

MISSED CALLS

by Eric Tseng

My eyes lingered at the empty parking-lot, illuminated by dim florescent street lamps and spots of red and green traffic lights. Graduation was a few short months away.

"So, have you made a decision?" Amy asked as she sat across the coffee shop's mesh patio table; her brows lifted as she held a cup of hot tea in the cold October evening--cold by Northern California standards. She wore a scarf and a grey woolen overcoat, complimenting her short, brunette hair and fair complexion. I liked to think that we've been dating.

I set my cup down. "Not yet. I gotta choose soon."

"It's. . . a tough choice." She said softly--empathetically. She took another sip. I wondered what she really thought.

I looked back at the empty parking-lot, recalling what my father said. He looked at me while we were seated in the living room, offering again what I ignored. He'd pay all the fees I'd owe the Army if I left my contract. He'd pay everything back--that he had the money now. Tempted, I thought about it. I could take a life of freedom--a life that I suddenly found myself drawn towards, or I could continue on with the contract and be *honorable*--an intangible,

illogical feeling that still somehow affected my reasoning.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, I’ll stick with my plan. I’ll keep applying to jobs. If I get one, I’ll go reserves and stay around here.”

She smiled. “I would like that. I like the routine we have going on, hanging out, drinking tea. . . eating stinky tofu.” We chuckled for a moment. “It’s always a good breath of sanity after work, you know? It’s nice being with you.” She scratched her paper cup. “So, my company is looking for a Wordpress web designer. Maybe you could apply?”

Even though I had created my own website through Drupal and programmed my own theme and widgets through PHP, I wasn’t entirely confident. After all, I was a Psych major, not a Computer Science major. “I. . . don’t think I have the proper qualifications for that.”

“I see.” She gave me her dimpled half-smile. “Back to your plan. When do you have a say ‘til they decide for you?”

“The end of the month.”

She nodded. I imagined she understood what I understood--that I was going Active Duty, defaulted through inaction.

#

Michael Janus deployed first. The day he left, in the opening months of 2011, I pictured him holding his head high as he stepped toward a military transport plane with a heavy pack slung over his right shoulder. The weeks preceding, he told me about training with his National Guard unit. Often referred to as "Nasty Guard", "Weekend Warrior", and "Saturday Samurai" by Active Duty personnel, National Guardsmen carry a stigma of being under-equipped, underfunded, unfit, and poorly trained. Despite this, Janus and a fellow Guardsman, Jeff Simonson, continued on their chosen path.

While we were in ROTC, they had more experience than the cadets selected for Active

Duty. They lead real units; they commanded real Soldiers. Even then, Simonson shied away amidst criticism. But Janus, he quickly stood tall and strong, ready to defend. He looked like a born warrior with a large, Syrid nose, long, thin lips, focused eyes, broad shoulders, and an athletic build. But when unprovoked, a softness seemed to overtake him. His eyes didn't seem as intense, especially behind those thin-rimmed glasses. He smiled. He looked approachable. He was a loving man.

Janus and Simonson became inseparable. During three hour drives to and from Fort Hunter Liggett for Field Training Exercises, we often heard Simonson's loud, distinguishable voice cracking jokes as Janus giggled louder than a kid. A few months after graduation and commissioning, Simonson stood next to Janus as his best-man. Soon after, Janus deployed to Iraq.

I received word of my selection for Active Duty on November 2011. At that time, Iraq remained largely ignored. The war calmed from the earlier torrents of sectarian violence, and President Obama ordered the withdrawal of all forces by December. Afghanistan soon stole the spotlight. Because of all this, I wasn't excessively worried about Janus; I placed that worry on Lieutenant Bautista, a Filipino-American infantry platoon leader deployed to what was known as the Devil's Playground in Afghanistan.

Bautista trained me up for an "Excellent" rating at the Leadership Development and Accessions Course at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. He kept me company the week before I jumped out of airplanes--day and night--at Airborne School, Fort Benning, Georgia. He shaped me from a timid boy into a confident man, willing to lead.

At Veteran's Day, Bautista returned from Afghanistan for R&R--his mid-tour leave. I was excited to see him again. I wanted to ask him about his deployment, about his time in the sandbox and outside the wire. I wanted to learn from him. When I entered the house and greeted him, he didn't seem any different.

“How the fuck have you been, loser?” He said with a big grin.

I laughed as I shook his hand and pulled in for a hug. “It’s been great! Just enjoying my last bit of freedom.”

“Enjoying college? Partying it up?”

“Not really, just hanging out with my old friends.”

“You need to enjoy it while it lasts, man.”

I nodded my head.

“I marinated this chicken last night. It’s going to be good. Want to help me grill this thing?”

“Of course.”

As we ate hotdogs and chicken outside with the smoke and sizzle of barbeque, he asked me about life. I told him about Amy, college, and my thoughts about the future. He scoffed, “Man-up. Just pull the trigger and ask her out, even if it’ll just be for a few more months. Enjoy your time together.” We talked as if he never left the States and simply vacationed for a few months, but the moment I asked him about Afghanistan, he shook his head. “I’ll talk about that shit later. Let’s just enjoy this food and sunlight. You don’t know what you have here.”

But as the day and drinking went on, he finally pulled me aside and said, "Never deploy. It sucks. Whatever you do, don't deploy." I looked at him blankly and nodded. That was the only thing he told me about Afghanistan.

