, and I panic. My foot's jammed on the brake and all I can think is 'They say steer *into* the skid but who are *they*? What do *they* know?' My mind is just whirling, right, but my hands do it, steering into the skid and I pump the brakes and the car slows and I pull over and stop. I'm like, shaking. In the rearview I'm so white I'm like dead and I remember thinking *maybe I am*, and then I felt like throwing up but just sat there, waiting, on the shoulder by the median—the wrong shoulder, you know?—and this Captain Beefheart song comes on . . .”

“Clear Spot,” Aaron said. “I put ‘Clear Spot’ on that tape.”

“Yeah. ‘Clear Spot.’ I was like, wow. And the squealing fading in my ears and the shaking calming down and I think—what about the coyote? So I get out and walk back and I remember the sun going down, right, and the storm, and it's sprinkling rain like any second now the sky's gonna unleash the deluge and I walk back to where I started braking, and then I go back a little further and look and there's nothing. No coyote, no blood, nothing, and I climb over the median and check out the other side because you know, I thought, maybe the force of the car threw him clear but still nothing. So I run across the highway and check the other shoulder and there's still nothing, so that's when I think, oh my god: he's under the car. He must be jammed under the frame somehow. Maybe still alive. So I go back to the car, walking slow, trying to get hold of myself, and as I walk I watch the car and the road, looking for signs, drops or smears of blood, fur, anything. I get to the car and I so

much do *not* want to look underneath . . . but I work up my courage and squat by the tire, sort of so I can hide behind it if he jumps out at me, and I look underneath and there's nothing. I can't believe it. I cannot believe it. Fender, grill—no sign at all I hit anything, no contact with anything, no remnants of flesh or blood, only the idea.”

She paused, sipped her beer.

“Wow,” Matt said.

“So what happened to the coyote?” Rachel asked.

Wendy held her hands open, palms up.

“Then what?” asked Mel.

“I threw up and felt a little better, then I got back on the road. I was a few minutes late to the reading, so I sat in the back—I mean, there were only like five people there—and it was a great reading but my mind was still on the coyote, on the absence of the coyote, and afterward, I went up to thank David and say hi, and we got to talking and then, later that night, when I got home . . .”

“You're leaving out the middle part,” Aaron said.

“Oh, we had a drink, you know, and talked—”

“Talked,” Aaron said.

“Anyway,” she continued, “the important part is when I got home. It was a weird night, weird energy in the air, and there's that witchy feeling you get sometimes, that feeling like there's a door open somewhere, right, like 'fragrant portals, dimly starred.' So I got home and drove up the lonely road to the driveway and came to my trailer and when I make the last turn, my headlights sweep across the mesa and I stop—because standing right there in the middle of my headlights, right in front of my trailer door, is a huge,

mangy coyote, his enormous yellow eyes staring right at me. I'm so scared I almost pee myself, so I just sit there watching him and he stands there watching me. I leave the headlights on, because I'm not going to get out till he leaves and I'm not going to turn the lights off so I can't see him, and he just stands there, and then—and this almost made me start crying—he sits back on his haunches and starts panting, still just staring. Finally I sort of come out of it and think to honk the horn, but it does nothing. He ignores it. I roll down the window and shout and honk but none of it makes any difference, he just sits there, staring. I turn off the headlights. In the dark I can still see him there. I crawl in the backseat, check the locks, and go to sleep. When I wake up, he's gone. No prints in the dirt—nothing. Nothing but a faint smell, like an old dog, 'the scents of ghosts, the memory of lithic days.'"

"You think it was a ghost?" Rachel asked.

"Who knows?"

"That's really incredible," Matt said, wondering how much, if any, of the story was true and not really caring, because her telling had given him license to watch her lips move gleaming in the torchlight, her eyelashes flutter, her delicate fingers trace gestures in the air. Wandering his gaze over the curves and hollows of her body made him feel better about the energy he felt flowing between Dahlia and Aaron that he kept telling himself he was just imagining. People look at people, he thought, and that Aaron's knee had been resting against Dahlia's for the last several minutes was no sign of anything, no red flag, no indication of anything other than his own weed-stoked

paranoia. It's all in your head, he thought, then again: say something.

Say what?

Dahlia felt him next to her, the pressure of his knee, the coiled power his body held, like he was about to jump on something. They're fucking, right? They had to be, Wendy and her war hero. Didn't seem to matter much to Matt, who looked at Wendy same as always: like he was gonna throw up on her shoes.

