

//////////////////// THE END //////////////////////

“Hey, Smithson,” says LT.

“Yes, sir?”

“What’s the best part about being in Iraq?”

“One way or another, sir, you know you’re going to leave.”

“That’s right,” he says, smiling.

This is the last thing we say while our feet stand on Iraqi ground. As the plane lifts off of Anaconda’s runway, the whole plane erupts in applause and cheering.

When we land in Kuwait, again the crowd cheers and we unload the plane. We’re led to a tent where we’ll be spending a few hours before our next plane takes off. Here’s that familiar, windy place we remember from twelve months ago.

This camp has soldiers coming and going at all hours of the night. But no midnight chow. So, as the rest of the company stays back at the tent, EQ platoon sets off to find some food. We’ve been eating MREs for the last year. We would rather not eat them while we wait for the plane to take us home.

After fifteen minutes of walking we find the chow hall. It’s closed, but there’s a back door open. So we help ourselves. Etiquette goes out the window when you’re hungry. And when you’ve just survived a year in Iraq.

The door leads to the kitchen. It looks recently tidied up and cleaned. So there’s not much food lying around, but there is a large basket of fruit and another basket full of chips.

“Take what you can,” says LT.

We’re all grinning at the absurdity of stealing fruit and chips from a chow hall, but we’re doing it anyway. I look at LT, and he shrugs.

“Shouldn’t have left the door open,” he says.

A guy comes out from the front of the chow hall. He looks like a cook. He’s not military, so we pretty much ignore him.

“You guys can’t be in here,” he says. The look on his face is priceless. Imagine the look on a homeless man’s face when you start reading the newspaper he’s using for a blanket. There are more than twenty of us, and he knows he

can't stop us. So we grab what we can and walk out the door.

"Thanks," Scott Moore tells him.

"This is so out of character," I say to Moore.

"Oh well."

He takes a bite out of an apple.

"Did I tell you about the last time I was in Kuwait, going home on leave?"

"I don't think so," he says.

"You told me," says Roman. "In the shower trailer?"

"Yeah," I say. Then to Moore: "You know at Camp Doha, they have those, like dozen, shower trailers lined up at the end of the tents?"

"Yeah," he says.

"The place was real busy. Tons of people going on leave . . ."

On my way to the showers I pass a guy walking to the tents.

"Go to the one all the way down at the end," he says. "There's almost no one there."

"Okay, thanks," I say.

And I start walking down the long length of trailers. As I pass each one, there are less and less soldiers going in and out of them. When I get to the last one, I walk up the stairs to the trailer's door.

Opening the door, I see that the whole trailer is empty. There are four or five shower stalls and four or five toilet stalls.

"All right," I say. "I got the place to myself."

I have to take a quick whiz, and I notice there are no urinals. Kind of weird, but you never know how equipped the facilities in the army are going to be. Not thinking much of it, I use one of the stalls. Then I take my time and get undressed. I start one of the showers and smile to myself in the mirror. Just a few short hours and I'll be heading home.

After a long hot shower I get out and wrap a towel around myself. I lather up and start shaving in one of the five sinks.

The door opens, and I look over to see who ruined my privacy.

It's a female.

She doesn't look in my direction, just turns and walks to one of the bathroom stalls.

I wonder if she knows she's in the wrong trailer, I think.

I look at the stalls again. There are no urinals. And then things start to click.

I'm the one in the wrong trailer. There's always a female shower trailer among the male trailers. And it's usually the one on the end. The soldier who gave

me the advice wasn't trying to trick me. When he said the trailer "all the way at the end," he assumed I would go to the last male trailer.

I rush to put my shirt and shorts on, and I realize my face is still half full of shaving cream. I look at the stall to which the female went. Then I look back in the mirror. Back and forth until I decide I might have enough time. I don't want only half my face shaved.

I run the razor over my chin and neck so fast I cut myself twice. I throw on my shirt, stuff my toiletries back in my little bag, and rush out the door. On my way back to the tent I start laughing hysterically.

