

DOPPELGANGER

By Travis L. Martin

I rub the sweat and sand out of my hair, onto my pants. The Iraqi sun bids farewell to Camp TQ and the blue sky turns darker-and-darker, enveloping the guard tower and berm to my front. Night falls over the terrain beyond the base, expanding as possibilities of violence in my mind. New soldiers replace the thoroughly baked day-shift in the towers. Up the ladder to watch the shadows they go. We prep our convoy for departure under their dutiful watch in the staging yard below.

Suiting up, I fold a side of my forest-green flak vest into its mate's velcro grip; the metal plate inside rests over my vital organs and I breathe a little harder to compensate for the weight on my ribcage. The desert tan arm protectors make a crunchy, rip-tearing sound as I remove and drop them one at a time onto the floorboard of the humvee.

I won't need them.

I pat my pockets in rapid succession—tobacco, flashlight, ammo—and squirt some CLP into the chamber of my rifle. I slide the bolt—back-and-forth and back-and-forth, letting it rest in the vehicle. The barrel wedges between the radio and the MTS Tracker, a built-in, state-of-the-art GPS messaging system found in each gun truck. I take a moment to dust off its screen before sitting down and tightening the laces on my boots.

I'm usually the lead gunner. Now I won't be as exposed. I've traded in my arm protectors,

flares, and glow sticks for two equally ranked soldiers and some notebook jottings from our pre-convoy briefing. Only the bigwigs get to carry notebooks.

It's my first time outside the wire as a truck commander—the first time, to my knowledge, that a Specialist in my company has commanded a gun truck. Tight boot laces seem like a good place to start in making sure all goes well.

After securing my chinstrap, I adjust my kevlar so that the brim runs parallel with ground, taking a leader's pride in my appearance, ignoring the crusty salt stains on my uniform and the three-day-old beard I've concealed during repeated night missions. It's a point of pride to sneak facial hair past our OCD platoon sergeant.

Maybe Knowles and Guiliani won't slack off because they like me. I can't expect them to respect me as a leader. Not yet. Respect has to be earned.

I take my seat in the front-right passenger seat, bolt the armored door shut, check the radio, send a text message through the tracker. I just need to wait for the order to "Roll out."

My first command: "Check your sensitive items, guys." Knowles gives me a thumbs-up and smiles a shit-eater's grin as he adjusts the timing of his .50 cal. to the beat of headphones. The white cords dangle through the curly hair on his temples and into a box of ammo and music bungeed to the turret. He's taken to wearing a

doo-rag.

I would normally tease Knowles about his do-rag if I didn't need to maintain a professional distance. I'm learning fast. Knowles is also a friend. He missed the first deployment and replaced me as one of "the new guys" a few months before we deployed. I like to think I've taken him under my wing, that I've helped him learn how to conceal three-day-old beards, the stench of dirty uniforms, and sham in the motor-pool with the guile and conceit common among those who hold the rank of specialist.

Giuliani is my first and only soldier. He came to our unit—my squad—as a loan from another in Germany. He's quiet, but efficient. His silence gets creepy, though. He gets a murderous sparkle in his eyes when he stalks between the sleeping quarters at night drunk on bootlegged Jordanian whiskey. That stuff makes your shit turn green for a week. He drinks it daily.

He usually has the type of look you see in a man's face right before he throws a punch. He looks rough and a single glance says he's fed up with all of the Army's bullshit.

I make light of Giuliani's demeanor for some reason, perhaps in some sick desire to provoke him. Sometimes I pull him aside after morning formations and speak into his hung-over eyes: "Giuliani, you're my first and only soldier. I am entirely invested in your success as your team leader. I want you to succeed." I make sure the platoon sergeant is just out of earshot when I play team leader.

The fact of the matter is, in the categories that really define a leader in the United States Army—running fast, doing pushups, ironing your uniform, and not talking back, Giuliani is probably a better soldier than I am. I like to think I am one of the more technically proficient troops—good with a weapon, working on a vehicle, and doing my job as a gunner, but those things only matter to the higher ups if shit goes wrong. I haven't mastered the craft of looking good on paper. I take pride in being what they

call a "field soldier."