A week later, he returned to the Devil's Playground and led a patrol. One of his Soldiers would sustain a traumatic lower extremity amputation caused by an improvised explosive device (IED). An explosion tore off his legs. The gravity of my decision weighed heavy. In a month, I would become a Lieutenant in the Active Duty Army, away from the comforts of home and possibly sent to the uncompromising risks of armed combat. The lives of 40 sons and daughters would be in my hands. I recalled what Bautista said, "Whatever you do, don't deploy." I

wondered if he secretly meant, *Don't go through with all this. Don't go Army. Be safe. Stay home.*

Home. I never thought of San Jose as home until that past year. That night, I drove around the city. I drove past my house and up the hill I used to take my ex-girlfriend. To the park I used to run away to, away from my father's golf clubs, sticks, belts, and hard metallic toys. To that dead-end street overlooking the city. It looked different at night, with the lone, yellow streetlamp illuminating the fence and nothing else. No mansions or fancy cars, just the city lights below dancing with the waves of heat dissipating from the black asphalt. I sat there with my music on, trying to imagine my future.

As I looked at the flashes of traffic lights and the flowing ribbons of cars, I thought to myself that I'd miss it all. After years of searching, I had finally found home and happiness. Life was filled with possibilities. Solid friendships formed in recent years. The possibility of *love*. It all felt right--it felt natural to settle in. I didn't want it to end.

#

The following week--the week of my birthday--Janus returned from Iraq, months too early. It came as a surprise. "Congrats, bro," he messaged on Facebook as he accepted an invitation to my Commissioning Ceremony--the day I recite the oath to become a United States Army Officer, "I just got back from Southern Iraq."

"Glad to hear that you're back safely. Is this for R&R or for good?"

"I'm ETS'ing. Got two top block OERs (Officer Evaluation Reports), a high award with a Valor device. I'm good."

ETS--*Expiration Term of Service*--5 years too early for his National Guard contract. He was forced to leave the Army. I wondered why, but nevertheless replied as if I was ignorant.

"Nice!"

"I spent the last month in the hospital."

"Oh man, what happened?"

"No comment. Regardless to say, I was a MEDEVAC."

He must have been medically discharged, I thought. "Damn. Are you back at 100 percent?"

"If you mean physically, yes. Otherwise, no. I'm good though, brother, no worries. I'll be fine."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

He paused for a minute before continuing, "So I've always had a lot of trust and confidence in your integrity. Can I count on it now?"

I looked off screen, leaving my fingers hovering over the keyboard. I was worried about what I was about to hear. He prematurely left the Army; he was likely about to tell me the reason. I typed, "Of course."

"I finished my mission. I ended up commanding 128 Soldiers and running healthcare for southern Iraq."

"Impressive"

"Got banged up a bit. Now that I'm at home, my plans have changed a bit to the left. This might strike you hard, but I'm changing my gender. I've got a two-star General and a Colonel trying to keep me in the Army. I was offered the job of Assistant to the Director of Madigan Army Medical Center."

My hands fell onto my knees. His poor wife.

"I'm already in the process of changing my gender. My troops in Iraq don't care about this because I cared for them. Back here, people are a hit and miss, but my work is untouchable."

I didn't know how else to respond. "I respect your decision."

"Fair enough. Figured I earned that much. If you still wish for me to appear at your

Commissioning Ceremony, let me know. Otherwise, I don't mean to tarnish it for you."

I wondered how my Colonel and classmates would react. I tried to stall, "Has that decision always lingered in your mind or has it come recently?"

"No, it has always been there."

I thought about the days we spent together in the field, watching the training we planned come to fruition. He was a good friend. I felt guilty for even considering no. "I still wish for you to appear at my event."

He didn't acknowledge my response. Instead, he quickly changed the topic. "I plan to party Friday and Saturday. When can we do a face to face?"

"I'm free Saturday morning and afternoon. Will Simonson be dropping by your party on Saturday?"

"Likely yes. Simonson and I are pretty close as friends."

"That's good. I haven't seen that guy in a while. Well, I gotta wake up for PT early tomorrow. I'll talk to you soon. Take care, brother."

"Later, brother. And it is a bit closer to sister now."

I signed off Facebook and sat back in my chair, exhausted from the conversation. I wondered what he looked like--how much he'd changed physically and mentally. I wondered if I'd still recognize him.

Two days after our first chat, I spoke with him again on Facebook. He talked to me as if he didn't remember our earlier conversation. About his decision to change genders. About his upcoming party. About his top block OERs, high award with a Valor device, and subsequent MEDEVAC. I went along, sometimes subtly reminding him that we had spoken earlier. My eyebrows rolled down as I responded. Something seemed off. During our ROTC staff meetings, he was strong and silent. He never spoke until something worth saying developed in his mind. Every time he did articulate, he was profound; the room would hush up and listen. Now, he was

repeating himself. This couldn't be him.

#

That Saturday, I took the scenic route along San Tomas Expressway. I turned into his quaint neighborhood, outlined by autumn trees rocking and shedding from the strong wind. While parking my car across the street by the side of the road, I looked at his two story townhouse. A wooden gate hid the front patio. As I entered through the gate, I heard two dogs frantically running from the back. I rang the doorbell. A German Shepard and a young Siberian Husky ran behind the fence and looked at me through the metal bars. I rang the doorbell once more. The dogs rattled against the fence. Nothing. So I turned around, and marched out the front gate. I jogged across the street, jumped in my car, and pressed my head against my hands gripping the steering wheel. I was a terrible friend, afraid of seeing him. Out of guilt, I texted, asking if he was home--told him to call me back.

