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Soldier's Heart

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Soldier's Heart

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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Bachelor of Arts in English, 2011

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Abstract

Soldier's Heart is a collection of stories about Preston Henry, a Special Forces Operator, doing what he must to survive combat and what he must--a quest just as harrowing-- to find peace back home. The stories of *Soldier's Heart* are interwoven in theme and plot, each story dovetailing with the next. It is a collection that shows not all war wounds can be seen.

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Soldier's Heart

Thistle Dew

Four years had passed since I last visited the Little Red River with my father. I felt strange standing beside him in the February twilight, the air thin and crisp and cold. We stood on a slight rise above our fishing shack, looking at the river. It widened around the bend and the moss beds beneath the surface reached like black mangled fingers for the surface.

"Sure is something," my father said.

I nodded. The johnboat sat in its dock stall. Dad built the dock from wolmanized pine just after purchasing the shack. The sun hid from us, but sprays of light spilled over the tops of pine trees into the valley and cast long shadows across the river. A bird chirped in a nearby pine, its song the only sound interrupting the serenity as the weather was still too cold for crickets and June bugs.

"How bout some chow?" he said.

"Yes sir."

My father looked at me from beneath his wool fedora, his face tan and wind-swept from years of guiding on the river. I made eye contact but said nothing. He looked away, and I watched him turn and walk up the hill. He was a combat veteran. Served back-to-back tours from '70 to '72 in Vietnam. Then he guided. His walk wasn't as steady as it was the last time I saw him, and his hands were spotted with age: purple, grotesque

bruises. He was old, a fact I only admitted for the first time in the privacy of the river.

I was medically retired from the army. Post-traumatic-stress and a traumatic brain injury were the official diagnoses, and it sent shock waves through my unit. Operators weren't allowed to have PTSD. I was out of the unit in three days, but it took another nine months for my honorable discharge. I'd been home a week when my father called and asked if I wanted to go fishing.

When I was a child, we had a terrific relationship, but when my mother left something changed in him and he became less and less affectionate. Though he attended all my sporting events, made sure I had everything I needed for school, took me fly fishing and cooked me breakfast--two fried eggs and bacon--every morning, it was different somehow; we never again had those father-son moments we shared before she left.

The fishing shack was a refurbished mobile home, resurrected by my father's hands. The tin panels were painted a deep green, the tin roof the color of tin, and it sat on a steady foundation of mortar and rock.

A lamp illuminated the living room and kitchen in a dull, yellow glow. A faded, floral couch sat against a wall beside my father's recliner. Above the couch were two eight-by-tens, a picture of a thistle and a close-up of glistening dew on a bed

of grass. It was our shack's name: "Thistle Dew." Replicas of trophy browns and rainbows mounted the walls, gathering dust.

A pot sizzled on the stove, and my father stirred it with a wooden ladle. The scent of chili powder and venison hung thick in the air; I ached, the smell stirring something within me.

"Chili'll be ready in ten," my father said.

I nodded and walked down the tiled hall to the bathroom sandwiched between two small bedrooms. I turned the sink on and let the water warm. I set my fedora on the counter next to several pill bottles and looked in the mirror. I looked more and more like him every year, and though I wasn't old, I felt it. I washed my hands and returned to the living room.

My father put a bowl of steaming venison chili in front of me with a package of saltines and a bottle of hot sauce.

"Thanks," I said.

He walked to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer. He sat beside me and dowsed his chili with hot sauce.

"Good for the soul," he said.

"That it is."

We ate in silence. I felt the need to fill the void in the room, but I didn't know how to begin. He kept his head down, looking at his bowl, and I got the feeling it took great effort to not look at me.

After supper I put the bowls in the sink and rinsed them out. My father lay back and read James Lee Burke's *The Lost Get Back Boogie*. He lit a Winston and took a long pull. His face was hard as iron and his eyes, set deep, stared at the page, his brows furrowed in concentration.

"I'm beat," I said. "See you in the morning."

"Bright and early," he said, his eyes on the book.

I walked to the bedroom and sat on the twin-sized bed. The green bedspread had a print of a large trout on it. I smiled at the thought of all the nights of my childhood weekends and vacations spent beneath the same blanket.

I kicked off my boots and undressed. I walked to the bathroom and slid the door shut. I opened each pill bottle and took out the prescribed dosage. I held round pills, oval pills, white and pink and blue and orange pills. As I looked at them, I thought, *pathetic, how pathetic*. I knew my father had seen the pill bottles, and I wondered what he thought of his only son having to swallow handfuls of medication just to be okay, to be normal. I felt weak with the pills in my hand, but I didn't need another episode, so I threw them all at once into my mouth and washed them down with water.

I stared at the clock on the wooden nightstand. The minutes dripped by like a leaky faucet, slow and steady. I closed my eyes, tossed then turned, trying to get comfortable.

My father's bedroom door slid shut, and then the light snapped off. My eyes adjusted to the dark. I stared at a painting on the wall of a trout fighting with a tiny fly in his mouth. In the background of the painting I couldn't see the small johnboat and the silhouette of a man with a fly rod high in the air though I knew they were there. The trout was out of the water and its sparkling body arched awkwardly; I imagined it tossing its head trying to throw the fly from its mouth. I looked back at the clock. Only a few minutes had passed.

This was commonplace. Sleep deprivation, they called it. I'd brought Ambien with me, but I didn't want to take it; the medicine left me groggy, and I wanted to rise early. I sat up and switched on the lamp. I crawled out of bed and walked to the living room. I picked up my father's book and returned to my room. I started reading. At some point, I fell asleep.

Eyes, black and menacing, filled with rage, loomed in front of me. The man's face, not a face at all, but a hazy, swirling shadow, a foggy apparition held no features other than those eyes, which came closer and closer until so large, they filled everything. All black and black. I raised my weapon, but the warning I shouted never came out. My heart thumped; terror gripped my insides until a pain cut into me. And just as I was squeezing the trigger, his putrid, moist breath woke me, freezing in my own sweat.

My heart pounded, and I felt an ache in my chest. Beneath the blanket I shivered. With sweat. With fear. The only relief I felt was the fact I didn't pull the trigger. In my dreams, I never pulled the trigger.

I continued to shiver so I braced myself on the bed. I wanted to close my eyes, but I feared those black eyes that filled every space of my mind. I got out of bed on weak legs and stumbled to the bathroom and put my head into the sink and let the water sluice over me, down my neck and back. It calmed my nerves. I looked at my reflection. *Who are you?* I returned to the bedroom but didn't attempt to sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning I heard my father roll from his bed. After a few minutes his door slid open, and I heard tap tap tap on my door.

"Sir."

"It's about that time. I'll get some coffee ready."

It was dark out. I stretched, arms over head, exhausted but not groggy. In the living room my father looked down the length of his fly rod like a pool sharp does a cue.

"Ready?" he said.

"Gotta get some coffee."

He continued to look at the rod as I stepped by him.

"Black, right?"

I nodded.

I walked outside. The winter morning slapped me. I held the coffee mug with both hands and raised it to my face to let the steam hit me. It felt like a sauna on my skin; goose bumps rose on my arms. There was very little wind. In the black morning I could see the silhouette of cumulous clouds, and I thought it might rain but hoped we could get a half-day in. I stood against the railing on the porch and peered at the unkempt grass, pine trees profiled by the low visibility.

My father stepped outside. "I'm gonna grab my shoulder bag," he said.

I followed him in the house to get my gear.

I raised my hand and put it out flat in front of me and tried to hold it steady. It shook. Another symptom. I swallowed a couple of Xanax dry. I shook my head at the reflection in the mirror and returned to my room. I put my bottle of Xanax in my shoulder bag and hoped he hadn't noticed my hands shaking.

He stood on the porch holding a green Stanley thermos and the rods. His vest was zipped over his jacket, and the shoulder bag over the vest, his fedora pulled low on his brow. As a child I thought my dad was Indiana Jones.

"All set," I said.

We walked to the dock. He nudged the boat against the stall with his right foot, and with the other he stepped into the boat with his arms outstretched for balance. He sat in the red swivel seat near the motor and pulled out his pack of Winstons.

I took a can of Copenhagen from my back pocket and thumped it with my forefinger. I placed a pinch between my bottom lip and gum. I sucked hard on the tobacco, and my mouth filled with the putrid taste and saliva. I sent a long tail of yellow spit into the river.

As I entered the boat my father primed the gas. He pumped the ball and turned the idle switch on the twenty-five horse Mercury and cranked the motor. After his first pull, a thick cloud of white exhaust wafted into the air around his face. It started with the second pull, and then he threw the handle into drive and revved the motor.

The motor was loud, echoing across the river. When the boat cleared the stall, he threw the handle into drive and made a semicircle; we headed upriver. The cold air whipped my face as we bounced and rocked on the water. It was still dark, but light crawled through the pines and into the valley. In half hour it would truly be morning.

A gamut of emotions. I was thankful for the motor noise. I wasn't prepared for the feelings of being on the water again.

Natural and Exhilarating. The motor exhaust, the wind, the crisp smell of winter. It was all almost too much.

My father cut the boat toward the right bank and slowed. I looked back at him as he peered over the edge of the boat. There was enough light to see moss beds beneath the water. Then, they were gone, and I couldn't see the bottom. He guided the boat just above the hole and let it idle.

"Drop the anchor straight down," he said.

I slung the anchor, a soldered piece of railroad tie, and it clanged the edge of the boat, echoing through the valley.

"Sorry."

"Pull the rope tight and tie her off," he said.

The boat pulled and steadied as my father did the same with his anchor. He picked up the rods and handed one to me.

"I rigged them this morning."

I looked at my rig: partridge-and-orange with an extra-crispy dropper.

"They're good; trust me," he said.

I nodded.

He raised his rod and whipped it back and forth, drawing line. I repeated his motion. When enough line was out, I raised my rod tip higher and made a smooth, ten-to-two motion with the fly rod from my shoulder. I kept my forearm steady and the line snapped by my head. I let it load in the back cast and

brought my arm forward with a jerk and the line uncurled itself gently onto the water.

