

Consequence



Gillon Crichton

Fiction

BIRTHDAY

Major Riley was suspended from a pull-up bar, mid-leg swing, when Gunnery Sergeant Mortimer called out for him from down by the shitters, hustling toward the tent gym with all the speed he could muster.

“Major Riley, sir!”

Riley dropped to the ground and winced. A warm breeze licked over the sewage pit and swirled around the gym. Riley scrunched his nose and wiped his dripping forehead with the sleeve of his skivvy. He muttered an expletive under his breath, cursing himself for telling Jane he’d been hitting the weights (*Swear to god*, he’d said, half-shouting through the static, *I’m like a young Hercules over here*) and Mortimer for interrupting.

The gunnery sergeant staggered the last few yards and keeled over, wheezing.

“I sprinted all the way up here, sir.”

“Whadaya want, Gunny?”

“Colonel Wolff wants to see you, sir.” Practically choking with each word. “I sprinted all the way up here.”

One of those fucking days. A month until they could punch the clock—so soon and not soon enough. Riley looked out over the camp. The rust-covered free weights strewn about the tent gym. The decrepit wood terp trailers. The dilapidated shitters. The chain-link fence curling up at the bottom for any halfway enterprising hadji to slip through.

And now, Mortimer gasping like the plague.

“Sir . . . Colonel Wolff wants to see you.”

“Where’s he at?”

“COC, sir.”

The COC. Just beautiful. And only an hour until his telephonic drop-in at his son’s birthday. Jane had suggested they wait a month, celebrate in person, but he’d insisted. *I’ll be there, I’ll be there*, he’d said. And Jane had exhaled real slow. *I hope so, Arthur*, she said. *I hope so.*

Riley ditched Mortimer and threaded his way down the pathways that twisted and turned about camp. Past the base laundry, where they soaked the clothes in wastewater, spritzed them with body odor, and called it a day. Past the exchange, where everyone's favorite local national Prince Ali ran his little side hustle in international SIM cards. Past the artillery bunker, where base ops caught a couple of soldiers in *flagrante delicto* before a motley audience of privates and lance coolies. Caught them blazing up the heat-vision camera like a supernova.

A time and a place, Riley thought. A time and a place. Nothing good comes from letting loose, not with hundreds of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines roaming around, unoccupied and armed to the teeth. Put together enough bored-as-hell warfighters, the whole thing gets a mind of its own.

"Salaam alaykum, my friend." Lieutenant Colonel Sa'ad stood sipping mint-infused tea on the patio fronting his trailer, his cammie blouse untucked and fluttering in the breeze. Inside the trailer, his deputies prepped the hookah and laid clean sheets on his rack. This was Sa'ad's camp—it was good to be Sa'ad.

"Morning," Riley called and gave a half-assed salute. Sure, Sa'ad was a colonel, but all that meant was he came from the right tribe, paid the right bribes. If he didn't have special sway with the sewage treatment office, he'd be about as useful as a fart in a jacuzzi.

"Come, my friend, drink some tea."

"Can't, Sa'ad. I'll swing by later."

Riley mopped dust and sweat from his brow. Nine in the morning and the sun was already sizzling. His silkies were damp with ass sweat. Out beyond the camp's gate, al-Zarqa wobbled in the heat. A city of cinderblock compounds and buzzing minarets. Not that Riley had ever seen it. His entire team of forty-odd marines had never left base. *What are you all even doing over there?* Jane had asked. Good question.

Riley rounded the corner to the Marines' COC, which shared a squat sheet-metal building with the Army's TOC:

combat operations center, tactical operations center, tomayto, tomahto. Each of them a euphemism for six months of bullshit and boredom. Except now there were dozens of soldiers in full battle-rattle streaming in and out of the TOC, all geared up to go full Rambo. Belts of heavy ammo, crates packed with high explosive, frag grenades dangling off flak jackets. A squad of privates manhandling anti-tank missiles.