After 15 minutes, my phone vibrated. "Hey Tseng, are you still coming?"

"I am. I'm actually parked right by the street. Are you guys inside?"

"We are. Let me get my friend, Lulu, to come get you. Asian girl with jeans and a grey shirt."

"Ok. Thanks."

I left my car and met Lulu by the wooden gate. She was a quiet girl with a pronounced under-bite and long, straight hair. She was a Marine. When the front door opened, Janus's wife, Lauren, held back her jumping dogs. The last time I saw her, they still lived at their old apartment. At the time, she seemed happy, energetic, and sociable. She had a consistent smile on her pale face--her skin seemed to pull tight from her ponytail. Now, she avoided eye contact. She quietly muttered, "Hi." She looked tired.

"How have you been?" I asked enthusiastically as I entered the house. It was expansive, sparsely decorated, and dark. Wood furniture populated the large room. On the far side was the

kitchen and dining table. Close to the front door were couches and a large 55-inch flat screen TV. I wondered how they could afford all this.

Still busy with the dogs, Lauren looked up at me, "Oh, I've been okay. We just got some lunch if you'd like to sit and eat with us." Still, no smile.

I looked at the dining table. There sat a man with a long pony tail. He was too old to be Janus. He stuck his hand out. "Hi, I'm Jacob. You must be Tseng."

I shook his hand. "Hey, Jacob. Where's Janus at?"

"Upstairs. She's fixing something. Join us and eat."

Jacob and Lulu sat down and ate Subway sandwiches. I told myself I would eat later. The dogs ran around the table, begging for food. "Pretty dogs." I said.

"They really are." Jacob agreed. "The small Husky is Nikki. Georgie is the big, slobbering, wild goose." Nikki crawled up between my legs and looked up at me. I smiled and rubbed her long winter coat.

"I should probably say hi to Janus. Would he mind if I came upstairs?"

His wife stood up from her chair and started walking toward the stairs. Without looking at me, she said, "I'll check for you. She'll probably be okay with it." I looked down at my sandwich, fighting the desire to immediately ask questions. Why he wasn't downstairs with his guests? Where were his friends? Where's Simonson? I heard his wife walk down the stairs.

"Yeah, she wants you upstairs. First door to your left." I thanked her as I jogged up.

"Janus?" I called out. I peeped inside the first door to the left. He wasn't there. I checked the other rooms.

I heard a faint "I'm here." He sounded effeminate; his voice was half an octave higher than I remembered.

"Where?"

"In the bathroom." I ran back to the first door I checked. "You're getting warmer." he

said. I quickly walked in and saw him standing in front of the bathroom mirror. He wore skinny jeans and a skin-tight, purple turtle-neck. He was applying super glue to an inch-long open gash on the bottom of his chin.

After a long moment of silence, I finally asked, "What happened over there in Iraq?"

"That's straight to the point. Before I answer that, do you mind helping me out with this real quick?"

"What do you need me to do?"

"Provide traction as I apply superglue to close the wound." I pinched the wound closed as he sloppily squeezed the tube against his gashed chin. I wondered if his aim is poor due to fatigue. It took him a couple tries before finally running out of tubes. "Well, fuck, that didn't work."

"We can try again if you want."

"No, that's okay. I'm out of superglue anyways." I stepped back toward the door. He looked at me and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm--I'm alright."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"That's good." He opened up his make-up bag and started applying foundation. "Can you be a sweetheart and grab that purse on the bed? There's more make-up in there."

"Sure." I grabbed the purse and handed it to him. He painted his long fingernails purple. He opened up the purse and started to apply red blush to his cheeks. I stared at him. This was such a change. The Janus I knew wore conservative collared shirts and work-khakis. Nothing fancy. I already knew his answer, but I asked to be sure, "So did you decide to change your gender before or after the war?"

"I've always wanted to."

I nodded my head, thinking of other things to ask. "So, what happened in Iraq?"

"Let me show you." He sucked in his lips after applying red lipstick and set aside his make-up case. He lifted up his left ankle, grabbed my hand, and brought it down to his anklebone. "Feel that." The anklebone was significantly larger.

"What is that?"

"That's metal."

"They did a great job."

"They really did. Also, there's this." He lifted up his shirt and pulled down his pants until tufts of pubic hair slipped out the top. A large scar ran down his right oblique. I quickly looked away, not because of the scarring but rather his privates were almost showing. "Open up that cabinet over there." Rows of medication ran across. "I have to take all that every day."

"How did this happen?"

"Follow me." He quickly walked toward the room on the other end of the hallway. As I entered that room, I looked around. Shelves of computer games and movies lined up across the walls. At his desk was his laptop, hooked into two monitors. "Sit down." He ordered. I pulled up a chair a few feet from his. "While we were over there, Al Qaeda never hit us. They agreed that as long as our pull out date remained the same, they would not attack. The Iranian Special Forces on the other hand," he opened up a video on the bookmark menu, "they're training Iraqi insurgents. Do you know what an EFP is?"

I shook my head.

He continued, "That's an improvised warhead that melts and forms copper and uses that molten copper to pierce armor. Well, here's a video that the Iranian Special Forces--the Quds--filmed. They attacked one of my convoys." He clicked play as I leaned forward for a closer look. There, a convoy of MRAPs (Mine Resistant, Ambush Protected vehicles) drove down a dirt road. They were large armored trucks with thick, plated hulls and windows. The

camerawork was shaky and a man spoke quietly in a foreign language. Suddenly, sparks and a continuous stream of explosions erupted where the convoy once stood. I looked at Janus. His eyes glued to the screen.