My father was the first man on the Little Red to do what we were doing: fly-fishing from an anchored boat. Or deep holing. Now, all the guides do it because the browns only spawn in the late fall and early winter. The rest of the year there are no trout on the shoals. Many don't like fly-fishing from a boat. We call them purists. They'd watched *A River Runs Through It* too often. But those who did accept the method were rewarded.

In the coming light we watched our indicators floating on the surface. The flow of the river was gentle. As my indicator neared his, he raised his rod and drew his arm backward, line springing from the river and snapping behind him. He whipped his arm forward and let his indicator hit just beside mine.

I laughed. He was an extraordinary fly-fisherman. He could hit a leaf with his fly at sixty feet, and I never saw anyone who could out-cast him. But he was casting with a kind of sidearm action, something I had never seen him do. His shoulder must have been bothering him, because he had taught me in the backyard as a child, with a styrofoam bobber attached to the end of my line, to cast with my forearm straight and to make my motion as steady as a pendulum on a grandfather clock.

I raised my rod tip and roll-cast my line upriver. It was a poor attempt as the line collapsed in a giant bird's nest.

The second time I put more power into it, and the line rolled off the river and came to a dead drift where I wanted it.

"Nice," my father said.

I heard his lighter spark, and he sucked on a Winston. He leaned back in his seat, holding his rod with his right hand. The cigarette hung lazy from his lips; in his left hand was the lid of the thermos, steaming with coffee.

"Bring an extra mug?" I said.

He pulled a ceramic mug from his bag and filled it with coffee.

"Thanks."

The previous night was bothering me. There was a reason he invited me fishing, right? I didn't know how to approach the subject. Whatever the subject was. I closed my eyes, exhaled deeply and went for it.

"Did I wake you last night?"

"Nope."

"That's good," I said.

He nodded. *Damn it*, I thought. *Not a single word?* I shook my head and looked to my indicator.

The valley was vivid with sunlight before we got our first bite. My father's indicator submerged slightly and stayed suspended beneath the surface for a full second. He set the hook, swinging his rod to the side. The arch in the rod was

magnificent as he stripped line. The trout ran downriver. My father let the drag do the work. When the trout slowed, he used the reel to bring in the slack and stripped the line again. The trout jumped. It was a colorful rainbow, silver and pink, and it glinted in the sunlight. He pulled the trout into the boat without a net and removed the fly from its lip, and tossed it back in the river.

"Was it in the slot?"

"Nah," he said. "Maybe fourteen inches."

"Nice start."

In no time, my father had his line in the water. In my peripheral, I caught him looking at me.

My indicator bobbed and though I knew better, I immediately tried to set the hook. The indicator rose to the surface.

"Damn," I said.

"Gotta let em take it."

"I know. I know."

I roll-cast again. I mended my line then set my fly rod down to get a pinch.

"I heard you last night," said my father.

My pulse quickened; breath shortened. I looked at him. He stared at the river.

Say something. Seconds went by before I did, and I said, "Sorry." *That's it,* I thought and clenched my jaw.

"Don't be. It's okay." He reached for a cigarette but stopped and looked at me. "I'm here."

I didn't know what to say, so again, I said nothing.

By lunch my father had caught five healthy rainbows. I'd caught none. He drifted the boat against the bank. We got out and found a log to sit on. The sun was overhead. The air, cold; the ground hard as concrete. In the east, I noticed cumulous clouds churning, moving our way.

"Just rusty," he said about me being skunked. He reached into his shoulder bag. "I made us sandwiches."

I got my flask.

"You know the rules," he said. "No brandy till you catch one."

Instead of peach brandy, he gave me a Bud Light from his bag. He eyed my flask, so I handed it to him. He took five drinks, long and deliberate. He even managed a smile.

"Thanks," he said.

"Sure."

"We better pack it up," he said. "Rain's comin."

We gathered our gear and headed toward the shack.

There, sheets of rain pounded the tin roof. It sounded like a machine gun. Sitting on the couch, I tried to read the latest *Field & Stream*. With my head down and eyes just over the

magazine, I watched him reading in his recliner. He looked so tense. So serious. But I knew there was a time when he hadn't always looked so tense. So serious. He never looked from his book when I stood to go to my room. The machine-gun rain was no match for our silence.

We ate venison stew again for supper. I had a small bowl and went straight to bed, hoping to sleep. When the rain stopped, the moon cast a dull light into my otherwise dark room.

I don't know how long I slept or when I woke, but when I did I was crying. My body shook. Those eyes, black and large as saucers, were suspended before me.

I squeezed my eyes closed, hoping they, the saucer like eyes, would be gone when I opened mine again. They were. My father's light came on. I wiped at my eyes, but he didn't come to my room. I lay back down with the lamp on and stared at the stucco ceiling. I didn't want to sleep. Scared to sleep. In a few minutes, my father's light snapped off. His bed squeaked beneath his weight. As night crept on, I heard his bed. I could see him in my mind rolling around, unable to sleep. It was my fault.

Morning with the moon out reflected light off the dew covered grass. We got in the boat and headed downriver. I knew where we were going. The hole where I caught my very first

trout: a 13 and 2/3-inch rainbow. I was six. My father measured it three times, and said, *Always pinch the tail. It's good for an extra inch.*

On the bank, a giant oak towered above a cluster of pine trees like a patriarch. Its grey branches hung over the water. We anchored facing the oak and cast toward it, our flies drifting beneath its overhanging branches.

"Sorry about last night," I said.

"No bother."

Wind gusted through the valley and blew our lines, pulling the indicators. When it stopped, my father and I simultaneously roll-cast, our flies landing within inches of each other. I smirked; he smiled.

"You're casting much better," he said.

"Thanks."

I caught him looking at me, and he didn't look away.

"I know you've been having some trouble," he said.

I nodded, but his comment startled me.

"Is it dreams?"

I considered an answer. How much did he already know? How much did I want him to know? Would he be ashamed? Should he be ashamed?

Before I answered, he said, "Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"No sir."

My father put a Winston between his lips. "It's okay, son." He lit his cigarette and said, "You can talk to me."

His stern countenance was gone. Replaced by fatigue. Consternation. I still didn't know what to say, but I thought, *isn't this what you've wanted?* It was time. I took a deep breath.

"It's just the same dream," I said. I looked away and closed my eyes. I steadied my breathing. "It's these black eyes. These dead black eyes."

"I've been wanting to tell you something," he said. "Now's a good a time as any." He looked skyward and continued, "In Vietnam I went on R&R to a small village on the coast of the South China Sea. Just a weekend, but I had a great time. Booze, dancing girls. I tied one on for three days, but I found some time to snorkel." He paused and looked away from me to the river. "Anyway," he said. "I was underwater when outta nowhere I see this amberjack, big and beautiful. I wasn't too far down so I could see her real clear. Solid gold. She really shined. You shoulda seen her. Anyway, she kicked that yellow tail and swam right at me, just staring at me." He looked at me. "Ever seen an amberjack's eyes?"

"No sir."

"Well, they're dead. Looks it anyway. For such a beautiful creature their eyes are just plain dead." He cleared his throat. "A week later we were watching this small village outside of Da Nang. Nobody wanted to go in there, so we called in an airstrike. That's how it was back then. When it's done we go down to have a look-see. Nothing but death. Men, women, children. Burnt. All of them. Some scorched black. Some ripped apart. I remember this one woman; she was still holding her baby all cradled in her arms. Weird though cause they didn't have a scratch on em. They were just as dead. But their eyes. Same as that amberjacks." He stopped speaking to catch his breath. He sucked in sharply and continued, "I guess I just want you to know I get it. I really do. I don't know what all you went through and I don't know what you see now, but I see that amberjack's eyes more than I want to. And I always see that woman and her baby in them eyes."

My father wouldn't look at me as he cleared his throat. My turn, but again, nothing came to mind. I tried, but settled for a simple, "Thank you."

He smiled his crooked smile. His eyes were glossed like glass, and I knew he had just seen his amberjack.

"Son, you can talk to me if you need to."

"Alright," I said. He was vulnerable. I'd always known he loved me. But this. He truly wanted to help. So, I obliged. For his sake or mine, I didn't know.

I began: "I was in Afghanistan. It was early September, and the heat was awful. Like nothing I'd ever felt."

Our uniforms, crisp and white from sweat, were like sandpaper on our skin.

"Intel reported Taliban activity around this small village right by the Pakistan border. A high-value target was there. He was bad. I mean, real bad." Holding my gaze, my father nodded. "We air-assaulted into the village. Kicked ass too. Detained some hajjis but nothing came of it.

"Anyway, during the raid we damaged some guy's property. I was tasked with the investigation and deciding if we had to pay him."

The local was not old by age alone. His dry, weathered skin matched the baked terrain. His black hair was dirty and matted; grey sprouts showed around his ears. But his beard was ink-black. He wore a soiled gown that had once been white. He spoke in a gruff, graveled voice. There was no intelligence on him or his property, and his pleading, at every meeting, seemed genuine. He swore his allegiance to the United States and rebuked the insurgency, thanking me for saving his country.

"We couldn't pay the claim, and I had to tell him. Me and a couple a guys went to see him. My teammates stayed at the truck, you know, smoking and joking. Through our terp, I told him over and over we couldn't pay." I paused. "I turned to leave but looked at him a last time. That's when he changed.

"His black eyes hardened. Darkened. He started shouting."

I took a step back. He took a step forward, and I raised my weapon.

"I told him to calm down. He took a step forward, and raised his arm. I saw something, like a flash or something. I just knew it was a weapon. So—" I stopped. I rubbed the sweat from my palms onto my jeans and popped my neck. Looking down I said, "I pulled the trigger."

My father didn't avert his eyes nor did he blink. His lips set in a straight line.

The shot echoed, and then there was a long, astounding silence. I could not take my eyes from his lifeless body. I stared at his black eyes, still open but now empty, cold.