Riley screwed up his eyebrows. "The fuck's going on, Thomas?"

Major Thomas, the Army's number-two man, stood with hands on hips and wraparound shades perched on his receding hairline. Sure, the Army had four hundred soldiers for some kind of border security mission, but all they ever seemed to do was wash their trucks.

Thomas smirked. "Guess you haven't heard."

"Heard what?"

Thomas spat and ran a finger around his gums.

"Heard what, Thomas?"

The door to the COC swung open and smacked into the metal siding.

"Jesus, there you are." Major Whitlow grabbed Riley by the shoulder. "We sent Mortimer a half hour ago."

A dozen marines were huddled around the conference table, asses on the edges of their seats. Riley hadn't seen this much action in the COC since the three-star came around for a tour. Not that the marines gave a shit about the three-star. The three star's aide-de-camp, though . . .

"What's with the skivvies?" Whitlow whispered, a sweat mustache coating his upper lip. "It's already zero-nine."

"Riley! Get in here."

Colonel Wolff paced behind his desk, and the nervous energy in the place made Riley's stomach churn.

"We've got a situation," the colonel said as Riley dug through his CamelBak for a roll of Tums. "The President's moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem."

"The *American* embassy?"

"DOD's upping our force protection to bravo-plus. The phone's been ringing off the hook."

Riley rubbed his chin and frowned. "I thought the embassy *was* in Jerusalem."

"It's *moving* to Jerusalem, Riley. Every city from Tangier to Tehran is about to explode. DOD's already got us at bravo-plus. The Army's all over it. We look like a bunch of cocksuckers over here, dicking around, not doing squat."

"Due respect, sir? I think most people think the embassy's already in Jerusalem."

"We're dicking around like a bunch of schoolboys, Riley. Walking around slick while the Army's mobilized. *Complacent*. That's what we are."

Riley glanced over at Whitlow, who had inched himself into the corner, half-concealed by the colonel's potted plastic palm tree.

"Devil's advocate, sir? What if it's just an embassy?"

"It's Jerusalem, Riley. The Wailing Wall. It's like a holy land to these people."

"So the Palestinians get up in arms for a few days—"

"Riley, the whole freaking *Middle East* is gonna be up in arms." The colonel snapped a can of dip and packed a wad against his lower gums. "This whole place is a powder keg."

"Okay. So . . . we sit tight. Post extra security. Wait for it to blow over."

"Riley, you're not listening. Every Mecca and Medina across the Middle East is gonna burn. And they're not burning their little bazaars. They're coming for Americans. You think the Army can hold them back? Marines, Riley. They're gonna need *marines*. Only a matter of time before we get the call."

"Sir—what call?"

"Riley," the colonel said, folding himself into the chair behind his desk. "Between us girls, I wouldn't be surprised if they extended our deployment."

The COC door slammed open, and Riley and Whitlow squinted into the harsh sunlight and took off at a brisk walk towards the marine cantonment.

"Holy mackerel," Whitlow groaned, looking like a shell-shocked private straight from the trenches.

"Fucking hell," Riley said.

"I can't get extended out here, man. I can't take it."

"Whitlow, my anniversary's in two months. Jane booked tickets to Cancun."

"They don't even need us out here."

"Cancun, Whitlow."

"We've got, what, forty marines? And the Army's got four hundred?"

"The colonel's out of his gourd."

Whitlow shook his head. "He's *lost* it."

"Wants to go home with a scalp in his hands."

"Fucking psychopath."

"Big help you were, by the way," Riley said.

Whitlow shrugged. "I'm not the deputy."

"The hell's going on with our storage container?"

At the edge of the marine cantonment, their twenty-foot storage container stood with doors agape and marines bustling in and out carrying gas masks and vacuum-sealed, oversized plastic bags.

"Hey, Staff Sergeant," Riley called. "The fuck you doing in the storage container?"

"The colonel radioed down, sir. Says to get the MOPP suits."

"The *MOPP* suits?"