"Is this how you got MEDEVAC-ed?"

"No. I was defending a perimeter from an attack when that happened. A rocket landed next to me. I've been ambushed while in a convoy though. Watch this video." Again, he clicked on a link bookmarked on his main menu. This time, sirens sounded loudly as a stream of rapid tracer fire illuminated the night sky. A stream of small explosions quickly followed. "Have you seen this system before?"

"That destroys incoming mortar and rocket rounds right? Active protection."

"Yes. I don't know how many times these things saved my life. Amazing piece of equipment. Every night was like this. Three, four times a night."

I realized he was showing me these videos not to remember, but rather to help me see what he saw. He wanted me to relate to his experiences. He wanted to talk to me. He continued to show me videos and pictures of his deployment: tents riddled with bullets and shrapnel; his Soldiers taking cover during a rocket attack; a picture of him storing packets of blood in an ice-cream refrigerator--the fridge for blood was busted. He was angry at the press for seemingly ignoring Iraq. He was getting attacked every day. He felt abandoned. I felt guilty, having forgotten that he was there while I was enjoying the free and safe life of a civilian. He seemed on edge the entire time, hands balled into fists. I looked at Janus staring at the screen and finally asked, "Are you doing okay? How are you? Honestly."

"Honestly?" He paused and looked me straight in the eye. "Honestly, I'm fucked up. The doctors told me I have severe PTSD. The other day, I tried walking Georgie with Lauren and I couldn't make it down half a block. It was garbage day and I couldn't stop myself from thinking what were in those bins. They were lined up all the way down the street."

I assumed he had PTSD from his behaviors, so I wasn't surprised. I tried to put myself in his shoes. "Did you feel naked without a weapon? Did you feel the need to check every corner, alleyway, and vehicle? Be wary of anyone walking towards you?"

"Yes. All that. It's hard to get all that out of your system. I had to do all that every single day for almost a *year*."

"What's it like being back?"

"Surreal. Everything is so peaceful here. Calm. I don't get it. This one time I was at a restaurant and a lady was complaining about having too much ice in her cup. I wanted to slap that cup out of her hand and say, 'Are you happy now?' People worry about useless things here."

His wife then opened the door, giving us a strange look. She pointed at it and said, "I don't want this door closed."

Janus quipped, "Why not?"

She stared at him with a stone-cold expression and continued, "I'm going to visit Will at the hospital."

"Did you guys get the sandwiches?"

She shook her head as she spoke. "Yeah, the sandwiches have been downstairs."

"Why are they downstairs? Bring them up."

She stared at him, shook her head once more, and walked back down. I wanted to say something. Instead, I asked, "Where's Simonson?"

"He should be coming. Did you know that he was at the runway when I came in to California? I don't know how he found out, but he was there with me. He was the first guy to see me back."

Lauren quickly came back up with two sandwiches in hand. "Here you go." she said as she thrust them toward us."

Janus stood up and looked at his wife. "Now. . . tell me where you're going."

She put her hands on her hips and looked down, "I'm going to visit Will at the hospital."

"What? What happened to Will?"

"You don't remember? God, Jess." She turned and began walking toward the door.

"Hey. Wait." Janus walked toward his wife and put his hand on her shoulder, leading her out to another room. I sat there quietly, hearing their muffled voices increase in volume, arguing. It must be hard for her. I wanted to talk to her. Comfort her. Calm her down and tell her that I know it must be hard taking care of Janus and if she needs any help, I can be there for them. But I didn't. I didn't want to interfere in their affairs. I didn't want to make them feel uncomfortable.

As they were away, I finished my sandwich and threw away the wrapper. Six empty beer bottles sat on the bottom of the bin. I pulled out my phone to check the time. I had to leave. He saw me looking at my phone as he came back.

"Are you leaving?"

"I have to. I've got friends celebrating my birthday without me. I'll come back tomorrow, though."

"I'll walk you out." Lulu and Jacob were nowhere to be found, so I walked to my car and left.

#

We sat in a private booth in suits and dresses. Scott, his sister, and Amy brought out their gifts between dinner and dessert. It was just the four of us.

"Happy birthday!" They all said in unison after singing the birthday song. I smiled and said thanks.

"Well, buddy, here's my gift." Scott said. He handed me a gift-bag stuffed with tissues. It felt light.

"You cheap bastard." I joked.

"Whatever. I think you'll like it."

I looked inside and pulled out the tissues. It was an engraved lighter.

“Thanks, man. This is pretty cool.”

“I thought I owed you something after all those coaching sessions after work.”

I laughed. “Yeah, you’re getting there. Maybe you can finally keep up with your work-crush whenever you decide to grow a pair and run with her.”

“Ha. We’ll see if that ever happens.” We smiled and glanced in Amy’s direction.

“Well, I guess it’s my turn.” She spoke with an exhale. She handed me a small wrapped box. I felt around the edges and gave her a look.

“I wonder what this is?”

She smiled. “Well, you’ll just have to open it.”

I unwrapped it, revealing a book for fiction writers.

“Thanks... I actually was looking for something like this.”

“I know.” She smiled once more. “That’s not all.” She reached down and pulled out another wrapped box, bigger than the last. She handed it to me.

