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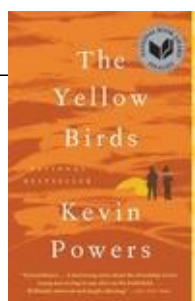
A Novel

KEVIN POWERS



Little, Brown and Company

New York Boston London



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For my wife

A yellow bird
With a yellow bill
Was perched upon
My windowsill

I lured him in
With a piece of bread
And then I smashed
His fucking head...

—*Traditional U.S. Army Marching Cadence*

To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetfull of evils past, is a mercifull provision in nature whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil dayes, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetitions.

—*Sir Thomas Browne*

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September 2004

Al Tifar, Nineveh Province, Iraq

THE WAR TRIED to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Nineveh and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers. While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire.

Then, in summer, the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all color from the plains. The sun pressed into our skin, and the war sent its citizens rustling into the shade of white buildings. It cast a white shade on everything, like a veil over our eyes. It tried to kill us every day, but it had not succeeded. Not that our safety was preordained. We were not destined to survive. The fact is, we were not destined at all. The war would take what it could get. It was patient. It didn't care about objectives or boundaries, whether you were loved by many or not at all. While I slept that summer, the war came to me in my dreams and showed me its sole purpose: to go on, only to go on. And I knew the war would have its way.

The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life. The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman, child. But it had killed fewer than a thousand soldiers like me and Murph. Those numbers still meant something to us as what passed for fall began. Murph and I had agreed. We didn't want to be the thousandth killed. If we died later, then we died. But let that number be someone else's milestone.

We hardly noticed a change when September came. But I know now that everything that will eventually matter in my life began then. Perhaps light came a little more slowly to the city of Al Tafari, falling the way it did beyond thin shapes of rooflines and angled promenades in the dark. It fell over the buildings in the city, white and tan, made of clay bricks roofed with corrugated metal or concrete. The sky was vast and catacombed with clouds. A cool wind blew down from the distant hillsides we'd been patrolling all year. It passed over the minarets that rose above the citadel, flowed down through alleys with their flapping green awnings, out over the bare fields that ringed the city, and finally broke up against the scattered dwellings from which our rifles bristled. Our platoon moved around our rooftop position, gray streaks against the predawn light. It was still late summer then, a Sunday, I think. We waited.

For four days we had crawled along the rooftop grit. We slipped and slid on a carpeting of loose brass casings left over from the previous days' fighting. We curled ourselves into absurd shapes and huddled below the whitewashed walls of our position. We stayed awake on amphetamines and fear.

I pushed my chest off the rooftop and crested the low wall, trying to scan the few acres of the world for which we were responsible. The squat buildings beyond the field undulated through the tinny green of my scope. Bodies were scattered about from the past four days of fighting in the open space.

between our positions and the rest of Al Tafari. They lay in the dust, broken and shattered and bent, their white shifts gone dark with blood. A few smoldered among the junipers and spare tufts of grass and there was a heady mix of carbon and bolt oil and their bodies burning in the newly crisp air of the morning.

I turned around, ducked back below the wall and lit a cigarette, shielding the cherry in my curled palm. I pulled long drags off it and blew the smoke against the top of the roof, where it spread out and then rose and disappeared. The ash grew long and hung there and a very long time seemed to pass before it fell to the ground.

The rest of the platoon on the roof started to move and jostle with the flickering half-light of dawn. Sterling perched with his rifle over the wall, sleeping and starting throughout our waiting. He jerked his head back occasionally and swiveled to see if anyone had caught him. He showed me a broad, disheveled grin in the receding dark, held up his trigger finger and daubed Tabasco sauce into his eyes to stay awake. He turned back toward our sector, and his muscles visibly bucked and tensed beneath his gear.

Murph's breath was a steady comfort to my right. I had grown accustomed to it, the way he punctuated its rhythm with a well-practiced spit into an acrid pool of dark liquid that always seemed to be growing between us. He smiled up at me. "Want a rub, Bart?" I nodded. He passed me a can of care-package Kodiak, and I jammed it into the cup of my bottom lip, snubbing out my cigarette. The wet tobacco bit and made my eyes water. I spat into the pool between us. I was awake. Out of the gray early morning the city became whole. White flags hung in a few scattered windows in the buildings beyond the bodies in the field. They formed an odd crochet where the window's dark recesses were framed by jagged glass. The windows themselves were set into whitewashed buildings that became ever brighter in the sun. A thin fog off the Tigris dissipated, revealing what hints of life remained, and in the soft breeze from the hills to the north the white rags of truce fluttered above those same green awnings.

Sterling tapped at the face of his watch. We knew the muezzin's song would soon warble its eerie fabric of minor notes out from the minarets, calling the faithful to prayer. It was a sign and we knew what it meant, that hours had passed, that we had drawn nearer to our purpose, which was as vague and foreign as the indistinguishable dawns and dusks with which it came.

"On your toes, guys!" the LT called in a forceful whisper.

Murph sat up and calmly worked a small dot of lubricant into the action of his rifle. He chambered a round and rested the barrel against the low wall. He stared off into the gray angles where the streets and alleys opened onto the field to our front. I could see into his blue eyes, the whites spiderwebbed with red. They had fallen farther into his sockets during the past few months. There were times when I looked at him and could only see two small shadows, two empty holes. I let the bolt push a round into the chamber of my rifle and nodded at him. "Here we go again," I said. He smiled from the corner of his mouth. "Same old shit again," he answered.

