

FOB THUNDER, AFGHANISTAN

By Dylan M. Reyes-Cairo

Damn! That one was way too loud... The thunderous boom still rings in my ears and I'm rocked out of my bunk, sticking my feet into my brown suede combat boots, not worrying about the socks. The second explosion takes me by surprise while I'm looking for my vest... No, dude, forget about that, grab your weapons and get to the bunker. My pistol belt hangs on the corner post of my bunk, and the M4 rifle is leaning on the corner of my desk. I grab them both and dash outside. Nobody follows me, so I assume the others must have gone to early chow. As I leave the tent I see, out of the corner of my eye, in one of those strange moments where an insignificant detail jumps out at you: a cigarette dropped on the ground, still burning, not even half smoked. It's a Marlboro green, menthol. Who the hell smokes those? I make the fifty meters to the bunker without problems, but my battle buddy Will's not there. Another kid is sitting inside, wearing just his black shorts and his fleece "bear suit" jacket. He asks me what time it is. "It's 7:15," I tell him.

"Shit! And I was just getting to sleep..." he moans.

I sit down next to him in the rocks, recognizing him. He's a Private, a mechanic... night shift worker. The explosions knocked us both out of bed. He must have just been lying

down for sleep, and I was just getting up. We're both poorly dressed for the chilly December morning, but we're fine in the dank safety and cold of a dim, cement bunker. He doesn't seem to remember me, much less my rank since the fleece jacket and black cap I'm wearing have no rank sewn on them. It doesn't matter. Here in this bunker, on this Forward Operating Base in the mountainous border regions of Afghanistan, we're both equally mortal.

Will suddenly bursts into the bunker, out of breath and panting as he settles his girthing frame into a comfortable position atop the fist-sized, broken rocks that line the floor. Paving apparently wasn't an option when the FOB was built, so they just covered the whole place with chunky, irregular gravel. Will's lucky he has a little more than the average cushioning down below. He's had a rough time keeping his weight down, I guess 'cause he tends to internalize his stress, and ends up eating a lot more than he should. That's the one thing about this FOB, the food's pretty good and there's lots of it. They'll do anything to keep the morale up. "The laundry's on fire," he gasps, taking a deep, shuddering breath, leaning his head back on the rust-stained bunker wall.

We sit there quietly shivering in the half-light, wondering how long this is going to last. The siren for the general alarm suddenly sounds, almost eight minutes after the first rocket landed.

Took ‘em long enough.

*“Attention in the FOB, Attention in the FOB!
This is not a drill! This is not a drill!
All personnel report immediately to the nearest
bunker!
Reaction Force, report to your stations!”*

They hit the laundry tent, what a laugh! Taliban fighters are notoriously bad shots with these rockets anyway, so they were lucky to hit anything at all. Most of the time these rocket attacks don’t even fall within the camp. No tactical value in that particular spot, except to instill fear, but that’s the kind of random insanity life hands us sometimes. The laundry facility is a small, cinder block building that’s been expanded by the addition of a tent on one side. It sits right next to the gymnasium, which is just another tent, set beside another tent, identical among hundreds. The whole FOB is just a village made up mostly of fragile, canvas structures where the soldiers work, sleep, and train. And at this hour I’m always leaving the gym after morning Physical Training. We call it PT, but it’s just another way to keep your mind off the bullshit. It was pure good fortune that the achy, stuffy cold I’d been suffering with should have saved me from a rocket attack since today I stayed in bed a little later than usual. I could have been walking right past the spot when that first rocket hit.

“Are the comms still up?” That question casually tossed at Will, hoping he knows something. My mind wanders, remembering how I used to joke around with Will’s name after we’d gotten to know each other for a few weeks. Willy or won’t ‘e? Will was a good sport, we always laughed and joked about everything. While we were in training at Hattiesburg, we’d go out drinking and tell each other outrageous stories. But he knew I wasn’t messing around now. The main communications tent was in the next cluster of tents over from the gym... the

laundry. The female barracks.