I gave her another look and tilted my head.

“You’ll just have to open that one, too.”

I unwrapped it and opened the top, revealing a wool scarf with earth tones--just my style. I often complained to her about not owning enough scarves for the winter. She listened.

“I was actually hoping for something like this.”

“I know.” She said again with a smile.

We left dinner and watched a movie that night, and later, bar hopped with a larger group of friends around Campbell and Downtown San Jose. I knew that would be my last birthday with my hometown friends--at least for a few years. It was bittersweet.

At 2 AM, as we walked back to Scott’s car after leaving the bars, my phone suddenly vibrated in my coat pocket. Janus was calling me. I answered the phone and told him I had to

go and then hung up, wondering why he called.

When I woke up the next day, I saw that he texted me early in the morning: "Hey Tseng, when are you coming over today?"

I texted him back, "Around 8. I'll see you then alright bud?" Two hours later, my phone rang again. He kept calling throughout the day. I found myself ignoring his calls, letting my phone vibrate in my jacket pocket.

I stopped by Janus's house at 8 PM, true to my word. Lauren opened the door and waved me in. She and Janus were playing cards with a much older, heavysset man. He had grey hair and dressed in a blazer and khakis. He introduced himself with a smile. "Hi, I'm Fred." I smiled and shook his hand. Janus walked me over to the kitchen, handed me a plate, and said, "Help yourself to dinner. Rice is in the pot and stir-fry is in the pan." I thanked him.

As I walked to the dinner table, I noticed that Lauren was in much better spirits. She talked with her husband and they smiled at each other every few seconds. As I sat down, Janus asked, "Hey Tseng, do you know how to play poker?"

I smiled and responded, "I do, but it's been years."

"I'll run you by the rules." He continued to explain every detail, including the dealer's script word for word. He demanded high standards, but we feigned smiles and divvied out playing chips. He was the first to deal.

After a few hands, Janus's intensity began to settle. The couple began smiling together while Fred drove the group's conversation. Eventually, Janus's wife decided set her cards down; she just wanted to sit and chat. Suddenly, Janus sniped, "According to rules, if someone wants to sit with the table, he or she needs to pay the ante."

She glared at him, "It's just a game with fake chips. It doesn't matter!"

"Exactly. The chips are *fake*. It shouldn't matter to you if you have to pay the ante. I'm just saying, the rules state that if someone wants to sit with the table, he or she needs to pay the

ante."

Fred and I looked at each other. Both of us itched to say something, but we didn't know who to defend. We didn't want to antagonize Janus--he had a mental disorder which made him irritable and overly vigilant. But he was wrong here. Finally, Fred and I jumped to Lauren's defense.

"It's ok, Janus, it's just a game."

"We'd love to have Lauren to sit with us."

Regardless, Lauren stood up and said, "No, I don't want to sit here anyways. I need to do some chores." She walked toward the couches by the front door.

Janus quickly said, "That's fine. Let's keep playing, guys." Fred and I looked at each other again and shrugged.

After a few hands, Janus asked if I wanted to be the dealer. I responded with hesitation, "I'm a newbie to this. I don't know if I'm the best man for the job."

"Ridiculous." He handed me the deck of cards.

Fred called out to Lauren, "Hey, we're starting a new game. Would you like to join us?" She walked over and sat down.

"It's great to have you back with us. The ante is 5. Deuces are wild." I said. I shuffled the cards and dealt their hands as well as the community cards. They threw in the ante. I continued while looking at Fred, "The bid is to you, sir." Fred threw down a chip and I placed it behind the first community card. "Fred raises 10." I looked at Janus and said, "The bid is to you, sir. 10 to call." Suddenly, Janus stared at me with burning eyes. Fred and Lauren glanced at each other and then quickly back at me.

"Excuse me?" he said.

For a second, I didn't know what the issue was. Suddenly, it dawned to me. "Sorry, ma'am. The bid is to you. 10 to call." *She*, Janus, slid a chip fast my way. The game continued.

Midway through, Janus got up from the table.

"Hun, can you keep throwing in the ante for me? I need to check something upstairs."

Lauren nodded her head.

"Hey, Michael," I said, "where should I put my bowl at?"

Janus laughed in disgust, "What did you call me?"

Both Fred and Lauren quickly turned to me and whispered, "Jess. Her name is Jess."

"I mean Jess. I'm sorry."

"Just throw it in the dishwasher." She shook her head and walked toward the stairs.

Lauren kept watching Janus until she was visibly gone. She turned to Fred and talked in a soft voice, "He keeps beer in that fridge upstairs. I've tried to stop him but--" She looked defeated. "Do you know how many hours of sleep I've gotten since he's been back?" I noticed her use of *he* and *him*. I wondered why.

Fred asked, "How many?"

"One hour or two per night. He hallucinates and yells. I always have to take care of him. A few nights ago, he yelled and ran toward the stairs. He fell down and gashed his chin open. I had to clean out all the blood."

Fred responded, "So *that's* how he got that. I thought that was from something else."

"I can't take this shit anymore. It's so hard."

Fred gave her a sympathetic smile and said, "If you guys need anything, let me know."

Lauren returned a weak smile and then turned toward me. "Never get deployed. It really fucks you up in the head."

I shook my head. "My friend said something similar."

We all heard Janus's heavy steps down the stairs and looked in her direction.

"What. . . are you guys talking about me?"