We'd come to that building as the moon flagged to a sliver in the first hours of the battle. There were no lights on. We crashed our vehicle through a flimsy metal gate that had once been painted dark red but had since rusted over, so that it was hard to tell what part had been painted red and what part was rust. When the ramp dropped from our vehicle we rushed to the door. A few soldiers from first squad rushed to the back, and the rest of the platoon stacked up at the front. We kicked in both doors at the same time and ran in. The building was empty. As we went through each room, the lights affixed to

the front of our rifles cut narrow cylinders through the dark interior, but they were not bright enough to see by. The lights showed the dust we'd kicked up. Chairs had been turned over in some of the rooms, and colorfully woven rugs hung over the windowsills where the glass had been shot out. There were no people. In some of the rooms we thought we saw people and we yelled out sharply for the people who were not there to get on the floor. We went through each room like that until we got to the roof. When we got to the roof, we looked out over the field. The field was flat and made of dust and the city was dark behind it.

At daybreak on the first day our interpreter, Malik, came out onto the flat concrete roof and sat next to me where I leaned against the wall. It was not yet light, but it almost appeared to be because the sky was white the way the sky is when heavy with snow. We heard fighting across the city, but it had not reached us yet. Only the noise of rockets and machine guns and helicopters swooping down near the vertical in the distance told us we were in a war.

"This is my old neighborhood," he told me.

His English was exceptional. There was a glottal sound in his voice, but it was not harsh. I'd often asked him to help me with my sparse Arabic, trying to get my pronunciation of this or that word right. "Shukran." "Afwan." "Qumbula." *Thank you. You're welcome. Bomb.* He'd help, but he always ended our exchanges by saying, "My friend, I need to speak English. For the practice." He'd been a student at the university before the war, studying literature. When the university closed, he came to us. He wore a hood over his face, worn khaki slacks and a faded dress shirt that appeared to be ironed fresh every day. He never took his mask off. The one time Murph and I had asked him about it, he took his index finger and traced the fringe of the hood that hung around his neck. "They'll kill me for helping you. They'll kill my whole family."

Murph hunched low and trotted over from the other side of the roof where he had been helping the LT and Sterling set up the machine gun after we'd arrived. Watching him move, I got the impression that the flatness of the desert made him nervous. That somehow the low ridgelines in the distance made the dried brown grasses of the floodplain even more unbearable.

"Hey, Murph," I said. "This is Malik's old stomping grounds."

Murph ducked quickly and sat next to the wall. "Whereabouts?" he asked.

Malik stood up and pointed to a strip of buildings that seemed to grow organically in odd, not quite ninety-degree sections. The buildings stood beyond the field at the beginning of our sector. A little farther past the outskirts of Al Tifar, there was an orchard. Fires burned from steel drums and trash heaps and sprung up seemingly without cause around the edges of the city. Murph and I did not start up, but we saw where Malik pointed.

"Mrs. Al-Sharifi used to plant her hyacinth in this field." He spread his hands out wide and moved his arms in a sweeping motion that reminded me of convocation.

Murph reached for the cuff of Malik's pressed shirt. "Careful, big guy. You're gonna get silhouetted."

"She was this crazy old widow." He had his hands on his hips. His eyes were glazed over with exhaustion. "The women in the neighborhood were so jealous of those flowers." Malik laughed. "They accused her of using magic to make them grow the way they did." He'd paused then, and put his hand on the dried mud wall we'd been leaning against. "They were burned up in the battle last fall. She did not try to replant them this year," he finished brusquely.

I tried to imagine living there but could not, even though we had patrolled the same streets Malik was talking about and drank tea in the small clay hovels and I'd had my hands wrapped in the thin veined hands of the old men and women who lived in them. "All right, buddy," I said. "You're gonna

get your ass shot off if you don't get down."

"It is a shame you didn't see those hyacinths," he said.

And then it started. It seemed as if the movement of one moment to the next had its own trajectory, a thing both finite and expansive, like the endless divisibility of numbers strung out on a line. The tracers reached out from all the dark spaces in the buildings across the field, and there were more bullets than streaks of phosphorescence. We heard them tear at the air around our ears and smack into the clay brick and concrete. We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms. When we got the order to cease fire we looked over the low wall and he was lying in the dust and there was a lot of blood around him.

"Doesn't count, does it?" Murph asked.

"No. I don't think so."

"What're we at?"

"Nine sixty-eight? Nine seventy? We'll have to check the paper when we get back."

I was not surprised by the cruelty of my ambivalence then. Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed. And now, as I reflect on how I felt and behaved as a boy of twenty-one from my position of safety in a warm cabin above a clear stream in the Blue Ridge, I can only tell myself that it was necessary. I needed to continue. And to continue, I had to see the world with clear eyes, to focus on the essential. We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare. Rare was the bullet with your name on it, the IED buried just for you. Those were the things we watched for.

I didn't think about Malik much after that. He was an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to my continuing life. I couldn't have articulated it then, but I'd been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not. You're nothing, that's the secret: a uniform in a sea of numbers, a number in a sea of dust. And we somehow thought those numbers were a sign of our own insignificance. We thought that if we remained ordinary, we would not die. We confuse correlation with cause and saw a special significance in the portraits of the dead, arranged neatly next to the number corresponding to their place on the growing list of casualties we read in the newspaper as indications of an ordered war. We had a sense, something we only felt in the brief flash of synapses to synapse, that these names had been on the list long before the dead had come to Iraq. That the names were there as soon as those portraits had been taken, a number given, a place assigned. And that they'd been dead from that moment forward. When we saw the name Sgt. Ezekiel Vasquez, twenty-one, Laredo, Texas, #748, killed by small-arms fire in Baqubah, Iraq, we were sure that he'd walked a ghost for years through South Texas. We thought he was already dead on the flight over, that if he was scared when the C-141 bringing him to Iraq had pitched and yawed through the sky above Baghdad there had been no need. He had nothing to fear. He'd been invincible, absolutely, until the day he was not. The same, too, for Spc. Miriam Jackson, nineteen, Trenton, New Jersey, #914, dead as a result of wounds sustained in a mortar attack in Samarra, at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. We were glad. Not that she was killed, only that we were not. We hoped that she'd been happy, that she took advantage of her special status before she inevitably arrived under that falling mortar, having gone out to hang her freshly washed uniform on a line behind her connex.