"And no one ever knew the wiser," I say.

"I can't believe you did that," says Josh Roman.

"I can," says Scott Moore.

Back at the tent EQ enjoys its pirated food. Some of the company tries to nap for the few hours we have, but we mainly stay up. We may talk briefly about going home but mostly we talk about the past year.

It's funny. When you're at war, all you talk about is going home. Now that we're going home, all we talk about is being at war.

"Man, our first time in Kuwait seems like forever ago,"

says Seabass. He's sitting on the floor across from me eating barbeque potato chips.

"I know," I say.

"All I can remember about Camp Virginia is the smell of it," says LT. "That fried, sandy smell of chow in the desert."

"The diesel fuel and grease," I say.

"How many times did we PMCS those friggin' dozers?" asks Koprowski.

"Too many," says Josh Roman.

"Hey, Smithson," says Neil Munoz from a little ways down the line of cots. "How about the smell of my shit?"

I laugh.

"I forgot about that," I say.

"Dude," says LT. "You wiping your boots off with a rock. That was one of the funniest things I've ever seen."

"What is this?" asks Zerega.

"You never heard this story?" says LT. "Oh, Smithson, you have to tell him."

"All right," I say. "Remember when Roman, LT, Munoz, and I got called for that range watching detail?"

"Yeah," says Zerega. "While we were armoring the twenty-tons."

"Yeah," I say. "Well, LT and Roman were in one Humvee and Munoz and I were in another. . . ."

Kuwait, besides for acclimatization and ship unloading, is for training. One of the training ranges is where this story takes place. We've already been to this range for unit training. And now we are back to act as security guards.

The range is a fake town. A mock convoy full of apprehensive soldiers drives through every thirty or so minutes and fires at pop-up targets. Some of the targets are angry-looking people wearing masks and holding weapons. Others are of smiling families.

The mock convoys drive through the mock town, firing at mock targets, avoiding firing at mock families, and weaving from mock IEDs. Then they park in a box formation and hold an AAR. Each convoy comes through three times. Think crawl, walk, run. The first time, crawl phase, that's a dry run. No rounds are used. The second time, walking, that's half speed, blank rounds. The third time is full speed, running with live rounds.

And then there's the range watch. On this half of the range the range watch is Munoz and I. We sit three hundred meters away from the fake town in our Humvee watching the desert be flat. Really we're watching for safety reasons. And by safety reasons, I mean camels. Plus, sure, if someone gets shot, we have a handheld radio to contact range control.

But mostly we're here for camel watching.

LT and Roman are off toward the beginning of the range. Two whole days. Guess how many camels. You got it. Not a one. So we take turns between dozing off and watching the route.

There's nothing around for miles but the range and a six-foot sign that says RANGE 2. We're parked right next to the latter. It's December, and it's pretty cold out. During the day it's about fifty degrees, and during the night, it gets down around thirty. And that damn wind, it never stops. Though, because we sit in a Humvee all day, the elements are tolerable.

"Oh, man," says Munoz. "I gotta shit."

He shifts around in his seat trying to hold it in. For some reason no one has thought to place a port-a-john at the range watching point. That's the army for you. Eleven hours of sitting in a Humvee, munching MREs, and no toilet.

"Better hold it," I say.

I put my nose back into a book. And he does hold it, but there are six more hours out here. So he gives up. A convoy just drove through the mock village and sits three hundred meters to our left holding their AAR. I am the driver, and we face the desert so that the passenger side of the Humvee can't be seen by the parked convoy.

"All right, I'm going for it," announces Munoz.

"Have a good one," I say.

You always keep toilet paper in a Humvee. Golden rule. So Munoz grabs the roll and glances out my window to make sure the convoy is still parked. He opens his door and squats on the passenger side. He holds the edge of his door and uses it to brace himself so he can sit like in a chair. All I can see is his head out of the backseat passenger's window. So I think his boom-boom will end up somewhere next to that door.