Fred smiled at him and said, "No, we're just waiting on you to get back here."

Toward the end of the game, Fred said that it was time for him to go. That was our cue to stop. We stood up and said our goodbyes. Janus and Fred hugged each other.

"You're an amazing man." Janus said.

"Jess, you're an amazing woman."

"Not yet, Fred. Almost there. That reminds me." They released their hug. Janus opened up a box of patches. She rolled up her sleeve and peeled off the patch on her shoulder. Lauren rolled on a new one.

Fred asked, "Hormone patches?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

Fred laughed, "Well, you don't smoke. I really should get going. It was nice meeting you, Eric. Take care, Lauren." We watched him leave.

Lauren turned to Janus and asked, "When are you going to bed? I really want you to sleep earlier tonight. I'm tired."

"Soon, Hun. First I want to show Tseng some uniforms and pictures."

"No. . . Don't."

"Fine. I won't, but I just want to talk to my friend."

"Okay. Don't be long."

"Okay. Wait here, Tseng. I have to take some medication."

I nodded my head and watched her jog toward the stairs, painfully aware that she'll likely be drinking. I turned to Lauren. "You doing okay?"

"I'm okay. Just stressed."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Just try to get him to bed early. I'm tired."

Janus came back down in a hustle. "Come. I want to show you something." Before she tried to walk off, Lauren touched her hand and said, "Don't close the door and *don't* have another

drink. I'm going to finish folding the clothes and then I'll wait for you in bed."

"Okay, Hun. Let's go, Tseng."

We both walked upstairs and into her computer room. As we entered, she grabbed another beer in her fridge. She sat in her chair and picked up a pair of boots on the ground. "Pull up a chair," she said. I rolled one by her desk and sat next to her. She looked at the open door. "Hang on." She walked over, closed it, and locked it. As she did that, I noticed empty beer bottles on her desk. I wondered why she would lock the door. I wanted to say something-- maybe prevent another tough argument for her wife, but I didn't. I let her carry on. She sat back down with the boots in hand. She then asked me, "Are you okay?" I nodded my head and wondered why she kept asking. She continued, "What we do is serious." She talked slowly. Her voice slurred. She was drunk. "I wanted to grab the rest of the uniform, but I think these boots are enough." I looked down on the boots and noticed that they were stained with blood. She opened up a bookmarked page on her computer. There was a picture of a young, handsome man in uniform. The title of the article mentioned his death in Iraq. Killed by an Improvised Explosive Device. "This kid was my turret gunner. He was an MP (Military Police) attached to me as an escort. In the back, we had four other MP dismounts. We were driving back from setting up healthcare with a near-by village when we were struck."

"Is this when you got MEDEVAC-ed?"

"No, that was a different day. Other guys pulled out the dismounts. I pulled him out from the vehicle." She paused. "One of his legs was gone. So was the back of his head. But he was still alive. He kept talking to me. He kept saying sorry. I tried my best to stabilize him. I called in a 9-line (the procedure for calling in a MEDEVAC)." She looked down on her boots. "I wore these boots. These boots have his blood on them. Same with the uniform, but I don't want to pull that out right now. These boots are enough."

I didn't know what to say. She continued on. "When I got back to base, I went straight to

the field hospital. When I got there, nurses were working hard on keeping the four dismounts alive. I joined in to help. The turret gunner had already died. As this happened, my First Sergeant came in and said to me, 'You're out of uniform, sir. You should get into the proper uniform.' I turned to him. . . and told him to stay in his room until I called for him. I was ready to un-holster my pistol and shoot his fucking head. I couldn't *stand* looking at him." As she said this, her eyes burned. She stared straight at me and continued. "Toward the end of my deployment, it was easier for me to shoot a human being than a dog or a cat. The first time I did it though. . ." I sat back in my chair, wondering if she's ever opened up like this with anyone else. "Human beings don't die quick. They contort and quiver. It takes a while for them to fully die. The first time I did it--it was painful for me. The sergeant accompanying me patted me on my back and said, 'Good job, LT.' I was congratulated for ending someone's life." She breathed out in disgust. "Imagine that. Getting congratulated for ending another human being's life as if it was no big deal." She picked up her beer and finished it.

"How many people did you kill?"

Quietly, she said to me, "Don't--*Don't* fucking ask me or *anyone* that question. Ask me something else."

"I'm sorry. What shouldn't I ask?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

I sat there, wondering what questions wouldn't offend her or bring back horrific memories. But at the same time, I wanted to treat her normally. I wanted to approach her like I would any other human being. I felt she appreciated my directness. She continued, "Do you know what my nickname was over there?"

She told me online. "Cutthroat Dixie?"

"No. Cutthroat Pixie. At the start, they called me 'Butter Bar' like any other Second Lieutenant. Toward the end of my deployment, I was called Cutthroat Pixie."

"Why did you get that nickname?"

Again, she paused for a second. "We'll talk about it later."

"Did Simonson ever come to your parties?"

"No. I don't know where he was."

Simonson abandoned his best friend. Earlier, I texted him to come, but never got a reply.

How he could let himself do that? I heard footsteps approach the door. It was Lauren. The locked door rattled. Janus got up and unlocked it for her. She probed, "Why is the door locked?"

Janus responded, "We just needed privacy."

She gave me a weird look. "Okay. . . Well, I'm going to bed. Don't take longer than an hour. No more beers, okay? And don't lock the door."

