

GILLON CRICHTON

TRANSIENTS

Picture the scene. Knees pressed to groins, forty, fifty marines packed in the cabin of a C-130, en route to Iraq by way of magnificent Ali Al Salem, Kuwait. Cropped hair, clean shaves, desert camouflage. Lower lips packed with chew.

Smell the cabin air, thick with body odor, teriyaki jerky, and the putrid scent of urine. Does a C-130 come equipped with a toilet curtain? It does. Does this particular C-130 have such a curtain? It does not.

Observe the squad leaders: Dixon, Dulaney, Dejung. Salty. Savage. Passed the fuck out. Do they each have “The Three Ds” tattooed on their right ass cheek? The smart money is on *yes*.

And here sits our hero, PFC Dimmler, squashed between PFC Weidemer, the lanky man-child from Tuscaloosa, and PFC Delgado, the college-grad-cum-private. Shaved heads, all three. A deployment thing. Except Lance Corporal Jones told Dimmler he was also supposed to shave his pubes. So now Dimmler refuses to relieve himself—no toilet curtain, you see.

In the rear, the platoon’s main packs and seabags are lashed to a pallet, and here lounge the staff sergeant and lieutenant. They stretch out on a lumpy mattress of entrenching tools, gas masks, and at least three devices of imitation female anatomy.

The rest of the platoon is ensconced on net webbing, the kind of luxurious net webbing that makes your capillaries burst. They listen to iPods. They share sunflower seeds. They wake up drooling on their neighbors’ shoulders.

These are the marines of Animal Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. They are young. They are hungry. Half the privates already purchased combat action ribbons, hidden away in footlockers back home. They wisecrack: Iraq doesn’t know what’s coming. They are decidedly mistaken.

After several hours of flight, the plane falls from the sky in a tight spiraling descent, a rollercoaster on a corkscrew. The privates jerk around, gape out the windows. With each nauseating rotation, a spectral runway vanishes and reappears, vanishes and reappears.

Dejung calls over the thunderous turboprop engines: Taking fire!

PFC eyeballs go wide. *Seriously?*

Dejung grins and nods vigorously. They are decidedly *not* taking fire.

The runway fills the windows. A wail of rubber on pavement echoes through the cabin. *Abhlaan wasahlaan al-Kuwait.*

The rear hatch groans open, and a blast wind of scorched, dry air desiccates their lips. Our hero removes his standard-issue glasses and adopts a stoic appearance. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, he says.

Jones punches his shoulder. What is that, Auschwitz?

Dimmler raises his bushy eyebrows. Dante.

They heave their packs and weapons and form a ragged column to footslog through camp. They're assigned to a gaping canvas tent littered with spit bottles and empty soda cans. This is what they call *transient billeting*.

The junior marines—the boots, in their lovable parlance—get the most fetid, threadbare mattresses. They stow their seabags and main packs, make temporary stores of hygiene kits and skivvy shirts. Their reeking sweat is repugnant.

The staff sergeant summons the Three Ds to his rack. This is our home for the next seventy-two hours, he says. Get this trash cleaned up. Get a watch going. Rinse, repeat.

The Three Ds go to work. Out of nowhere, the marines rustle up cleaning solvent, trash bags, and off-brand Lysol wipes. Weidemer and Delgado wipe down the bunks. Our boy Dimmler cleans the mattresses with soapy water and a toothbrush. The staff sergeant and the lieutenant stand back and assume the detached posture of supervisors.

Welcome to Kuwait, sir, the staff sergeant says.

Nice place.

Oh, it's a little piece of paradise.

The two of them disappear into the night for a meeting with the company commander. The marines clean for another hour and settle into their racks with dreams of Baghdad. Weidemer gripes that his mattress is too short. Weidemer's always griping about something. Delgado's universal SIM card won't connect to Kuwaiti carriers. And Dimmler? Dimmler is curled up asleep on the floor, a small bear figurine gripped in his right hand. Don't ask me why.

It's almost daybreak before the lieutenant and the staff sergeant reappear.

School circle, the staff sergeant hollers. They gather round and rapidly grow anxious at the deep red coloration of his neck.

Something's up, Weidemer mutters. Weidemer's always muttering something.

Alright, marines, says the lieutenant. Mission's changed.

Can you hear the phlegm caught in his throat? Can you see the twitch in his right eyelid? This, my friend, *this*: this is the lieutenant's worst nightmare.