The inside of the storage container looked like a Walmart on Black Friday. Gear thrown everywhere. Boxes ripped open, equipment strewn about. The detritus of years and years of interminable deployments. From standard-issue ratchet straps and tattered shooting targets to a ratty old couch and a cracked satellite dish. Boxes of Gideon bibles next to stacks of VHS pornos. And there at their feet, the torn-open boxes of the team's anti-chemical-warfare MOPP suits.

"Christ." Whitlow gripped his forehead between his thumb and index finger.

"The MOPP suits? Is he serious?"

Whitlow was on the verge of tears. "Those suits are individually serialized. I signed for them back in Lejeune."

"The colonel is *out* of his gourd."

“Riley, I personally signed for them. They’re worth thirteen hundred bucks.”

“And that’s what you’re focused on right now?”

“Riley — thirteen hundred bucks *each*.”

Riley jumped from the storage container. “Staff Sergeant!”

“Sir?”

“Where are you taking those MOPP suits?”

“Colonel Wolff says to go MOPP Level Ready, sir. Gas mask, blouse, cammies. Whole nine yards.”

“Just make sure the marines don’t open this shit up, okay?”

“You want us to leave the suits in the bags, sir?”

“In the bags. Unopened. No shitting around.” Riley pointed his index and middle fingers at his own eyes, then at the staff sergeant. “*Unopened*, Staff Sergeant.”

“This shit’s out of hand,” Whitlow said.

Riley watched the marines trudge away with their MOPP suits, clipping their gas masks to their thighs and already ripping open the vacuum-sealed blouses and trousers.

“Christ,” Whitlow said.

Riley’s pulse throbbed. He checked his watch: thirty minutes to telephonic father-time. He popped a Tums and grabbed his gas mask from the storage container. He didn’t know which would be worse — missing Andy’s birthday or disappointing Jane. Both, he decided. Definitely both. “Get the officers together,” he said. “Meet by my hooch. Fifteen minutes. We gotta sort this shit out.”

Riley left Whitlow and hit the shower trailer, where he stripped off his skivvy shirt and silky shorts and gingerly passed his hand under a torrent of water. Piping hot, even with the knobs swung to ice cold. He danced about the dank little shower stall and briskly cleaned his pits and whanger.

What the team needed was to remain calm. They needed stability. Poise. Some fucking serenity. That’s what the team needed. Riley breathed deep in the steam, and with his flip-flopped feet spread wide, pissed hard against the concrete.

With his privates cleaned and his system empty, Riley wrapped a towel around his waist and shuffled back to his hooch. A mantra of *serenity* and *poise* rattled around his head as he opened the door to his containerized housing unit.

“What in the *fuck*?” Whitlow, Romero, Zhang, and Fongus crowded about the interior of his doorway, corralling bandoliers of rifle and pistol ammo and loading up their mags. “The fuck’s with the ammo?”

“Christ, Riley, we talked about this,” Whitlow said. “You can’t walk around like that, the Army’s got females out here.”

“The fuck’s with the ammo, Whitlow?”

Whitlow cleared his throat. “Uh, you’re not gonna like it.”

“I already hate it.”

Captain Romero looked up from his mags. “You didn’t hear about the embassy, sir?”

“I know all about the goddamn embassy.”

“Yeah, well. They’re moving the embassy to Jerusalem. This whole place is a powder keg.”

“You been talking to the colonel?”

“Yessir,” Lieutenant Fongus said. “Colonel Wolff briefed us. Crazy times.”

“Anyone speak to you, Fongus?”

“Sir,” Captain Zhang said. “With the embassy moving and all, Colonel Wolff says we need full mags. Five-five-six and nine-mil. Full combat loads.”

Riley glared at Whitlow. “Full combat loads, huh?”

Fongus beamed. “Colonel’s orders, sir.”

Riley pointed at Whitlow. “I’m blaming you for this one, buddy. I take one five-minute shower . . .”