"Okay." Janus said. As Lauren walked off, Janus closed the door and locked it again. She grabbed another beer from the fridge and sat back down. As she drank it, she tried to give me advice. "When you deploy, always maintain your sense of integrity and moral compass. Always do the right thing." I nodded as she continued, "*Always* do the right thing. No matter what. You know right from wrong, correct?"

Her eyes continued to burn into me. I didn't know how to respond; I wondered if she was asking a trick question--if she'd tell me 'bullshit' after saying yes. I replied, "I like to think I know right from wrong."

"You know right from wrong. Back in ROTC, you struck me as a man of integrity." Again, I nodded my head. She paused for a second before continuing, "Ask me any questions. I have top block OERs, a high award with a V device, and top recommendations. I know what the fuck I'm talking about."

Her slurring worsened. I glanced at the computer screen. It was around 11:30 PM. Again, I looked at the ground, trying my best to think of questions to ask. I knew she wanted me to. It was good for her to verbalize her experience there, so I asked away. She showed me how

she would greet and talk to Iraqi village elders. She talked about the good she did for Basra. How she believed the Iranians wanted that port for themselves as soon as we left. After an hour, I told her that it was getting late. She walked me to the door and asked me to hang out with her tomorrow. I agreed and left.

#

The last time I saw Janus was a few weeks after the poker game. She wore bright-red lipstick, heavy foundation, a necklace, and woman's clothing. Physically, she wasn't very convincing as a woman. Her hair was still short, and she had broad shoulders. People stared, waiters whispered, and she drank heavily. When Lulu and I asked her to stop, Janus commanded us to stop the nagging and labeled us idiots. After that, I stopped seeing her. She barraged me with phone calls, but I chose to ignore them, telling myself that I'd call back as soon as life became less busy. I wondered if Simonson told himself that too.

#

I graduated December 2011. I was the only graduating ROTC student in my university that quarter, so they held the commissioning ceremony solely for me. By then, combat missions in Iraq had officially come to a close. I had a feeling it wouldn't last.

My parents, who opposed my choice to join the Army, were set to attend. I stood in the empty, white hall filled with rows of seats in my Dress Blue uniform, looking at their reserved chairs alongside my brother's. In the back of the hall, I had arranged a line of tables for catering. I hoped they would arrive on time as planned. It was hours before the ceremony would start, and I was tired from spending the night prior finalizing the montage of videos and photos constituting my life as a toddler to the man I had become. The ceremony script demanded such a video, typically made for every commissioning Officer by the commissioning class.

The week prior, I found dusty camcorder tapes stashed and buried in the garage and under the aging TV stand. I extracted the footage, converting it all into digital format and watched

patiently as the video played on the screen during the process. There I was, climbing boulders in Yosemite as a two year old. There I was with paint on my face, clumsily crawling under our old coffee table with a slight smile as I stared back at the camcorder. There I was, holding my mother's hand as we walked toward the beach. Her late biological father stood in reflection, watching the foaming water retreat from the sand.

I vaguely remembered those scenes. The happier times. My mother must have taken the footage of me looking out the towering airport window at the taxiing planes--my father wouldn't have bothered filming that. He demanded purpose, not sentiment. I looked on at her work, the parts of me sitting with my brother with our favorite stuffed animals, pretending to play piano, biking in small circles on my tricycle, around my father smoking a cigarette. I smiled as the video played. I knew my mother would appreciate my effort. I doubt she knew the footage still existed.

My Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel Liu, walked into the hall in his Dress Blues alongside the Executive Officer, Major Cutter, and the program's top Sergeant, Master Sergeant Michaelson. I snapped into the position of attention and called the assisting Cadets to the same. The Colonel was also from Taiwan--like my parents. I hoped he would ease my parents' fears.

"Relax. How are you feeling, son?"

I released my stance. "I'm good, Sir."

"Are you nervous?"

"A little bit."

"Let's start dry runs. Is the video loaded and tested?"

"Yes, Sir. I've walked media through the time-hacks and the script."

"Good. Let's start from the top."

#

After an hour of rehearsals, I walked out of the building alongside my Colonel, the Major,

and the Master Sergeant--the official party--and into the staging area, away from view as the ceremony intended. I peeked around the corner and saw friends and family trickling in. Nearly everyone I invited attended, including an English professor I became close with. She supported my desire to write. Scott and Amy skipped work to attend; I hadn't seen much of her the past few weeks, as she returned to the arms of her former boyfriend. Old high school friends visited from out of town, mostly my wrestling teammates. Even Jana, a Slovak au pair I met while we browsed rock climbing gear in REI, came. Nearly everyone attended, except Janus.

We received the signal to march toward the ceremony doors. The four of us filed through in perfect step and sharply continued down the aisle between the rows of seats. My eyes remained forward as I marched--per regulation, however tempted I was to glance at my family and friends.

After the National Anthem and invocation, I gave my mother a ceremonial rose and remained seated in the dark as my video played. As I heard the audience react positively, I imagined my mother smiling. Shortly after, the lights brightened.

"Today, Cadet Eric Tseng will be commissioned into the United States Army."

I marched center-stage.

The master of ceremonies continued, "Cadet Eric Tseng's Oath of Office will be administered by Lieutenant Colonel Liu."

He lifted his right arm. "Raise your right hand and repeat after me. I, state your name."

"I, Eric Tseng."

"Having been appointed an officer in the Army of the United States."

I repeated every line.

"As indicated above in the grade of Second Lieutenant.