“No, I don’t know what happened to your little girlfriend, dumbass. I only noticed the fire at the laundry generator as I was running over here. That first rocket must’ve hit there...” A third detonation, maybe a little farther away now, interrupts us.

“Fuck!” Private First Class Something-or-other must still be a little unnerved, cussing under his breath. A plume of moist air condenses as it leaves his mouth, puffing out in the dimness. I shift a little to get away from the rocks under my ass, to no effect. They just poke me in different places now.

“It’s not because of her that I’m asking,” I tell him. “It’s so we can report...”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” he grins wickedly. “You know I’m the one who calls in contact reports. And I know you like her. I’ve seen you two sitting out there on that bench every night.”

The booming reply of the howitzers begins, sending death and destruction downrange into the mountain ridges where the rocket attack came from.

“We’re probably gonna kill a lot of goats,” jokes Will during a pause between the volleys.

“Ha, you’re just worried that your boyfriend might be among them,” I snap back.

He picks up a rock and chucks it my way, “Shut up, smartass.”

I slap the rock away with the brilliant retort, “I’d rather be a smartass than a dumbass. Fatass.”

It’s true, what he says about the girl, but not really. Sergeant Vera, I don’t even know her first name, which is just as well. I’m riding the line with fraternization just spending the amount of time we do together. It feels better to me just to keep that small level of formality between us. I’m Captain to her and she’s Sergeant to me.

We just sit and chat about things. She’s a smart girl for her age and background; she’s into philosophy, too. Her family’s from South Carolina, and when she talks she sounds like

she's lived there all her life, but contrary to all expectations, she knows her literature. We're not really into each other "like that." She's an artist, though, and she does cool chalk drawings. She works in the Commo shop. She's cute, I guess, and her green eyes are kind of interesting. But she's just a little too short, and anyway, this is not the kind of place to give in to such thoughts.

My mind drifts back to the here and now, and I see my battle buddy out of the corner of my eye, wearing that sly little smirk. "Will you quit grinning at me like that?"

An hour later they give the All Clear over the loudspeakers, and I walk as quickly as I can to the Tactical Operations Center, the TOC. Sergeant Peña is sitting at his desk as I plod through to the back of the room. This TOC is just a smaller version of the main TOC a hundred meters away. Ours is a resident unit on this FOB, so we're not the ones in charge. Our troops are embedded trainers with the Afghan forces. They call us ETTs, or Embedded Training Teams. Our job is to help train the Afghan Army officers and troops to do their job better, which at this point is to fight the Taliban. We ride out in our up-armored Humvees every morning to visit the Afghan general and his staff. They stay at this old, dilapidated British fort that's been there since God knows when. I'm the one who helps train the S2. He's the Intelligence Colonel on the Afghan side. Basically, he's just interested in the goodies we bring. Last week I gave him a white board and some markers, along with some laminated maps of the valley. I'm sure they'll end up being sold to someone at the market downtown. He'll probably trade it for something he really wants, like whiskey. People say these guys don't drink 'cause of their religion, but they just pour it into tea cups so nobody can tell. He might actually keep the maps.

The TOC for the ETTs is one of the few hardstand buildings on the FOB, and there's one room that's been hardened with extra cement barriers and sandbags so Peña can sleep there. He generally handles the radios at night. He's also the medic for our little band of brothers.

"What's up, Peña?"

"Not much, sir. Four rockets, one hit the generator by the laundry; the other three landed outside the wire."

"And the communications?"

"Good, everything's okay. Their aim was about up to par. You wanna use the radio?"

"Don't worry about it. Will's coming in a minute to report to the Battalion Commander."

"The BC already checked in, I gave him a verbal. He's gonna want something official ASAP. Where you going?" Having resolved the required official business, I'm now heading toward the back door.

"That's Will's job. I'm gonna go check out the generator!"

His smug grin follows me out the door.