"Shit, babe, that's a crazy story," Mel said. "But what about this other wild animal you brought home? What's with Mr. Fox here?" She pointed her beer at Aaron: "Tell us something about yourself, Mr. Fox. What's your deal?"

His energy shifted, tensing. He smiled uneasily. "Not much to tell. I'm from Arizona, grew up near Tucson. I met Wendy in college. I'm just sort of traveling around right now."

"Vision quest?" Mel asked.

"Yeah, sure. Taking some time off. I was staying with some friends in Arizona, now I'm visiting Wendy, then I'm going to Colorado to stay with another friend, then maybe Montana or Washington. I'll probably head back to Tucson in December, get back in school."

"What do you study?" Rachel asked.

"I was doing history. Now maybe poli sci. Maybe something pre-law. Not really sure."

"Didn't you just get out of the Army?" Matt asked.

Aaron's smile hardened. "Still in, technically. But on my way out, yeah."

“What did you do there?” Matt asked. “I mean, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“You don’t have to . . .” Dahlia said, touching Aaron’s arm. “Matt spends all his time on the computer and forgets how to talk to people sometimes.”

“No problem,” Aaron said. “I’m what you call a Nasty Girl.”

“A what?”

“Nasty Girl. It’s slang for National Guard. I wasn’t in the regular Army.”

“Oh,” Matt said. “Like the reserves?”

“Yeah, like that.”

Mel leaned in. “So what was your MOS?”

Aaron sized her up. “Thirty-one Bravo. Yours?”

Mel shook her head. “No, man, I wasn’t . . . My dad was in ’Nam, that’s how I know MOS. He was a Fifteen Mike—a Huey mechanic in the Screaming Eagles.”

“That’s cool,” Aaron said. “My military occupational specialty was Thirty-one Bravo. Corporal Aaron Stojanowski, 3rd Platoon, 858th Military Police Company, 850th Military Police Battalion, Arizona Army National Guard. Military occupational specialty Thirty-one Bravo One-Zero. They called me Sto.”

“Sto?” Rachel asked.

“Like a nickname. Sto.”

“Was that when you were in Iraq?” Matt asked.

“Matt,” Dahlia said.

“Yeah,” Aaron said.

“Wow,” Matt said. “That must have been intense. Well, thank you for your service.”

“Sure,” Aaron said. “No problem.”

“Was it dangerous?” Matt asked.

“Matt, please,” said Dahlia.

“What? He doesn’t have to answer.”

Aaron lit a new cigarette from the butt of his old one. “You mean besides people shooting at me and shit exploding all the time?”

“I just, you know, I mean, all we know is what they show us on TV, right? I mean, we don’t even know. I can’t even imagine. We’re totally ignorant of this situation, and I’m just wondering, is it really like how they say? Is it bad? Is it getting worse? Is it getting better?”

“I don’t know what to tell you, chief. It’s bad enough.”

“But they can vote, right? They have democracy. That’s better, isn’t it?”

“Better than what?”

“I don’t know. Better than Saddam? It just seems like such a waste if nothing good comes out of it.”

“I don’t know, man,” Aaron said. “I was just a dumb grunt, you know. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“But, I mean, it’s such a huge question now with the election and America’s role in the world post-9/11, and we have this obligation, right, to try to make things better, but maybe it’s really all about oil and . . . I mean, I don’t even know what to think. Should we stay? Should we pull out? They say if we pull out, Iraq collapses into civil war. But it seems like that’s happening anyway. What do we do?”

“Listen, uh, Matt? Matt, right? That’s your name? Well, Matt, it doesn’t really fucking matter what we do.”

“But what about . . .”

“Things matter,” Rachel said. “There are serious problems in the world, but people do things to make change happen. We can hold governments accountable. Voices matter. The election matters.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Matt said. “Exactly. Should we stay? Do we have a moral imperative to clean up our mess, bring democracy to the Middle East, or what? I mean, we can’t just leave, can we?”

Dahlia looked at Matt, her lips compressed. How many beers had he had?

“Look,” Aaron said, “Matt, Rachel, you seem like nice people and this is a great barbecue. I’m gonna say this one thing, then . . . Maybe let’s talk about something else, okay? Because Iraq’s a fucking disaster. The whole thing. Staying’s a disaster. Leaving’s a disaster. It’s a fucking shithole. And it doesn’t matter what the fuck we think about it, because the guys who run shit don’t give a rat’s ass what people like you and me *think*. Or do. Or say. Unless we’re blowing shit up or donating money, they could give a flying fuck. So I don’t know what to tell you.”

“That’s a pretty negative world view,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, well, I’m all traumatized and shit. You know what it’s like. You saw the movie.”