He finishes up and pulls himself back into his seat.

"I can't believe you just did that, Sergeant," I say.

"Gotta do what you gotta do," he says. "Just watch out on this side. I pushed some dirt over it, so don't step on the mound."

After a few more boring hours of reading, napping, and getting to know Munoz, I have to pee. The wind blows from the left, where another convoy has rolled through, camel free, and is parked in a box formation at the end of the mock town. So I stand at the rear of the Humvee with my back to the wind so as to avoid spray-back. Peeing into the wind is a mistake you make only once.

Munoz leans his head out of his window.

"Watch out for my shit," he says.

"All right," I say, looking down at the small mound of dirt on the ground outside the back passenger seat.

I laugh and continue my stream. When I'm done, I shake off and button my pants. I look out over the flat, brown desert. Seeing the curve of the earth makes me laugh and shake my head. I decide I want a cigarette. Now, I don't really smoke, but this is a stupidly dull detail. Smoking is something to do besides read and nap.

People wonder why soldiers smoke. This is why: because two days of range watching is enough boredom for your whole life.

I pull the lighter from my pocket and try to burn the cigarette hanging from my mouth. The wind blows hard, and the lighter's flame won't stay up. I turn my back to the wind and try some more. This still doesn't work.

The Humvee is built like a sort of pickup truck. The wind rushes right over the back half. So with my back to the wind I move to the left, finding cover behind the taller, rear passenger seat.

With the cigarette lit I stand up and gaze at the curve of the brown earth. I inhale a few times.

Iraq can't be this boring, *I think.*

I fuss around like people do when they're bored, when they're smoking. I shift weight from one foot to the other and twist my feet in the dirt.

Uh-oh, *I think.* Please tell me it's farther left.

I slowly lower my stare to my feet. There between them is light, desert brown sand swirled like ice cream with dark, Munoz brown shit. I lift my feet and look at the bottoms. The treads are packed with sticky, recycled army chow.

I look around for a place to wipe it off. The only thing around besides the Humvee is the Range 2 sign. It stands off to my right like a pillar. It's a pretty large sign supported by four by four posts. On one of these posts is where I rub my shit-covered soles.

Munoz sees me and pokes his head out of his window. Then he looks back at the trampled mound he made. His laugh is hearty, from the belly, just like his crap.

"*You stupid ass,*" he says.

I wipe my boots off the best I can on the Range 2 signpost.

When we get back to the range control station, where we sleep in the Humvees, we meet up with LT and Roman. Of course Munoz is eager to tell

the story as I pour water on my boot and scrape the treads with a pointy rock I found.

"So LT's about to fall over laughing—"

"And then"—LT takes over the storytelling—"Smithson says, 'You eat corn yesterday, Sergeant Munoz?' I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life!"

LT wipes the tears out of his eyes.

Soon the company is led outside to another runway. This time, we board a commercial plane, like the one on which we came over. Instead of Germany, this time we refuel in Ireland. Then we board the plane that will take us to Fort Bragg.

The moon shines out the window. The waves in the Atlantic break up the moonlight, making it dance around thirty thousand feet below us. There are a few overhead lights on in the plane, the ones you use to read, that give some of the cabin an orange glow. Most of the plane is sleeping, dreaming of home. A bunch of us from EQ platoon, we stay up.

We reminisce about the year we wished away, the year that would never end, the year that's over now.

"LT," says Marc Zerega, "you want to talk about falling over hilarious. What about the time on the Samarra mission?"

"With Smithson?" asks LT.

Zerega nods.

"Oh my God. I haven't thought about that in months."

"What happened on the Samarra mission?" asks Jesse Smith.

"That's right, he wasn't here yet," says Zerega.

Smith and a few other guys joined our unit about half-way through the tour. So they weren't there for the Samarra mission.

"Why don't you tell this one, sir?" I say to LT.