Shuffling through the gravel expanses on the FOB is one of the biggest, ever-present annoyances I deal with on a daily basis. Doesn't seem like much to an outsider, but when you're carrying an M16 or even an M4 carbine everywhere you go, plus any other gear as you're moving through the camp, it gets to you day after day, week after week. I tromp along the shitty gravel surface, risking a twisted ankle to get to the laundry's generator, with my rifle slung over my shoulder. The spot I'm headed for is right across the way from her room, right in line with the gym. I stand there dumbly, feeling the now quiet atmosphere where a rocket hit, almost in the center of what's been my world for the past nine months. I pause beside the bench where for so many evenings I've sat with her to talk about the ideas of Ayn Rand, Aristotle, B.H. Roberts, C.S. Lewis. We reminisce about

cartoons and ice cream flavors, or whatever comes to mind. But the smell of smoke and burning fogs the memories now.

There's a crater in the ground about twenty meters away, and just before it sits the exploded diesel-powered generator, the fire quenched. Past the generator and the hole in the ground, I can see where the cinder block wall of the Laundry got singed and stained black, riddled with fist-sized pockmarks from chunks of rocket shrapnel. The firemen are putting their equipment back into the truck.

"Hey, Captain Alonso!"

Sergeant Procel strides earnestly across the gravel toward me. I can see by the red stubble of his beard that he's been up all night. His clear, blue eyes flash out from a distance. Procel is such an enigma; his eyes always seem to be holding secrets behind cerulean panes of crystal. He's one of the communications NCOs. He's also the one that introduced me to Sergeant Vera. At that moment, I notice a cigarette that he almost steps on as he comes over. From a few feet away I know that it's a Camel. I connect the dots in my head, realizing that she always smokes in the morning, and this one hasn't even been half finished. She must have been sitting there when the rocket hit. He recognizes the demand in my eyes.

"The explosion knocked her off the bench where she was sitting, but she's fine, she's in the hospital, the concussion..."

His last words fall on my back.

Outside the camp hospital there are a couple of wooden benches. On the smaller one, I see a girl's figure, seated. Sergeant Vera stares at the ground, shrunken into herself. Her right arm crosses her stomach, a cigarette pinched between her fingers. There's a medic beside her, holding an IV bag above her head. The tube goes from the bag to her left arm, which is tossed listlessly across the seat. She's wearing her grey PT clothes and smoking

a Camel, like always. I'm stomping crunchily along, and the same damn gravel that I always curse for making it so hard to walk announces my approach. At the sound of my footsteps, she raises her head and stares at me with those huge, green eyes. She shouldn't be so surprised to see me. She stands up quickly, almost at attention, but doesn't salute. No sniper checks, please.

"Sit down, Sergeant. What are you thinking? You've got an IV in your arm."

"Yes, sir," she responds with that self-conscious tone of someone caught off guard.

"Oh, quit it. You don't have to talk to me like that; we're alone here."

I give the medic a look past Vera's shoulder and he begins to ignore us fixedly. She's still standing up, staring at her feet.

"You look like you could use a hug," and without asking for permission I give her one, the hug a worried friend gives, a chaste hug. Her hair is down, still a little damp from a recent shower, with the smell of fruit or something from the shampoo. She feels soft, her generous breasts press against me deliciously, something I haven't felt in all the crappy months I've spent here. Her hair feels irresistible on my cheek. I'm hit with the sensation of her breath there, a mixed scent of tobacco, chewing gum, and sensuality. I suddenly get the urge to squeeze much too hard. She returns the hug with her right arm, lightly, without holding back, but the tube in her other arm keeps her from making a complete circle. The smoke from her cigarette drifts into my eyes and they begin to sting. For some reason I feel the blood pulsing in my veins, and I notice a gratifying pressure in my pants. I let go before she notices my reaction. She's staring at me with a sort of curiosity.

"I told you smoking was going to kill you some day."

A little smile twitches on her lips, a nervous laugh, her Carolina drawl, "Don't worry, the Taliban will make sure of that."

