

WHERE BOYS GO (snippets)

by

Eric Y. Tseng

PFC STEPHEN CHEN, AFGHANISTAN, FEBRUARY 2008

Steve sat on his cot, listening to the sounds of war. The booms and echoes ripped across the deep valley, through the timber and shale villages, up and down the vegetated terraces following the contours of the Pech River, and skyward toward the crest where OP Woody sat defiant, overwatching it all. Steve held onto a laminated photograph of Rachel and him by the park. He remembered setting his point-and-shoot on the ground and prancing back next to her as the flashing timer quickened. The photograph, a lie. They were never in the throes of love, but here, they appeared to be. That illusion of intimacy gave Stephen comfort--a luxury hard to find through the constricting vines of battle.

Staff Sergeant Verne poked his head through the door. "Formation and PCIs¹. 30 mikes². Full battle rattle³. We got a mission."

"Roger, Sergeant." His body armor leaned against the plywood wall and coarse desk, built with leftover timber. Half-read books piled atop, abandoned after tired effort. He brought

¹ Pre-Combat Inspections - A check of all equipment as a group prior to a mission.

² Mike - Military phonetic of the letter M. In this case, it's an abbreviation of "minutes."

³ Full battle rattle - Body armor, Kevlar helmet, a full load of ammunition, Individual First Aid Kit, weapon. All gear necessary for combat.

his Micron art pens, 4H to 9B art pencils, and charcoal set, but there they sat, untouched and dull, adjacent to a letter addressed to Rachel. He wrote that letter his first-week in-country while in the relative comforts of Camp Blessing. The days following, he asked Staff Sergeant Verne if he should sign it with "Love" or "Sincerely". Verne laughed, "Goddamn it, Chen, you gotta stop bothering me with this love shit!" Stephen sounded sentimental, optimistic, innocent. He sounded young. Now, as he read the letter in the Spartan conditions of OP Woody, his eyes drifted down to the still-empty signature block, vacant for half a year.

Stephen hooked his body armor with his arm and set it onto the cot. He reached for the letter, slipped it back into its plain-white envelope, and dropped it in a zip-lock bag--afraid that moisture from wet snow, mud, or his own blood would stain his tried crusade to gain her affection. He did the same with the photograph, but his gaze lingered seconds longer. His thumb caressed Rachel's straight, amber hair and soft cheeks, but stopped after just a moment. He felt guilty.

With the letter and photo safely tucked behind his body armor's front ceramic plate⁴, he threw on his gear, strapped his armor, pulled his helmet tight, and slung his carbine. He ran his fingers atop the brass ammunition, snapped in place in 30-round metallic magazines--checking for moisture. He then inserted them upside-down in pouches woven in the front of his body armor. He reached behind and pressed on his Camelbak full of water. It was full enough. While donning his thick flame-retardant gloves, he stepped out and greeted the cold Afghan morning with chattering teeth. His vaped breath clouded his vision. His heart thumped faster. The cold scratched his flushed, weathered skin; it jabbed needles into his bones. He closed his eyes and thought of sunny California. Rachel's fluttering hair at the beach. The salty whiff of ocean

⁴ Ceramic plate - An insert for the body armor, designed to withstand multiple 5.56mm M16, 7.62mm AK47, and 5.45mm AK74 rifle rounds.

breeze.

HESCO gabions, filled with hard rock and clumped dirt, fortified OP Woody. Light snow coated the tops of sandbags reinforcing the wooden living quarters and machine-gun nests. Private Jennings, a 19 year old from the outskirts of Rapid City, South Dakota, peered through his machine-gun's scope and scanned the terraced wood-shale village and heavy tree-line across the valley.

“How you feeling, Chen? You ready for this?” It was Dominguez--a 21 year old from El Paso. The Rangers scouted him for his pitching arm, and the Texas Longhorns offered him a scholarship. Then his girlfriend got pregnant. They married after graduation; shortly after, he joined the Army. He was now Stephen's Fireteam leader.

Stephen wondered how he should answer. “I'm just counting off. . .”

Sergeant Cobb barked, “Check your equipment! Ammo, radios, batteries, weapons, and water!”

“What were you going to say, man?”

“Nothing. I just can't wait to be done with this shit.”

“Same here, man.”

He carried his carbine tight against his chest, resting his elbows on the magazine pouches on his body-armor. Snow crunched under his weighted, slow footsteps. They marched in column, down a worn trail eroded by either animals or men. Brush, wild-grass, and stout trees flanked either side and sprouted from the snowcapped ground.

The mountain sloped off in jagged rocky formations, northward to the approaching village below. Buildings stood erect despite the steep slopes. Like the men inching their way

down the mountain, the village stood weathered by past wars and winter winds. Ladders connected rooftops; typically, curious, peering children sat with their legs hanging over the edge. But today, the village stood ghostly bare and white; snow layered upon the rough shale and wood, and such children were absent. A chill went down Stephen's spine.

“No children,” SSG Verne observed, “stay frosty.”

It was a bad sign. It smelled like an ambush. Dominguez, the point man, glanced back and caught the LT's signal to halt. The patrol stopped. Steve automatically ran at a crouch and kneeled behind cover, watching his sector, as did the rest of the patrol. He hoped the LT sensed the same thing he sensed. He hoped that the LT would just say fuck it; RTB⁵. But LT was LT. “Mission first,” he would say, “then your men. Then yourself.”

⁵ RTB - Return to base.

