

We Could Be Heroes

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It must look wicked to the deer, he thought, and when he thought, he wrote: *We wake in the woods where a red metal sign marks the day's lane 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 by the bivouac site, our bodies knocked down in sleep, one after the other alongside rucks and LBVs and rifles loaded with blanks flop flop flop (we exhaust, stop, flop; we don't exactly sleep), one after the other by team and squad, flop flop flop and sigh ahhhh, like meaty dominoes wrung of sweat to gristle. We make a saggy O around the bivouac where we settle. We wet our gristle down with baby wipes and we stuff the smeared wipes in the side pockets of our rucks. Pits, faces, balls, assholes. The deer can still smell us. We can't smell it anymore. I mean us. But everything natural smells us and avoids us. I wish I could avoid us, too. By which I mean me, especially me. And I wish I could see the deer in the chemlight glow of the wood line or the red lens lights that we use to stumble when we need to piss. I wish they'd stop and stay for a while. It would be something to see. For them. For us. Me. No one would move a muscle. I wouldn't. The TACs won't let you fuck with the wildlife when you're running lanes, and I don't think I'd want to anyway. It's hard to tell, though. If the deer would just stop for a minute, at least I'd know XXXXX.*

There were words under the Xs but you couldn't see them anymore.

He stopped writing and bit the inside of his cheek and crossed out the last part from *us. Me* all the way to the end. And when he was done XXXXXXing it all out, he went back and crossed out *I mean us* and *us, too. By which I mean me.* It just didn't make any sense, he thought. You were either *us* or *me*. You couldn't be both, or at least it didn't seem right that you'd be both at the same time, and when there was nothing more of *us* or *me* to scratch out, he skipped a line and started again *We wake in the woods and the deer smell us* and he crossed it out again. *We wet our gristle in the woods and*

it still wasn't right. He stopped. Listened. Alabama sounded like a motor. *It's our last week and we're lucky*, he wrote. *The TACs run you on the lanes all day but they let you bed down early (no 2, 3 hrs a night shit) when the tree frogs are still pulling the night to life like* a something. He didn't know what. He thought about a man pulling the string of a boat's motor. Wrote it. Crossed it out. *I shouldn't be talking about shit like that*, he thought. He was from Schenectady. He managed a U-Haul on the civilian side and took classes online. He didn't know anything about starting boats. *Maybe it's like writing letters*, he thought. *You start and stop and start and stop until what you're trying to say starts running on its own*. He started again. Stopped. Started. Stopped. Sometimes it didn't work. Maybe boats were like that.

He turned the page, but the next page was full of acronyms and numbers and coordinating instructions, a kind of outline of his day smeared together into nonsense by sweat and dirt and part of an MRE that had leaked in his cargo pocket a few clicks back. He closed the notebook and set it on his lap and brushed the hard, green cover clean. He opened the shoulder pocket of his ACU and withdrew a fingerlength packet of tissue paper. A single serving of instant coffee sealed in a little red wrapper. There was a man's face on the red wrapper, all clean and whitetoothed and smiling with thick, brown hair drawn back and up at the widow's peak over an aquiline nose. White waves of odor drifted in front of the clean man's profile from a hot white mug of fresh coffee. *I bet this fucker's got a boat*, Schenectady thought. Maybe the aquiline man liked to drink his coffee on the boat. Maybe an aquiline woman from Westchester served it to him in the white mug. Maybe the boat always started on the first try.

He bit the red wrapper open along the edge, tearing the man's skull in two with his teeth. He took a single square of tissue out of the packet and laid it flat against the notebook cover and poured half of the coffee out in the center of the single square and he rolled the square at the edges until it made a kind of pouch for coffee grounds.

Then he twisted the edges, tore them off with his thumbnail, and packed the pouch in his jaw like a dip.

Shutz was watching him. The one from Nebraska. Lutheran. No, Mormon. Something. Rawboned. Decent looking. Decent. Shutz was a schoolteacher or something back home. A basketball coach. Something. He used to be fat before he joined the Guard and when they were all still in the barracks, he used to show the platoon his old driver's license, the one with the fatman picture in the corner. You were supposed to notice how much weight he'd lost. How seriously he took Officer Candidate School. How much he was willing to sacrifice for a wife and three kids in Nebraska, a better career, a right way of doing things. *It's because he doesn't think I should be here*, Schenectady thought. *Or because he can't figure out why I'm here in the first place. That's why he watches.*

You're not going to eat that, Shutz said.

It's Ranger dip.

You're going to dip coffee?

Yeah.