As you know, we're drawing down in Iraq. Transitioning authority over to the Iraqis. Now that doesn't mean we've missed the fight. There's still a war going on. But it does mean we're going to spend some time stationed here in Kuwait.

The lieutenant coughs, clears his throat.

So, until further notice, beautiful Ali Al Salem Air Base in the great emirate of Kuwait is your new duty station.

The lieutenant's eyelid looks like it's about to have a seizure. Forty-odd marines take a good look around. Our favorite PFC gets the dorkiest grin you've ever seen.

The fuck you smiling about? Jones asks.

Dimmler grins some more. Abandon all hope.

Jones cocks his head and punches Dimmler in the gut.

I doubt if Dimmler had any idea how goddamn perspicacious he was, as things go real south, real fast.

Did you think that the nasty funk of transient billeting was, itself, transitory? Think again, my friend. There ought to be a policy on maximum-allowable-number-of-days-stranded-in-a-canvas-tent-in-hundred-and-twenty-degree-heat-with-a-whole-platoon-of-sweaty-heaving-testosterone-boosting-marines. Unfortunately for the platoon: there is no such policy.

Within three days, the tent is downright gruesome. The marines sprawl out on their rancid mattresses, too lethargic from the heat to move. On Ali Al Salem, the base facilities operate on a nocturnal schedule since no one—not even the *Kuwaitis*—want to traipse about in the sun if they can help it. Practically suicide. So the marines sleep by day, making offerings and fervent prayers to Ra to please, for all things holy, conjure up a cloud or two. The cornucopia of scents is breathtaking.

If you haven't been to Ali Al Salem, picture an idyllic, pastoral town of the Eisenhower-era. Post office, general store, a single main street. Hold that image in mind. Now picture it built from concrete and plyboard, blast it with a godless wind, smother it in dust, bleach the signage white, and kill off the foliage and fauna. Tracking?

Shit gets weird when, on the fourth day, the marines discover an oddly life-like drawing of Pamela Anderson on the inside door of a shitter. A gift

from some master artist of a deployment past, his name lost to history but his artwork immortal. A student of the Old Masters. For years afterward, when these marines find themselves in an especially putrid, oven-like shitter, they will discover themselves distressingly aroused—evidence of the fabled penile-olfactory connection.

So, uh, how about that Pamela? our hero asks over a barbarous round of spades.

Absolutely epic, Delgado says. A prayer to PFC Rembrandt, god rest his soul.

I don't think she's all that special, Weidemer says.

I'd give my left nut for Pamela, Dimmler retorts.

That's probably a bad trade.

Yeah, I don't think you've thought that one through.

I mean it. I'd give my left nut for Pamela. Fair trade.

Weidemer grunts. Can we focus on the goddamn cards? Weidemer's always worried about his goddamn cards.

But the cards don't last for long. Before the week is out, the Three Ds have the platoon out on the parade deck, buddy rushing and combat shouting. Literally. The poor bastards take turns blasting imaginary rounds from their M16 rifles while their buddies leapfrog ten yards forward and holler COMBAT at the top of their shredded, oxygen-hungry lungs. Dimmler and the man-child Weidemer take turns suppressing and rushing, and when Dimmler fires off his imaginary rounds, he shouts in his deepest marine voice, *pew pew!*

Their squad finishes a mock attack, and the marines slouch against cinder blocks and concrete benches, chugging water mixed with MRE beverage powder. Sweat seeps through every inch of uniform, as if they've come straight from the dunk tank.

How we doing, marines? the lieutenant asks as he and the staff sergeant make their rounds.

Jones straightens up, the consummate professional. Good training, sir.

Good to hear.

Dimmler wipes his lips with the sleeve of his sopping blouse and beams. I'm a glutton for punishment, sir!

The lieutenant raises his eyebrows, and he and the staff sergeant head to the next squad. The marines suit back up for the next mock attack. Before Dimmler can get his flak jacket on, Jones delivers a hammer-fist to the chest.

Routine settles in. The sun rises. The sun sets. The marines conduct squad and platoon attacks. They rehearse immediate action drills. They storm the hill, they take the hill, they collapse on the hill, their skin chalky white, their throats gagging on their tongues. Their layover at Ali Al Salem takes on an air of indeterminacy.