1LT JOHN HENNING, AFGHANISTAN, FEBRUARY 2008

First Lieutenant (1LT) John Henning grew tired of the mission. He never understood how his peers and higher-ups could remain motivated. He wondered if his soldiers could see it through his slouch. All he wanted was to return to his wife, Caroline. But now, another patrol. He slowly dropped his armor over his head and pulled the Velcro straps tight. He didn't bother to plan an alternate route or protective indirect fires on key, suspected enemy locations. He still had the coordinates marked on his map and notebook, anyway. *We'll be ok. It's a cold winter*, he told himself. He tapped his various pouches, feeling for key items. GPS, binos, ammo, radio, working flashlight on the weapon, map case with protractor, overlays and radio frequency sheet, pen, notebook, extra batteries, NVGs, compass, water, snacks from leftover MREs. He also felt for his personal items. Caroline's scented letter, a stuffed tiger mailed by a kid from the states, his camera, and a dream catcher. He stepped out and felt the snow bite his naked fingers as he rested them on the sandbags next to his door. *Gloves*. He pulled them on.

There were his men, performing their own checks, huddled close to stay warm.

"Rough night, Sir?" Sergeant First Class Williams chuckled.

"Rough night? More like a rough ten months."

“Could be worse. You could be invading Iraq in MOPP-fucking-2⁶ and no sleep.”

“Fuck that. Though, I could use some heat.”

“Don’t think you’ll enjoy that kind of heat, Sir.”

Henning nodded and took a closer look at his men. Burks and Wilson had dark rings under their eyes--they were probably playing Xbox *Call of Duty* late into the night. PV2 Braday and PFC Campos were good, innocent southern boys ruined by the Army. There was Staff Sergeant Verne, the only other man besides himself in the platoon with a Ranger Tab⁷ and the only one with a scroll⁸. Williams was the Platoon Sergeant and his right-hand man. Corporal Dominguez, the killer athlete, stretched and got shit for doing so, like always.

“Do you also stretch before you fuck, Dominguez? Shit.” Verne sniped as the rest of the patrol laughed.

“Fuck yeah I do. My wife *needs* to stretch, too.” More laughter.

PV2 Rhodes, the physically awkward kid who probably should have joined a support MOS didn’t look entirely awake. Then PFC Chen. He reminded Henning of himself. Bright kid. Grew up in the same area. Went to the local college but dropped out. Henning wondered why.

John shook his head as he spoke to Williams. “That’s all we’ve got?”

“That’s everyone stepping outside the wire, Sir.”

“I thought there’d be more.”

The ones that weren't there were either pulling security, resting from the night shift, wounded, or dead. Howard, Cortez, and Orozco were the dead. John hated writing those letters. Orozco. The life of the platoon. Him and his damn unauthorized "Ninja" tab velcroed underneath

⁶ MOPP 2 - Wearing thick layers of Chemical, Biological, Radiological protective equipment.

⁷ Ranger Tab - A tab on the uniform that shows an individual has passed Ranger School.

⁸ A scroll - A Ranger Battalion unit patch. If worn under the American Flag, it denotes that the individual has deployed to a combat zone while serving in an actual Ranger Battalion.

his shoulder pocket's top flap. If there was anything that needed to be done, he would do it with a smile and a flex of his biceps--just like a living version of a happier Popeye. He had to bite down as he heard the patrol report his death over the radio months ago.

That IED. He still remembered Cortez's screams as he burned. That smell. Howard, the gunner, didn't get pulled down from the hatch as the Humvee overturned--there was no time to. They found pieces of his head outside the wreck. They picked him up with plastic AAFES bags. Henning tossed his bloody gloves afterward.

"You alright, Sir?"

"Yeah, just. . . playing out the mission in my head. We got time for a rehearsal?"

"There's always time for a rehearsal, Sir."

John nodded his head. "You got the OP, Williams."

"Hooah, Sir."

John walked toward his men and took a deep breath. Another day. Another dollar.

STEVIE CHEN, A BRIEF HISTORY, 1989 - 2001

Little Stevie stood up on his crib and scanned the world around him. This would be his first memory, etched into a naturally curious brain. Artistic. Even as a child, he sensed beauty in the way the yellow sunlight bloomed from the vertical blinds. He loved the way the room seemed to glow. He grabbed onto the wooden bars surrounding his crib for balance. Footsteps approached from the right. It was Mother. She smiled down upon him as she entered the room and picked him up.

It was 1989, and her hair made it apparent with the long, poofy curls. Despite working in the farms in rural Taiwan for half her life, Yali never exuded an aura that suggested that. She walked with grace and presented herself equally.

She would later lose those curls and mask the grey and silver through repeated dyes. She'd tug her hair whenever she saw the numbers of newly dead in Afghanistan. She gained a new vocabulary. A suicide bombing. An IED. A firefight. She would always wonder if he was one of them. Her heart would break. She later chose to keep the TV off.

She wasn't aware of the grief this child would bring as they both watched Stephen grow. He took his first steps in front of a Christmas tree, reaching for his first real gift, a Batmobile. Once he could walk regularly, Chris would take Stephen's hand and lead him everywhere. They

became inseparable. Stephen would smile brightly with his chubby cheeks and waddle toward Chris, walking quickly with his thin legs. But sometimes, they would have to watch Chris closely. Stephen would mysteriously cry and be found bruised--not by his knees he fell upon, but rather on his face, arms, and thighs. Perhaps Chris learned from Father.

There was a cycle that formed early in Chris's life. Whenever he disobeyed father, he found himself tugged into the laundry room and beaten until his skinny legs collapsed from under him. Father would then leave him there crying with the door closed. This in turn taught Chris to do the same to little Stevie whenever he didn't play along. From Chris, Stevie learned to strike his one-year-old cousin with a blue plastic mallet until her head bled. He, too, was pulled into the laundry room.

Steve rarely spoke of his childhood. He lied often, reciting stories of normalcy within the ranks of American children, a habit rooted from a single preschool experience: "Draw something your daddy and you do together!" Ms. Thompson exclaimed. The following morning, little four-year-old Stevie brought in a drawing he was proud of. Ms. Thompson's smile retreated in horror as she studied it. A stick-figure Father punched little stick-figure Stevie as blood and tears streamed out in colorful crayon.