Do you really need a cigarette that badly?

No, Shitz, I just really need something that's mine.

Whatever you say, Cahan.

We can't all be Captain America, hero.

He said it *heyrow*, twanging and bending the vowels like notes stripped raw from a slide guitar. That's how Lieutenant Pitt said it. It was his catch phrase: a singsong, ironic, dismissive *heyrow* punctuating questions that weren't really meant to be answered, negative spot reports, corrective actions, reminders to stand at parade rest, attention, salute, close your pockets, fix your IR tab, reminders that you weren't prepared, qualified, competent, that you were *still day one*, *phase one*, *heyrow*, that you owed him time in The Pit and he wouldn't forget. *Ah ain't gwon to ferget*, *heyro*, he'd say. *Yew owe me. Ah see yew in The Pit*. And you saw him in The Pit. You saw his clean, jumplaced boots when he had you push in the sawdust *one-*

two-three one sir until you could only breath it *one-two-three fifty* but you said *sir* or at least you grunted it. In either case you pushed the word out well enough for him to hear it, *sir*.

But you didn't always push. After five or six weeks you knew how to hold your body straight like a plank, how to put a hump in your back or sag your belly when you couldn't keep straight, and all you could think of then was the absurdity of it all. The little patch of ground by the pullup bars framed with 4x4s and filled with sawdust and play sand. The bronze plaque on the whitewashed post nearby that announced your arrival at The Pit. The commemorative plaques, cordoned in their own beds of sand or sawdust or bright red yard mulch, that displayed the names and mottoes of old graduated classes of officers and warrant officers. About a dozen paces from The Pit, some field grade Major or Colonel had built a little graveyard with flat granite markers dedicated to the memory and repose of luminaries and alumni with names like COL Cigar Butts or MAJ Corrective Training or OC Failure T. O'Adapt. It was meant to be funny.

And every time Schenectady went down to The Pit, he stopped to read another grave name, thinking *because it is funny; it's funny because they're letting you know that it's all a game and it's funnier still because no one's listening*. No one. Not the squared away NCOs and E4s with two deployments and New Testaments in their personal drawers who should have known better. Not the patrol car cops and firefighters from Worcester, Mass., or Providence, Rhode Island, who should have just smirked and squinted and gone with the flow. The college athletes waiting to take the fire department exam or get a second interview with the New Jersey State Police when they got back home. The serious Smallville types from Kansas or Iowa or wherever the hell Shutz *no, Shitz, he's still Shitz, he hasn't fucked off yet* was from. *They're the worst*, he thought. *The farmboys. The Dawson's Creekers*. The hopeful and neighborly Creekers who slung their grins easily across their jaws and lifted their eyebrows the way you did when you were talking to women; the ones who had been more athletic once than they were now, whose bodies were marked

indelibly, old hat, by what he could only assume was some kind of rural ballet practice of running in track meets and going long for a catch in the cornfields. *No*, he thought, *the wheatfields. Superman flashback panels. Clark in a shrunken teeshirt, jeans, like a uniform. Doesn't drink much, still young, godlike, cut out for good uses. The Kent farm's a wheatfield. Someday, he'll play a silly game with a woman named Lois and save cats in trees and curb his power for a silly game with a rich man named Lex, but he'll wear a nice costume. And the game will mean everything to him. More than his parents. More than his own home. More than the woman he keeps saving from rich men and trees. The Kent farm's a wheatfield, but not a home, not his home, only his gameboard.*

More than anyone else, it seemed, the Creekers should have known better. Everything was a game to them. They spoke to one another in a secret, laconic code of preseason trades and twelve-and-oh records. They sang the Ohio State song for the TACs. They *knew* the Ohio song. Ohio *had* a song and they claimed it for their own. But they were the ones who seemed to hate the Lieutenant most of all. It was as if they couldn't bring themselves to accept that sometimes a game was just a game. Or that the game was fixed. That the plays didn't matter. When he didn't rotate his boots out, Shutz would come up to him whispering *it's knot day, Cahan. Don't you see everyone else has the pair with the knots in the laces?* and he'd answer that yes, he did see, and let the silence hang between them like an insult. It wasn't the right answer. When they went out to the field, he'd leave his sleeping mat in the barracks, pack two t-shirts, clean socks. Freeball for a few days. Sleep on the bare grass with his ruck for a pillow. And when they came back, he'd shove his dirty laundry into his personal drawer. They never gave you time to get the locker display right. It was a move they made in the game. And he knew the inspection schedule, anyway. You had to make your own moves.