My first and only troop alternates between sleep and a book resting against steering wheel, feigning acknowledgement of my order to check his gear. Giuliani speaks so little that I'm not entirely sure he speaks English, a stereotype reinforced by the title of his book: *Puerto Ricans: A History*. He's learning about his people. A smart soldier is as good as one with all of his gear, I figure.

Meanwhile, through the bulletproof glass of my humvee, drama ensues in the staging yard: an entire convoy of soldiers bustles about, performing last-minute checks on their equipment, securing their loads with ratchet straps: little ants getting ready for another mission.

I hold my hand up and squish them between my index finger and thumb, making little noises as the insects meet their end.

My squad leader, SSG Ford, considers it a point of pride that his soldier is the first E-4 to be in charge of a gun truck. It is more of an apology than anything else. A few days prior, after months of studying for the E-5 Board, after being drilled—legs shaking at the position of attention, hands trembling at parade rest, voice wavering as I repeated basic soldier tasks and drills—by the top ranking Non-Commissioned Officers in my battalion, my promotion packet disappeared into thin air.

People with sole responsibility of filing paperwork managed to screw up that one, simple task. I cursed them as fobbits, of course, as if proximity to danger and competency somehow go hand in hand. Somewhere, someone in the infantry probably curses us as POGs for our own ineptitude as transportation soldiers. There's a whole hierarchy of dick-measuring that goes on between occupational specialties in the Army. It has nothing to do with competence and everything to do with Iraq being a shithole.

I'm just sick of standing at parade rest for my friends and the polished garrison soldiers who've been promoted over me.

It's completely dark before the ants finish up their work and we exit the gate.

A beat-up, four-cylinder truck backs out of a roadside Iraqi police station, weaving in-and-out of its traffic-restricting serpentine, casting accusatory light in every direction, especially onto the blue-uniformed backs of the guards. The vehicle travels a quarter of a mile down the road, disappearing into the black of night and veering into the desert undetected. Sand and dust fill the air, but the driver is the only one who notices as the concoction exacts water from his eyes.

Rahim nervously checks and rechecks his mirrors, but no lights follow. He bites his hand—hard enough to make him check for blood—as the truck betrays his position, coughing or sputtering every fourth or fifth second it's in motion. He brings it to a stop where passersby won't notice, a couple of hundred feet from the road. The driver takes a deep breath, pulls the door handle towards him, and falls out and into the dark, limping through the sand a few feet toward the back of the vehicle.

As he grabs hold of a pick and shovel, his dishdasha snags a piece of rusted metal just above the fender well, ripping it at the waist. In his mind, he angrily adds a new garment to the costs: 200-feet of detonator wire, gas for the trip over from Najaf, and the money needed to convince the Iraqi police to look the other way. He knows he is in over his head.

In truth, Rahim has been out of control since accepting a down payment from those men outside of the mosque, since the Americans stopped in front of his house two years prior and terrorized his family, since a Republican Guard convoy stopped in the exact same spot eight years before that. Rahim felt as powerless then as he feels now.

In the dark, but never alone, he has memories to keep him company. Racing thoughts propel him backward as shooting stars speed to

the earth overhead. He remembers the days of Saddam; he remembers the pain in his leg and the bullet he received as a gift for looking at a member of the Republican Guard the wrong way. After two days of bleeding out the wound became infected—"the consequence of an American embargo," he was told. Without the proper medication, a permanent limp ensued. Every step reminds him of that day.

Rahim props the tools against the side of his truck and lights a cigarette. He struggles to come to terms with the enormity of the risk he's taking: the sight of a widowed wife, two fatherless daughters, and a crying, confused son haunt him. The cherry-glow illuminates his knuckles and blinds him to the rest of the world. There, in orange light just inches from his face, Rahim escapes: the world and the past burn away; Iraqi and American soldiers become unreal and he is left with the hollow feeling of pain, a void he plans to fill with a bomb. Nicotine floods into his anticipating veins and provides momentary relief. It quickly fades as the smoke rises from his hand and the void demands action.

He flicks his cigarette into the distance and watches as an American convoy passes. He sets his stopwatch to four hours, about the time it will take for them to complete their mission and return to the exact same spot.

Pressing my night vision goggles against the passenger-side window, I peer into the darkness to escape boredom, spotting a flicker of light that arches up for a few feet before dropping to the ground and disappearing forever. It was a couple of hundred feet from the road, probably a firefly, if they have those in Iraq.