Ms. Thompson brought Mother in and showed her the drawing. "Can you explain this, Mrs. Chen?"

Yali smiled out of fear and nervousness. She couldn't bear to see her little Stevie taken away--his precious smile and chubby cheeks; he and Chris brought joy. They brought love. She said what she had to in the little English she knew. "We watch a violent movie yesterday. Stephen has good imagination."

Ms. Thompson's eyebrows drooped with skepticism. She looked at Stevie for

confirmation. He stood there confused, wondering why Mother was brought in after class for questioning. He wondered why she didn't just say that Father beat him whenever he got angry. Don't all fathers do that? He saw the worry in her eyes. As Ms. Thompson inspected Stephen's reactions, Mother looked straight at him and slowly nodded her head. Stephen mimicked. Ms. Thompson sighed in relief. "Don't scare your mother and teacher by drawing things like that, Stephen!" Even as a four-year-old, he knew what he and his mother had done; he just didn't have a word for it.

Stephen always looked forward to driving with Mother after school to pick up his brother. Often, she opened the sunroof and let little Stevie poke his head out. His mouth gaped open with awe as the orange and yellow leaves fell around him from the towering oak trees. Such leaves painted the sidewalk and streets, causing Stevie to scan the world. Seven-year-old Chris ran toward the car with his oversized sky-blue backpack loosely bouncing behind him. He grinned brightly--two front teeth missing--at the sight of his brother smiling back.

They both loved Mother and loved being at home with her. They ran about the house, inventing space operas with Legos. But fear would slowly overtake them as they heard the muffled, mechanical whirr of the garage opening. It always meant Father was home. Freedom would be overshadowed by discipline. They would quickly shuffle toward their rooms as Yali welcomed her tired husband, Anmin, walking into the house. He would stand distant, grab a lighter, and smoke Marlboros in the garage.

One night after school, Stephen shot Nerf darts at the TV screen as Mother watched a Chinese drama. Stevie giggled to himself whenever a dart landed on a character's mouth. Father warned, "Don't do that, Stephen. We are trying to watch." Stephen smiled as he shot another dart at the screen. Suddenly, Father ripped the Nerf gun from Stevie's hands and swung at him. The

metallic handle that jutted from the side ricocheted off Stephen's arms blocking his face and continued through the dry-wall. Stevie held his arm--already swelling from the strike--as he ran in the bathroom, locking the door behind him. Father forced it open and continued striking Stevie with the plastic and metallic toy. He cowered and shivered as he forced his eyes shut and felt the burning explosions of pain. At the age of 8, he wanted to die.

At the age of 11, Stephen ran from home the moment he realized he had that power. He would sprint out the front door, knowing that Father was too slow and proud to chase him. The jagged concrete tore and blistered his bare feet. He ran to the park next to the local high school and shivered through the cold, dark night, secretly hoping that Father would seek him out and ask for forgiveness.

Steven's belief that a man's worth is seen through hardships endured stemmed from his own pain. He looked up to such professions which pain was the norm. His drawings shifted from still-life shoes to Soldiers marching through the mud and rain--Soldiers under fire; he often sketched roughened faces found in Life Magazine throughout the Vietnam War, archived by his high school. He'd study the contours of their faces and the expressions through their eyes.

September 11th, 2001 magnified this sentiment. As a freshman, he sat in silence as the images of men and women threw themselves out of burning towers. Anger filled his heart--that of a young boy experiencing the early spurts of testosterone. Fire ignited the pit of his stomach as he saw images of crowds in the Middle East celebrating.

AHMAD KHAN, AFGHANISTAN, VIRGO 1380 (SEPTEMBER 2001)

The rivers carved the valley, composed of hard granite and shale. They formed from the melting snow, which typically capped the mountains--even in the early summer months. Capillaries seeped between the rocks and further carved details whenever it wasn't obscured by the layers of snow. Sometimes the setting sun would emphasize such grooves with deep shadows.

The people of the valley seemed to mirror the landscape. Their skin weathered by the elements and carved by deep wrinkles. They were a hard people to survive the highlands. The children grew up with weapons--a knife, pistol, or an AK. They learned to clean it, to aim it, and that manhood centered around defending honor, family, and land. Their lungs grew to enjoy the high elevation. Sometimes the children ran for miles on the dirt roads which often paralleled the thin rivers and over the thin, concrete or wooden bridges. Kahlil was one of these children. He ran with a kite his father, Ahmad Khan, recently smuggled from a trip to the green valleys of Jalalabad.

Ahmad Khan could not keep up. Instead, he watched his son from the flat rooftop of the family dwelling. He thought about the future. Ahmad Shah Massoud, The Lion of the Panjshir, assassinated. Americans, attacked days later. That was no coincidence. A bigger war approached. He remembered the Soviets. The bombers screaming down and up the valley. The helicopters.

Kahlil ran on, laughing with the other boys. How would the Americans be? He worried.

JOHN AND DUSANA, CALIFORNIA, JANUARY 2005

He took her to Santa Cruz. They carried their roller blades and hiked toward a natural pier which stood tall despite the corrosion on the flanks. She stood at the edge while waves clashed against the rocks below and scattered foam and ocean water around her. Her jet black hair ruffled in the harsh wind, cold for a beach day.

“This is the first time I’ve seen the Pacific.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Thank you for bringing me here.”

It was his last month in California. He had just received orders to report to the Infantry Officer Basic Course in Fort Benning, Georgia, then after that, Korea. He thought, with his luck, he’d find the girl of his dreams before he had to leave. He met her in November, two months ago at an REI; they were both looking at rock climbing gear. They would climb together days after, first indoors, then out. By the side of a waterfall in the Santa Cruz mountains. Up the granite cliffs of Yosemite.