That was how the Lieutenant stayed on top of the game. He was constantly moving, changing, preempting the gambits of his

ward-opponents with pushups, front-back-gos, Iron Mikes, rifle PT. Sometimes, when he'd exhausted the playbook, he'd have you just roll around in the sawdust, back and forth, over and over, until you puked *all over Major Barrett's Pit, heyro, you get that out of the Major's Pit*, and you had to grab the dust where the puke clumped and put it in your pocket. There wasn't much point in rolling after that, so he put you on your back doing flutter kicks *one-two-three-one sir one-two-three two sir* and you could see his face, haloed by the sun, the lines of his countenance cut and scribbled dark by the shadow of his cap. Flat. Hard. Stretching at the jowls with weight and diet and age. The Lieutenant was at least fifty or so with bright, stark salt-and-pepper hair tipped in blinding white crewcut shocks below his black patrol cap. A narrow blackdyed moustache with blackdyed skin beneath that faded into deep, even tan around bright, boyish eyes that darted and squinted. Former enlisted, no doubt. Maybe an E6. No, too authoritative, too familiar with the deep intimacies of one man's power over another. It all seemed old hat to him. Somewhere along the line, he must have gotten his sevens or eights, and his eyes must have twinkled like a boy at Christmas who's seen how much his parents spent. Twinkle, twinkle, little eyes: he seemed to live for breaking soldiers. Making *heyrows*.

But lately, it had gotten to the point where Schenectady would have to remind the Lieutenant to send him down to The Pit. Sometimes, usually between breakfast chow and noon meal, the Lieutenant would start with *you all jacked up, heyro, day one phase one or it ain't over, heyrow, the Army don't need bad officers*. And Schenectady would just stare back with a sudden, noticeable flash of hatred that shocked his face tight, a hatred for the Lieutenant and for all lieutenants. A hatred of being *jacked up*, of being called on it, of not knowing whether it was true or merely part of the game. A hatred of chiggers and triple digit temperatures, of Alabama Julys, of Schenectady anytime, of *us* and *me* and Creekers, officers, candidates, anyone. And the Lieutenant saw. Knew. Smiled. Inflated the tendons in his neck until they were red and ready to burst, saying

don't you gimme that eye, heyrow, or I will kick you in the neck, you know't. I got a thing for you. I will see yew later in The Pit, yew want to be playing fuckfuck games with me, heyrow. I will see you.

Lately, though, the Lieutenant seemed to forget all about his threats by lights out. Or, when he did remember, he just squinted and puffed out his chest and muttered *oh, I didn't ferget yew, heyrow. I got somethin good comin just fer yew later.* It was always *coming*. Soon. Later. It didn't matter when; it was *coming* without fail like the old sacerdotal Last Things that his mother used to pray about in Schenectady. Death. Judgment. Heaven. Hell. The end but sillier. And that had become the Lieutenant's final gambit: restraint, revelation, the foreknowledge of judgment. And that was why Schenectady, in turn, always went looking for the Lieutenant right before lights out on the days when he was *day one phase one*. It was like being a boy again: when you didn't want to play anymore, you just knocked over all the pieces and walked away, saying *sir, you told me to report* and the Lieutenant, turning red, *first five words, heyrow, goddamnit you know your first five words*, and the *heyrow* says *Sir, Senior Officer Candidate Cahan reports with a statement, 1,2,3,4,5.* Like that. And the revelator *git on, heyro, what's yer statement?* and he *gits on*, saying *1,2,3,4,5, sir-senior-officer-candidate-cahan, you were going to see me in The Pit.* And the Lieutenant, *right, right, you git on now in yer bunk or I gwan write you up for* [pause] *insubordination refusing to obey a direct order* [pause] *failure to adapt.* It was like being a boy again, knocking over the toys. Or a man at his mother's funeral, knocking over God. *Right, right, you git on now in yer bunk.* The silly graves and the grave endgame. Judgment. No more judgments. Jacked up. Sleep.