“C’mon, man. It was a direct order.”

“The MOPP suits weren’t bad enough?”

“Christ, can you not remind me?”

“You need me to grab your MOPP suit, sir?”

“*Fongus*. Shut. Up.” Riley clasped his hands to calm himself. “Okay, here’s the deal, gents. No one issues *anything* without my say-so. Gunny needs batteries for his radios? You call me. The heads are out of TP? You call me. You need your rag and lotion before bedtime? You *fucking* call me. And when the colonel radios down and says he wants anti-tank missiles on every post, you roger up, you set the radio down, and you get me on the goddamn phone.” Riley checked his wristwatch and caught his breath. “I got Andy’s birthday in fifteen minutes.”

“None of my sons say more than three words to me,” Whitlow said.

Fongus raised his hand.

“Fongus. *What?*”

“Good chance to tell him you love him, sir.”

“And why might that be, Fongus?”

“With the embassy moving and all, sir. And the powder keg.”

“Fongus. Swear to God, I’m going to murder you.”

“Okay, okay,” Whitlow said, throwing up his hands. “Let’s let our esteemed deputy clothe himself and fulfill his fatherly duties.”

Riley stepped into his hooch. “No one issues anything, gents. Freaking *nothing*.”

He flung his plywood door shut as the officers shambled off, lugging their MOPP suits and combat loads. He hoisted his bandolier, plopped on his rack, and loaded up his mags. Busted bedsprings dug into his heinie. He measured his breathing out in four-counts. Slow is smooth and smooth is fast. He chewed up a couple of Tums. Looked about his room. His Kevlar hanging from a hook. Cammies folded neatly on the shelf. Boots, go-fasters, shower shoes, all in a row. Everything in its place. That’s what this team needs right now, he thought. Just get everyone back in their place.

Sa’ad was back in front of his trailer when Riley clomped by, his pistol chafing against his thigh and his gas mask bouncing against his kneecap.

“Salaam alaykum, *habibi*.”

“Hey, Sa’ad.”

Sa’ad gestured to a deck of playing cards splayed out on a small table.

“Come, teach me an American game.”

“Can’t, Sa’ad. Gotta call my kid.”

Riley held his cell phone aloft and kept his eyes on the bars. He hunted about camp, searching out the sweet spots for cell service: the little rise by the front gate, the nook between the barbershop and the bazaar, the expanse of dust behind the tent gym. At last, he chanced upon two bars from the strip of gravel behind the sewage pit. He checked his watch.

“C’mon, c’mon,” he muttered, shielding his nose and praying for the call to connect.

A woman’s voice answered. “*Marhaba!*”

“Jane?”

“*Tabiat al-Zain Mobile!*”

“Fuck!”

He pelted out from behind the sewage pit and threaded his way towards the PX, desperate to partake in Prince Ali’s infamous little side hustle in low-cost SIM cards. Sweat dripped from his cheeks and coated his skivvy shirt. His freshly washed nethers felt swampy.

“Major Riley, sir!”

“Not now, Mortimer!”

Riley’s boot caught on one of the power-cord daisy chains that propagated about camp like some kind of tendril-based organism. His hands slapped the asphalt. His gas mask collided with his testicles.

“You alright, sir?” Mortimer grasped Riley under the armpits and lifted him upright with surprising delicacy.

“*Getoffme!*”

Mortimer raised his hands. “Just trying to help, sir.”

Riley hurried on, past the barracks and the helo-pad and the secret squirrel tent with the bearded civilians. He felt on the verge of tears, consumed by the ache in his testes. He thought of Jane and Andy. Valentine’s Day had been bad enough. But Andy’s birthday was a red line.

Riley paused to dig the holster’s thigh-strap out of his groin when Major Thomas motioned for him from the Army’s motor pool. A column of MaxxPro trucks idled in the lot, laden with geared-up soldiers and all the accoutrements of war. Thomas lowered his voice conspiratorially.

“You hear yet?”