He never felt this way about anyone. He wanted to show her the world and everything he knew. He wanted to take her by hand and lead her toward places of beauty. He wanted to

experience life with her--to experience every waking second by her side. He felt the need to know her life from when she was a child and to learn from her--her side of the world and her definition of beauty. To share her knowledge--what she knew. What she thought. But life had other plans. All they had was this last month.

He drove her north up Highway One. He wanted to show her the seeming miles of cliffs towering over the pristine beaches stretched beyond the horizon. He blasted his playlist as she smiled at him singing along. Eventually, they drove east toward San Francisco. After buying coffee at a café by Fisherman's Wharf, they both sat on a bench, looking at the city before them.

"This is the first time I'm so sure about my plans." She said with a smile.

"What are your plans?"

"I'll stay here for a year, and then travel around Asia. I'll visit Pham and you! Then I'll go back to Masaryk to finish my Masters."

He smiled.

She sat for a moment in contemplation before looking at John. "I really hope our plans come true."

John looked back. "Me, too."

"To our dreams?" She lifted her warm cup of coffee.

"To dreams." They tapped cups.

She smiled and sipped. John did the same, but no smile. His eyes stared off into the distance.

Before he left, he stopped by her house. They had breakfast one last time and brought gifts for each other. She gave him a beige journal and made him promise that she'll be the first to read his novel. He gave her a copy of her favorite movie, *The Fountain*.

He had a second gift. He scoffed at the idea at first, but bought it anyway. He planned to explain his intention, but decided against it the moment he presented. It was a dream catcher. He bought one for himself as well.

ANMIN CHEN, SAN JOSE MEPS, JUNE 2006

Anmin watched his son leave. Stephen joined the cattle-line of recruits holding folders, slowly making their way into an open door at the end of the hall. It looked like an old hospital with white walls and cracked tiles. Only Stephen occasionally looked back toward the lobby where his family stood watching. No other families were there. Yali started walking toward her son.

“Ma'am, please step behind the yellow line.”

“Can I please say goodbye to my son?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am. We can't let any civilians past the lobby.”

She tried to call Stephen's name as she waved her hand quickly. Then he was gone.

After a few minutes, Anmin squeezed Yali's hand. “Yali. It's time to go. He's not returning.”

“He might come back...” She whimpered. After fifteen minutes of staring at the empty hallway, she followed her husband back to their car.

The drive back seemed longer. The grey and black zeppelin hanger stretched across Moffett Field and seemed to follow them as Anmin sped down Highway 101. Yali couldn't keep her eyes off the planes flying overhead; she wondered if Stephen was on board. She glanced at

her husband and wondered what he thought--if he knew his part in this.

They continued down 101 in silence. For Anmin, the temptation to smoke was never stronger than now. He had quit years ago, but still envied those with a cigarette in hand. He remembered himself from back then. Was he that different from his son?

ANMIN CHEN, YU-LI, TAIWAN, AUGUST 1982

Anmin stared off toward the town from the cleared trail that sloped up and snaked toward the ancestral burial grounds. The trail cut a path through the vegetated jungle down to the base of the hill, exposing the town, Yu-Li, off in the clear distance. Low-hanging cumulus clouds drifted miles away, casting shadows upon the roads, rice paddies, and concrete houses visible in the clear horizon. It was the summer of '82, and Anmin was a handsome man. Despite the malnutrition inherent of being a poor farmer, he had a strong, thin body and a chiseled face--unrecognizable from the overweight and stocky appearance Stephen grew familiar with. He sat on a stump and lit a cigarette with a match, shaking the flame out once he inhaled and heard the lit cherry crackle and hiss. He remembered his high school days just a few years ago, sprinting down the same trail he now sat on and past the small, grey elementary school made of cracked concrete at the base of the foothill. He was the son of the principal. *Father*. . . Anmin still didn't know when he should tell him.

He noticed the days paced quicker than usual. The daily chores at both the farm and mountain seemed to peel off what little time he had left. He received a full scholarship to the University of Idaho, served his conscript tour with the Taiwanese Air Force, routing jet fuel from

airbase to airbase throughout Taiwan, and saved enough money for the ticket to America by working in 100 degree rice paddies for another, more wealthy farm. A bridge stretched above those fields. Anmin would stand inside its shadow and wipe the sweat off his eyes. As he worked, he thought of his wife. He thought of America and the towering cities. Automobiles. Would he ever own one? A house? He sucked on the cigarette, burning the paper and tobacco until the filter burned and exhaled smoke through his nose. He closed his eyes. He hoped this wasn't a mistake. He flicked the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out, stood erect, put his hands on his hips, and gave the town one more glance. He wondered when he'd return--how his father, Tsai-Chun, would react.

He walked down the hill and glanced at the unkempt shack he used to live in. Vines now crept up the serrated metal walls. Tall weeds dominated the yard. He stood for a long minute, remembering the times he would chase his brothers and sisters about--and the times he was beaten by Father while tied to the papaya tree that grew in front of that shack; the tree now grew tall. It still bore fruit. His back would bleed as he stayed there overnight. He eventually learned to hide in the tall brush from Father after he made a mistake. He would stay still, even when the swarms of mosquitoes buzzed and stung. Even when palm-sized spiders crept near.

He continued on, past his father's school at the base, past the village on the outskirts, and across the river. Tsai-Chun used to carry him when the currents were too strong. Untended children would wash away and drown. But now, Anmin was a man. The cool river washed his thighs and calves. He glanced over at workers laying foundation for a new bridge to prevent kids from drowning. Times have changed.