The bouncing of the vehicle—Giuliani's expert ability to hit every pothole—his own method of alleviating boredom at my expense—jabs the lenses of the NVGs into my eye-sockets. I quickly return them to their OD-green pouch and stare at my first and only soldier for two

minutes. Regaining focus, I check the tracker for messages. None, just a couple of little arrows moving forward on the main supply route. I take comfort in the artificial light of the MTS tracker. It reminds me that civilization still exists somewhere beyond the dark.

Camp Duke to Iskandariah. Iskandariah to Dogwood. Dogwood to Duke again before daybreak. We're the rear vehicle in the convoy; it's Knowles's job to make sure no one sneaks up on us with a car bomb. It's Giuliani's job to follow the tail lights in front of him. As truck commander, all I have to do is sit around and monitor the radio. Cake.

This is a relatively easy route. We even get to go through a little town and take in the streetlights and scenery. It's not like that boring mission to the Jordan border and back. They might even let us sleep in. The E-6s will put themselves in for Bronze Stars for this.

As Rahim pounds the metal pick into the asphalt, his thoughts circle but keep returning to a moment two years in the past. Shame curdles inside of his gut like a firestorm from the clouds above, the light of Rahim's rage ignites an otherwise black sky in the present, transforming the sweat on his brow into that brought on by midday sun. He remembers how his boy looked under that same sun. Uday, who looks like his father did as a boy, eyes burning white with hope, stands in awe of an American cavalcade of trucks and guns.

It doesn't matter what country the trucks belong to. Soldiers always bring trouble to your doorstep.

Americans stand on either side of the road, smoking cigarettes and laughing with their weapons pointed at the ground, a sign that they are the friendly type. A small group huddles around a flat tire and conducts repairs while others attempt to look useful. Rahim can always tell who the leader is: the man who inspires bustling concern wherever he goes.

He spots this man and makes sure he is at the other end of the convoy. Motioning for Uday, he carefully takes out a couple of watches he bought at the market. Young men like to send home jewelry to their wives and mothers, he figures, handing over the last little bit of his savings to the boy.

The work of pulverizing the asphalt is complete.

Rahim fumbles around in the dark, locating his shovel. He begins digging out the debris, returning to his memory as his body works mechanically.

We're halfway through the mission. The moon dust particular to FOB Dogwood fills the cab. My eyes water, but I'm the only one who notices. Moon dust is not quite sand. It's something else, like a brown baby powder minus the pleasant smell. It covers your entire body. You breathe it in. It gets in your nose, your clothes, your water bottle, and before you know it, you don't even mind the gritty taste as you chew your food.

We used to live here, in Dogwood. Moon dust reminds me of that first deployment, when we were closer to our primitives selves: showers with bottled water—great for the skin, actually, because of the minerals, doing laundry in a bucket and hanging it in the sun for ten minutes to dry—war stories to swap with grandma, scalding your tongue on water secured the night before in the darkest possible corner of the tent—a daily reminder of hellfire and brimstone. I especially remember looking at the ironic salt stains on cots before mission—white chalk lines of sweaty, sleeping soldiers. Dogwood reminds me of war.

Over the short period of nine months between our two deployments, war changed: tents gave way to connexes, bottles of water gave way to showers, MREs gave way to hot chow, cots gave way to beds, dehydration gave way to air conditioners; they even have a laundry service and

make us do PT when we aren't on mission now.

In 2004, some units refused to go on the same missions we ran in the Sunni Triangle in 2003. They balked at the idea of running convoys without armor. We didn't know any better. We interacted with locals and kept the wily ones at bay with crudely fashioned "haji sticks." I fired my weapon in combat only twice that year. In Dogwood, nature seemed like our biggest threat.

Iraq is becoming a garrison environment. It won't be long before the officers grab both of their balls and make us salute them on base. I can't stand all of the prim-and-proper bullshit. So, I stay on mission as much as possible; the land outside the wire is the only place that has remained the same. Iraq itself hasn't changed a damn bit. You just have to keep moving to keep from moving on.

Rahim finishes digging up the asphalt. He carries supplies from his truck to the side of the road. Simultaneously, in the light of day, he sees himself handing Uday the watches, telling him to approach the soldiers farthest away from the leader, the boys next to the last truck. He is proud as his son approaches the occupiers. Boldly, Uday looks up at the large metal contraption with wheels and a hook as long as his house. Out of sight of the others, the Americans ask Uday to come around to the back of the trucks so they can inspect his wares.