It was all worth writing about, he decided. He opened the field notebook again and turned to the first blank page he could find. He pressed the tip of his tongue against the Ranger dip in his cheek and felt the sudden rush of bitterness fill his mouth. It made him feel present. Alone in the sensations of his body. His *own* body. He pressed the tip of his pen against the paper and tried to think, and

when he couldn't, he wrote anyway. *When Lieutenant Pitt killed Blanch*, he began [pause], and then XXXXXed out *killed*. He didn't know that for sure. It was other people's language. Gossip. And it hadn't happened yet, anyway. Blanch was probably still at the Birmingham hospital. He had even overheard someone from 1st Squad saying that the battalion was going to fly the family in from Ohio to see him. *No*, he thought, *so they can see how much the Army cares*. The Army was good at decorating people. They were going to make him like the old pictures of Christ taken down from the Cross, the speechless body surrounded by doctors and nurses and gentlemanly field-grades, a whole Pieta of majors and lieutenant colonels and staff chaplains slapping him gently on the shoulder and reassuring him *you're gonna come through this, hooah* and called him *son* or *soldier* or *brother* when they couldn't remember his first name. He wondered if they'd call Blanch *heyro*. He wondered if they had boats.

He started again: *The Army will have to hang someone out to dry*, but that wasn't it, either. He could see a scribbled OPORD bleeding through from the other side of the page, jumbles of letters and numbers: *NLT 0800 hrs ... IAW ... coordnatng inst. 3rd sqd to conduct recon in AO Witt*. It had all made sense to him earlier that morning when he wrote it down. It had been the most serious thing in the world. *No*, he thought, *the Army never had to hang anyone out, or at least it hung who it wanted where and when it wanted, because it got to hide bodies in a jumble of language*. He tried the idea out. Wrote it. Read it. It didn't strike straight. The Army wasn't a person. Ideas don't hang or hide or want anyone. Men do. *We do*, he thought. *There's no Army, just us*.

He looked up. Shutz was sitting against his ruck, curled like a cicada, powdering red, raw feet speckled with blister. *No*, he thought. *The us is a game, too. Something to hide in*. Soon it would be dark and there would be no more regular *O* of bodies at intervals, no more Army, no more jumble of language or jumble of *us* and *me*. Only *me*. Secret bodies fumbling in the darkness to piss. The furtive display of red lens lights flickering and dashing without pattern. Pri-

vate conversations. Minds isolate in their separate sleep. Endgame. Sleep. Soon. He wrote quickly:

*no one's killing Blanch and if he dies no one killed him.
if someone killed him, we want it to be the LT because we hate him.
I don't hate the LT, so it doesn't have to be him.
we don't want people to die just because they die or because of more
than 1 thing.
we want someone to be a killer and someone else to be the hero.
we want the LT to kill Blanch. we want to be heroic in our hatred.
I don't hate the LT. I don't know Blanch. there's no we.*

He stopped. He wasn't ready to XXXX it all out. Tomorrow, maybe, when he thought about it more. He stuffed the notebook back into the top flap pocket of his ruck. He unlaced his boots and peeled off his socks and stuffed them deep into the toes of his boots where he couldn't smell them. He put the boots beside his ruck in a pile of gear and lay down. *The LT's only one of the reasons for Blanch*, he thought. *But he was just playing the game and Blanch was playing the game and all the heroes who've hated the LT for weeks and just learned Blanch's name. They played, too.* Then stopped thinking. Slept.

He woke at zero three. From a dream, he marvelled. Back home, he never dreamed. That was his girl's thing. She kept a journal of her dreams and she told him about the really good ones, the ones that were strange and violent and teetered on the edge of meaning like Nick Cave songs or *Naked Lunch*. She was convinced that he dreamed, too, but he knew better. *Everyone dreams*, she'd say, *you just don't remember. You need more B vitamins.* And he'd shrug. It was all the same if he didn't remember. He'd get off work with his mind racing a million miles a minute and stay that way until he slept, stopped, just stopped like a clock, at zero three or four, and he stayed that way until he lurched awake by fits and starts midmorning. In the

Army, though, he slept whenever he stopped moving. And when he slept, he dreamed about a Schenectady that was not Schenectady, a life that was his but not his. It was better than his and he was a fugitive in his own flesh. The world was rich and vivid and when he woke, it was immediately hidden and forgotten and he went about the work of the day eating and pissing and laying prone and standing to, guiltless of having stolen the world.

Somehow he had moved about a dozen paces from his sector of fire while he slept. Somehow he'd pulled his sand tee up over his shoulders and ended up lying on his side, his arms and legs spread out, right over left, like the body of some dead buck, his heartbeat pulsing in his abdomen through a red girdle of fifty or sixty chigger bites. He was thirsty, famished, and something made his feet tingle. The heat, maybe. Or his heart pulsing doubletime in his abdomen. His kidneys. *Maybe they'll stick me today*, he thought. Since they'd been in the field, at least a dozen guys from Bravo had gone down from the heat. Even Gomez, who spent the first two days reminiscing about the march to Basra. Sweltering heat. Your piss dried on your ACUs in under a minute. Hell. Down range. One of the older candidates would start faltering in the kudzu or begin pouring his onequart down the front of his ACU and Gomez would be there playing platoon sergeant, ambling up and down the line, saying *this ain't nothing, bro. C'mon now, no fallouts, no fallouts. 'Bama heat ain't got nothing on in-country*. They stuck him on the third day. He fell out after the react-to-ambush lane and spent the rest of the day in the back of a medic truck eating MREs and napping while a sixty-eight-whiskey with a tight blond ponytail pumped bags of water through his veins. He shut up after that.