Of course, we were wrong. Our biggest error was thinking that it mattered what we thought. It seems absurd now that we saw each death as an affirmation of our lives. That each one of those deaths

belonged to a time and that therefore that time was not ours. We didn't know the list was limitless. We didn't think beyond a thousand. We never considered that we could be among the walking dead as well. I used to think that maybe living under that contradiction had guided my actions and that our decision made or unmade in adherence to this philosophy could have put me on or kept me off the list of the dead.

I know it isn't like that now. There were no bullets with my name on them, or with Murph's, for that matter. There were no bombs made just for us. Any of them would have killed us just as well as they'd killed the owners of those names. We didn't have a time laid out for us, or a place. I had stopped wondering about those inches to the left and right of my head, the three-miles-an-hour difference that would have put us directly over an IED. It never happened. I didn't die. Murph did. And though I wasn't there when it happened, I believe unswervingly that when Murph was killed, the dirty knives that stabbed him were addressed "To whom it may concern." Nothing made us special. Not living. Not dying. Not even being ordinary. Still, I like to think there was a ghost of compassion for me then, and that if I'd had a chance to see those hyacinths I would have noticed them.

Malik's body, crumpled and broken at the foot of the building, didn't shock me. Murph passed me in the smoke and we lay down beneath the wall again. But I could not stop thinking about a woman Malik had mentioned in conversation had reminded me of, who'd served us tea in small, finely blemished cups. The memory seemed impossibly distant, buried in the dust, waiting for some brush to uncover it. I remember how she'd blushed and smiled, and how impossible it was for her to not be beautiful, despite her age, her paunch, a few teeth gone brown and her skin appearing like the cracked, dry clay of summer.

Perhaps that is how it was: a field full of hyacinth. It was not like that when we stormed the building. It was not like that four days after Malik died. The green grasses that waved in the breeze were burned by fire and the summer sun. The festival of people on the market street with their long white shifts and their loud voices were gone. Some of them were lying dead in the courtyards of the city or in its narrow alleys. The rest walked or rode in sluggish caravans, on foot or in orange and white jalopies, in mulled-up carts or in huddled groups of twos and threes, women and men, the old and young, the whole and wounded. All that was the life of Al Tafar left in a drab parade out of the city. They walked past our gates, past Jersey walls and gun emplacements, out into the dry September hills. They did not raise their eyes in the curfewed hours. They were a speckled line of color in the dark and they were leaving.

A radio crackled in the rooms beneath us. The lieutenant quietly gave our situation report to our command. "Yes, sir," he said, "roger, sir," and it passed, at each level more removed from us, until I am sure somewhere someone was told, in a room that was warm and dry and safe, that eighteen soldiers had watched the alleys and streets of Al Tafar through the night and that X number of enemies were lying dead in a dusty field.

The day had almost broken over the city and the ridges in the desert when the low, electric noise of the radio was replaced by the sound of the lieutenant's boots padding up the staircase to the roof. Memories took shape, and the city, vague and notional at night, became a contoured and substantial thing before us. I looked west. Tans and greens emerged in the light. The gray of mud walls, of buildings and courtyards arranged in squat honeycombs, receded with the rising sun. A few fires burned in the grove of thin and ordered fruit trees a little to the south. The smoke rose through the gently tattered canopy of leaves only slightly taller than a man and leaned obediently to the wind coming across the valley.

The lieutenant came up to the roof and lowered himself into a slouch, his upper body parallel to the earth, his legs chugging, until he reached the wall. He sat with his back against the wall and gestured for us to gather around him.

“All right, guys. This is the deal.”

Murph and I leaned against each other until the weight of our bodies found their balance. Sterling inched closer to the lieutenant and fixed his eyes in a hard glare that traversed the rest of us on the roof. I looked at the lieutenant as he spoke. His eyes were dim. Before he continued he let out a short, bright sigh and rubbed a rash the color of washed-out raspberries with two fingers. It covered a small oval from his sharp brow line down onto his left cheek and seemed to follow the rounded path of his eye socket.

The LT was a distant person by nature. I don't even remember where he was from. There was something restrained about him, something more than simple adherence to nonfraternization. It was not elitism. He seemed to be unknowable, or slightly adrift. He sighed often. “We're here until midday or so,” he said. “Third platoon is going to push through the alleys to our northwest and try to flush them to our front. Hopefully they'll be too scared to do much shooting at us before we...” He paused and brought his hand down from his face, reached into the pockets on his chest beneath his body armor and fished for a cigarette. I handed him one. “Thanks, Bartle,” he said. He turned to look at the orchard burning to the south. “How long have those fires been going?”

“Probably started last night,” said Murph.

“OK, you and Bartle keep an eye on that.”

The column of smoke that bent beneath the wind had straightened. It cut a black runny line across the sky.

“What was I saying before that?” The lieutenant looked absently over his shoulder and inched his eyes up over the wall. “Fuck me,” he muttered.

A specialist from second squad said, “Hey, no sweat, LT, we got it.”

Sterling cut him off. “Shut the fuck up. LT's done when he says he's fucking done.”

I didn't realize it then, but Sterling seemed to know exactly how hard to push the LT so that discipline remained. He didn't care if we hated him. He knew what was necessary. He smiled at me and his straight, white teeth reflected the early morning sun. “You were saying, sir, that hopefully they'll be too scared to shoot before...” The LT opened his mouth to finish his thought, but Sterling continued, “Before we fucking kill the hajji fucks.”

The lieutenant nodded his head and slouched over and trotted downstairs. We crawled back to our positions to wait. A fire had begun to burn in the town, its source obscured by walls and alleys. Thick black smoke seemed to join from a hundred fires all over Al Tafari, becoming one long curl up toward heaven.

The sun gathered itself behind us, rising in the east, warming the collar of my blouse, baking in the salt that clotted in hard lines and snaked around our necks and arms. I turned my head and looked right into it. I had to close my eyes, but I could still see its shape, a white hole in the darkness, before it turned west again and opened them.