“Jesus, what’s with the MaxxPros?”

“Riley, listen to me: you need to get your guys prepped.”

“We’re prepped, we’re prepped. The colonel’s got us drawing everything out.”

“We just got the word. If the street riots at the consulate, they’re calling us in.”

“If the street riots at the consulate—Thomas, what riots?”

“Riley—if the street riots at the consulate, they’re calling us in. These people are mad as hell about the embassy thing.”

“They’re calling you in? Thomas, isn’t that what Delta’s for?”

Thomas shook his head. “Too many consulates, not enough Delta.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Riley stammered, popping a chalky Tums tablet on his tongue. “No one’s sending soldiers into the streets.”

“Riley . . . we already got the order. I’m telling you as a friend.”

Thomas about-faced and returned to inspecting the convoy. His soldiers bristled with ammo belts, grenades, and cigarettes.

“For Pete’s sake,” Riley mumbled. Soldiers skittered everywhere. Local nationals whispered in huddled packs. Outside the cantonment, several intrepid marines used a tram to lift sandbags on top of a Hesco barrier—sand piled on top of sand.

Sa’ad waved at Riley from the patio fronting his trailer.

“Come, my friend, have some tea.”

“Still can’t, Sa’ad, I’ll swing by later.”

But before he could take two steps, the public service loudspeakers crackled and a brief siren wailed.

“Attention! This is not a test. I say again, this is not a test. By order of the camp commandant, all servicemembers will move immediately to MOPP level zero. I say again, all servicemembers will move immediately to MOPP level zero.”

Sa’ad raised an eyebrow.

“Shit.”

Riley hightailed it for the COC, swallowing the pain from his scraped kneecaps and throbbing gonads. Surely there had been a mistake. Surely the MOPP suits and the combat loads and the MaxxPros were one big misunderstanding, one colossal overreaction. Good initiative, bad judgment, that’s what this was.

He was half-jogging, his lungs feeling tight and dry, when the door to the COC slammed open and marines streamed

out fully MOPPED up: gas masks over their heads, MOPP blouses, MOPP trousers—they even had the overgloves and the thick rubber booties. *For chrissakes . . .*

“The fuck’s with the MOPP suits?”

Fongus leapt to answer, his gas mask fogged over.

“MOPP level zero, sir. Full MOPP suits.”

“That’s MOPP level *four*.”

“Then what’s MOPP level zero?”

The door to the COC smacked into the metal siding and Whitlow popped his head out, squinting into the sun.

“Riley, get in here!”

The COC buzzed with marines in motion. Marines filling CamelBaks, marines issuing tourniquets, marines checking magazines, marines pulling on MOPP boots. Empty MOPP bags littered the floor.

The colonel was perched over his desk, marking up an unfurled map with an orange highlighter and a black Sharpie. He grinned.

“We got the mission, Riley. Take a look.”

“What mission, sir?”

“*What mission?* Riley, we got the consulate mission.”

The colonel thunked a sheaf of official-looking papers on the map, stamped with an old-school *SECRET* label and bound with heavy metal brads. He flipped through and pointed with his switchblade. Sure enough: consulate reinforcement.

“Consulate reinforcement is a Marine Corps mission,” the colonel said. “Those jokers can idle in their MaxxPros all day. They’re not getting the call.”

Riley flipped through the documents in stunned silence. They were an advisor team, for chrissakes. Glorified ass-munchers. No one even read their weekly situation reports. Half the team had already filed for retirement and disability—busted knees and bulging discs and swelling hernias. Hell, one of the master sergeants was a veteran of the Gulf War. The *first* Gulf War. Meanwhile, the Army had four hundred hard-charging youngsters strapped to the nines and ready to rumble. Riley plopped the sheaf back on the desk, barely cognizant of his surroundings.

They're really gonna extend our deployment, he thought.

He chewed up a couple of Tums and leaned back over the desk, studying the thick, crinkly document. The classification markings. The commanding general's signature. The date-time group . . .