"It was a watch. A goddamned watch. And it ticked. Tick. Tick. Tick. I looked back toward the truck where my teammates stood. The next thing I remember is they were standing beside me. James told me not to worry about it, and Josh searched the body while Andy brought the truck over."

I didn't watch but felt the body thump in the bed. I'm not sure how long we drove, but we finally stopped by a river. The river was an infested shade of brownish-green. The smell—rotting death—stung my nostrils, and I breathed through my mouth to keep from vomiting though I could taste it. I concentrated on the air-conditioning, breathing slowly, steadily.

"They threw his body in the river."

My father looked out toward the towering oak. He shook his head; the tears on his cheek reflected in the sunlight. My stomach tightened because I'd never seen him cry, not even after my mother left.

"I'm sorry, son."

"It is what it is."

He looked at me with glassy, red eyes. "I wanted to protect you, but I wasn't there. And I can only imagine what you went through."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not."

"Dad," I said. "It's not your fault."

He nodded, looked me in the eye and said, "It's not your fault either."

Either. When I heard the word, I felt a sharp tightening in my chest. He was with me. Yes, I thought, *he was with me.*

Killed a Man, Twice

He might have been seventeen, maybe eighteen, his dark smooth skin a few years away from the wrinkled and cracked face of the desolate and unforgiving country. He couldn't yet grow a beard that signaled manhood. He didn't need a beard or wrinkles or cracked skin to be a man; all he needed was an AK-47, which he had been holding.

But there was a hole that went right through the center of his skull.

In his knapsack, a picture of a young Iraqi woman, face uncovered. With her dark skin, her dark hair and eyes, she was beautiful. As the picture was passed around everyone had a comment about fucking her. While the picture was still being passed around a bloody arm and hand reached for it. The hajji shot through the middle of the skull wheezed. At the realization he wasn't dead, everyone around took a step back, shocked. No way he could be alive. Not knowing what to do, Josh handed him the picture of the woman.

Christ, said Doc. Fucker ain't dead.

Doc said it loud enough that most of the team and QRF went over to see what was going on. Everyone but Preston, who shot him.

Look at him, bro, Doc said. He's breathing and with a goddamn three inch hole through his head.

The six-man team was there, minus Preston, and all the QRF, watching. Preston had pulled the trigger, but damn, who'd ever seen anything like this? Who'd want to miss it?

When we got the all clear, Preston must have found a quiet spot. We knew he had his Kevlar off replaced by a ragged, tattered Razorback hat. The back had to be taped just so it would stay on. Preston wore it after every mission. Perhaps his symbol all was clear and safe.

Here's the amazing thing: Preston shot him from fifteen to twenty meters away. The entrance wound was about an inch long, right through the middle of his head. The exit wound, four inches and you could see six inches into the fucker's head. The shot went straight through, a literal hole in his head. It was the perfect kill shot but the hajji wasn't dead.

Blood, more pink than red, oozed from the wound along with pieces of his skull and brain matter.

Hajji's eyes were open. They were somewhere between life and death as if they hadn't made up their mind.

While kneeling, Doc asked if Preston was around yet. Everyone looked but no one saw him.

Doc thought, if I had just made the perfect kill shot and the fucker didn't die, I'd want to see it.

But that was Preston. Preston had his own way.

Preston finished his cigarette and lit another. He could see the huddled mass from his shaded cover and wanted no part of it. He pulled out a flask from one cargo pocket and a couple Twizzlers from the other. He poured bourbon on the Twizzlers and ate them while he smoked.

Preston had been close enough to hear Doc say, "Fucker ain't dead," and he knew everyone would want to look and talk and bullshit. He just wasn't in the mood so when he heard Doc, he went off in the other direction to find some privacy.

Four Regular Army Soldiers sat in the DFAC eating lunch. Three were Infantry and the other, a S-1 clerk. One of the Infantryman, a Specialist, had been on the QRF detail a few nights earlier when the hajji had been shot and didn't die.

He told the others the story: Preston Henry, you know, that green beanie, killed a man. Twice. I saw that shit, he said. I'm so glad I was QRF for that mission. Anyway I see two muzzle flashes; hajji drops his gun, knowing we can't shoot but Preston Henry didn't give a fuck. He popped the fucker. Popped him right in the head.

Yeah, I heard about that. But they said it was a clean kill.

Clean kill or not, hajji needed to go.

So what happened?

We hit the compound six vehicles deep; they were ready for us. It was a helluva firefight. He paused a moment and continued. Like I said I saw two burst of fire from the corner of the building. Though the muzzle flashes blinded me, I saw the hajji drop his weapon and run but within a second I heard a three round blast and the fucker dropped.

Isn't that against the Rules of Engagement? The S-1 clerk said.

You're such a pussy. Here's the thing: according to the ROE if hajji doesn't have a weapon we can't kill him. Those fucks know that and that's why they drop their weapons. Well, fuck that and good for Preston Henry. That fucker's my hero now.

They all laughed.

Anyway, within minutes the whole thing was over. The HVT we were after—

HVT? Said the clerk.

You're such a POG. High Value Target. That's all those guys go after. Anyway, the HVT we were after was flexed cuffed. He was all crying and shit. I think he even pissed himself.

Everyone at the lunch table laughed again.

Such pussies.

We got him and about a dozen other guys, not including the ones that got smoked.

How many did ya'll kill?

I think I got two, he said then cleared his throat and looked around the table. But we got nine total and there wasn't a single American casualty.

The others at the table quickly glanced at each other, skeptical of what they had just heard but they didn't say anything.

To break the silence one of the Infantryman asked, So those Green Beenies, they're as bad as everyone says they are?

Yeah, they're badasses but I think any of us could do it. He looked at the POG and said, But you, you ain't got the balls for it.

Everyone laughed but the POG. He sat staring at his lunch.

So anyway, all this shit is going on when Doc all the sudden is like this fucker ain't dead. No one can believe it. Hell, I didn't. I saw the shot. It was perfect. So, I had to check it out myself. Sure enough, hajji's still breathing.

How?

How the fuck should I know? No one did, not even Doc. I'm telling ya, it was nuts. So everyone goes over to see except Preston. No one knows where he is.

Did you get a good look at the wound?

Fuck yeah I did. You shoulda seen it. Blood and brains everywhere. Hell, Doc even showed me the entrance and exit wound. You coulda stuck your whole hand down there. It was some sick shit. Doc said he'd never seen anything like it.

Shit, I wish I'da been there.

Quit being a bitch and maybe you'll get off guard duty.

More laughter from the table.

So now they got this hajji with a huge hole in his head and James is freaking out.

Who's James?

The ODA Team Leader.

Oh, okay.

Says right to me: this is going to be some shit storm.

Then what happened?

Well, I had to escort the detainees to the RPC detention center, but the ODA showed up a little later. I guess there was a shit storm. Apparently, hajji was sent to Balad but they didn't want him to just die so they flew his ass back down here.

No way.

I saw the bird and everything. They had to bring the fucker in for a checkup or something.

Did you get to see anything?

Nah, it was all behind closed doors.

So what ended up happening?

He leaned in close and whispered, This is just what I heard, but he was taken to some Shia or Sunni neighborhood, I can't remember but Preston Henry unloaded a clip into the motherfucker.

For real?

If anyone would do it, it would be him.

Holy shit?

Yeah, fucking crazy right.

From start to finish, Operation Valhalla lasted about fifteen minutes. All we wanted to do was get back to the Safehouse and crash. We didn't have another Operation for three days so we planned to kick back, drink some cold ones by the pool and find some ladies. Preferably British.

Nope. Even Operators have to deal with Regular Army bureaucracy.

It went like this: we were at the Safehouse for about two hours when James gets a call from HQ in Balad. We heard him arguing, yelling over the phone, everyone on the team listening. James slammed the phone down and yelled, Goddamn it.

P, he said. We have to take control of that fucker you shot. Balad doesn't want him dying on their watch.

What, Preston said.

James sat down and called the Battalion Commander at RPC. James said a lot of yes sirs but with eye rolls and middle fingers. He hung up.

Mother fucking fuckers, he said. Apparently Colonel Fuck Ass in Balad called the BC first and gave him an earful. I guess I'll call the detention center and see if they'll take him.

James made the call, again screaming before finishing with a fuck your mother and he hung up.

Guess that was a no, Doc said.

We all laughed. Josh grabbed some cold Heinekens from the fridge and passed them around.

So what's the plan? Preston asked. I mean, someone has to take the fuck.

We do, James said. Preston, you and me are going to talk to the Colonel at RPC. They are flying hajji down now so I need the rest of ya'll to pick him up at the LZ.

James and Preston left in the Tahoe and Doc, Josh, Tim, Clay and I took the Explorer to the LZ, which was near the RPC detention center.

The bird landed in about half an hour and Major Watts, the Brigade XO and a pimple-faced red beret Specialist helped the bandaged hajji off the bird; they didn't even shut the

helicopter down, obviously wanting nothing to do with this motherfucker.

Major Watts yelled over the props, I know this is bullshit and I'm sorry about it. I nodded and we shook hands. Josh and I each grabbed an arm and put the hajji in the backseat of the Explorer.

James and Preston arrived just as the bird was taking off.

Damn, James said. Quicker than I thought.

That's what she said, Josh said.

James punched Josh in the shoulder and we all got a needed laugh.

So, we have a plan? Clay said.

James looked at Preston and smiled.

First, James said. The Colonel wants Doctor Phillips to do a, um, an informal inspection before we proceed with the plan.

Preston, Josh and Clay walked the hajji to the detention center. He couldn't stand on his own and his head sagged, drooling on himself.

The fuck, Josh said. Goddamn spit just got all over me.

Preston and Clay laughed but made sure to stay out of the way of the drool.

Some National Guardsman opened the gate and Doctor Phillips was waiting on us. We carried him to an exam room and

sat him in a metal folding chair. Doctor Phillips undid the bandage around hajji's head.