The high-speeds don't like playing Army once they get stuck, Schenectady thought. *Only the jacked up ones who don't care if they're sitting under a fan or pouring water down their shirts or pissing themselves in the prone with their LBV open and their sleeves loose. Us. Me. We'll run around fucking up the OPORD and swear at the Joes, shove them where we want them for support*

by fire. He got up and thought about fixing his shirt. He stripped it off and unclipped a canteen from his LBV and doused the shirt in the musty water and put it back on. Gasp. He could feel his heart clench from the sudden coolness that made him lightheaded, if only for a moment, until wet cotton warmed to match his skin. *That was Blanch's problem,* he thought. *He wasn't good enough but he wasn't fucked up enough to not care.* Blanch was satisfactory, earnest, easily forgotten in accountability formations and chow lines. A *third-squad-third-man*, like the Lieutenant joked, too afraid to get stuck, get noticed, named, watched, judged. Maybe he really believed all that nonsense about getting sent home without a commission for missing training, being with the medics more than twelve hours, recycled for another eighteen months, back to Phase II, Phase I, blah, blah, blah, *heyro.* The game. And Blanch was a Creeker, with two Creeker kids and a proud Creeker wife. They believed in the game and they believed in their man, their daddy, and he knew it and he stood justified before them on merits of the game. It was a way of loving, and who would surrender that? The strange language of formal sacrifice and martial endurance that meant anything and everything like all clever games do, meant *I love you, you'll miss me, please miss me, daddy, darlin, I love you, you used to love me, I still do, I'll fix it, I'll fix me, you, I can't, I know.*

No, he thought, *Blanch must have seen people getting stuck all the time, falling in and out, seen the TACs nervously ordering everyone to drink water, report to the medics, eat salt packets.* It cost money to make officers and you weren't commissioned yet. Even the Lieutenant had grown delicate with the candidates' bodies by week six. Your body was the Army's collateral. *If you step back from the game,* he thought, *you've got to see that they won't really hurt it. Or expell it. Even Blanch had to have seen.* Maybe it was something else, then, like the second man and the first man standing next to *third-man-third-squad*, and the fear of looking weak to them, *us,* broken. The fear of being short, fat. A bench warmer. Not one of *us,* and a fear of *us* worse than heat sickness or fever or kidney failure.

It was easier to just collapse the way he did. Someone would strip you down until were half naked and unconscious in your nakedness, and someone would stick you and soon your veins would shiver in the body the Army let you benchwarm for it. And it wouldn't be your fault. That's how the rules of the game worked. You weren't *day-one-phase-one* if you just broke. It was like getting the pawn to the end of the board. They made you a *heyro*. A real one. *No*, he thought. *They just took away the y.*

The blackness of the tall pines hid the stars where they passed in their old gambits but he could hear the ring of bodies shifting and jostling against their gear in all directions. Thirty meters out, a chemlight pulsed to mark the spot where you pissed. Where *they* pissed. Shutz. Creekers. Sleepers. He pissed where he wanted; he had that license; he was jacked up. He turned away and walked toward clear sky and starlight where the red clay road ran like a faded ribbon past the bivouac. There was a medic's truck parked at the edge of the woodline, idling, air conditioned, empty. *She must be sleeping in the back*, he thought, *the little sixty-eight-whiskey. Or eating, maybe. Eating real food. Fucking around on an iPhone. Sexing someone. Waiting to stick us and getting paid, sticking or no. And why not?* He walked out onto the road, skipped his bare feet on the gravel, a man walking on coals, until he came to a water buffalo parked in a ditch on the other side of the road. He went around to the far side of the water tank and pissed at the bushes. Stripped his clothes off and sat against the buffalo wheels and flipped the spigot open 1,2,3, short bursts, 1,2,3, so that it sprayed against his neck and ran cool water down the length of his trunk to the groin. He shut his thighs tight so that the water pooled at his groin and drowned it. Cleaned it. Cooled it. He wondered if it could still do anything other than piss. Maybe he'd hit the truck in the morning. Maybe he'd let the little 68-whiskey stick him.