"Sir," Riley gasped. "This op order's nine years old."

"Doesn't matter. It's a CENTCOM order. Never rescinded."

"They probably forgot it even exists."

"Riley," the colonel said, his lips peeled flat against tobacco-stained teeth. "It's never been rescinded. This is *our* mission."

Riley stared.

"The team's already staging the SUVs," the colonel said. "Route reconnaissance. Rehearse our movement to the consulate."

The COC door clanged open, and Riley and Whitlow departed, breaking into a heavy lope.

"We are so fucked," Whitlow said.

"Would be nice if you'd open your goddamn mouth in there once in a while."

"I didn't wanna jump the chain of command!"

"Whitlow, I give you my permission to fucking jump it."

"Riley!" Major Thomas jogged to catch up. "Hey Riley, we gotta talk!"

"Can't, Thomas!"

"This is *our* mission, Riley. You stay off those streets!"

Whitlow shook his head. "We are so fucked."

The team's Mahindra SUVs idled outside the cantonment, loaded up with marines in MOPP suits. The exhaust pipes choked with fumes. Romero and Zhang prowled the convoy with tactical notebooks, confirming manifests and weapons serial numbers.

"Major Riley, sir!" Mortimer called. "You're in my vic."

"Shove over, Mortimer."

Riley took the wheel and counted out his breaths. Easy does it, he thought. Slow is smooth and smooth is . . .

"Watch out, gents," Mortimer cracked. "The sir is driving."

The convoy rumbled over a faint desert road, discernible primarily from the absence of any sizable rocks or holes. Engines roared and clutches whined and off-road tires chewed

up the desert terrain. Riley clenched the wheel like a corpse in rigor mortis.

They hit the hardball with a clatter of suspensions and axles as the Mahindras bottomed out on the lip of the pavement. The lead vehicle gunned it and soon they were weaving in and out of traffic, whipping past mosques and souks, madrasas and bazaars.

The radio crackled. "This is vehicle one, passing checkpoint one."

"Vic two, checkpoint one."

Mortimer grabbed the radio and hollered, "Vic three, checkpoint three!"

"You idiot." Riley swiped the radio from Mortimer's grasp. "This is vehicle three, passing checkpoint *one*. And slow your speed, this is too fast."

"Vic three, this is vic one—keep this channel clear of non-essential communications."

From the backseat, Lieutenant Fongus grinned in the rearview mirror. "Hey, sir?"

"*What*, Fongus?"

"How'd your son's birthday go?"

The convoy sped down a boulevard and hurtled around a corner. Street merchants and pedestrians gawked at the Americans in the SUVs. Riley fumbled with the gearshift and narrowly averted stalling the engine.

"What'd you say to me, Fongus?" Riley asked.

"I said, how'd your son's birthday go, sir?"

Riley locked eyes with Fongus in the rearview mirror. Fongus—with his peach fuzz and his goofy grin and his stupid questions.

"Fongus," he said. "Swear to god—"

A pair of thuds shook the Mahindra. *Thwump, thwump*. Riley hit the brakes and the wheels locked up.

Fongus whipped around, trying to see out the rear windshield. "What was that?"

A small crowd was already forming. Shopkeepers quit their storefronts and came down into the street. A construction crew abandoned their shovels and jackhammers.

The radio crackled. "Vic three, this is vic one."

"What was that?" Fongus asked again.

Riley's hands shook. "Oh my god."

"Vic three, this is vic one. Come in."

Riley fumbled with the radio. "This is vic three, returning to base."

The reply hissed from the small speaker. "Negative, vic three. Continue with the convoy."

Riley clicked the radio off. Outside the Mahindra, the crowd thronged.

"Sir?" Mortimer said.

Someone threw a coffee cup at the passenger window. A bottle exploded on the windshield.

"Sir?"