He passed the rice paddies and walked the narrow, dirt road that lead toward town. Bicycles now passed him as the sun steamed his pouring sweat. The high school's track looked

new after recent renovations. Asphalt roads now snaked through the blocks of grey. There was that soccer field Anmin and his best friend used to loiter about before they left for their mandatory tour. They'd sit in the center and blow cigarette smoke that drifted toward the clear, night sky--the beginnings of a lifelong habit. They chatted about leaving Taiwan and the monotony of a simple life.

He finally returned home late that afternoon. The sun was glowing red as it fell toward the mountains to the west. The moment he told Father of his intentions, the house silenced. He could see a mix of emotions contorting his face. Then confusion. Tsai-Chun muttered a phrase in Mandarin, “為什麼? (Why?)”

Anmin responded. “We will have a better chance in America.”

“How will you survive?”

Anmin remained silent as he looked out the screen door.

Tsai-Chun glanced at him from his rocking chair and continued. “I've always imagined the family staying here to improve our mountain. I had bought that mountain with that vision. But now, all my boys and daughters are leaving, and I am getting old. I hoped for at least one of you to stay.” He rocked forward. “When are you leaving?”

“Next month.”

“How are you getting there?”

“The rail will take us to Taipei. We will fly to America from Chiang Kai-shek International Airport.” He heard Yali talking with his mother, Su-Hue, in the kitchen as they cooked dinner with propane gas tanks.

Tsai-Chun looked at his hands and briefly closed his eyes as he said, “I can't help you if you go. You will be on your own.”

Anmin looked on the floor as he said, "I know." He glanced back to see his father looking down. He knew what the man was thinking--it's an unforgiving world.

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Mother and their neighbor, Tou-Yen Pou, made them breakfast that morning and cried as she hugged them goodbye. Tsai-Chun stood by the front door, inspecting his son's luggage. Anmin's brothers and sisters visited from Hua-Lien and Taipei to see him off. As Anmin approached, his father slipped a red envelope filled with money into his hands and said, "You need this."

"Thank you, but please. . . I don't need it."

"You don't have to be polite. Take it." So he did.

They left quickly toward the train station a mile away, dragging their luggage on the rocky pavement. The sun and humid air scorched them. When they arrived, Tsai-Chun purchased the train tickets. Anmin and Yali crossed the tracks and waited at the center platform. The family watched from the station. The two o'clock train stopped to load passengers. Tsai-Chun held his wife as the train left.

A couple years before, the railroad toward Taipei did not exist. The common man or woman living in Yu-Li had to rough the mountainous roads that twisted with the terrain and riverbeds. Only a handful of villagers owned cars. Anmin's father wasn't one of them. Now, the train carried them through the mountains. It wined parallel to the eastern coast, riding on the tracks contouring the tall, lush, green mountains towering over the narrow beaches. Anmin and Yali's luggage sat in the compartment safely behind them. It carried their life.

As they passed Hua-Lien, Yali wondered if she could see her old home in the distance--if she could see her adoptive father working on the season's crops. A week prior, she visited to say

goodbye. Her brother, still an alcoholic, stammered as he spoke; his wife kept away. They replaced Yali's dog with a black, temperamental mutt. She helped Father pluck and behead a few chickens for dinner. Sometimes, she missed the place.

The train passed through tunnels; the wind muffled down to a slow *woosh* whenever it did. After some time, the metallic yet rhythmic beating of the tracks put Yali to sleep. Anmin held her Bien-dong (bento box), bought from the car attendant pushing a lunch cart. He sat straight and looked out the window. They were inland now and crossed over gentle, wide rivers. Newly erected textile and concrete factories boomed on the outskirts of towns. He wondered how much it'd all change over the years.

ANMIN AND YALI, CALIFORNIA, FEBRUARY 2008

Typically, Stephen would share movies he thought they'd like. Father would exhibit them on his 65 inch TV screen and admire the high definition and surround sound. Mother would sit by her table and paint flowers in dark, murky colors and occasionally look up at the screen; sometimes, Stephen wondered if there was a hidden message behind her dark palette. But at rare occasions, Stephen would finally show a movie that would move them all. Mother would set her brushes down and sit on the couch; Father, in his typical spot; Stephen, between them. But now, he was gone--gone to war--and they were left alone in their house. Father watched the news, and an eerie silence would overtake them both when a list of casualties scrolled on the bottom.

Stephen and Father argued about war once. They were sitting in the car on the way home.

"I think that evil really does exist. That things can be black and white," he remembered Steven sharply lecturing from the back seat.

"No. Everyone has own perspective. People don't understand other perspective. Everyone is right and wrong in own way."

"I don't believe that. How do you explain what Osama Bin Laden did to those thousands of innocent people?"

"America kill thousand of people too. How you think they feel?"

Father glanced at his rear view mirror. Stephen sat with his arms crossed. He was just a boy at that time, and even now he remains almost as young. His face was turning red. The boy didn't know what to say.

"I know what I believe."

"That is problem for the world. No one try to understand each other."

"Why would I want to try to understand a perspective that kills innocent people?"

"Are you sure your perspective do not kill innocent people?"

"Yes," Stephen said with a scoff, "I'm positive."

"Maybe you won't kill innocent people, but you support perspective that does."

Stephen shook his head. "What the fuck do you mean by that?"

"You support culture that support war in name of freedom."

Stephen raised his voice. "Yes. So that we can free innocent people from oppression. So we can protect our people from those people with harmful, evil perspectives that will kill other innocent people."

"Still, you support war and innocent people die. World isn't so simple. You think that is only reason for Iraq War? Freedom?"

"Well, I--The government obviously has other intentions for the war beneficial to themselves. I know that the Bush Administration wanted a war in Iraq prior to 9/11, but still, I believe the main focus is for the security of our innocent civilians and for the freedom of the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship."