If Blanch had only made it another twenty meters, he thought. Remembered: they'd just finished running the react-to-contact lane and the crossing-a-linear-danger-area exercise, eaten their noon

chow, and marched again, slogging two or three clicks between points on narrow, indirect paths broken by webs of kudzu and wisteria. *And looking wicked to the deer*, he thought. *Shifting the weight of our rucks up and down our hidden spines as we filed, one after the other, our heads round and hard and dull green in our kevlar.* *Bellicose. Instinctive. Like a long, ignorant file of snapping turtles waiting to squat and settle and practice the day's assigned game of killing.* Then stopped imagining. Remembered: from 1300 to 1445, he'd been the acting squad leader for react-to-ambush. The Lieutenant and the lane NCOs brought him into the tent and issued the order and he scribbled the important parts over a laminated OPORD template. Tried to play. Win. The Lieutenant made notes and comments about him on a yellow rating card while he stumbled through the steps of the game: (1) receive the mission; (2) make a tentative plan; (3) issue the warning order; (4) start necessary troop movement; (5) reconnoiter; (6) complete the plan; (7) issue a complete order; (8) supervise and refine. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8. Your tactics didn't matter. The yellow cards didn't care if you won. Took it seriously. Would have lived if you'd been down range. Might have gotten other people killed.

It's all common sense, he thought as the last of the water ran and dried in furrows down his chest, *but you have to make a show of it, make sure they see you making the right moves.* He'd made the sand table and laid the little toy soldiers out on it in their proper positions. He'd given a show of talking to his team leaders, running rehearsals, conducting spot checks. And all the while Blanch had been lying prone, watching his sector of fire, third-man-third-squad, dry, disoriented, feverish, silent because he was playing, too; he was the pawn for that lane, waiting his turn to play bishop, king, queen. *No*, Schenectady thought, *waiting to get taken off the board. Sent home as a Sir to kiss the little Creekers. Earn them. Show it. Prove it, having gone and played and returned for their sake.* And at 1445, third-man-third-squad was closer to home. They had gone through the mission by 1430 and the Lieutenant filled the balance

of the time with *day-one-phase-one, heyrow*. They dropped their rucks and held their filthy bodies suspended over the red clay path for what seemed like an eternity as he told them *I don't care if none of y'all graduate. Fall out, yew fall out. Army don't need you. I don't care if yew all is heat cas*. And they waited. And he waited. Blanch dropped to his knees and the Lieutenant's eyes danced like a child's; he had something to do. *Yew ain't heat cas*, he said, *yew just drag-ass. Yew just fall out, heyro. Do it. I want yew to fall out. I gonna throw a rock at yew, heyro*. And Blanch grunted, straightened the angle of his body. *Yew shut up with that noise, now*, the Lieutenant said, and Blanch shut up with it. He faced down the way you did in the Pit, and just stared while the ants maneuvered their hurried formations in the clay below him. *You-can't-see-me-if-I-can't-see-you*: you could always wait the clock out like that. Then they were marching again, and he was safe again, anonymous, stifling his burning, lumbering body, one step after the other, like a turtle cooking in its shell.

Safe again, Schenctady thought, *but from whom?* He heard the door of the medic truck slam shut. He launched his body up from the muddy clay under the spigot and balled his wet clothes in his hands and drenched them again before putting them on. He wondered if the ponytailed medic saw. He hoped she did. He wondered if Blanch could feel her hands on his soft, rank body when she shucked it from its shell and poked for veins. *If he'd just made it twenty more meters*, he thought, *but*—he didn't know *but what*.

When he passed the truck, the medic saw him and she nodded to him through the open cab window. She was plain and freckled and querulous and her flat, split hair hung wet and loose for the night. He moved closer to the cab. She smelled like shampoo and cigarettes and he wanted to smell her long enough to remember the next day.

Latrine, he muttered.

Three more days and a wake up, she shrugged.

Three more days and a wake up, he winked.

You hang in there, you get your goldbar.

You gonna salute me, then, Specialist?

If the heat don't get you, she laughed.

He shook his head.

Y'know he was a dozen meters off from the ORP, he said, the guy you got today.

That's what y'all keep telling yourselves.

Three more days and a wake up, he grunted.

That too, Candidate.