“So why’d you go, then, man,” Mel asked, “if none of it matters?”

“Because they told me to.”

“But why’d you join the Army?”

“National Guard. I was National Guard.”

“Okay, man. Why’d you join the National Guard?”

“College money, patriotism. Service, challenge, honor. Nine-eleven. Same things as anybody else.”

“But now you think it’s all bullshit,” Mel said.

“I think we all gotta make hard choices,” he said, “and how you feel about shit doesn’t really matter. You gotta do what you gotta do.”

“And all you had to do was kill people.”

Aaron laughed. “What?”

Rachel put her hand on Mel’s thigh and squeezed. Mel brushed it off. “No, he made a choice. He wasn’t drafted. All he had to do was kill people.”

“Yeah, sure,” Aaron said. “Not a bad deal, either. Easier than working for it.”

“I just don’t understand how you could do that, man.”

“Mel,” Rachel said. “Hey.”

“You don’t understand how I could do what?” Aaron asked.

“How you could kill people for money.”

“Okay, you got me. I joined the Army so I could fucking kill people. Big secret: It’s a blast.”

“But doesn’t it bother you at all?” Mel asked. “Aren’t you ashamed?”

“Ashamed of what?”

“I mean, you know the war’s fucking bullshit, but you go do it anyway. You know it’s illegal, but you do it anyway. People die and you don’t even fucking care. You could’ve not gone. You could’ve been a conscientious objector. You could’ve gone to Canada.”

“I signed a contract. We had a job to do.”

“That’s all you got? You had a contract? A job to do?”

“This is real nice, Wendy,” Aaron said. “I’m glad I came.”

“Man,” Mel said, “I just can’t understand how you can take part in an illegal war that kills thousands of innocent people—for college money—and then act like it doesn’t matter. Like you didn’t choose. That’s what seems completely fucked to me.”

“Mel, honey,” Rachel said. “Lay off.”

“Yeah, Mel,” said Dahlia, “let it go.”

“Hey,” Wendy shouted, “anyone else here see that movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*? With that actor, what’s his name, Ace Ventura? I watched it on DVD the other night and it was *so good*.”

“Fuck that,” Mel said. “This shit’s fucked up. This shit’s real. Don’t you see that? Killing people for money? And then you wear that fucking t-shirt like it’s all a joke. That’s just *wrong*. I mean, if that’s not evil, I don’t what is.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“It’s like the Nazis,” Mel said. “Like some people do it just because other people tell them to.”

“Mel, that’s not fair,” said Dahlia.

“No, really, man,” Mel said. “Think about it. Loads of German soldiers were just doing their jobs. Loads of German people were just doing what they were told. They all thought it made sense, they all thought what they did was fucking justified, but it wasn’t. They don’t get to say it’s okay. It’s like that Eichmann book, man. Evil is evil.”

“Call me a Nazi one more time,” Aaron said.

Matt put his hands out: “Whoa, now—let’s all chill out a little bit.”

Mel stared hard at Aaron: “*Did* you kill anybody?”

His eyes narrowed.

“Well did you?”

His eyes closed slow, then he smiled and opened them. “No. I didn’t. Not that it’s any of your goddamn business, but no, I didn’t kill anybody. It wasn’t my job.”

“But it was someone’s,” Mel said.

“I just held the camera.”

“Hey, y’all,” Dahlia said, getting up, “how ’bout some dessert? Mel, Rachel, you wanna help me with the pie?”

“Bullshit,” Mel said. “I can’t fucking believe I’m fucking sitting here with a fucking American Nazi I don’t know what, and everybody’s like, ‘Play nice, Mel. Lay off, Mel.’ Like it doesn’t fucking matter. Fucking sheeple. This is why. *This* is why.”

Aaron stood up. “I’m done here. Let’s go, Wendy.”

Mel stood to face him. “I know you. I know what you are. I can see it.”

Aaron’s voice went cold. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

“Admit what you did was evil.”

“It’s called reality. You need to grow the fuck up, bitch.”

“Bitch? You fucking Nazi asshole!” she screamed, jabbing her finger in his chest.

“Listen up,” he shouted, grabbing her wrist, “this shit”—then Xena—Mel yanking her hand away and whacking Aaron’s arm, Aaron shouting in Mel’s face and Matt leaning up going *whoa* and Xena—Xena barked, leaping snapping at Aaron who turned smooth and kicked the dog hard in the side, sending the animal rolling yelping and Mel surged, hitting Aaron in the neck and he caught her forearms in his

fists and she kicked but then Dahlia was between them and Wendy and Rachel too, pulling Mel back, Aaron walking off cold, Mel held by Rachel, still raging, still flailing.