Two minarets rose, like arms, up from the dusty buildings, slightly obscured now and then by smoke. They were dormant. No sound had come from them that morning. No adhan had been called. The long line of refugees that snaked its way out of the city for the past four days had slowed. Only a few old men bent over worn canes of cedar shuffled between the field of dead and the grove of trees. Two gaunt dogs bounced around them, nipped their heels, retreated when struck, and then started in on them again.

And it began once more. The orchestral whine of falling mortars arrived from all around us. Even after so many months beneath them, there was a blank confusion on the faces of the platoon. We stared at one another with mouths agape, fingers strangling the grips of our rifles. It was a clear day in September in Al Tafari, and the war seemed narrowly focused, as if it occurred only in this place, and I remember feeling like I had jumped into a cold river on the first warm day of spring, wet and scared and breathing hard, with nothing to do but swim.

“Incoming!”

We moved by rote, our bodies made prostrate, our fingers interlaced behind our heads, our mouths open to keep the pressure balanced.

And then the sound of the impacts echoed off into the morning. I didn't raise my head until the last reverberation faded.

I looked over the wall slowly, and a din of voices shouted, “All clear!” and “I'm up!”

“Bartle?” Murph huffed.

“I'm up, I'm up,” I said quietly, and I was breathing very hard and I looked out over the field and there were wounds in the earth and in the already dead and battered bodies and a few small juniper trees were turned up and on their sides where the mortars fell. Sterling ran to the opening in the floor and yelled down to the LT, “Up, sir.” He moved to each one of us on the roof, smacking the back of our helmets. “Get ready, motherfuckers,” he said.

I hated him. I hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination. But more than that I hated the way he was necessary, how I needed him to jar me into action even when they were trying to kill me, how I felt like a coward until he screamed into my ear, “Shoot these hajji fucks!” I hated the way I loved him when I inched up out of the terror and returned fire, seeing him shooting too, smiling the whole time, screaming, the whole rage and hate of these few acres, alive and spreading, in and through him.

And they did come, shadowed in windows. They came out from behind woven prayer rugs and fired off bursts and the bullets whipped past and we'd duck and listen as they smacked against the concrete and mud-brick and little pieces flew in every direction. They ran through trash-strewn alleys, past burning drums and plastic blowing like clumps of thistle over the ancient cobblestones.

Sterling yelled a long time that day before I squeezed the trigger. My ears had already rung off from the noise and the first bullet I released into the field seemed to leave my rifle with a dull pop. It kicked up a little cloud of dust when it hit and it was surrounded by many other little clouds of dust just like it.

Rounds by the hundreds shook dust off the ground, the trees and buildings. An old car crumpled and collapsed beneath the dust. Once in a while, someone ran between the buildings, behind the orange and white cars, over the rooftops, and they'd surround themselves with little clouds of dust.

A man ran behind a low wall in a courtyard and looked around, astonished to be alive, his weapon cradled in his arms. My first instinct was to yell out to him, “You made it, buddy, keep going,” but I remembered how odd it would be to say a thing like that. It was not long before the others saw him too.

He looked left, then right, and the dust popped around him, and I wanted to tell everyone to stop shooting at him, to ask, “What kind of men are we?” An odd sensation came over me, as if I had been saved, for I was not a man, but a boy, and that he may have been frightened, but I didn't mind that so much, because I was frightened too, and I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn't stop until I was sure that he was dead, and I felt better knowing we were killing him together and that it was just as well not to be sure you are the one who did it.

But I knew. I shot him and he slumped over behind the wall. He was shot again by someone else and the bullet went through his chest and ricocheted, breaking a potted plant hanging from a window above the courtyard. Then he was shot again and he fell at a strange angle—backward over his legs—and most of the side of his face was gone and there was a lot of blood and it pooled around him in the dust.

A car drove toward us along the road between the orchard and the field of dead. Two large white sheets billowed from its rear windows. Sterling ran to the other side of the building, where the machine gun was set up. I looked through my scope and saw an old man behind the wheel and an elderly woman in the back passenger seat.

Sterling laughed. “Come on, motherfuckers.”

He couldn’t see them. I’ll yell, I thought. I’ll tell him they are old, let them pass.

But bullets bit at the crumbling road around the car. They punched into the sheet metal.

I said nothing. I followed the car with my scope. The old woman ran her fingers along a string of pale beads. Her eyes were closed.

I couldn’t breathe.

The car stopped in the middle of the road, but Sterling did not stop the shooting. The bullets ripped through the car and out the other side. The holes in the car funneled light, and the smoke and dust hung in the light. The door opened and she fell from the old car. She tried to drag herself to the side of the road. She crawled. Her old blood mixed with the ash and dust. She stopped moving.

“Holy shit, that bitch got murdered,” Murph said. There was no grief, or anguish, or joy, or pity in the statement. There was no judgment made. He was just surprised, like he was waking from a long afternoon nap, disoriented, realizing that the world has continued uninterrupted in spite of the strange things that may have happened while you slept. He could have said that it was Sunday, as we did not know what day it was. And it would have been a sudden thing to notice that it was Sunday at a time like that. But he spoke the truth either way, and it wouldn’t have mattered much if it had been Sunday and since none of us had slept in a long time, none of it really seemed to matter much at all.

Sterling sat down behind the wall next to the machine gun. He waved us to him and took a piece of pound cake from the cargo pocket on his trousers as we listened to the final bursts of nervous firing peter out. He broke the dry cake into three pieces. “Take this,” he said. “Eat.”

The smoke rose and began to disappear. I watched the old woman bleed on the side of the road. The dust blew in languid waves and began to swirl slightly. We heard shots again. Beyond a building a small girl with auburn curls and a tattered sundress stepped out toward the old woman. Errant bullets from other positions kicked up the dust around her in dry blooms.

We looked to Sterling. He waved us off. “Someone get on the net and tell those fuckers it’s a just kid,” he said.