The left side of his head, the entrance wound side, was shaved and stapled. Six staples. The right side also shaved was closed with fourteen staples.

You really fucked him up, Clay said.

Doctor Phillips grunted in agreement.

Preston shrugged. Wish I'd killed him or got there before anyone knew he was alive.

Doctor Phillips stopped what he was doing and looked at Preston. Whatever he was going to say or do didn't seem worth it, so he kept going with the examination.

I can't for the life of me figure out how he's still alive, Doctor Phillips said.

That makes all of us.

I can tell you he doesn't have much time left.

Preston and Clay helped the Doctor undress him for further examination. There were two more bullet wounds in his left shoulder.

How many times did you shoot him? Doctor said.

Three I guess, said Preston. I usually shoot in three round bursts.

Doctor Phillips nodded, still examining the hajji.

We all stared at the hajji in amazement. I mean, it was a thing to behold. This motherfucker was shot straight through the head and twice in the left arm and here he was breathing. His head sagged and he continued to drool on himself but he was alive.

The Doctor found a maggot in his left armpit. A sign everyone took as hajji wasn't long for this world.

That's sick, Clay said.

I've done my part Doctor Phillips said. In and out, they said. Better get him out of here before he dies.

Thanks, Doc.

Not a problem, he said. You fellas have a plan?

You don't want to know, James said.

Fair enough.

Take him to the Tahoe, James said.

The hajji was in the backseat, hands zipped-tied behind him. The team stood at the front of the Tahoe.

Alright, James said. Here's the deal. The Colonel found us some funds, a couple grand. He said he didn't care what we did as long as we got rid of the fuck and it didn't come back on him, the unit or us.

So, Doc said. What's the plan?

This is how we're gonna play it: me and Preston are gonna take the money and pay some cabbie a few hundred bucks to take him to Al Dura.

But he's Shia.

Exactly, James said.

Gotcha.

Works for me, Preston said.

I'm in, Doc said. But if we are only paying the cabbie a few hundred what about the rest?

That's the second part of the plan. After we know the hajji fuck is in a place where he's no longer a problem, James said. We are going to use the rest of the money at the Duty Free.

Brilliant, said Josh.

The rest of the team laughed and high-fived.

Ok, James said. Preston I need you to put on a dishdash—local Iraqi clothing—and I'll change too and get this motherfucker gone. James paused a minute and looked at Doc. Why don't you come with us?

Alright, Doc said.

What about the rest of us?

I want you all to follow us to gate 1 and wait. We'll be in constant contact. I'm not alerting QRF about this so if shit goes down, ya'll are gonna have to get there in a hurry.

Not a problem, Josh said and smiled. Some men were just meant for this kind of shit.

James and Preston got in the front seats and Doc got in the back with hajji. The rest of the team followed in the Explorer. We passed three checkpoints, but our Tornado Badges allowed us access without being searched. We laughed at the MPs with their stupid fucking confused faces as they looked at the badges.

Preston and Doc both had beards and with the dishdashas could pass as locals from a distance. Doc also spoke a little Arabic, which helped with the taxi.

Doc negotiated with a local taxi driver for a few minutes and then the local nodded his head and waved us over.

How much? James said.

Five hundred, said Doc.

James gave the taxi driver the money and put the rest in his pocket.

He knows where we're going, right? James said.

Yeah, said Doc. We are good to go, bro.

Josh and Doc loaded the detainee into the back seat. The driver looked at him in the rearview mirror until he caught James' look. The cabbie looked away.

James to Doc: tell that fuck the money is for him to keep his goddamned eyes on the road.

Doc said something in Arabic and the cabbie nodded and waived his hands. He said, Know nothing.

James' beard wasn't as thick or impressive as Preston's or Doc's, so he changed his mind about going. This was a risky maneuver and had to be pulled off perfectly. No chances. No problems.

Doc sat in the front seat with the cabbie while Preston helped the detainee from falling over in the back. We hoped he didn't die before reaching Al Dura.

The cab had no air conditioning so the windows were down, which didn't help. Preston and Doc wore their flight suits and weapons under their Iraqi garb, making the heat that much worse. No one spoke. Every once in a while the cabbie would look in the rearview and then he would notice Preston. Preston pulled up his dishdasha and showed him his .40 cal attached to his flight suit. The cabbie didn't look in the rearview again. It took about twenty minutes with traffic to get to Al Dura. They had the cabbie drive around until they found a deserted area and threw the detainee out. He would either die of natural causes or the Sunnis would take care of it; either way, he was no longer a problem. After seeing the pistol, the cabbie didn't even watch what they did with the detainee. Another twenty minutes and they were pulling up to a checkpoint at Gate 1. Doc showed his badge and was waved through. On the other side of

the gate was the team. Preston got out of the cab and walked to us. Doc exchanged a few words with the cabbie.

What was that about? Preston said.

Doc laughed. Preston here decided the cabbie needed to mind his own business so he showed him the business end of his .40.

You showed him your piece? James said.

Preston nodded and said, He wasn't minding his business.

He was so scared, Doc said. I thought he was gonna shit himself.

James put his arm around Preston's neck. My man. He squeezed a couple of times and said, How did it go?

Smooth. No problems at all, Preston said.

Doc nodded in agreement.

I knew I could count on you boys, James said. Fucker is probably already being tortured.

They laughed as if the hajji fuck hadn't been through enough already. A little more might finally do the trick.

James pulled out a wad of money from his pocket and said, Duty Free, bitches.

The Duty Free was an alcohol store for civilians and contractors who worked on Camp Victory. It was owned and operated by a local and his two daughters. The booze cost half of what they did in the States.

Is it gonna be you Preston, with that beard?

Sure. I just need to take this fucking dress off.

Everyone laughed.

Before we hit the Duty Free, James said. I need to get to HQ and let them know we no longer have a problem. James looked at Preston and said, You're with me. The rest of you wait at the bottom of the hill.

HQ was in one of Saddam's many palaces. It was a long steep winding hill to get to the palace.

They parked the Tahoe by the front doors, two wooden doors, weighing hundreds of pounds each, that opened outward. They walked through the main corridor where MWR had set up computers with Internet for soldiers to use. They walked up a couple of steps into another large room. It held the XO's office and the S1. Just to the left in another office were the JAGO and his paralegal.

The XO, Major Roids (as he was referred to behind his back), was a well-manicured, tanned meathead, who thought he was god's gift to women. His blonde hair was way beyond regulation even for Special Forces standards and always slicked back.

You boys get it done? XO said.

That's what we're here to see the Commander about, James said.

The XO got on the phone and after a few seconds hung up and said, Go on up.

James, a Captain, despised the XO and gave him a mock salute before starting up the winding stairs that led to the Commander and Sergeant Major's offices and sleeping quarters.

James knocked on the Commander's door.

Behind a large mahogany desk sat Lieutenant Colonel Atkins and on the couch adjacent to the large desk was a brown leather couch where the Sergeant Major sat splayed out.

Take a seat fellas, the Commander said.

We sat in two seats in front of the Commander's desk.

The Commander and Sergeant Major were both holding a tumbler of whiskey.

So, Sergeant Major said. Should we be saluting your good fortune or drowning our sorrows?

Though it was often tough to gauge the mood of the two men, they seemed relaxed and pleasant.

James said, I think you can go ahead and salute.

Everything went as planned then? Colonel Atkins said.

Perfectly.

I knew I could count on you boys. I'm just sorry about the clusterfuck. Those fucks in Balad didn't give us a say. We'll get em back though.

No problem, James said. You know if you need something done, we got you.

That I do, Colonel Atkins said. Which is why I need you to do me one more favor.

Name it.

With that money you have left, the Colonel paused and smiled, I want you to get me a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue.

James and Preston looked at each other. We can oblige you, said James.

You need anything, Sergeant Major? Preston said.

Since you're asking get me a bottle of Jack.

No problem.

Now, the Colonel said. That money was for a special fund. I'd say it was a special situation so no one is going to be asking about it. Just don't flaunt it too much. His face went from friendly to fierce: I don't want any questions.

Yes, sir, they replied in unison.

Job well done, the Commander said. Go ahead and take a few extra days off. Enjoy yourselves. We'll get back to business soon enough.

As the Colonel stood, so did James and Preston. They each shook hands with the Colonel then saluted. Preston saluted the Sergeant Major as James shook hands and they left.

They tried to wait till they were out of hearing range, but it was tough. The Colonel basically just told them to keep whatever money was left. He just wanted a bottle of Blue, which you could get in country for just over a hundred bucks. They couldn't believe their luck. They got to the bottom of the stairs and made a dash for the front doors before anyone could bother them. Preston thought maybe someone behind him said something but he kept going.

They drove down the hill and informed the team. From a clusterfuck to a party. That was war. Or it could go the other way. That was war too.

Fifteen hundred bucks for booze, James said.

Even if we only drink half that, we can sell the rest for a couple grand, Preston said.

True. True.

Alright, James said. Let's mount up and hit the Duty Free.

Preston changed into a pair of khakis and a light blue button up shirt. He wore Ariat boots and his disgusting Razorback hat. With his beard, there was no way they could tell he was a soldier. Besides, he'd done this a dozen times before, even getting friendly with the owner.

He walked in to brightly lit room. There were rows and rows of alcohol and against the back wall a cooler. One of the daughters was working. Her olive skin, black hair and dark eyes

did it for him. Plus she dressed Western, showing just a bit of cleavage, painted-on jeans and high heels. Preston had always been into dark women, but he knew there was no point; he was sure every swinging dick that went in there hit on her. And he couldn't use the line that usually got him laid: I'm an Operator, you know, a Green Beret.

He started grabbing bottles off the shelf and setting them on the counter: Jack, Jim, Smirnoff, Bacardi and a couple of cases of Heinekens. In all there were sixteen bottles and two cases of beer. The last thing he purchased was the Johnny Walker Blue, which was kept behind the counter. The total came to just over five hundred dollars. Shit, he thought, I still have another grand. Before deciding to buy more he would talk to the team.