“Motherfucker!” she screamed. “Fucking motherfucker Nazi fuck!”

“Watch yourself,” Aaron hissed.

“Easy now,” Rachel said. “Easy.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you, motherfucker!”

“Somebody shut that bitch up,” Aaron said, stalking back and forth along the fence line.

Dahlia went to Xena, the kicked dog hiding behind a bush near the back door, keeping an eye on Aaron the whole time. Rachel and Wendy whispered to Mel. Matt stood between them, near the barbecue again, feeling confused, until Wendy pointed at Aaron.

“Hey, uh, Aaron, you wanna go out front for a minute?” Matt asked.

“Fucking asshole!” Mel shouted after them as they disappeared. “Fucking fascist puke!”

“Mel, sit down,” Rachel said, gently pushing Mel into a chair. “Calm down. We need to calm down.”

“I think Xena’s okay,” said Dahlia.

Wendy took a step toward the gate, came back. “I’m so sorry about that. I didn’t know—he seemed a little tense but I didn’t know . . . That was completely insane.”

“Mel, please, you need to calm down.”

“Get the fuck off me!” Mel shouted, swinging at Rachel.

“Easy,” Rachel said, holding up her hands.

“Whose fucking side are you on?”

Rachel took Mel’s chin in her hand and pulled her face

up: “Melanie. You will calm down right now. You need to breathe. Breathe. You are not going to behave like this. You’re a grown woman. Now breathe.”

Mel took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. Rachel knelt and held her. Wendy went over, then back to Xena, then stood alone staring up into the night sky. After a few minutes, Mel straightened up and wiped her bleary eyes.

“I’m alright,” she said. “I’m okay. I just . . . I don’t know what the fuck happened. With all the whiskey, I guess, I went a little sideways.”

“You went, like, diagonal,” Rachel said.

“That was crazy, Mel,” said Dahlia. “You just called Wendy’s boyfriend a Nazi.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Well, he’s not a Nazi either,” Dahlia said. “He’s a soldier who just got back from a war zone. He’s a person.”

“I know, man. I’m sorry.”

“Honey, I love your political passion,” said Rachel, “but goodness gracious. You might as well have just called him a baby killer. We don’t *do* that anymore. You know how messed up your dad is.”

“I’m know . . . I just . . .”

Dahlia stood between the flickering tiki torches in the dark, feeling the adrenaline course through her arms and legs, thinking who decides things? Who makes choices? You go do a thing, you commit to things, then something happens. Sometimes you just do things. Sometimes things just happen. “I’m going inside for a minute,” she said to no one in particular, then slid away into the house, through the kitchen, down the hall and into the bathroom

where the lightless gray and black wrapped around her like blankets. She locked the door behind her, felt her way to the toilet, and sat. She didn't want to see his eyes in the mirror. She didn't want to feel him. She rubbed her arms hard, trying to scour away the electricity, the gold flecks in his green irises, the way he sat too close, his chipped incisor, the way his knee bumped hers. His body pressing on her as she came between him and Mel, his arms, his muscled chest and shoulders. His smell that seemed to catch in her throat.

Why'd Wendy even bring him? *Some jerk*. He could do anything.

You have to stop.

But not if it happens to someone else. Who says I always have to be the same when I'm always different? Always different. *Pull yourself together*. Pull together what? Who? And what would it feel like?

Does Matt know? Is he gonna take you home?

I am home. You gotta get out.

Pull yourself together. You're the one who got her shit together. You make choices. You're the one who does what you do, this life, right now. Ride it.

politeness automatically require an answer of “still checking” or something similar means “no,” an indirect response also means “I am still your friend, I tried” therefore when dealing with OPERATION BULLDOG MAMMOTH polite way for an Arab to say no is to say “I’ll see what I can do” no matter how impossible after the Arab concerning his success have fled to Iran from Baghdad works as a journalist. When the uprising begins in earnest OPERATION WARRIOR lives in the flood plain
heart of the TV
according to Military Intelligence

knowledge or implicitly of what will be yours my spear the Kingdom this day

I could hear the water I threw up
fall back on

the frequency of interrogations and the middleman’s hands:
having failed punishment of Allah to come victorious out of interlocking to circumvent public rage, buildings and the leashed hotel, pyramids naked, naked blood, heading off some report, the collective flattened and critically wounded patients sealed off from the responsibility made to spare those targets on the edge, the heart