The girl ducked behind the building, then emerged again, this time shuffling toward the old woman very slowly. She tried dragging the body, and her face contorted with effort as she pulled the old woman by her one complete arm. The girl described circles into the fine dust as she paced around the body. The path they made was marked in blood: from the car smoking and ablaze, through a courtyard ringed by hyacinths, to the place where the woman lay dead, attended by the small child, who rocked and moved her lips, perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn’t hear.

The ash from the burning of clay bricks and the fat of lean men and women covered everything. The pale minarets dominated the smoke, and the sky was still pale like snow. The city seemed to reach

upward out of the settling dust. Our part was over, for a while at least. It was September and though there were few trees from which leaves could fall, some did. They shook off the scarred and slender branches, buffeted by the wind and light descending from the hills to the north. I tried to count the leaves as they fell, removed from their moorings by the impact of mortars and bombs. They shook. A thin sheaf of dust floated off each one.

I looked at Murph and Sterling and the rest of the platoon on the roof. The LT walked to each of us and put his hand on our arms, speaking softly, trying to soothe us with the sound of his voice, the way one would with frightened horses. Perhaps our eyes were wet and black, perhaps we bared our teeth. “Good job,” and “You’re OK,” and “We’re gonna be OK,” he said. It was hard to believe that we’d be OK and that we’d fought well. But I remember being told that the truth does not depend on being believed.

The radio came on again. Before long the LT would give us another mission. We would be tired when the mission came, but we would go, for we had no alternative. Perhaps we’d had them once before, alternatives, other paths to take. But our course was certain then, if unknown. It was going to be done before we knew it. We had lived, Murph and me.

I try so hard now to remember if I saw any hint of what was coming, if there was some shadow over him, some way I could have known he was so close to being killed. In my memory of those days on the rooftop, he is half a ghost. But I didn’t see it then, and couldn’t. No one can see that. I guess I’m glad I didn’t know, because we were happy that morning in Al Tafari, in September. Our relief was coming. The day was full of light and warm. We slept.

2

December 2003

Fort Dix, New Jersey

MRS. LADONNA MURPHY, rural mail carrier, would have only needed to read the first word of the letter to know that it had not been written by her son. The truth is, she had not received all that many letters from him, so when I wrote it, I took a guess that she might not have that much to compare it to. He'd rarely been more than a few miles away from her during the first seventeen years of his life. About five miles, depending on where Daniel was, when she reached the farthest stop on her mail route if measured as the crow flies. Seven, if we allow for depth, at midnight, during those three months he worked in the Shipp Mountain Mine after he graduated from the Bluefield Vocational and Technical School. Then on to Benning in the fall, the farthest he'd ever been from home, where Daniel would write her a few short notes before lights-out, scrawling out his thoughts about the redness of the clay, the pleasure he took in sleeping under those endless Georgia stars and, when time allowed, making space for the assurances that boys like me and Daniel always end up sending to our families—assurances that were as much for us as for them. The rest of his life he'd spent with me. Ten months, give or take, from the time he appeared next to me in formation that day in New Jersey with the snow so high over our boots that our left and right faces made only a whisper in the snow. Ten months, give or take, from that day to the day he died. It might seem like a short time, but my whole life since he's merely been a digression from those days, which now hang over me like a quarrel that will never be resolved.

I'd had this idea once that you had to grow old before you died. I still feel like there is some truth to it, because Daniel Murphy had grown old in the ten months I'd known him. And perhaps it was a need for something to make sense that caused me to pick up a pencil and write a letter to a dead boy's mother, to write it in his name, having known him plenty long enough to know it was not his way to call his mother "Mom." I'd known a lot, really. I'd known that snow comes early in the year in the mountains where Daniel was from, November, sure, and sometimes as early as October. But I only found out later that she'd read that letter with snow falling all around her. That she'd set it on the seat next to her while she mused her old right-hand-drive Jeep up and down the switchbacks on her route, carving clean tracks through the white erasure that had fallen all throughout the night before. And then, as she pulled down the long gravel path leading to their little house, on the winter-dormant apple orchard Daniel had talked about so often, she kept sneaking glances at the return address. She must have taken those glances with an unusual level of skepticism for a rural mail carrier as experienced as she was, because she thought each time that something different would be written there. When the wheels of her old Jeep finally stopped, and the whole mass of '84 metal slid a few last feet in the snow, she'd taken the letter in both hands and become briefly, terrifyingly happy.

At one time you could have asked me if I thought the snow meant something and I would have said yes. I might have thought there was some significance to the fact that there had been snow on the day Daniel Murphy had come into my life and snow on the day I willed myself into the one that had been taken from him. I may not have believed it, but I'm sure I would have wanted to. It's lovely to think that

snow can be special. We're always told it is. Of all those million million flakes that fall, no two are alike, forever and ever, amen. I've spent some time looking out the window of my cabin watching snowflakes fall like a shot dove's feathers fluttering slowly down to the ground. They all look the same to me.

I know it was a terrible thing to write that letter. What I don't know is where it fits in with all of the other terrible things I think about. At some point along the way I stopped believing in significant Order became an accident of observation. I've come to accept that parts of life are constant, that just because something happens on two different days doesn't make it a goddamn miracle. All I really know for sure is that no matter how long I live, and no matter how I spend that time, those scars aren't ever coming level. Murph's always going to be eighteen, and he's always going to be dead. And I'll be living with a promise that I couldn't keep.

I never intended to make the promise that I made. But something happened the day Murph pivoted and moved through the open rank of our formation, took his place in the squad next to me and looked up. He smiled. And the sun careened off the small drifts of snow, and he closed his eyes slightly against it, and they were blue. Now, so many years distant, I picture him turning to speak, with his arms clasped behind him at parade rest, and it seems like whatever he says back there in my memory could be the most important words I'll ever hear. In truth, he didn't seem special then. All he said was "Hi." He only came up to my shoulder in height, so when Sergeant Sterling, our newly assigned team leader, heard the muffled whisper Murph had made, he didn't see him. Instead, he saw me. He glared and clenched his teeth and barked, "At ease the fucking noise, Bartle." There is nothing else to be said. Something happened. I met Murph. The formation broke. It was cold in the shadow of the barracks.