"That's no joke," I tell her, hiding an

unexpected tenderness in my voice. “You’re going to make it home in good shape.”

She looks up at me, then back down to the stones. As my eyes follow her gaze toward the ground, I see that she has a viper tattoo on her foot and ankle. I can see the snake’s head showing just above the sock. “I don’t want to go, they’re going to send me to Bagram. I’ll have to spend Christmas there.”

I violate some of the most deeply ingrained training from my enlisted days and stick my hands deep into my pockets, not knowing what else to do with them. My fingers fumble with my old keychain. The one that after nine months’ deployment still bears my car and apartment keys from all the way back in South Florida. It’s like it helps keep me sane, that little reminder that I still have a home to go back to; that this stay in hell can’t last forever.

“They have to check you out in the hospital, and it’s better there than it is here. Take care of yourself; don’t come back too soon. You need to rest. It must have scared the hell out of you.”

Her shoulders remain hunched, and she rubs her left elbow with her right hand, still pinching the cigarette between her fingers. She speaks dreamily, detached from the event as if trying to relate something that had happened to someone else.

“I was just sitting there smoking. It was such a peaceful morning. I almost didn’t hear it coming, just that ripping sound, and before I could even look up... it knocked me to the ground. I couldn’t see or hear or anything... I... I was totally deaf and blind. I just felt someone lifting me up and dragging me to the bunker. The generator saved me; it blocked the shrapnel. I still can’t hear on this side.” She points stiffly, but the needle in her arm won’t let her bend her elbow.

After one last puff on her Camel, she inhales deeply, holding the smoke in for just a little longer than usual. She pushes hard when she exhales, but I can’t even see a wisp of it. It’s as

if the smoke just filled her up and never came out. Smoke is like fear, sometimes. You suck it up and it just stays inside. You can’t breathe it out no matter how you try. She flicks the butt to the ground and it’s not even lit any more. I can see the burnt end, blackened all the way to the filter.

We say our casual goodbyes when the nurse comes out to tell her she has to lie down now. I step off to go, and I get that creepy feeling that someone’s following me, so I just have to turn around one last time. She looks over her shoulder at me as she goes back into the medical tent. The screen door is dirty, full of that fine, powdery dust that gets all over everything in this arid shithole. It’s like brown talcum powder. As the wood-frame door slaps shut on its rusty springs, she turns away, her green eyes muted through the crusted mesh. The day is beginning to heat up, now.

Turning back toward the center of camp, a dust devil whips up to my right, threatening to blow my cover off my head. I hold it tight to my skull and squint tearfully against the blowing grit, until the wind dissipates with a hiss. I trudge away on the sun-whitened, unsteady gravel, and now I can hear the medevac helicopters starting up behind me.

Before going back to the TOC, to my crowded little office filled with maps and radios, I decide to stop by my hooch. This has been my only home since I came here an eternity past. It’s a tent, just sheets of canvas sewn together and draped over walls made of thin plywood and skinny beams. I share this space with two colonels and a major, but early on we managed to set up some walls and dividers to give a little privacy. The plywood floor thumps under my boots, a much more welcoming surface than the gravel.

On one wall of my cubicle, I’d put up some bookshelves, crudely assembled with the scraps left over from the construction of the camp.

They were just irregular pieces of plywood, some short ends of pine 2x4s, and a bunch of nails that had been bent and tossed aside by the engineers, lying there in the dirt between the tents. I remember that afternoon so many months ago when I made them. I labored for hours on one of my infrequent days off, straightening out each nail, pounding it, rock against rock, outside the GP Medium tent. Later, I borrowed a hammer from the mechanics. The lending of tools is frowned upon, so I sweetened the deal with a couple of those fine cigars I'd bought online and had shipped to our APO address. I pieced the scrap wood together like a mad carpenter that day, and in spite of everything, my little shelves turned out pretty well. It was one of those few moments in life when you feel like you get it right in spite of the odds—a simple, forlorn triumph. Major Hayes had commented that whenever I wanted, I could make a shelf for him, too. I never got around to it, and he hadn't asked again.