"American Government want you to think that. Innocent Iraqi die. American soldier die. Because people support perspective of few men in American Government. You support perspective of American Government."

"I do support that perspective because I believe in the bigger picture. We suffer now and innocent people and Americans die in the process, but in the end, Iraq will end up a better place than before and the world will advance since the people of Iraq will be able to advance as a civilization due to having the freedom to progress. They won't be tied down by a dictatorship anymore. They will be free to think however they like and be free to choose whatever profession they want to pursue. From that, a culture will not be oppressed by one man anymore and be free to explore."

Alan looked at his son through the rear-view mirror. He still had his arms crossed as he looked out the window. He then interrogated his son with a question he immediately regretted asking. "Would you die for American Government perspective, Stephen? Would you die for Iraqi people freedom?"

Stephen looked right back at him through that mirror and said firmly, "Yes. I'd rather live a life believing in something enough to die for than live a life as simple, fucking, inept sheep like you."

The numbers of casualties continued to scroll at the bottom of the screen. The uncertainty of war. Stephen caught in the middle. Alan sat on his couch, wondering if his son held the same beliefs--the same smile. What did that boy see half a world away?

PFC STEPHEN CHEN, AFGHANISTAN, FEBRUARY 2008

All energy was sapped from him. He felt weak as he stared at the dead boy and grieving father. He wanted to curl up and sleep away the ills he felt. It was time to go. March on and move on. He brought his legs underneath him and urged himself up, pulling and pushing each muscle. Up the trail. Down the mountain. Through the ECP. Until he reached his cot. He dropped his gear on the ground. He heard whispers outside, but they let him be. He curled up in a ball and held his head and wished himself to sleep. Away from this. Away from this fucking world. But he couldn't. He was here now, and this was reality. He was a killer, and he wanted to be left alone.

1LT JOHN HENNING, AFGHANISTAN, MARCH 2008

It was strange to him that he couldn't quite recall his life. He had 25 years of memories and yet, he could only remember snapshots of his childhood, adolescence, and now adulthood. He remembered scaling stone walls in Yosemite and running toward his towering parents. He remembered stumbling after his pet iguana through his house whenever it escaped the terrarium. He remembered the smell of his mother's homemade pasta and scuffles with his brother in the backyard. Once, they tried to build tents out of cardboard boxes and spent the night shivering in their own failed renditions of a house. Then his life revolved around baseball. Then women. Taking his high-school sweetheart to prom. Losing their virginity together, entwined in a bed with her lavender-scented sheets.

He thought of her. Her blue eyes and adventurous attitude. Climbing together. Sleeping next to her. He still wondered how things would have been if he never left. Would she know of his fate? Would she react?

But LT Henning could not think of any of this, nor did he recall his life as the explosion

tore his jaw and neck from his body--as scraps of metal pierced and jabbed through his hard armor and soft tissue. As he searched for a thought, remark, or emotion, the sharp, scorching pain and flashes of light tore through his brain's synapses which immediately faded to nothingness as he was thrown stiff into the air, a pile of torn, useless flesh--an object of collected cells, soon to die on their own as his consciousness had. His dreams of making things right with his wife, his dreams of exploring the world, his dreams of writing the next great American novel or taking the next Pulitzer winning photograph, or his dreams of making the world a better place with education, vanished as soon as he fell dead into the water.

And yet, in this very moment, hundreds of others were dying or in the process of dying elsewhere in the world. A mother passed in a hospital bed six thousand miles away as her family watched on in tears. In Detroit, gangs waged a bloody war. An Iraqi family disintegrated from a suicide bomb. An African child starved to death. A ship of two hundred immigrants, escaping genocide and war, sunk by the coast of Italy by Egyptian smugglers. And yet, if you travel farther out, you'll see nothing but the green land and blue oceans of Earth. No warring nations, boundaries, or borders--except for the rivers and mountains. Even farther, you'd only see a speck called the Solar System swimming in a vast ocean of stars. Beyond that, galaxies, and nebulas. A red giant imploded hundreds of light years away, destroying its system of planets and early cellular life--the evidence only reaching Earth hundreds of years later. Yet, there, in that instant of time, in that speck of a galaxy, in a speck of a world with imaginary borders, imaginary religions, and imaginary divisions of people, John died.

PFC STEPHEN CHEN, AFGHANISTAN, MARCH 2008

They had to find him. They couldn't leave any man behind. After the gunfire stopped, Stephen's Squad doubled back to the river and looked for LT Henning in the stream, cold and rapid from the melted snow.

"Keep your weapon fucking ready, Rhodes! They could hit us again!"

"Those motherfuckers. . ." Some caught glimpses of Henning's body thrown stiff, away from an explosive charge set by the river crossing right before they took direct fire. He wasn't there anymore, so they assumed he fell into the waters. Maybe he was still alive and breathing. Maybe he was just thrown unconscious.

They marched downstream, away from the rest of the patrol, pulling security for the inbound MEDEVAC. Their eyes continually shifted from scanning the river to the steep incline toward their left, populated with an abundance of rocks and foliage--possible enemy positions.

They found his body caught against roots, jutting from the edge of the river and exposed after years of erosion from the flowing stream. His left arm seemed to wave at them, flapping

loosely with the flow of water. For a moment, they thought he was alive. But as they looked closer, they saw that his head was almost completely severed. His neck was still connected by patches of stretched flesh, almost tearing from the force of current pushing into the underside of his loose helmet. Blood colored the waters flowing downstream. His legs were gone. A red cavity of mush took the place of his face.

They gathered around, staring at his body until someone finally spoke. "Fucking get him out of there. Secure his weapon, personal effects, and body parts that are loose. . . And don't let his head rip off."

They laid his body on a soft-litter, strapped him down, and covered him with a poncho.