"Bartle. Murphy. Get your stupid asses over here," called Sergeant Sterling.

Sterling had been assigned to our company when our deployment orders came through. He had been to Iraq already, on the first push north out of Kuwait, and had been decorated, so even the higher-ups looked at him with admiration. And it wasn't just the fact of his having been there that caused us to respect him. He was harsh, but fair, and there was a kind of evolutionary beauty in his competence. His carriage seemed different only by a matter of degree from the way our other sergeants and officers acted. I noticed the way his whole upper body moved in concert with his rifle on field exercises, pivoting against the backdrop of the snow in the branches of the hardwoods, his legs propelling him purposefully forward, where he'd stop in a clearing and kneel. The way he'd remove his helmet slowly, showing his cropped blond hair, his blue eyes scanning the brush at the wood line. And he'd listen and I'd watch and we'd wait, the whole platoon, for him to make some determination. We would trust him when he pointed and told us to move on. It was easy to follow him wherever he was going.

Murph and I walked to Sterling and stood at parade rest. "All right, little man," he said, "I want you to get in Bartle's back pocket and I want you to stay there. Do you understand?"

Murph looked at me before he answered. I tried to make a face that would clearly communicate the need for his answer to come quickly, and for it to be directed toward Sergeant Sterling. But he didn't answer, and Sterling smacked him on the side of the head, knocking his cover to the ground, where the little drifts of snow sketched the December wind.

"Roger, Sergeant," I said. I pulled Murph toward the awning of the barracks door, where a cluster of guys from second platoon were smoking. As we walked, Sterling called behind us, "You guys seriously need to unfuck yourselves. None of you people get it."

We turned to look at him when we got to the door. He had his hands on his hips, and his head was tilted skyward. His eyes were closed. It was getting dark, but he didn't move. He waited, as if waiting for whichever last shadow would cause evening.

Murph and I got up to our eight-man room on the third floor of the battalion barracks and I closed the door. ~~Everyone else was milling around base on an evening pass. We were alone.~~ “You got your bunk and locker?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s down the hall.”

“Swap your shit out and get a rack near me.”

He left the room with a shuffle. As I waited for him I thought about what I would tell him. I’d been in the army a couple of years. It had been good to me, more or less, a place to disappear. I kept my head down and did as I was told. Nobody expected much of me, and I hadn’t asked for much in return. I hadn’t given a lot of thought to actually going to war, but it was happening now, and I was still struggling to find a sense of urgency that seemed proportional to the events unfolding in my life. I remember feeling relief in basic while everyone else was frantic with fear. It had dawned on me that I’d never have to make a decision again. That seemed freeing, but it gnawed at some part of me even then. Eventually, I had to learn that freedom is not the same thing as the absence of accountability.

Murph came back into the room with a kind of waddle under the weight of his gear. He looked a little like Sterling in some ways, the blond hair and blue eyes. But it was as if Murph was the ordinary version. Where Sterling was tall and trimly muscled, Murph was not. He wasn’t fat, it was just that he seemed almost incorrectly short and squat by comparison. Whereas Sterling’s jawline could have been transferred directly from a geometry textbook, Murph’s features were nearly imperceptibly askew. Whereas Murph’s mouth fell comfortably into a smile, Sterling’s did not. Maybe all I noticed was a condition of reality, applicable everywhere on earth: some people are extraordinary and some are not. Sterling was, though I could see at times that he bristled at the consequences of this condition. When he first came to our company, the captain introduced him to us by saying, “Sergeant Sterling will be put on the fucking recruiting posters, men. Mark my words.” When the formation broke, I walked past them and overheard Sterling say, “I will never ask anyone to do this, sir. Never.” And I noticed as he walked away that he wasn’t wearing any of the awards on his Class A’s that the captain had rattled off with such poorly hidden envy. But wars need ordinary boys, too.

After we put his gear in his locker I sat down on a bottom bunk and Murph sat on the one across from me. The room was bright from the sheen of fluorescent paneling above us. The shaded windows looked out onto night and snow, circles of lamplight and the red brick of other barracks. “Where are you from?” I asked.

“Southwest Virginia,” he said. “What about you?”

“A little shithole town outside Richmond.”

He looked disappointed by my answer. “Hell,” he said, “I didn’t know you was from Virginia.”

Something about that fact irritated me. “Yeah,” I said smugly. “We’re practically related.” I regretted saying it immediately. But I didn’t want to be responsible for him. I didn’t even want to be responsible for myself, but that wasn’t his fault. I began to lay out my gear. “What’d you do down there in the sticks, Murph?” I took a wire brush to all the metallic components of my equipment, the small buttons and the hooks for straps, cleaning off the tarnish and oxidation of lying in the snow while preparing to fight in the desert. As Murph began to answer, the thought crossed my mind that something can only be absurd if enough people take it very seriously. When I looked back over at him he had started to list facts about himself on the fingers of his small right hand. He hadn’t yet moved his index finger before pausing. “Yeah, I guess that’s about it. Not much.”

I hadn’t even been listening. I could tell he was embarrassed. He hung his head a little and grabbed his gear from the locker and began to mirror my actions. For a while we were alone. The sound of the wire brushes roughing against green nylon and little pieces of metal settled into the room with a low

hum. I understood. Being from a place where a few facts are enough to define you, where a few habits can fill a life, causes a unique kind of shame. We'd had small lives, populated by a longing for something more substantial than dirt roads and small dreams. So we'd come here, where life needed no elaboration and others would tell us who to be. When we finished our work we went to sleep, calm and free of regret.