It was always the same when he got home. For the first day or two, he felt like a sleepwalker. His bills were past due, his voicemail was full, he had missed too much work, and his mother wanted to know if he could feel her prayers in Officer Candidate School. He paid the bills, went back to work, erased all the messages, and said yes, *I think so* when his mother pressed. None of it required any thought. They were like the automatic choices of a man in a dream world, and he kept waiting for something to happen to jar him awake. Anything. Airborne. Air Assault. Branch School. Not Schenectady. U-Haul. Online classes. Nothing about the Guard seemed like a game anymore when they sent you home.

When he landed in Albany, his girl was there to meet him at the terminal. She grabbed him and held him tight and hovered around him. *Like another fucking NCO*, he thought. He waited in line for Starbucks; she studied the changes in his body. He watched the baggage conveyor; she told him the plan for the rest of the day. *It's sweet, though*, he thought. *And it mean a lot to her*. And nothing seemed wrong, yet. He always waited to see if something was wrong before he let himself exhale around her. Really *be* around her. Home. *It wouldn't be so hard*, he thought, *to get a date for Benning sooner*. Maybe get deployment under his belt after that.

But by the time he reached the car, he knew that everything was okay. She was still hovering, talking, waiting to hear his stories. *I'll have to start calling you Lieutenant, now*, she said. He grinned, listened to himself say *yeah*. It didn't feel real yet. *Lieutenant Nathaniel*

Cahan, she repeated. *Do they call you Lieutenant Nathaniel like it's Father Joe or something?* She went to kiss him but he looked away and stuffed his ruck in the trunk. *Just Cahan*, he said, *or Natty, or some stupid shit. No one calls me Nathaniel 'cept you.* That made her happy enough to stop trying to kiss him. Earned him a little room. He set his duffel upright on its end and opened the clasp and fished around until he pulled out something that looked like a white branch, two feet long, with ridges and bumps covering the base of the trunk and bite marks along the circumference of the thick sprouting twigs.

For your brother, he said.

Y'know, she began, he *really* wanted to come but third grade starts tomorrow and—

I know. It's fine.

What is it?

It's an antler. It's off a deer.

How?

They shed them.

No, how'd you get it?

Couple days ago. We were marching by it and it was hanging in the crook of a tree like a claw.

And they let you keep it?

I dunno. I just took it.

He'll love it.

She kissed him. He wasn't ready for that, but he let her do it anyway. She wouldn't understand, otherwise. And then something might be wrong. On the drive home, she asked him about Alabama and he stared at the woodline running along Route 90. They were moving past it so quickly that it made him feel wrong in his own skin. She asked him about the deer. *No*, he told her, *I didn't see too many of them. They mostly kept away from us when they could.* There were plenty of deer around the Hudson. She reminded him about that. Two, three times before he stopped counting. *He didn't have to go anywhere to see deer*, she said. He nodded. The traffic slowed down near Schenectady and he could see at least a dozen

meters past the woodline. He felt better. He started telling her about Alabama. The heat. The Pit. The Lieutenant. The fucking Creekers. Blanch.

Poor dear, she said.

No they just do that naturally. The antlers grow back, he said. Like teeth.

No, I mean the guy with the kidney failure. Blanch.

Oh, he said. Yeah. He seemed like a nice guy.

He stared harder into the woodline. You-can't-see-me-if-I-can't-see-you: he didn't want to talk about it anymore. He wasn't sure what he thought about it yet. He hadn't written it down.

I'm going to go kill one, he said. Maybe next week.

A nice guy? she laughed. She didn't mean to laugh. She just couldn't help it.

A deer.

Oh, jeez, okay. You mean you're going hunting.

No. I'm going killing.

You're always like this when you get back from your two weeks. You don't hunt.

Killing. Hunting's a sport.

She furrowed her brow and put on the most serious face she could without breaking.

Sir-yes-sir, she said.

First-five-words, he laughed.

The day before he went killing, he got a mass email from 2LT Shutz addressed to *Gentlemen (Bravo Co., 4th Platoon)*. Gentlemen. Us. Heroes. Spam, he thought, like the one from the prince in Kenya who had selected good-sir-you to receive a billion US dollars. The message gave an update on Blanch's condition; it thanked everyone who had donated cash to cover the family's travel expense; it offered a prayer for soon-to-be 2LT Blanch's soon-to-be full recovery from what 2LT Shutz called *the atrocity*. Shutz was a schoolteacher, he remembered. *The atrocity* sounded on point. The message ended

with a plea for ALCON to please forward sworn statements THRU UNDERSIGNED to the Ohio Cadre of the USARNG OCS NLT 16 SEPT 20-- IOT ensure *that this kind of atrocity is never allowed to happen again*. He clicked on the attachment. SWORN STATEMENT DA FORM 2823. Stared at it. Closed it. Swearing meant writing and he didn't know what he was willing to swear to yet. He hadn't thought about it enough. He hadn't written it yet.