The young lady helped him put the bottles in old liquor boxes. Preston kept glancing at her, hoping to catch her eye but she was stoic and or careful. It took him three trips to get them to the Tahoe. Because of the Tornado Badges we knew we were safe from inspection.

How's about we throw a little blow out? Josh said.

How about tomorrow night, Preston said. I'm beat. I want a few shots and some sleep but I'll be ready to roll tomorrow.

Sounds like a plan, Josh said.

Our safehouse was in downtown Baghdad, less than a mile from Sadr City, perhaps the most dangerous place in all of Iraq, but we were staying in VIP quarters at RPC.

It's all about whom you know and if you knew Sergeant First Class Max Brown, the S-4 NCOIC, then you knew who to get shit from. He hooked us up all the time when we were on RPC. Though he wasn't an Operator, he could have been and we treated him as such, the respect we had for him and what he could do.

Seriously, you needed a flat screen, an X-Box or PlayStation, a stereo, steroids, shit, you name it and Max could make it happen. So we had some really nice digs on RPC. We lived in the same villa as Max and a few other NCOs. The rooms in the villa were like small apartments, surrounded by a pool.

Max saw us pull up. He dabbed and shook hands, and we showed him the haul in the back of the Tahoe.

Holy shit, he said. That's a fucking score.

Damn right, said James. And that's not all.

Hey, we want to throw a little party tomorrow night, Preston said. Think you can arrange something?

Max laughed. I'll have more pussy here than a Hawaiian brothel.

We laughed.

James and Preston grabbed a couple of bottles of Jack and Bacardi and took them into Max's quarters. He had the set up:

a sixty-inch flat screen against one wall, three-person leather couch on the other. A leather recliner. A vinyl and CD player and tied to the fan a strobe light. In the corner he had built a bar with flashing Christmas lights and Bud Light and Miller Light signs that lit up. I couldn't imagine everything he had behind that bar. Each doorway was strung with beads and he had posters on the walls of his favorite musicians: Dylan, Zeppelin, Tom Petty, Dr. Dre, Snoop, etc. He also had a framed poster of Tony Montana going nuts with a machine gun. I could hear him saying, Say hello to my lil friend. I loved that movie. We all did.

What'll it be, Max said from behind the bar.

Jack.

Jack.

Jack.

Bacardi, Clay said.

Pussy, Josh said. Jack for me.

Go ahead and make mine a Jack as well, said James.

Max poured the drinks, set them on a large tray and brought them to us. We each picked up a shot glass, raised high and toasted to honor: a cheers to honor, if you can't get on her or stay on her and if you can't come in her, come on her.

Here, here. And we drank.

Fishing With My Sin

Almost daybreak. I'm on the bank of the Little Red River, which is covered in fog that will soon dissipate with the coming sun. But the sun won't break the February chill or the fog from my breath.

Sitting on the bank, I pulled my Neoprene waders up and I tied double knots into my Simms wader boots, grabbed my nine-foot, five-weight Sage and stepped to the edge of the river. It was shallow; of course, a swift shoal with a pebbled bed. In some places the water was low enough to see the wide backs of the monster female brown trout that come here to spawn.

It wasn't yet bright enough to see my indicator on the water, so I sat on my haunches, stared into the river and nipped peach brandy from a flask. My fedora was pulled low and the scruff on my face was getting soft. I ran my left hand over my stubble as I took another swig. I needed to shave.

A small ripple began right in the middle of my reflection but I didn't drop anything and there was no one around to have tossed anything. The ripple spread and as it did another reflection appeared. Familiar. Too familiar.

I spun around.

"Hello, Preston," he said. "Or should I call you Double Tap?"

I was staring at myself. My own voice had just said hello to me, knew my nickname. I slowly stood, staring at him, me.

I was trying to look into his eyes but his fedora was pulled too low.

"Got a smoke?" He said.

I didn't know what to say, so I fumbled around in the chest pocket of my waders until I was able to get the pack and hand it to him.

"Ah," he said. "We smoke the same brand." He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I figured you'd be here. Mind if I share the shoal?" He took a long drag from the Marlboro and said, "I'll go up or down, whatever you want."

He held his hand out to me and I carefully took it in mine. His hand was so cold.

"So, up or down?" He said.

"Eh, well, it doesn't matter to me."

He laughed. "I know your favorite spot. I'll head below you."

He tipped his fedora and began walking down the bank. Everything about him was me except for his waders, Simms 4, which were too thin to wear in the winter.

I watched him walk down river. The sun was just beginning to breach the valley; his fedora was washed-out and beat up like mine.

I knelt down and splashed the freezing water onto my face. It took my breath away. He laughed.

I knew why he was laughing. It wasn't at me exactly. I knew he had the answers but obviously wasn't ready to give them.

Though the temperature was below freezing, I felt beads of sweat on my forehead. I took it off and wiped my brow with my elbow. As I did, I watched my, my what? My double?

He took off his fedora and looked at me. I felt bile in my throat. I gagged but kept it down. I didn't take my eyes away from him. He was smiling, eyes squinted, but he had a hole right in the middle of his forehead. I recognized it immediately. A bullet hole. My bullet hole.

"I'm sorry," he said when he realized I was staring at his wound. "Just an old war wound."

He put his fedora back on and began stripping his line.

"You probably remember the date," he said.

I did. I could never forget the date.

On the night of August 18th 2007, I put a bullet through the middle of an Iraqi squirter's forehead. We were on an operation to catch an HVT. I saw a muzzle flash but he then dropped the weapon. I already had him sited so I pulled the trigger.

He was in the middle of casting, letting the back cast load before letting the fly line role forward. "You didn't have to pull the trigger."

"The fucking hajji shot at us."

"Yes," he said. His line rolled and the tiny fly lightly kissed the water. We could both see his chartreuse indicator floating and bobbing on the surface. "But when you pulled the trigger he was unarmed."

I felt my face flush with anger. "Didn't mean he didn't deserve it."

"Rules of Engagement, remember those?"

"Yeah," I said. "I remember those. Got more people killed than I can count." I took a deep breath and continued, "And he was obviously trying to kill us. Just because the sonsabitches know the ROE doesn't give them a right to hide behind them."

"That's an interesting take," he said. "He dropped his weapon though."

"So fucking what."

"C'mon, Preston. You don't mind me calling you that do you?"

"You aren't real."

He took off his fedora again and smiled. He raised his rod and walked to me. We were face to face. I was definitely staring at myself but with a bullet hole in the middle of my head.

"Touch it," he said.

"No."

"Touch. It."

I started to say no again, but I knew that look. I ran my thumb over the wound.

"No, no, no," he said. "I mean *touch* it."

I stuck my middle finger into the hole and rolled it around a bit. When I pulled it out, there was blood and brain matter on my finger. I rubbed my middle finger and thumb together, mixing the blood and brain matter until it was a gooey pink mess.

"No," I said. "I was just doing my job. That's all we ever did. Hell, you should know that."

As he stuck his finger into the bullet wound, he said, "Is that right?" and then raised his eyebrows at me, his index finger halfway into his skull, "Absolutely necessary, huh?"

"It's not black and white. Right and wrong doesn't exist there."

"Doesn't it though?"

"What the hell do you know?"

It had been almost seven years since the incident. Seven seconds much less seven years is a lifetime in combat. Had I had memories of the man I shot? Sure. But it was always his face, that dark smooth skin. That adolescent face. Not this.

"Why are you here? What are you getting at?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing that you don't absolutely think about daily."

He was me. I; him. Of course he knew my thoughts but why torment me with them? What was his endgame? Did he have one?

That shot. That head shot. That kill shot had haunted me more than all the others. I knew the truth: after shooting, he dropped his weapon. He was no longer a threat, but I took the shot anyway. No matter how I replayed it in my mind, hajji was unarmed when I put a round through his skull.

He was back in the river and had his fly in the water. His indicator disappeared.

Instinctually, I said, "set the hook."

He gave me a no-shit look as he set the hook. His fly rod doubled over. He held his rod high and let the trout race downstream; he simultaneously let go of the fly line with his left hand – so as not snap the trout off – just as my father had taught me to do many years before.

He was a master with the fly rod. I admired his work with her. He walked, each step carefully, down river toward her while she ran. Anytime she slacked in her run, he reeled and as soon as she felt the tug of the hook, she would run again. A jerk here or hesitation there was the difference in landing the trophy. This was the most difficult part with trophy trout – keeping enough pressure on her to tire her out but not so much as to snap the line. If his rig was like mine, which I'm sure

it was, his tippet would only be about two-pound test and the trout could be as heavy as thirty pounds.

Because he was down river of me, I never got a chance to see her. I knew at some point she would tire and he would need me to net her, so I got to the bank and raced past him and the trout.

I stood thigh deep in the river as the fish surged once more. It was only an instant but I saw a flash of gold, a very large flash of gold. Then I watched her maneuver left and into an eddy. There she could regain her strength while the river itself put the pressure on the fly rod

He knew she was in the eddy and he knew he had to get her out or this was over. He walked down river until he was parallel with her and he began to reel. Without the eddy for protection, she ran once again. I could tell he was getting worried because he was out of fly line and into the backing. He began putting more pressure on the monster. I knew this was it. Get her to me to net or lose her.

Trout are delicate compared to other fish, and if they fight too long and even manage to get loose, there is a high probability they will die. So at that moment, I knew exactly what was going through his mind.

"Don't," I said. "You can still catch her and not kill her."

I knew it was a lie and the look he gave told me he knew it was a lie. He looked up into the sky, shook his head and then grabbed the backing and cut it with his pocketknife.

"The only person I know that could or would do that is my dad," I said.

He looked at me and I saw the hole again. It kept coming back to that.

"No, not the only one."

Speechless. I knew he was going to cut the line to save the trout but I didn't want him to. Hell, it wasn't even my catch but I wanted it for him. If I had her on my line would I have cut it?

"Helluva a fish," I said. I looked at him and the hole in his head. "You gonna be around?"