Days passed. We came closer to our ship-out date, which was still being kept a secret by the higher-ups. But we felt it looming. The war had become a presence in our lives. We were grooms before marriage. We trained in the snowy fields. We left the barracks in the morning, went to classrooms for briefings on the social structures and demographics of the unnamed towns that we'd be fighting for. We'd leave the classrooms at night with the sun already fallen as if by accident, somewhere to the west beyond the base's barbed wire fencing.

The last week we were in New Jersey, Sterling came to see us in our room. We were packing up a lot of our gear that we knew we wouldn't need. The higher-ups had told us we'd have a pass soon and that our families would be able to see us for a last visit before our battalion's movement. The only thing left was a final range day, put in place as the result of a suggestion Sergeant Sterling had passed up the chain of command. When Sterling stepped through our door, he waved off our somewhat lazy effort to rise to parade rest.

"Sit down, guys," he said.

Murph and I sat down on my bunk, and Sterling sat down on the bunk across from us, rubbing his temples.

"How old are you two?"

"Eighteen," Murph answered quickly. "My birthday was last week," he said, smiling.

I was surprised he hadn't told me and a little surprised by how young he was. I was twenty-one then, and eighteen had never seemed so young until I heard the number said out loud. I looked at Murph sitting next to me on the bunk. He had a pimple on his chin, but otherwise his skin was smooth. It dawned on me that he'd never even shaved. The soft down on his cheekbones beneath his ears glowed whitely under the panel lights. I heard myself say, "Twenty-one." And now, as I remember it, I can feel how young I was. I can feel my body before it was scarred. I can reach to my cheek and for a moment remember how the skin was unblemished, then torn, and then healed below my eye like a wadi in miniature. "Twenty-one," I'd said, and I was as full of time as my body would allow. But looking back from where I am, almost thirty, old enough, I can see myself for what I was. Barely a man. Not a man. Life was in me, but it splashed as if at the bottom of a nearly empty bowl.

And so we looked at Sterling, distraught, and he said, "Fuck," and I knew that when he told us his age it would not be much more than ours. "All right, look," he said. "You guys are my guys."

"Roger, Sarge," we said.

"Our AO just came down from higher. It's gonna be a goat fuck. You guys have to promise to do what I say."

"OK. Sure thing, Sarge."

"Don't give me that shit, Privates. No 'sure thing' this time. Tell me you'll do what I say. Every fucking Time." He beat the notes with his fist into the palm of his left hand.

"We'll do what you say. We promise," I said.

He took a deep breath and smiled. His shoulders sagged slightly.

"So, where is it, Sarge?" Murph asked.

"Al Tifar. Up north, near Syria. Like a hajji proving ground up there. Gets real fucking heated sometimes. I wasn't supposed to tell you yet, but I need you to understand something." He w

slouched beneath the bunk above him. It caused him to lean slightly forward toward us and across the white space of the buffed tile floor.

Murph and I looked at each other and waited for him to continue.

“People are going to die,” he said flatly. “It’s statistics.” Then he got up and left the room.

Somehow I slept, but fitfully. I’d wake from time to time and look out to see how the frost had gathered on the windowpanes. Murph called to me once, in the small hours before daybreak, and asked me if I thought we’d be OK. I kept looking out the window, even though the night had covered it over completely with a small layering of ice. A streetlamp glowed with a pale orange through the opacity. The air was cool and crisp in the room and I pulled my rough wool blanket tight around me. “Yeah, Murph. We’ll be OK,” I said. But I didn’t believe it.

In the morning, before first light, we dragged ourselves over the sides of the company’s deuce-and-a-half trucks and convoyed to the range. The snow had changed to rain overnight and we pulled our hoods over our helmets as far as we could. The rain was cold, percussive. The drops slid down the backs of our blouses and jackets, each one seemingly on the cusp of freezing. No one talked.

When we got to the range, we circled in the grayish snow for our safety briefing. I was tired and had a hard time focusing. The voices of the range cadre barked out through the mist like an unpractical choir. I watched the rain fall onto the dead leaves, causing a kind of shimmer in the nearly naked branches. The sound of magazines being loaded by the range detail carried over the thin winter air from the dilapidated ammo shed. The white paint peeling off the sides reminded me of a country church I’d passed on my way to school as a boy. The noise emanating from the shed was strange and mechanical and droned in my ears until I couldn’t hear a word the safety officers said. Sterling and Murph had taken their places in line to be rodded onto the range. Sterling glared at me, then cupped his rifle into the crook of his elbow and pointed at his watch. “Waiting on you, Private,” he said.

Sterling was attentive in his marksmanship instruction. Murph and I both had our highest qualification scores ever. Sterling was pleased with us and seemed to be in a good mood. “Anything less than forty out of forty is operator error,” he said. We moved to a small hill that sloped down from the firing line. We relaxed and sat at his feet as he reclined on the hill, oblivious to the snow. “I think y’all might be all right.” For a while we didn’t speak. It was enough to be satisfied with his approval. The sun was still high over the berm at the end of the range when Murph started talking.

“What’s it like over there, Sarge?” Murph asked sheepishly. He was sitting cross-legged in the snow, his rifle over his lap like he was cradling a doll.

Sterling laughed. “God, that fucking question.” He had begun gathering rocks and tossing them into my upturned Kevlar.

Murph looked away from him.

He spoke firmly. “They aren’t gonna pop up and wait for you to shoot them. Remember your fundamentals and you’ll be able to do what needs to be done. It’s hard at first, but it’s simple. Anybody can do it. Get a steady position and a good sight picture, control your breathing and squeeze. For some people, it’s tough after. But most people want to do it when the time comes.”

“Hard to imagine,” I said. “You know, whether we’ll be one or the other?”

He paused. “Better get to fucking imagining.” He started to chuckle again. “Just gotta dig deep. Find that nasty streak.”

I listened to the crack of rifles on the line. Saw branches lift and shake off snow when birds took flight, startled at the sound. The sun was small and bright in the sky. The rain had let up to a noisy drizzle.