"So this was the mission when you guys got ambushed?" asks Smith.

"Actually I think it was the same night we got ambushed," says Zerega.

"Yeah," says LT. "In the tent at FOB Summerall. I walk in and a bunch of guys are in the back by Zerega's cot. . . ."

It's after dinner. No one can sleep, so we're up telling riddles. LT comes in the tent, bags under his eyes, and joins our group.

I stand up to meet LT and say, "Sir, a farmer has twenty sick sheep. One dies. How many does he have left?"

When you ask someone this riddle, they'll say twenty-five sheep until they're blue in the face. Because out loud, when you say "twenty sick sheep,"

it sounds like "twenty-six sheep."

LT doesn't know the answer, so he just keeps walking. Now, he's 6'2" and I'm 5'6". So as he walks, he has to look down. And since you don't stand toe-to-toe with an officer, I have to back up. He gets police-interrogation close and stares me down, grinning the whole time.

"Sir, I'm going to need an answer," I tell him.

He keeps walking.

"I'm warning you, LT," I say.

When we're ten feet away from the original group, I feel something brewing down below. It's just unnecessary for LT to still be towering over me with this shit-eating grin he's wearing, so I do something about it.

I turn quickly so my butt is facing him. Then I let out a little fart, a tiny squeaker. Think of a rabbit burping.

When I turn back to face him, LT has stopped dead in his tracks. The group explodes in laughter.

"Push" is all LT says.

I get down in the front leaning rest and start knocking them out. From the group Zerega says, "You don't fart on a commissioned officer in the U.S. army!"

LT says he needs a spot to sit and contemplate the

answer to my riddle. That's when I get flattened on the wooden floor.

"I didn't say stop," he says. I make a feeble attempt to push with him sitting on my back.

"Recover, Smithson," he says when he gets off me. "You know, they put you through a lot of training classes when you become an officer. What to do when one of your soldiers farts on you? Not one of them."

"That's because the army never saw me coming, sir."

"I can't even be mad at you, Smithson," he says. "You were desperate. And that, my friend, was a brilliant solution. You looked like a squid shooting your ink."

"You called me Squiddy for two weeks," I say.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Smithson," says Jesse Smith.

"Hey," says Todd Wegner, who joined our little EQ huddle when he heard the farting-on-LT story. "Remember when the commander came out on that mission?"

"Yeah," I say, laughing quietly so I don't wake up the rest of the people on the plane, who all seem to be sleeping.

"And he set his cot up on the edge of the tent?" says LT. He covers his mouth with one hand, and all I can see are his eyes. On top of the dark bags his eyes laugh with all the

force his mouth can't right now.

"I gotta hear this one," says Jesse Smith.

"All right," I say. "Well, in the wintertime, all it does in Iraq is rain. . . ."

The tent at FOB Summerall has plywood floors. This is so the puddles of rain and mud that collect outside the tent don't come inside the tent. But apparently these tents were set up during the dry season because there's slack in the tent's roof. So every night when it rains, the edges pool with water until they leak. Obviously, after only one night of sleeping here, we figure out to place our cots in the center of the tent and leave the edges clear.

During the second week of the Samarra mission the commander comes out to the field with us. He walks in the tent, and you can almost hear the sigh let loose from everyone's mouth. The commander is wearing his tan army-issue gloves. Outside of his office he always wears gloves. His uniform is pressed and sparkling clean. And his body armor and field gear look like they were just pulled from their plastic packaging.

It hasn't started raining yet, and the commander begins setting up a cot. Instead of taking a hint or—here's a thought—asking someone, he sets his cot up on the outskirts of the thirty others pushed toward

the tent's center. He must assume we all pushed our cots together because we enjoy the smell of one another's feet and morning breath. Though I'm sure he thinks we pushed our cots to the center to give him more living space. While he wrestles with the cumbersome army cot, no one offers him a hand or bothers to tell him that the edges of the tent drip rainwater all night.