By the time he got to Durham, he still couldn't shake the feeling that he had to swear to *something* by the sixteenth. Right, wrong, guilty, innocent, atrocity, accident. He was a lieutenant, now, and that was the difference between officers and their joes: the officers took oaths, made decisions. Like the Lieutenant. *No*, he thought, *like me*. That much, at least, he was sure of. And he knew what he was supposed to swear by. Somewhere in Ohio, the field grades were shaking their heads about the field grades down at McClellan. They were reading statement after statement remembering first hand how *1LT Pitt said he wanted OC Blanch to fall out, knowing he was suffering from exhaustion and dehydration*. But that was the game, *heyro*, and everyone knew it, played it, *I want yew to fall out*, and it held no more weight than if they decided to report how *1LT Pitt threatened to throw a rock at me or 1LT Pitt conspired to drop kick me in the throat*. But it had been so hot. And Blanch had been third-man-third-squad. Silent, feverish, determined to make it another twenty meters. And it had happened, just the way the Lieutenant pretended it would. Like dying in Halo and dropping dead on the couch at the same time. An alien killed the man on the couch; an alien tried to kill Blanch, a ludicrous monster who had been realer than God for eight weeks, more capricious than God, who still, after eight weeks, treated them all like they were still *day-one-phase-one*, who *didn't care if none of yew graduate*. Even though they were *Senior Officer Candidates*, then. Even though they were almost heroes.

The atrocity. He pulled the truck off the road about a half a mile outside of Durham and got out, rolling over the phrase in his mind. It didn't fit, yet. He took his cousin's AR-15 out of the truck

bed and cleared it and fingered the safety while he loaded a mag. He walked nearly two clicks into the woodline, heel, toe, heel and then toe, silent as a deer, until he finally stopped and assumed a firing position halfway up a little ridge. There were other men in the woods. *Hunters*, he thought. Upstate rednecks with trucker caps and mouths full of chew and sportsmen from Westchester in new L.L. Bean boots and plaid shirts that smelled like clean blankets.

He watched his sector of fire.

By noon, he had overlaid the whole landscape with patrol bases, rally points, defensive positions. He was in a good spot to conduct a linear ambush. By 1300, he had forgotten all about the atrocity, and *I, _____, want to make the following statement under oath:* had replaced it, running through his mind, again and again, with a hundred different versions of what he meant appended afterwards. He started getting his range. He aimed at the top of a pine three hundred meters away. He aimed at a patch of moss on a rock a hundred fifty meters out. He aimed for some leaves on a poison ivy plant at a little more than twenty-five. 1,2 [pause] 3; 1,2 [pause] 3. Two in the chest, one in the head. 1,2 [pause] 3. Center mass. On the exhale. Exhale.

Trigger squeeze.

By 1400, it had become a game. He flicked the safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Safety off, good sight picture, center mass, on the exhale, exhale, safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Then faster. New sight picture. Then faster. Ranging, ranging, 25, 50, 75, 100, 150, 300. Then back down again and faster. Sometimes he got the order wrong and caught himself when he felt the trigger mechanism begin to give. *I don't want to scare the deer*, he thought, but he hadn't seen any deer yet. Safety on, then faster. Sometimes he saw the bright orange windbreakers of sportsmen appear and and then drown in the leaves. *The ones with boats*, he thought, and lodges upstate. Gentlemen. Us.

At 1430, the brush began rustling at a little under two hundred meters. He waited for the deer, but none appeared. He waited to

spot orange, but he didn't, to hear voices, but he couldn't. He sighted the life in the bushes center mass where it shook them. It had to be a deer. You could always hear the sportsmen were always talking and swearing. Safety off, good sight picture, center mass, on the exhale, exhale, safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Then faster. He kept thinking about the Lieutenant. Blanch. Soon-to-be-2LT Blanch. I, _____, *want to make the following statement under oath*: two kids and a Creeker wife who believed in their man, their daddy, and he knew it and he stood justified before them on merits of the game. No, he thought, crossed that out in his mind. *Safety off, good sight picture*. Then added it back. Then added: Blanch would have gotten someone killed down range *center mass* it would've taken a full fire team offline to medivac him out *on the exhale* he wanted to know what to write about heroes; he had to kill to know what to write; it had to be a deer *safety off, then trigger* you could always hear the heroes swearing loudly *squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3*.