"Yes," he said. "A while."

Safehouse

The third deployment

Preston waited on the tarmac for the C-17 that would take him and James, his team leader and best friend, to Iraq. James wasn't there yet. Preston kept looking to the parking lot, telling himself he was looking for James but he hoped to see her burgundy Camry. Though he tried, he couldn't stop thinking of Kay. He wanted to James to arrive; perhaps his company would help ease his thoughts.

A group of soldiers huddled together though it was unseasonably warm for March. Preston glanced at his watch and back to the parking lot. No Camry, no James. Preston sipped from a water bottle as he searched Pikes Peak to the west, but it was still too dark. He wore a thick cotton jacket; the warm morning left him feeling stifled, but the plane ride at thirty thousand feet would be cold.

The group of soldiers stared at him. He was used to it. While they were in full uniform, he wore civilian clothes, khakis, a button-up, boots and a hat, and he had an unkempt beard he had been growing for weeks that caused most of the staring. Preston averted his eyes from theirs. He enjoyed the solitude. A gentle breeze blew from the east, and he savored it, knowing this would be the mildest weather he would encounter for many months.

Kay. They hadn't spoken since the fight. Three weeks was the longest period of time they had not been in contact since meeting two years before. It was the way it ended that bothered him the most. He knew it was his fault.

Preston closed his eyes and remembered: he and Kay seated at a small table in the corner of Maggiano's Little Italy, an Italian restaurant in downtown Denver. It was just after returning home from his second deployment. Soft Italian opera played above them. She wore a black, strapless dress that accented her tanned skin and strawberry-blonde hair. He had always loved how thick her hair was (she complained about it constantly) and her blue eyes as clear as the crystal on the table.

They shared a bottle of Brunello with their entrees and fed each other tiramisu. It was then that he promised her the end of his career. No more deployments. No more secrets. Rather, he promised her marriage and a family. She cried. They kissed.

Preston still didn't know if he made the right choice: Kay or the military. But he would give anything for the joy they shared that night.

James tapped him on the shoulder.

"Glad you decided to make it," Preston said.

"Fashionably late," James said. He wore khakis, a red flannel shirt and a dirty Infidel hat.

"As always."

James set his duffel beside Preston and picked up the water bottle at Preston's feet and helped himself.

"Sure, have some."

James took another drink. "Don't mind if I do," he said.

"You ready?"

"Ready as always. How's Rita?"

"She's fine. You know how she is."

"She's a trooper, that's for sure. We're gone half the year, every year. Hell, I don't blame Kay for leaving me."

Why had he said that? He knew James didn't know how to respond. James had a wife and a family and the constant deployments were part of the package. Preston knew what James thought about his re-up: James, the team leader, was thrilled; James, the best friend, was shocked.

"Rita's remarkable," James said.

"Five minutes," someone yelled from behind them. Five minutes, Preston thought, and Colorado and Kay would be behind him.

The rising sun turned the sky a metallic haze of blue and orange and lit the snow-capped mountains. The moon was still set firmly in the sky preparing to battle the coming sun. Though James was there, Preston again searched the parking lot. He didn't expect to see her or the Camry but he couldn't seem to

help himself from looking. If he had just one more chance to say his piece. Preston knew James was watching, but he would remain silent, as always. An incoming plane disrupted Preston. He watched as the C-17 lowered toward the tarmac, touched and rolled, the engine drowning all other noise. Once the plane stopped and the door opened, Preston and James stood. Preston placed the bottle of water into his backpack and threw it over his shoulder. James entered first. Preston followed but didn't turn around; there was no point. He found a seat and closed his eyes, trying to think only of his destination.

#

Somewhere over the Atlantic, Preston failed to keep from thinking of her. The scene played over and over in his mind:

Preston sat on the edge of the bed. He held his languid head in his hands. "What do you want from me?"

"You know what I want! What you promised!"

He looked up at her. God, how he hated to see her cry, the tears tearing something deep inside him.

She was wrapped in a white towel. Her damp hair, dark and heavy, curled below her shoulders. With her eyes swollen and red from tears, any anger he felt subsided. Preston rose and reached for her.

"Don't," she said. "Don't touch me."

He could feel the heat in his neck. Preston closed his eyes, breathed deeply. He smelled her lilac soap and perfume. Moments passed before he returned to the edge of the queen bed they bought last fall in anticipation of his leaving the service. Preston felt the softness of the down comforter beneath him. Kay sat on the bed as well, though not close.

"I'm sorry, Kay, but you know I can't."

"Can't? You promised me."

"Please, Kay."

"I love you, Preston. I truly do, but I can't believe this."

"Please stop."

"Stop?" she said and stood. "You tell me in a text that you re-up and deploy in three weeks and I'm suppose to just stop. I can't believe you; I really can't."

She looked at him, waiting. There had to be an explanation. One better than they need me. He would say something. He had to say something. Moments passed between them without a word yet neither surrendered eye contact. And then, the moment was gone. It was as if all the air in the room had suddenly been sucked out. Words could not repair what was now inevitable and even if they could, Preston wouldn't speak. That damned pride.

Finally, she relented and looked away. "Just go," she said.

Preston stood and slowly walked from the bedroom. He paused at the front door but didn't look back and walked out.

Following the third deployment

Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America, authorized by an Act of Congress on July 9, 1918 (amended by an act of July 25, 1963), takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Staff Sergeant Preston P. Henry, United States Army, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as Detachment Senior Weapons Sergeant of Special Operational Detachment Alpha 021 (ODA-021), 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), during combat operations in support of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, in Baghdad, Iraq, on 4 July 2006. Staff Sergeant Henry distinguished himself through his heroic actions in the face of overwhelming enemy fire. With total disregard for personal safety, he engaged the numerically superior enemy forces and managed to evacuate two critically wounded teammates to safety. His courage, heroism, and perseverance in the face of the enemy are in keeping with the highest traditions of the Special Forces

and reflect distinct credit upon himself, his unit, and the
United States Army.

The fifth deployment

The safehouse was a two-story building in the center of Baghdad. The building was decrepit: age and the steady barrage of rockets and mortars made it almost unlivable. Almost. Each team member had his own room, and there was a training room, a kitchen, a weight room, and, most importantly, running water and electricity.

Preston sat on his bed in his cramped room. His camouflage poncho liner lay crumpled beneath him. A thin film of dust covered his pillow. A bottle of Johnny Walker Red, half empty, sat on the nightstand beside a broken clock and a dilapidated and dog-eared copy of *The Bell Jar*. A flag hung from crudely painted white walls, stripes down. A television sat atop a wooden table he had built three deployments prior but rarely used. Little room was left, but he managed a chair in the corner and used a tuff box as a table and footrest.

Preston picked up the bottle and moved to the chair. He fell into it, the weak metal joints creaking and moaning. He placed his feet on the tuff box, unscrewed the lid, watched it fall to the floor, and took a long pull from the bottle. He

leaned his head back until it hit the wall and closed his eyes. He was tired. Exhausted. But sleep would not come. Preston raised the bottle again, his eyes still closed; he tipped it, finishing the bottle in a few seconds.

Preston walked from his room to the other rooms on the floor. Everyone was out of liquor or said they were. He didn't want to ask James.

James sat propped on his bed. Preston stood in the doorway when James lowered his paperback.

"Hey. Good mission tonight," James said.

"It went well."

"I'm gonna write the oprep in a few. Mind giving me a hand?"

"No problem," Preston said. He looked away from James.

"You don't have any Red do you?"

"Damn it."

"Don't. Do you have any or not?"

"No, but you can't keep doing this. I can't cover your ass forever."

"I'm fine. Good mission, remember."

"It was, but don't think Colonel Crowder and the Sergeant Major don't know what's going on with you. Your reputation is pulling you through right now. One fuck up, and I mean, one--"

"I know. I know. I'm handling it."

"You're kidding? Have you looked at yourself? You look yellow, and it looks like you haven't slept in a month."

"Maybe I haven't."

He knew and understood James's concern, but James didn't understand. Couldn't understand. Between deployments there was always talk of being forced into the substance abuse program, but as soon as PTSD was mentioned, the talk subsided. Operators didn't get that. Preston knew his value as an Operator. A damn fine Operator, the Sergeant Major was fond of saying of him. He had been awarded the Silver Star after the break-up. The Kay deployment, James called it. Preston knew it was then the problems started, but he didn't know if it was Kay or the Silver Star operation or combat in general that had exacerbated his spiral. He couldn't answer, and that left him feeling more confused, frustrated. And the urge to grip the bottle grew stronger.

"I'm worried about you, brother."

"No need. I gotta run but I'll help you with the oprep."

"Sure."

The lights around the safehouse were turned off, security protocol, but Baghdad was well lit. Night in Iraq brought little relief from the heat, as if the heat was in invisible cloud that never left the city. The air stifling, and even though Preston had spent so much time in-country, he still found

it difficult to breathe at times, acclimation didn't seem to exist here. The city lights hid the stars but the moon hovered in a deep green sky.

The compound was guarded by Iraqi soldiers, their allegiance to money paid by the US rather than to country or religion. As Preston approached, he shouted to let them know he was near. An AK-47 in skittish hands was always dangerous.

"Mr. J," said a familiar voice.

Preston placed his hand over his heart and bowed, "Evening, Amir."

"Yes, Mr. J."

"How's it tonight?"

"Nothin."

"That's good."

"Yes. Yes."

"Yeah," Preston said. "I need a bottle."

Amir smiled, showing waxed brown teeth. A thick mustache flexed above his lip.

"Yes. Yes. For you, anything."

"Johnny Walker Red?"

"Yes. Yes. No Jack?"

"No Jack."

"Forty?"

Preston pulled out three wadded twenty-dollar bills and handed them to Amir. "Keep the change."

Amir bowed. "Thank, Mr. J. Thank."

Preston patted Amir on the shoulder. "My pleasure, Amir."

Amir smiled and bowed again.

He left Amir in the dark and returned inside to help James write the report.