Riley popped the clutch and shifted into gear. The crowd erupted. Men dove onto the windshield and others blocked the street ahead. Riley accelerated. Some leapt away and others were flung to the ground. One man gripped the windshield wipers with bloody hands. Riley honked the horn in one long, forbidding blast before gunning the gas and breaking so hard the seatbelt dug into the skin of his neck. The man writhed on the pavement, his leg jutting at an unnatural angle. Riley dropped his foot on the gas and they were gone.

Mortimer slouched in the passenger seat. Fongus watched out the rear windshield. Riley drove the Mahindra in a daze. His cammies swamped him like they were meant for a marine twice his size. The city was a blur. Vegetable stands full of dust-covered squash and tomatoes. Stakebed trucks cobbled together from improvised parts. Mosques buzzing with the calls of the muezzin.

At the front gate, Riley flashed his ID and jolted into a parking spot outside the marine cantonment. He darted out of the SUV and past the marines on post. Fongus called after him, but Riley didn't hear. His chin felt tight. Bile pooled in the pit of his throat. He shivered—his skin was covered in goosebumps. At the door to the exchange, he buckled over and vomited into a trash can. Protein shake and powdered eggs.

"Where's Ali?" he asked, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

A wide-eyed clerk looked from Riley to the trash can and back, then pointed over his shoulder. Riley raced to the rear counter. "Ali?"

Ali shuffled from the backroom, his leather sandals slapping against his soles. "My friend," he said. "How may I assist?"

"Ali, I need minutes."

"Of course. Zain or Orange?"

"Zain," he said, his voice sounding like a dry heave.

Ali dug around under the counter and produced a Zain calling card. "My friend," he said, still holding the card in his yellowed fingers. "You do not look so good."

Riley placed a twenty on the counter. "I'm fine."

Out behind the sewage pit, Riley plugged the activation digits into his phone. His thumbs quivered. Twice he input the wrong code. Finally, the phone made a quiet chime and he dialed Jane's number.

"C'mon, c'mon," he said.

Jane answered on the first ring, her voice flat. "Hello."

"Jane?"

"Arthur."

". . . I know I'm late."

Jane laughed, a short, sad *ha*.

"Can I still talk to him, Jane?"

"You think he wants to talk to you?"

"I really need to talk to him, Jane."

"You know he told all his little friends his daddy was going to call? He had all his little friends stand around the phone. Waiting. And for what?"

"Jane, please don't do this."

"Don't do what?"

"*This*."

. . .

"Jane, I'm begging you."

Jane shushed someone.

"Is he there? Can you put him on?"

He heard the muffled sounds of Jane passing off the phone, and then a child's heavy breathing.

“Andy? Is that you?”

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hey there, big guy.”

“You missed my birthday.”

“I’m so sorry, Andy.”

“Were you fighting the bad guys?”

Riley looked out over the camp. The rest of the convoy was just passing through the front gate, sunlight glancing off the windshields.

“Yeah,” he said. “We were fighting the bad guys.”

“That’s good.”

The convoy parked at the COC, and marines jumped from the vehicles. Riley felt very tired. Exhausted, even.

“I love you, my boy.”

He waited for Andy’s reply, but whatever Andy said came through distorted and unclear. The public service loudspeakers sputtered and the whole camp reverberated with the noise of a bullhorn siren.

“I love you,” he said again. Then he sat in the dirt, and held the phone to his ear, and waited.

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Laura Da' is a poet and teacher who studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is the author of *Tributaries*, American Book Award winner, and *Instruments of the True Measure*, Washington State Book Award winner. Da' is Eastern Shawnee. She lives near Seattle, Washington.

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Ukata Ameluzu Edwardson (U.A Edwardson) is a Queer writer of color, posthumous and sick, who was the second-place winner of the *SprinNG* Poetry Contest 2021 and honorably mentioned in the Starlit Awards



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Matt Burgess
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Natalka Bilotserkivets
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Gillon Crichton
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Laura Da'
Ejiro Edward
Ukata Edwardson
Alan Elyshevitz
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