The commander is the first one asleep, and it doesn't start raining until one in the morning. We're woken up by his lone, key chain flashlight as it dances blue light across the tent.

Sticking my head out of my sleeping bag, I see him trying to keep the little LED's button pushed down with one hand and move his stuff with the other. I turn back over to go to sleep.

Quietly, head in my sleeping bag, I laugh because it's the middle of the night in a combat zone. . . .

“And the commander took the time to put on his gloves,” I finish.

When we land in Fort Bragg, the applause is deafening. EQ platoon sits in the back of the plane laughing and cheering. We pat each other on the back and shake each other's hands. And the whole time, in all of our eyes, that

look of regret. The same one I gave Heather. There's that shameful feeling of abandonment.

This time I'm not leaving the love of my life for a year. I'm leaving my only brothers and one sister forever. Even if the unit gets deployed again, the half of the platoon that was cross-leveled won't be cross-leveled back. The army just doesn't work like that.

Back in Old Division Area, we settle down into the barracks the same way we did while we were going through mobilization training.

The first night the whole platoon is taking turns in and out of the bath and shower room. I stand next to Justin Greene and Austin Rhodes at the sink, brushing my teeth. I look in the mirror, and my eyes are desperate.

When I was here the first time, I was desperate because I wanted to be brave. Now “brave” means nothing. All I want to do is hold on to that year. I don't necessarily want to return to Iraq. And I sure as hell want to go home and see my family, but in the last few days of something you know will never come back, your mind has a desperate way of holding on to it.

“Remember when you got your wisdom teeth pulled?” Greene asks Rhodes through the minty suds in his mouth.

“Yeah, all four of them,” says Rhodes, spitting into his sink.

“I remember that,” says Jesse Lee, standing a few sinks

down. "And Smithson had to watch him."

"Had to?" I say. "I volunteered for that. It was hilarious. . . ."

"Somebody has to stay back with him," says Munoz.

"I'll stay back," I offer immediately. How can I turn this down?

"All right, we'll bring you guys a plate," says Jesse Lee.

Normally dentists won't pull all four wisdom teeth in one shot, but this is the army and we are in a combat zone. There's no time for mercy.

However Rhodes doesn't feel the slightest ounce of pain. He's still drugged from whatever they gave him at the dentist. Though "drugged" may not be the right adjective. Downright royally stoned seems more appropriate.

Rhodes sits in a chair in our common room, the one with the shelf full of candy, in a drunken slumped position. His head is back, jaw open, and the clump of gauze in the back of his mouth makes it difficult for him to talk.

"No tea-bagging Rhodesh," he says.

The whole group of us is laughing when LT walks by. He looks down at Rhodes slumped there

in his inebriated state and smiles.

"You feelin' okay, buddy?" asks LT.

"You arn gonna tea-bag me are you, shir?"

LT laughs and assures Rhodes that no tea-bagging of any sort will occur. Then the group heads off to chow.

Minus two, that is. Rhodes and I sit in the common room, next to the fridge, and he tells me all about how he'd fought to stay awake while the dentist intravenously knocked him out.

"I don think itsch werrkin'," he had told the dentist. The dentist prepped another needle and gave him a second dose. "Then my head juss fell back and I passhed owt." Rhodes fakes his head falling back and almost falls out of the chair. This is why he needs a guardian while the rest go to lunch.

I catch him and lift him back into his seat.

"Thanksch," he mutters.

He looks to the platoon's dry erase board, which sits on the wall beside him. It has all the soldiers from EQ listed by last name. There are small corresponding boxes for writing in where they are at any given time. It's for accountability.

Rhodes turns in his chair, grabs the marker, and begins scribbling things next to the names of those who had just gone to chow. Normally, we write a D

for DFAC (Dining Facility) when we go to chow. Rhodes just writes "food."

"I need a shmoke," he tells me.

"I don't think you should be smoking," I say.