Rahim wonders if his son will learn not to fear the Americans as he learned to fear Saddam.

A minute later, the boy runs back to his father, empty-handed and in tears. He grabs at his father's garment and points to the young men. They're laughing and trying on the watches in the distance. Uday's hand nurses a red face. He gestures to his father that they struck him with sticks.

Rahim knows the trickery of older boys; he reminds himself that they are prone to immaturity and decides to set an example for his son. He walks up to soldiers with a smile and asks firmly

for the watches. He knows they do not speak Arabic but he wants Uday to hear his resolution as defiance.

One soldier laughs. The other's eyes gleam with contempt. "Get back, Hadge!" he yells as he points his rifle into Rahim's chest.

In Dogwood's supply yard, I watch as the trucks' loads are taken off by forklifts. The convoy commander comes over the radio and tells those of us in gun trucks to head to the fuel point so that we can top-off. I decide to make a command decision. I tell Guiliani to make a beeline for the mess tent. "My joes need to eat," I tell them. All good leaders look out for their "joes."

Dogwood exercises light discipline, so we drive with our lights off through the moon dust as Knowles navigates from gunner's hatch. The base is mostly barren except for a few tents here and there. The danger of hitting anything is minimal, but I've already run over one humvee on this deployment. We don't need to take any chances.

We arrive without incident and the two go inside while I monitor the radio. I prepare a clever excuse for the convoy commander.

The soldiers embarrass and emasculate Rahim in front of his son. He knows that if he raises so much as a hand in protest he can be shot. But he desperately wants to show his son—perhaps himself—that they are not under the rule of Saddam, that there are those who will do the right thing even if they have guns. He leaves the young soldiers and walks toward their leader, a large, black man smoking a cigarette and overseeing the repairs of the disabled vehicle.

His emotions—his righteous conviction that this man will prove, once and for all, that Iraq is changing—take over as he pleads with the leader. Rahim barely notices as the two soldiers begin barking in English behind him, defending

their actions and denying any involvement.

The leader looks at Rahim, then at his soldiers; their crooked helmets remind him of himself as young soldier. At first, he waves Rahim away and returns to the repairs. Rahim becomes loud, demanding even. Before he knows it, he is crying.

It all hits him at once. Rahim shouts the obscenities inflicted upon him at the leader, shaking and flailing his hands; he no longer cares if he is shot. He forgets completely that Uday is watching as the pain in his leg increases, reminding him in this pivotal moment of the constant sounds of bombs in the distance, reckless gunfire, broken promises, and how little things have changed.

Finally, the leader hears enough. He walks over to his soldiers, reaches into their pockets, and retrieves the watches. He hands them over, yelling at the soldiers and instructing them to return to their posts.

Rahim takes the jewelry. He weighs whether or not he should allow his son or the leader see him wipe his eyes. Without thanks, turns to his son, ashamed that he'd seen him beg.

The convoy commander calls me on the radio to find out what's taking so long. I tell him that we got turned around after finding the fuel point because of the lack of visibility—that we have directions and are on our way. He tells me to take my place as the rear gun truck when I arrive.

Our platoon sergeant would never let us get away with this. He controls everything at all times. While other platoons sleep or enjoy free time, we do drills, hold weapons classes, check the humvees alongside the mechanics, always something. He has his own little rule book, making us repeat commandments like “Thou shalt not use the CB radio to discuss sensitive information” in convoy briefings. He wanted to ride in the back seat of my Humvee tonight. He wanted to keep an eye on me and make sure I

was doing my job. He would be livid if he found out I blew off the convoy to get chow.

Rahim carefully packs the explosives—twenty-two pounds in all—and metal shards tightly into a hollowed-out propane tank. He shakes as he lowers it all into the ground, knowing the bullet will hit him before he hears it. He also realizes that the Iraqi Police could take his life as well as his money. But he knows for certain that the men at the mosque will.

He counters the sickening feeling in his stomach with the sounds of “Hadge” and other profanities endured for two years. The look on Uday's reddened face triumphs as a sad calm before the storm. Resolve.