It only took Amir a few hours. Preston sat in his chair, *The Bell Jar* raised to his eyes, the fresh bottle between his legs. After reading the same sentence three times, he dropped his feet to the floor and set the book face down on the tuff box. He sat erect and took a drink from the bottle.

He kept her last letter in a copy of *Ethan Frome*, the book tucked deep at the bottom of his tuff box. Preston dug beneath a dozen worn books, beneath uniforms and civilian clothing, under running shoes and extra combats boots, beneath magazines, bootleg DVDs and a few authentic souvenirs purchased as gifts for his return home. He found the book and held it in his left hand, the bottle in his right. He kicked the lid shut, took a drink and set the bottle on the lid. Preston examined the cover of the book, faded and tattered.

He considered the book and all it held: Colorado Springs. Poor Richard's Bookstore, Kay's favorite place. He stood behind

a shelf, watching, careful not to disturb her. He could only see the profile of her face, but her mouth was rigid in concentration as she scanned the shelves. Preston watched her kneel to peruse the bottom shelf and her nimbleness surprised him, always surprised him. He watched as her head moved slowly with her eyes, as if one couldn't move without the other. Her lips curled and broke apart slightly as she read the title and author to herself. Sometimes he could see a glint in her eye or a smile without her mouth moving when she found a coveted book. Countless hours they had spent in the bookstore together, yet she seemed to always fill with wonder at something within this place. Watching her in this place that brought her such joy, surrounded by thousands of books, millions of words, he knew it was the simplicity of it all, and he loved her more deeply for it. More deeply than he ever thought possible. But he always thought that when he watched her.

She snapped her head toward him. "Caught you," she said and smiled.

"I guess I didn't hide too well."

"Special Forces, huh?"

"That's the rumor," Preston said as he walked toward her. He placed his hand on the small of her back. He traced tiny circles with his fingertips. "Find anything new?"

She kissed his cheek and turned toward the books. "A brand-new one," she said as she took the book from the shelf. She held it up for him.

"*Ethan Frome*. I don't guess I've ever read it," he said.

"It's wonderfully tragic. I'm going to buy it for you."

"That's all I need is a depressing book."

"No need to be depressed," she said. "You have me."

He put both arms around her waist and gently pulled her into him. She put her arms around his neck, still clutching the book. As Kay raised her head to kiss him, Preston came to. Came back to his dusty room. His book. His bottle.

He picked up the bottle and took a long pull, drinking savagely until he was out of breath. He opened the book to where the crinkled envelope stuck out from the book's pages. The envelope was postmarked March 29, 2006. The ink had faded but he could still see her name, Kay S. Harmon and the address that no longer housed her. Preston remembered the day he received the letter. It was unexpected. She sent a picture of herself with the letter, a picture he still carried. He removed the letter, unfolded it and read:

Preston,

There is no good way to say goodbye, but to think how we ended that night...I never thought you would leave like you did. I know you, and I know how you hate to leave things

unresolved, but I also know, and knew, you wouldn't call. Pride will be the death of you. Honestly though, I think I need this closure more than you. I couldn't take the broken promises. Deep down I guess I always knew you were a Green Beret at heart. I'm not mad anymore. I've accepted it. You are who you are and that's why I fell in love with you.

I'll always cherish our time together. Remember the first day we met? You were so quiet and nervous, but I could tell there was so much more to you. I was right. You are the best man I have ever known and I'll always respect your decision.

Thank you for the memories and know I will always love you.

Love,

Kay

Preston read it again, concentrating on each word. He didn't know what he expected or why he read it so meticulously, but he always did, and he was always felt unsatisfied. He carefully folded the letter, placed it in the envelope, returned it to the book and picked up the bottle. He had raised it in mock toast when he felt the explosion. The plastic window rattled, and the concussion knocked him deeper into the chair. Preston dropped the bottle and hurled himself to the ground, covering his head with his hands. His body shook.

Preston's glanced at his armor, but he was frozen. He willed himself to move, but to no avail, and his breaths came in rapid succession. Preston was helpless.

Another explosion. This one closer. Ringing in his ears followed by static that ceased any ability of thought. Preston pressed his head into the floor as hard as he could, as if it would give him more cover.

Three more explosions followed in rapid succession, each closer than the last. Preston was lost in the chaos of his mind, then nothing. It was silent but he was powerless.

As Preston remained sprawled on the floor, head covered, he felt a hand on his neck, but he couldn't look up. His breathing was erratic. Someone rubbed his neck and shoulders as if coaxing him to calm.

"Preston."

He heard the voice, knew the voice but couldn't answer.

"Hey, buddy. It's over. It's all over now."

A few seconds passed before Preston raised his head. He looked around the room, rolled over and sat up. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe, his arms resting on his knees. His entire body shook. He looked at James. He'd never seen such pity in another's eyes.

"You good?"

Preston nodded.

"You sure?"

He nodded again.

"I'm gonna check on the rest of the guys. Holler if you need anything."

James left the room. Preston looked around and saw the bottle lying on its side, unbroken. A small puddle of alcohol had spilled on the floor, now a glob of alcoholic mud. For a soldier with so much combat experience, Preston didn't understand why these episodes were happening. The first one, which happened about a month ago, he told himself, was just a reaction, but after the next attack he found himself on the floor again. Now it seemed anytime an explosion was near, his body would heave itself upon the ground and he had no control over anything. I must be cracking, he thought. He felt a desire to weep. It came upon him so suddenly, so violently the only thing he could think to do was throw himself upon the floor once more and slurp up the alcohol mud. He slurped and licked until it was gone. He didn't give a fuck. He picked up the bottle and drank.

Three nights later

Preston had been in this situation before. He knew the protocol like the lines in his hands. Hours upon hours had

trained him for this, but he stood staring at the rifle in his hands, white-knuckled and frozen. Sweat seeped into his eyes, stinging, but he could not take his eyes from the rifle.

Preston felt a growing ache in his neck; the helmet was an unbearable weight on his head. He tried, God how he tried, to think, to react, but the weight was too much. And the rifle, the goddamned rifle.

With all the power he could muster he threw the stifling helmet from his head, and as it hit the floor he collapsed to his knees, holding the rifle. Finally, he closed his eyes, breathing heavily. He smelled gunpowder and oil and blood. With each breath the blood grew stronger until he could taste iron in his throat. The putrid, menacing mixture of smells fell from his throat to his stomach. He opened his eyes to keep from vomiting.

Preston saw the lifeless body before him. He watched the black liquid pool around the head. With great effort Preston directed his eyes to his helmet lying between the body and himself. The picture inside was crinkled and smudged from sweat and wear; she was almost gone; anyone else wouldn't be able to recognize her but he could. He felt powerless, the emotions welling inside too strong to deny or ignore. He dropped the rifle, dust wafting up as the rifle thudded and bounced, and picked up his helmet. He wanted a closer look at her. He

needed to be lost in the moment with her, but the helmet was heavier than the burden he carried.

Exhausted, he fell backward to the floor and the helmet slipped from his hands and settled beside him. He closed his eyes again. He lay there thinking of her. Then he thought of the dead man and considered him lucky; blood and brain oozed from his wound, but he was gone and so were all the things that plagued his mind. Preston's wound oozed too but it oozed humanity, at least what he thought he had left of it. And though there was a wound it did little to help Preston's thoughts.

Preston began to laugh. In moments the laughter was uncontrollable, as he lay sprawled on the floor. As the laughter progressed, tears began to well in his eyes, and the tears fell down his cheeks into small, muddy pools on the dusty floor. The laughter had turned to anguish. Anguish for her, for the dead, for himself.

"What the hell?"

Preston stared up James. Shame filled him. James held his arm out toward Preston, and he took hold. In a swift motion he was back to his feet, though his balance uncertain. As Preston worked to steady himself, James grabbed Preston's helmet and rifle from the floor and shoved them into his chest. Preston felt the heavy thump of them against his armor.

The weight of the helmet was normal; he took a quick glance at the picture, smeared and almost unrecognizable and placed it on his head. He slung his M-4. Preston watched as James looked at the lifeless body, shrugged, said something inaudible, slapped Preston on the shoulder and walked out of the room. Preston took a final look at the body, spit where the dead lay, and followed James out.

#

Back at the safehouse, Preston felt broken. Humiliated. Nothing like that had ever happened to him before on an operation. Years of training, years of combat, missions, close calls, and never once had there been a mishap. Besides the explosions but those weren't on ops. Those were shitbag hajjis lobbing shit at the safehouse. But tonight she had plagued his mind and that was worst of all.

He unscrewed the lid to the only answer, the only certainty he knew. He chugged until his stomach bloated and then set the bottle on the tuffbox. Realizing he was still holding his rifle, he tossed it on the bed and it bounced against the springs in the mattress. He undid the straps to his armor, his helmet rocking from its carabiner. He bent forward and shrugged the cumbersome armor to the floor and it vibrated against his feet. Preston flipped the armor over and pulled his .45 from the holster. He sat in his chair and stared at the pistol. The

handle and hammer were brown with dust, the rest a shiny black. He took another drink and switched hands with the bottle.

Preston held the pistol and rotated his wrist, viewing the pistol at different angles as a child does a coveted toy. He straightened his wrist and aimed the pistol at the falling flag in front of him. He snapped his wrist upward as if firing. Satisfied, he placed the pistol down on the tuff box. Unsatisfied, he rotated the pistol until he could see down the barrel.

"Preston," James yelled from the training room.

The report. Fuck, he thought. Though it was necessary, he wished he hadn't got a KIA. KIA reports were always scrutinized and followed by inquiries and investigations. He took a drink. He felt a deep stiffness in his neck. He poured a small amount of alcohol in his hands and rubbed it on the back of his neck. Dead skin and dirt rolled into small clumps that stuck to his fingers, which he then sucked off. The heavy smell of bourbon burned his nose and lingered in the air. Preston stood and walked downstairs to the training room.

"Damn. Did you bathe in it?"

"Eh, kinda."