“How do we do that?” I asked.

Sterling feigned frustration, but I could tell our solid performance on the range had given us some latitude. “Don’t worry. I’ll help.” He seemed to catch something spilling out of himself and corrected his bearing. My Kevlar was full of rocks.

“Shit,” said Murph.

“We just gotta train it up. Practice, practice, practice,” Sterling said. He laid his head down on the ground and put his feet on my upturned helmet.

Murph started to say something, but I put my hand on his shoulder. “Yeah, we get it, Sarge,” I said.

He stood up and stretched. The whole back of his uniform was wet, but it didn’t seem to bother him. “It was their idea,” he said. “Don’t forget that. It’s their idea every time. They ought to kill themselves instead of us.”

I wasn’t sure who “they” were.

Murph was looking at the ground. “So...so what are we doing?”

“Don’t worry so much, ladies. You two just hold the tail. Everything’ll be cool.”

“The tail?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he responded. “Let me fuck the dog.”

The reports of rifles disappeared. Our last task was over. We loaded back on the trucks, anxious for a pass and time with our families. I thought about what Sterling had said. I wasn’t sure he wasn’t crazy, but I trusted that he was brave. And I now know the extent of Sterling’s bravery. It was narrowly focused, but it was pure and unadulterated. It was a kind of elemental self-sacrifice, free of ideology, free of logic. He would put himself on the gallows in another boy’s place for no other reason than that he thought the noose was better suited to his neck.

And then we celebrated. There were banners and folding tables in the base gymnasium. Our families watched as we stood in formation while the battalion commander gave a rousing, earnest speech about duty, and the chaplain injected humor into somber tales of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And there were hamburgers and French fries and we were glad.

I brought a plate to my mother and sat across from her, a small distance away from the throngs of mothers hanging on their sons’ shoulders, the fathers holding their hands on their hips, smiling on cue. She’d been crying. She rarely wore makeup but it ran down into the hollows of her eyes that day. A smudge on the back of her wrist where she’d rubbed the tears away while sitting in the barracks parking lot in our ancient gold Chrysler.

“I told you not to do this, John,” she said.

I clenched my jaw. I was still young enough then for the weak mannerisms of rebellion. I had practiced them from the time I turned twelve until I left our house, when I got fed up with nothing and called the only cab that had ever graced our long gravel driveway. “It’s done, Ma.”

She paused and took a deep in-breath. “OK. I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. Let’s have a nice time.” She smiled and patted the back of my hands where they sat on the table and her eyes welled a little.

And we did have a nice time. I was relieved. As I sat up listlessly the night before the range, I’d run through all the possibilities that lay before me. I became certain that I’d die, then certain that I’d live, then certain that I’d be wounded, then uncertain of anything. It had been all I could do to keep from pacing the cold tiles, looking out the window for some sign in the snow or the lamplight. I remained uncertain. But I settled on the fear that I would die and my mother would have to bury a son she thought was angry. That she’d take the flag and see me lowered into the brown Virginia dirt. That she’d hear the salute of rifle shots roll in quick succession through the air, the whole time thinking that they sounded like the door I slammed when I was eighteen and she was in the backyard picking honeysuckle off the fence.

I went outside to smoke and see my mother off. I kissed her on the cheek and surprised myself with the force of my lips. "You need to quit those things," she said.

"I know, Ma. I will." I stubbed the cherry out beneath my boot. She hugged me and I could smell her hair, her perfume, my whole life back home. "I'll write as soon as I can, OK?"

She stepped slowly away from me, raised her hand to wave and turned and walked toward the car. I remember following her taillights as they turned out of the parking lot, watched them grow smaller as they passed the PT field and turned again toward the guard shack at the base's exit, where they disappeared. I lit another cigarette.

Most of the families had gone by then. Most but Murph's mother and a few others I didn't know. I saw Murph leading her by the hand throughout the gymnasium, investigating each small cluster of remaining people briefly, then moving on. I didn't realize they were looking for me until Murph turned in my direction and I saw him mouth something to his mother. I got up from the chair where I'd been sitting and waited for them to cross over the painted lines of the basketball court that had been used for our festivities.

Mrs. LaDonna Murphy hugged me tightly when I met her. She was small and frail-looking in a weathered sort of way, but younger than my mother. She smiled broadly when she looked at me, still wrapping her arms around my waist, looking up and showing me teeth slightly browned by smoke. Her hair was a faded blond worn in a bun, and she had on jeans and a blue button-up work shirt.

"Five more minutes, men," one of the NCOs called.

She released me from her embrace and said excitedly, "I'm just so proud of you guys. Daniel's told me so much about you. I feel like I know you already."

"Yes, ma'am. Me too."

"So y'all are getting to be good friends?"

I looked over at Murph and he gave me an apologetic shrug. "Yes, ma'am," I said. "We roomed together and everything."

"Well, I want you to know if y'all need anything, I'm gonna take care of you. Y'all will get more care packages than anyone."

"That's really kind of you, Mrs. Murphy."

Sterling called Murph to help another private sweep up red, white and blue confetti from around the three-point line of the court.

"And you're gonna look out for him, right?" she asked.

"Um, yes, ma'am."

"And Daniel, he's doing a good job?"

"Yes, ma'am, very good." How the hell should I know, lady? I wanted to say. I barely knew the guy. Stop. Stop asking me questions. I don't want to be accountable. I don't know anything about this.

"John, promise me that you'll take care of him."

"Of course." Sure, sure, I thought. Now you reassure me and I'll go back and go to bed.

"Nothing's gonna happen to him, right? Promise that you'll bring him home to me."

"I promise," I said. "I promise I'll bring him home to you."

Sterling caught me later as I was walking back from the gym to our barracks. He was sitting on the front stoop and I stopped to smoke a cigarette. "It's kind of nice out tonight, huh, Sarge?"

He stood up and started pacing back and forth. "I overheard you talking to Private Murphy's mother."

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