"Doctor shaid itsh okay ash long ash the gauze esh there," he informs me. "Maybe Fawldeh hash shome shigarettesh."

"He's at chow," I say.

Rhodes apparently doesn't believe me and stumbles out of his chair to prove me wrong.

"Be careful," I tell him.

"For wha?"

He staggers through the nearby doorway to the hallway and Folden's room. Knocking on the door, he asks for Sergeant Folden.

"He's at chow," I say again. Rhodes opens the door and enters the room.

"Surjen Fawldeh?" he asks the empty room.

This room is the size of a cubicle and to anyone except Rhodes obviously unoccupied. I stand at the doorway chuckling as Rhodes pats down Folden's bedsheets.

"He'sh not shleepin."

I try to remain polite and avoid just laughing at him, but when I see him physically pat down a bed to be sure no one is sleeping in it, I lose it.

"Yoush okay, mahn?" he asks me.

"I'm fine," I say. "Let's go to your room and sit down."

We walk back into the hallway and down to his bay.

"Wanna shee the toothsh that got pulled?" he asks me.

"Sure," I say.

He pulls a small plastic jar from a nearby shelf. Inside are four bloody teeth.

"Look at thish one." He points. The tooth he refers to has a gnarly, pointed chunk sticking out of its side, not unlike the barb on the edge of a fishhook. "Thatsh gonna hurt when it comesh out."

"Yeah," I agree. He puts the teeth down and sets up to play me in Battlefield 1942 on his laptop. Sadly he kicks my ass.

After a little while Jesse Lee comes back with the crowd and gives us our to-go plates. I have a hamburger and onion rings. Rhodes gets peaches and some Jell-o. He takes the bloody gauze out of his mouth. Then, after more than a few unsuccessful tries, he pokes his fork into a peach slice.

"Ish thish my lower lip?" he asks us with his finger on his lower lip. We tell him yes, and he places the peach there. Tipping his head back, he opens and

closes his mouth. Think of a seal trying to swallow a dead fish. I guess he's hoping gravity will help him out and shimmy the peach into his mouth.

Lee and I stand in the doorway watching him. Our laughs start as scratchy grunts in the back of our throats. Again, attempting to save his dignity, we try to keep the laughs from becoming audible.

After a couple of jaw flexes the peach falls right into Rhodes's lap. And his dignity falls with it, because as it sits on his pants, Rhodes keeps opening and closing his mouth, attempting to eat the slippery thing.

Lee and I roar with laughter. Rhodes looks at us like a lost puppy. Then down at the peach slice in his lap. Then, as he tries to poke it with the fork, I say, "Sorry, man."

Although I'm still laughing. So I have to say it a few more times before he actually believes me.

"Rhodes ate the rest of his meal in front of a mirror," I say.

After a week of out-processing we are all flying out from the airport in Raleigh, North Carolina. Before we head to the holding area (also in Old Division Area) where the buses come to take us to the airport, the commander lines us up in formation.

In Iraq, because of the danger of mortars, we couldn't hold formations. With the whole company lined up one well-placed mortar could wipe out a whole platoon. So being in formation at Fort Bragg, although we're in the army, is a pretty foreign thing.

However, we don't forget our little twist on the commander's attempt at motivation and morale. Every time he calls us to attention, we're supposed to yell, "Adapt and overcome."

We're all lined up, standing at ease. The commander comes to the front with his head high.

"Company!" he yells.

"Platoon!" yells Munoz.

Then the commander: "Attention."

The whole company says his quirky little line. EQ platoon cries out what we always say: "Inept and overdone."

We all grin as we stand at attention. This is our last little attempt of holding on to the year, the last time we get to do something as a platoon, the last time we get to use our sense of humor, the biting sarcasm that got us through our year in Iraq.

All of our planes take off at different times, so every couple of hours the buses come and load a bunch of us at a time. We're all trying so hard not to cry. No one offers to shake a hand, because you're supposed to hug your brothers and sisters.

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