James shook his head. "Ready to write this thing?"

"Not really."

"Better when it's still fresh."

"Hence, not ready."

"I know it's tough, but it's gotta be done."

Preston sat in a chair beside James. He stared at the white screen. His fingers found the bumps on the keys, but he didn't type.

"Just the basics. You know the drill," James said.

Preston continued to stare at the screen until it became fuzzy; its brightness caused a tension headache behind his eyes. Eyes closed, he replayed the events in his mind and settled on a scene: sitting on the floor and held the helmet in his hands, he stared at the picture. She was gone and all that was left was the lifeless body and the blood and the metallic taste and vomit in his throat.

"I can't do this right now."

"Come on, Preston. I have to get this to HQ before sunup."

"Just give me some time to straighten it out in my head."

James exhaled. "Alright, but get it straight and get your ass back here."

Preston stood.

"And make sure you're sober enough to write the damn thing."

"Sure."

Preston fell into the chair. He stared into the barrel of his pistol. The cold inviting steel. He put the pistol on his

knee and opened the tuff box. The book, *Ethan Frome*. He searched the cover, looking for something, a sign perhaps. Nothing. Fuck Ethan Frome. He pulled the envelope from the book and removed the letter. He began reading. It felt different; somehow, he felt satisfied. He felt calm. Something he'd only dreamed of. Something he didn't think existed. Peace perhaps. Perhaps reconciliation. Perhaps nothing. He picked up the bottle and drank as if it were his last drink.

He started reading the letter from the beginning, concentrating on each word and his hand crept toward the pistol until his fingers and the handle were one.

Between the Banks

The first trout I caught on a fly rod was a 17-inch German brown trout. I was eight, a frigid miserable February morning. My dad and I, on our first fly-fishing trip together, though we had been bait fishing for years-I caught my first trout at four, the earliest memory I have.

The brown trout spawn was coming to an end and the spawning females and milting males had moved from the shoals—swift, shallow water over sand pebbled river bed—into deeper water to feed on sowbugs and snails nestled in the moss.

I had to beg dad to take me. I'd been working on the fly rod for a year so it wasn't ability; rather, the weather made him hesitant. The day called for a high-pressure system, heavy overcast and highs in the teens. At five-thirty in the morning it was eight degrees and on the river the temperature would be ten degrees cooler than that. I started in again but he gave me the look, his look and I went silent. He sat back in his faded brown recliner, sipping coffee and Baileys from a white mug, a Winston in his left hand. He stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and grinned at me.

"Why the hell not. Let's get the gear."

We began at the head of Beach Island shoals, my father just beside me on the left. All was grey and grey, sky, river, great oaks without leaves. I cast over and over—raising my rod tip to

two o'clock, letting it load in the back cast for a second, and with my wrist and elbow straight, I brought the rod tip to ten o'clock, allowing the line to curl out and fall into the swift current—finding my rhythm, dad talking, encouraging me with each new cast.

He knew there were no trout on the shoals and I now realize he was teaching me patience and process.

Begin at the top, work your way down, slowly, never rush, they're in here, son, and we'll get to em, that's it, let it load in the back cast, yes, good.

Often I felt his hand on my back just where my waders came to at the shoulder blades.

A half hour later, we were taking a break on the damp bank of the river. I remember the wind that day. Like razors. Dad must have tied on 30 flies for me. Because I was shaking, he put his thick camouflage jacket around me, lit the hand warmer—a Folgers coffee can with a roll of toilet paper inside dowsed with rubbing alcohol and lit—gave me small shots of coffee as he smoked his Winstons.

When I had warmed enough, we waded back into the water, dad beside but just a step ahead of me. Soon the water was almost to my chest. Across the river, about twenty feet, there was a flat rock that dropped straight into the river.

"There's a hole there, son. Think you can reach it?"

"Yes sir." Though I didn't know.

"Let's get you a little closer." He stepped in front of me and knelt down; I put my arms around his neck and he carried me to a large rock submerged just under the water about 12 feet from the hole.

"Be careful; it might be slick."

I had on a number 14 grey sowbug. I pulled green fly line from the reel with my left hand and shook the rod side-to-side to release the line. As I raised my rod tip, my dad's hand gripped the top of my waders to steady me. At the elbow I pulled the rod straight up, the line rolling behind me, waited a second and released the line forward. It curled like smoke and kissed the river smoothly.

"Good," he said.

I cast just to the front of the flat rock and let my line drift through the hole, watching the chartreuse indicator, which when suspended beneath the surface meant a bite. No bite. Again, I raised the rod, let the line load in the back cast and released it, this time further in front of the hole to give myself more of a drift.

"Expert cast," he said. "Won't be long before you're better than me."

I laughed. My indicator submerged and I tried to set the hook, the indicator rising to the surface. I shook my head.

"It's okay. Just let em take it; you know what you're doing. When the indicator is suspended under the water for a second, set the hook." He said this as he mimicked it with his free hand.

"Yes sir," I said.

I cast again. Just as it passed the flat rock my indicator went under and stayed. Just as I was about to set the hook, dad said, "Now!" I set the hook and my rod doubled over. My heart pounded and I still can't remember the cold in that moment. What I do remember is feeling pressure both in front of and behind me. The fish and dad.

As his gripped tightened, he said, "Get her on the reel."

I held the line in my right hand, not too tight for the trout to snap the line, and began reeling until all the loose line was on the spool. It was she and I now fighting on the reel.

"Let her go if she feels like running," dad said.

And she did. She swam like hell up stream.

"That's fine," he said. "Your drag is set right."

When she finished swimming, I began reeling. I got her close enough to see. A brilliant gold in the otherwise grey morning.

"She's gonna try again."

And she did. I let her run. She tired and I reeled furiously.

"You're gonna get her this time," he said.

As he held on to my waders with his right arm, he took a long step out and reached with a net in his left hand.

"Lead her to me."

I tried to lead her but I got excited when I saw her girth, and I lowered my rod giving her slack, which allowed her one last fight but not a long one. This time I brought her right to dad and he scooped her in the net. He stepped back and put his right arm around my shoulder.

Again, he carried me to the bank where we quickly measured the brown. Then, I held the fish—one hand under its gills, the other just before its dorsal fin—away from my body, canted slightly up and he snapped a couple of pictures on a disposable.

"Let's get her back in the water."

He took her from me and gently placed her in the water. She didn't swim away. He held her by the back fin and swayed her body side-to-side in the water.

"That's it girl; get that oxygen."

In an instant, she jerked from his loose grip and was gone.

My sister emailed my dad who was in Kuwait working as a contractor and told him not to come home or at least not rush. I was going to die and there was nothing he or anyone could do. So he didn't.

I was rushed into emergency surgery and fell into a coma. I was going to die. I lived through the night though my condition was no better. Twelve hours later my body crashed and I was rushed back into surgery. After surgery, the consensus was the same: zero chance. I was going to die.

Every time the doctors stabilized me, hours later another organ would crash because I had broke all my ribs and another emergency operation performed. Prognoses: death.

Six days and seven surgeries later, I woke, my hand in my sister's. She temporarily moved to Colorado to stay with me after a month in a hospital bed.

Wheelchair bound for five months, I decided to fly from Colorado to Arkansas and celebrate with some family when I upgraded from the wheelchair to a cane. My father wouldn't be there, still working in Kuwait and unable to take the time off.

My sister and I arrived at DIA four hours early and still only made the gate with 15 minutes to go, less to do with crowds, more to do with my ability to navigate the cane and the constant pain breaks. I was determined though. It was the same

when we landed in Little Rock, short steps, constant breaks but we made it down the escalator to the baggage claim and there he was: my dad. I remember wanting to run to him and almost did, but when I put weight on my left leg the pain, like a torrid heat wave, rushed through my body. I grimaced and he swept to me as if his feet never touched the ground. He embraced me, delicately.

The boarding, plane ride and exit took more out of me than I expected. I need forty-eight hours of sleep and rest to recover. After being in Little Rock for six days, coddled every waking moment, no one allowing me to do even the simplest task, I was ready. I was still learning my healing body, so, at the time it must have seemed a terrible idea. Knowing the consequences and the recovery time of such exertion, I wanted to fly fish. It was February and there were browns in the deeper waters.

He said no. And no. And for all the same reasons the women did, but he either saw or found the logic needed so he devised a plan. He would pack our gear, put it in the truck and later in the very early morning, we would sneak away to the Little Red.

I kissed my sister and stepmom goodnight around nine pm. Sleep was impossible. I hadn't fly-fished in years, before joining the military, six years earlier.

My mind: Would I be able to cast? Could I find my rhythm? Did I still know patience and process? Could my body take it? Would the pain, which was inevitable, going to be too excruciating? Was this an awful idea?

I had yet to sleep when my father walked in the bedroom at two-thirty.

We were at the river by four-thirty. The sky was black and we stood at the top of the ramp leading down to the dock, trying to see the river just below us. Our eyes adjusted and there she was. There she was in the complete silence of the blackness just before dawn. We went into our small fishing shack, Thistle Dew, and made several pots of coffee for our Stanley's: two-thirds coffee, one-third Bailey's. It took half an hour to get from the ramp to seated; dad had taken all the equipment and kept a steady hand near me. I felt his eyes on me and imagined the look of worry on his face.

We both knew where the browns were. We roared up river in the flat bottom, the wind harsh against exposed skin, until we got to Beach Island. He coasted to the bank, letting the front run into the soft mud and stepped out of the boat and helped me into the shallow water. Dad was my cane. With each tiny step, I felt his hand firmer and firmer on my back, though not yet holding onto my waders. We waded to waist deep water, slowly as if the river bottom was some treacherous obstacle, though I

suppose for me it was. I was at the same rock I stood on eighteen years before. I looked at him. Though he didn't look at me, I know he saw it. We both had the same idea. He helped me onto the rock, holding me by the waders as he did back then, just to my left. He steadied me—an eight-year-old child; a 25 year old combat veteran—while I cast my rod into the cold crisp February morning.