I toss my weapons on the bed and scoop up a couple DVDs sitting on the tiny, wooden desk knowing they'll get scratched if I leave them there. I'd watched them over the past few nights, *Blade Runner* and *Orfeo Negro*. I stand there in the quiet tent, staring at my little lonely treasures sitting on my crooked, patched up shelves. I have books by Dumas, LeGuin, Allende, Coelho... my fingers touch the spines, feeling the titles almost by intuition. Here, this one by Tolstoy. Of all the ones I have, it's the largest. My copy of *Don Quixote* is imposing too, but it's in Spanish, a gift from my boss back home before I left. Sergeant Vera may have a Hispanic last name, but she only reads English as far as I know. I guess we all get separated from our roots sometimes.

I affectionately pull down my copy of *War and Peace*, a thick paperback version that sits heavy in my hands, almost interminable in length. Like so many things in my life, I haven't even started it yet. I'm thinking she might want something

really long, since she may be gone quite a while. The air transportation in this unit is uncertain when there are missions that take priority. She'll be fine, but she's going to take her time returning. She might never even get sent back to the FOB.

I go back to the TOC and I tell Sergeant Peña, "Hey, do me a favor. Take this book to the hospital. Go quickly and give it to the medic for Sergeant Vera... before they put her on the helicopter. Hurry!"

"Okay, sir... uh, sir, somebody came and left you something. It's on your desk."

"Okay, I'll check it out."

My desk is one of those heavy, grey metal ones, scratched and abused from too many frantic moves. There in the center lies a manila envelope, with no name or identifying marks. It's not even sealed. Funny. Opening it, I pull out a blank paper. I turn it over and see that it's a colored chalk drawing. In the center are the outlines of a man and a woman, she with her back turned to the viewer. They are both nude and embracing each other. The human figures are rendered in black and white, without much detail, but the woman's perfect bottom and the profile of her breasts jump out at me. Around them are other things, senseless, something artistic but incoherent. Grey colors, browns, a little blue and red, a touch of yellow, and an orange square behind them. I don't know what it is, something from the joined minds of Picasso and Mondrian. But the figures in the center don't seem to notice the frenetic swirl of colors around them. They're enclosed in their own world, excluding everything except that skin-to-skin contact, in an eternal, imperturbable kiss. The paper is unsigned, but I'd already seen Sergeant Vera drawing the man and woman days ago.

In the evening, with the lights turned out, my little flashlight illuminates the book I have resting on my legs. It's a thick, heavy tome, long, almost interminable. It's another

story about battles and heroics, good vs. evil, but mostly about people with good intentions running around making a mess of everything. Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra, the man called “El Manco de Lepanto” because of the wounded hand he got at the Battle of Lepanto, begins his prologue to the story of Don Quixote:

“Disoccupied reader: without resorting to vain oaths you must believe that I wish that this book, as the son of enlightenment, were the most beautiful, the most elegant and wise book that one could imagine. But I have not been able to contravene the order of nature, in which all things engender their kind. And, therefore, what could this, my sterile and poorly cultivated mind produce, but the history of a dry, withered, capricious son, full of disparate thoughts never before thought by another, as if he had been

born in a jail, where all discomfort resides and all cheerless noises inhabit? Whereas respite, a peaceful place, pleasant fields, the serenity of the sky, the murmur of fountains and a quietness of spirit are a great portion...”

Islap the book shut with a dull whup, overcome suddenly by a melancholic fatigue. My eyes fill with a misty ocean of worries from the day. The missions in progress, plans, operations orders, and intel reports invade my consciousness, together with the humid longings of a nearly forgotten past, all reflected in cloudy drops of salt. I lie back and sink into a grey dream, unsettled, knowing that at any moment my life can become another exercise in distress. Another night in purgatory, much too long...