No one notices when we return to the staging area. Knowles and Giuliani put on their flak vests, helmets, and headsets without being told—testament to my superior leadership abilities. We fall into position as the last truck. With any luck, we will be back at Camp Duke in a couple of hours.

“It is officially October 31st, Hallo-fucking-ween!” I yell. “I think I am going to dress up as a soldier this year.” They don't care. They don't even give me a courtesy laugh. Holidays are meaningless in Iraq.

Rahim has been hard at work in a crucial element of his task, rigging together a detonation device the way the rough men taught him. He associates each crippling fear or painful memory with a particular element of the explosive, inserting an electrical wire into the device that will provide him with a measure of separation from his past. As he unravels the cord, Rahim distances himself from the memory of those boy soldiers, from the shrieking of his wife, from the callous laugh of a Republican Guardsman eight years before that. It's all buried in the road. It's no longer a part of him. Soon, it

will become something else.

Rahim sets a stone on top of the wire and leaves the trigger exposed. He would pray but has found his peace with Allah.

I stare at the taillights of the truck in front of me and reminisce as I have on a hundred other missions. Something about the redness of those lights ensnares a part of me. That part remains trapped inside the glow until I hear a bump or feel a boom. But I always come back together.

Despite reliving my past time and time again in that red glow, I always manage to find new interpretations of the things I have done and had done to me. I think about God's grand plan and what makes my uniform smell like rotted vegetables. I think about my first deployment two years before and the first time I saw a grown man cry over a stupid watch. I wonder what a little, red-faced boy I met one day outside of Najaf is up to. I think about what I am going to do when I get out of Iraq, about how I am going to time my leave so perfectly that I can't possibly be caught up in stop loss. I think about settling down, starting a family, planting a garden, about a life that should not appeal to me for at least another ten years.

I say a prayer. It's one of the few times during the war my sentences aren't laced with profanity. My life, this war, everything is profane; such adjectives are fitting. I pray for my friends, innocent civilians, and the chance to get out of Iraq and prove myself. "I'm biding my time," I tell God. "Forgive me for the things I do between now and when I get out of this place."

We're not far outside the gate. The convoy is snaking through the serpentine barriers of an Iraqi Police checkpoint. Scruffy, guilty-looking men in blue uniforms hold AK-47s in one hand, smile, and wave to us with the other. I close my eyes and complete my prayer. For a moment, I forget about the Army and am simply glad to be alive.

Rahim hears the roar of truck engines and sees the unmistakable procession of twenty to thirty trucks lighting up the road. The goal is to get the last one: "Go for the last truck. If you can cut it off from the rest there is a good chance the occupants will bleed to death before anyone realizes they are missing. You get paid more if a soldier dies," the men outside the mosque had told him.

Rahim puts all of the righteous conviction he can muster into his index finger and prepares to push the button. "I'm done after this. I can let it all go," he says to himself. The anger that brought him from the holy city of Najaf to this desolate Iraqi road travels first into the tip of his finger and then into the button. It speeds down the wire and toward the convoy at the speed of thought. Finally, it travels onto the asphalt and into the ground, transforming into a beautiful ball of fire. The pangs of hurt, humiliation, and vulnerability implode upon themselves and fill the sky, blotting out the past, filling his void with a black blacker than the night itself.

Rahim loses himself—the world becomes an absence equal to the void he carries inside and, suddenly, he is at peace. He basks in the orange afterglow of an obliterated self.

My eyes continue their inward journey into the taillights to my front. Something innocent wraps itself around the filament wire as it burns; the electric current pulses back to me through the darkness at the speed of thought. So long as I remain in the vacuum of that bulb I am protected from its fire. I lose myself more and more until only a small something connects me to my innocence.

Meanwhile, another something grows underneath us, seeping through the ground, snaking first between the humvee's two rear tires. The smoky blackness establishes itself in the undercarriage, expanding outward past the doors, tying itself like a bow around the roof of our

armor-plated vehicle. From there, it becomes aware, peeling away at the exterior as if I, my friend, and my first and only soldier are the morsels of a tin can. It envelops us and assaults our flesh and minds.

I am cut off from the boy I sent to explore that red glow. The light shines upon his face like a red blush as he looks back at me. I understand he has his whole future mapped out for him. He has

figured out God's grand plan. He can rest now. But his absence hurts me, leaving a void that aches in my soul like a bullet wound or shame.