"Prepare to lift. Lift."

Blood and water spilled as they struggled to lift and carry his weighted, damp body.

Rhode's arms shook as he struggled to keep Henning's legs off the rocky ground. His voice strained as he asked, "Can't we just drag him, Sarge?"

Sergeant Cobb snapped, "Do you want me to fuck you *up, Private?* Do you want me to drag your *fucking body?*"

Rhodes threw up on the way back to the LZ.

SPC ANN VASQUEZ, AFGHANISTAN, MARCH 2008

His body was escorted to the Mortuary Affairs Collection Point (MACP) in Bagram Airfield.

Specialist (SPC) Vasquez's heart pounded as she ran toward the escorts on the tarmac.

She followed the escort toward the Blackhawk's side door. He grabbed a hold of the litter with John's body.

He yelled over the roaring rotors, "This will be a four man-lift! This guy's pretty heavy! They found him in the river so his armor and uniform are drenched!"

SPC Vasquez ignored him as she halted, stood at the position of attention, and rendered a salute to LT Henning's remains. Once she completed the salute, she looked at the escort and grabbed a hold of the litter for a two-man lift. "I'm ready to go, Sergeant."

"You sure you can handle the weight?"

"I'm certain, Sergeant."

He nodded his head and began pushing the litter off the metal rail.

She guided the litter and tightened her grip.

"Prepare to lift. Lift."

She grunted as she stabilized her legs and felt the full weight of LT Henning's dead,

damp body, armor, Kevlar, and ice. Her hands and fingers immediately strained at the hard, downward pressure of the metal handles. She was afraid her fingers were going to slip, but she had to do this. This was her job. She stepped out and refused to show any sign of weakness.

“You got it?”

“I got him, Sergeant.”

They carried his remains to the box truck.

When they loaded the body, SPC Vasquez asked, “Sergeant, are you with the deceased’s unit or can you identify the human remains?”

“Negative.”

“Do you have DD-form 565 along with a casualty feeder card?”

He pulled out the documents and handed them to her.

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

“You’re all business, aren’t you?”

“I just try to be professional. Especially around those who gave their all.”

The Sergeant nodded his head and offered his hand. “I’m glad our guys are under your care. Stay safe.”

She shook it and said, “Thank you, Sergeant. You do the same out there.”

He smiled and ran back toward the Blackhawk, off to his next mission.

She and PV2 Brown transferred the remains atop the inspection table. Even with their deliberate placement, the weight of the body dropped atop with a heavy *thunk*.

“You got this one?” Brown asked as he breathed hard.

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

He left. She stared at the black bag. He was her first. She had arrived in country a month and a half earlier, nearly straight out of AIT⁹. Her 40 college credits boosted her to the rank of SPC. It wasn't the first time she dealt with death. SGT Barnes and PFC Michaels died on the way to a vehicle clearance--cleaning off the remains splattered and fused to the burnt hull of a vehicle that was torn apart and incinerated by a rigged 155mm artillery round. They stepped on the pressure plate of a secondary. Their remains would have been SPC Vasquez's first; however, they flew the bagged remains to Kandahar's MACP team instead. Inventorying and inspecting dead friends was considered detrimental to morale. That brought her team from six personnel to four. They've been pulling twelve hour shifts with no rest since.

She looked at the casualty feeder card. IED. Amputation from the knees for both legs. Amputation of the right arm. Partial amputation at the neck. Large lacerations across the face. This was going to be a messy one. She placed her fingers on the zipper, closed her eyes, and slowly unzipped the bag.

⁹ AIT - Advanced Individual Training. Training US Army Soldiers go through after Basic Training to learn their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)

CAROLINE WOLF-HENNING, CALIFORNIA, MAY 2008

She stared at the beige colored journal and dream catcher. At first, she thought the journal was addressed to her, but as she read on, she realized it wasn't. Her tears bled through the pages; the moisture joined them together.

She already missed classes for a couple months since his funeral and finally worked the courage to fight her anxiety and embarrassment to attend again. This would fuck things up. She didn't quite know what to make of the dream catcher--she certainly didn't give that to him, nor did she think John would be the type to carry one from his own accord. But that journal. . .

She collected his letters in a shoebox and brought them out to read whenever she longed for him. She kept herself busy with her studies, but those small things reminded her. Waking up without his arms around her. Lying on their bed. The scent of his shaving cream in the bathroom. He always forgot to bring that, even to Afghanistan. She smiled at the thought of mailing a box last May. She paused. *He would have been back by now.*

She would hang out with her friends during the weekend and spend her time as their designated driver whenever they would go out. But not tonight. She stood in her room, looking at the shoebox full of letters sent by a dead man.

Caroline looked back at her computer screen. She had a paper to write, but no spirit to

continue. She couldn't do this. . . not now. It was a beautiful night outside. She needed to get out.

She ran from her apartment and took her usual one mile route, away from the cat-calling frat boys likely out at this time. She spoke with her mother earlier. She told her she needed to get out and away from her apartment, away from the things that reminded her of him. It's been months already, she said. Months. It didn't seem that long. At least she was blunt and honest, unlike her friends who seemed to tread around eggshells.

Caroline was never religious or spiritual, but she couldn't help but think that he was still watching her. That last thing he said to her. It echoed. *I'll be back before you know it.* Bullshit. She felt the pavement beneath her feet tapping rhythmically. She never understood the compulsions of men. The violence. Honor. The works. Were such things biological instincts or a learned behavior from the messages brought by media and culture? Such questions drove her to pursue the muddled and byzantine topics for her paper. *I'll never finish that shit*, she thought. She ran on.