"Do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States

"Against all enemies, foreign and domestic

“That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same

“That I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservations or purpose of evasion

“And that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am
about to enter

“So help me God.”

So help me God. The words stumbled out of my mouth. I dropped my arm. He extended
his hand and smiled.

“Congratulations, Son.”

I firmly gripped his hand as I shook it. “Thank you, Sir.” With that, the government owned me.

The master of ceremonies cued my mother, father, and brother onstage to strap my
shoulder boards and pin my rank. We smiled for the camera and applauding audience before they
returned to their seats.

“*Lieutenant* Eric Tseng will be receiving his first salute from Master Sergeant
Michaelson.”

Master Sergeant Michaelson, whom I stood at the position of parade rest a mere hours
ago for simply being in his presence, marched center stage, stood at the position of attention, and
snapped a salute, honoring my newly established rank. “Airborne, Sir!” He shouted, referencing
his past in the 173rd Airborne Regiment and my Parachutist Badge.

“All the way, Master Sergeant!” I responded appropriately.

I shook his hand with a silver dollar cupped in my palm, passing him the coin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the newest Lieutenant of the United States Army!” Colonel Liu
shouted. He motioned toward me with moist eyes. I recalled that his oldest shared my name and
ambitions.

After the cake cutting, my friends and family approached. We made plans for the night. I
gave Jana a tour of my university and walked her to her car. I then wandered back to the hall and

helped the cadets clean.

#

A few months later, I stuffed my belongings in the trunk of my Toyota Highlander. I spent that morning saying my final goodbyes to Amy, Scott, and Jana--whom I grew surprisingly close to through the closing months.

My mother looked on as I struggled to shut the trunk. The sun hovered just above the mountains and trees to the west, casting a tint of yellow-orange. It made the afternoon seem later than it was.

“You need to have enough room to look behind.” She said in her pronounced Taiwanese accent, pointing at the boxes blocking the rear-view.

I finally slammed the door shut. “It’s okay, mom. I’ll be fine. I can see.”

She kept looking on as she reached for a hug. My father inspected the wheels.

“Do you know where you’re going?” He interrogated--also with his heavy accent.

“I do, dad. Drive east until I hit Georgia--it’s pretty straight forward. Plus, I have a smartphone and GPS.”

“Sometimes you need real thing.” He handed me a packet of printed directions. “Stay south, away from snow and ice.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Drive safe, okay? Pull over or go to hotel when you’re tired.”

“I know, dad.”

“We’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you guys, too.” I gave him a hug and got in the car. I shifted the car into reverse, backed out of the drive way, and waved as I slowly drove off. The sun was almost setting. I had a long road ahead of me.

#

I drafted this piece three years ago. Now, it's April 2015. ISIS has risen in Iraq murdering thousands, and I'm packing my bags for a deployment to Afghanistan in the opening months of the fighting season--the first after US combat units left Afghanistan the December prior.

As I look back, I realize I was in a different world then with a different level of maturity and understanding. I was scared of change and scared of uncertainty. Leaving a comfortable nest is never an easy transition. Much of the worries I once had have now passed; I've proven to the men and women under my command that I am an effective leader. I've proven to myself the same.

Over the years, two parts of me diverged and grew independently. There is the side of me who loves unconditionally--the side of me that cannot imagine how people can so easily kill; I constantly question man's inhumanity to man. It is the side of me who hopes for peace and ponders the possible solutions toward achieving such an impossible state--not only between human beings, but also towards our planet as a whole. That side of me understands that ideologies cannot change overnight or even in decades--an ever-repeating mistake world leaders commit. I understand that change must rise organically through honest, factual and compassionate education--uncorrupted by fallacious tradition, misinterpreted religion, or ill intent.

Then there is the warrior in me. That side of me enjoys the tactical aspect of my job. I enjoy the adventure. I live for jumping out of planes in an MC-6 steerable parachute with combat gear and my weapon strapped to my side. I live for leading my men. That side of me has an urge to deploy, away from the caged and unfocused garrison environment. That side of me wants to make a difference.

I wonder if Janus struggles with this divide. As an EMT prior to commissioning, she is trained to save lives; her larger mission in Iraq had similar intent. But in those moments of self-preservation, she killed.

I lost touch with Janus over the years along with most of my friends from home--including Amy. Janus took it upon herself to cease contact with those who knew her before the transition. I've only heard snippets. She leapt out of her second story window after a flashback. She was placed in a hospital, undergoing medicated treatment for PTSD. She tried to commit suicide. Truth is, I don't know what happened to Janus or her wife. I don't know if they're still together. I don't know if she's recovering. But what I do know is that Janus would have excelled as an Officer if given the opportunity to continue. Instead, she was forced to transition into the civilian world--a world which remains ambivalent and ignorant of her skills and experiences. I know she remains proud of her duties and of her work in Iraq.

When I drive around town, I sometimes spot a yellow ribbon proudly displayed on the car in front of me. *We Support the Troops*, it says. Sometimes, a homeless man wearing old fatigues and carrying a muddied A-bag bearing his stenciled name and last-four would walk next to that car. The family would stare straight ahead or look the other way, unaffected.

I wonder about her. I wonder if she's okay--if she's still receiving treatment. I wonder if she'd be better off focusing on a job she excelled in--if her life would be better if she was allowed to remain in the Army with a sense of purpose and belonging. Then I think about other veterans, returning from war. Are they receiving the help they need? Would I?

END