John. Fucking John. The shit he put her through. The sacrifices. She felt her heart skip and eyes swell with tears. Then her legs stopped. She threw herself onto a park bench and sobbed. How could she still love him? Then those moments came back--those wasteful moments of doing nothing but enjoying each other's company entwined in each other's arms, simply feeling his naked body pressed up against hers. She felt safe then. But sometimes she questioned whether or not he imagined being with *her*. That other woman. Did he think of *her* when he died? In some ways, she felt sorry for him. Was she the one for him? She sat up, wiping away tears. She watched the lights of cars cross the bridge ahead. The red and white blended together as tears blurred and crystalized her vision. She needed to get back. She had a paper to write.

STEPHEN CHEN, CALIFORNIA, JULY 2009

He lay in his tub, feeling the slight waves tickle his thighs and neck. His eyes focused on the shower head, pointed at his face. What would happen if it suddenly turned on, beyond his will? How about a gun? That kid would know. He closed his eyes and felt his buoyant body rocking with the warm water. Is this what it felt like to be in a womb? Twisting his body over, half his face submerged. Opening the eye above water, he wondered if this was what LT Henning last saw. No, the water would be red. Maybe some pieces of himself would be floating around. Don't you live just a second or so longer after decapitation? He closed his eyes and pulled the drain with his toe. He felt his body sink. The water skimmed his skin as it dropped, pressing heavier and heavier against the tub floor. He lay there naked, wondering what it must feel like to be dead.

Back in his room, Stephen watched a video on LiveLeak. The Army was pulling out of the valleys. The outpost they built with their own hands while under enemy fire was demolished by Army Engineers. It was named after their dead brother. He kept pressing play after the video would end. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. It's as if they desecrated Woody's grave. That year of fighting. All that work. The wounded and dead. . . He copied the link and shared it

with his squad-mates on Facebook. Some have deployed to Afghanistan again. Others left the Army as he had. He wished they weren't so far away. He'd like to grab beers with them and reminisce about the times they had. He felt close to them, closer than his friends at home and even family. Civilians didn't fully understand what it was like to be a gunfighter. A door kicker. To shoot or be shot. To save your friend from a gunshot wound or risk your life trying.

Mother suddenly walked into his room. "What are you watching?"

He turned off his screen. "It's nothing. . . You wouldn't understand."

"Stephen. . . I'm your mommy."

"It doesn't matter." He continued to stare at the black screen.

"Please talk to me."

Stephen closed his eyes and shoved his head on his shaking hands. "Just leave me the fuck *alone. Please.*"

She walked out the room, shutting the door behind her. She looked back at his door as tears began to gather in her eyes. She remembered a younger Stephen--the life of the family. He scaled boulders as a kid with a big grin on his face. He wanted to stand tall--to see the world and be noticed. She remembered Stephen leading Chris by hand, climbing up the slide of their rickety, rusted swing set in the backyard. They stared eastward and called for her while she watched them through the window as she cleaned the dishes. They begged her to come see the rainbows projected afar.

She shook her head again, fighting back the tears.

STEPHEN CHEN, CALIFORNIA, AUGUST 2009

Stephen stepped off the BART train and into the San Francisco crowd. He wore his headphones as he followed the herd up the Embarcadero station escalator, across the street, and toward the shadows etched by buildings towering above in glass and concrete. His eyes adjusted to the daylight. He paused and looked up at the towers scraping the sky, recalling moments in his childhood where he did the same. Still awed by the illusion of buildings tumbling forward with the low, moving clouds, he smiled.

He continued walking north-east on Market Street, past Main Street, and toward the tower in Ferry Plaza, framed by the blue sky and buildings at either side. When he reached the Embarcadero, the buildings disappeared and only piers and the vast bay were ahead of him. The Bay Bridge stretched far and towered above the waters. He was always struck by humanity's ability to create something so massive, fighting against the torrents of sea.

As he crossed the Embarcadero, bikers and runners passed him. He continued westward as he stared right at the expanse of the San Francisco Bay--whenever the piers of restaurants

didn't interrupt.

He passed Piers 9, 23, and 35. The crowd started getting thicker. Tourists with DSLRs, point and shoots, and camera phones twirled around and snapped photos with clicks and shutter-snaps. When he reached Pier 37, the crowd stopped moving. They surrounded professional video cameras and boom mics on cranes and tripods, elevated and pointed downward toward the center. As he moved through the crowd, the camera clicks and snaps grew frequent. In the middle, a lone artist--dressed in a top hat, large, lens-less glasses, a hip, yellow shirt, a vest, and torn jeans-- stared at a wooden panel while holding a large brush in hand. Surrounding the panel were tin-cans full of paint. Stephen couldn't see the panel fully and expected a magnificent work of street-art--art he so frequently browsed in magazines. Instead, as he got to the inside edge of the crowd, he saw random splotches of paint and clashing colors. The artist dipped his brush in red and whipped it downward toward the panel. Steve shivered as he remembered Staff Sergeant Verne's blood splattering on his boots and ground as he carried him on a litter. But he knew it was just paint splattering onto black, hurried streaks, painted with a large priming brush. It looked like shit to him.

He looked at the crowd's reaction. They all stared approvingly with camera phones. A professional cameraman followed the artist's every move; he seemed to feed at the attention, exaggerating every flick of his brush, every ponder of his next stroke, and every step around the panel. He imagined himself painting next to this exhibitionist. What would he paint? Sisyphus crouching in defeat? A lone woman standing in a ruined cathedral covered in snow? But instead, Stephen looked on. His scoffs soon transformed to envy. He realized the artist was around his age.

As a member of the faceless crowd, Stephen walked off toward the edge of the pier. He

imagined himself painting freely, surrounded by an attentive audience. His talents could have been appreciated. Famous, even. Instead, he fought a war for a foreign land and returned as a nobody. He looked off at the ocean, tempted to jump into the torrents of the cold expanse.