Lucky for the marines, this six-month staycation is all-inclusive. After accounting for hostile fire pay and the combat zone tax exclusion, the junior marines haul in \$2,173 per month. With only the base exchange for idle consumerism, the canvas tent transforms into a storehouse of sundry goods: brass knuckles, Nike sweat tops, vibrating electrodes for abdominal stimulation. Dimmler buys a glass tube of Kuwaiti sand, stopped up with a cork.

Jones shakes his head. We're literally *living* in Kuwaiti sand.

The bulk of their cash goes to nutritional supplements. The marines ingest every supplement known to man. Pills, powders, oils, gels. You name it. They buy the stuff in bulk and stack it under their bunks in neat rows.

Two weeks in, Delgado claims to have already packed on ten pounds of muscle. He mixes a gruesome yellow liquid in a shaker and flexes. It's all chemistry, he says. If you understand the chemistry, there's nothing to it.

Tastes like shit, Weidemer mutters as he shakes his own concoction.

While the rest of the marines hit the gym during their downtime, our boy Dimmler squirrels himself away at the Green Beans Coffee. The Green Beans has a few dust-infused sofas, some tables with checkers and chess sets, stacks of ancient guns and ammo magazines, and a row of dial-up computers.

It's also got Viola.

I can't explain how a girl like Viola comes to work at a place like Ali Al Salem, let alone any of the other random Americans working on base. Some things in this world are inexplicable—mysteries that aren't meant to be solved.

Dimmler practically faints the first time he sees her. There he is, standing in line, absorbed in one of his comics, when Viola asks, is that *Dune*?

She has braided hair, strong eyeliner, a plaid button-down under her Green Beans apron. Dimmler half chokes. Yeah. *Dune*.

Thought so.

Dimmler's heart just about leaps into his throat. Viola brushes loose hair out of her eyes.

I always preferred the novel, she says.

The novel?

Yeah. By Frank Herbert?

Oh, right. That one. Haven't got to it, yet.

Well, you've *got* to read it. The comics are pretty derivative.

And with that, Arthur Dimmler is in love.

As the weeks pass, he and Viola develop a kind of practiced repartee. Viola asks for his order; Dimmler orders coffee. She asks how he takes it; he adopts a manly bearing and replies, no cream, no sugar, with a shot of espresso. She readies his coffee, and they banter about his graphic novels—she seems to have read *everything*. Then, single-shot coffee in hand, he perches himself at a computer, logs in to Hotmail, and composes lush and lascivious love letters. He agonizes over each one, casting furtive glances at Viola as he writes. And then, before leaving, he saves the letters to the drafts folder.

Back in transient billeting, Dimmler finishes a drawing of Viola and tucks his sketchpad away. He curls up in his sleeping bag and clutches his bear figurine. Most nights, Weidemer returns to the tent a tad fleet-of-foot, having paid a visit to Ms. Pamela. Dimmler can't help but grin. Weidemer eases into his rack, like a teenager sneaking in after hours, and Dimmler stares up at the colossal feet hanging off the end of the top bunk.

Night, Dim, Weidemer whispers.

Night, Weidemer.

Three months in, the Three Ds get the marines formed up, and the platoon route-steps to the parade deck.

Something's up, Weidemer mutters.

You think they're sending us home? Dimmler asks.

Fuck no. Probably telling us to swab the shitters.

This isn't about the shitters, Delgado says. The whole battalion's forming up.

Have you *seen* how many shitters there are?

The three rifle companies, the weapons company, and the headquarters company assemble on the parade deck. The Three Ds are in their element, cheeks flushed as they spit and howl to get every marine just so. It takes a half hour of barking orders to get the eight-hundred-some-odd marines and sailors covered and aligned, lockjaw silent and snapped into parade rest.

Now, if you are unfamiliar with parade rest, let me assure you: there is

no *rest* in parade rest. If you haven't stood in hundred-and-ten-degree heat with your legs a crisp twelve inches apart and your hands clasped smartly in the small of your back, well, my friend: consider yourself blessed.

Sweat streams down their faces. Minutes tick by under the merciless sun.

This is bullshit, whispers Weidemer.

Dimmler shifts his weight back and forth, looking panicked. My *arm* is going numb.

Jones tries to catch their attention. *Shut your face.*

They snap back into rigid parade rest for another minute before Weidemer mutters in a long, slow, *sotto voce*: this is total fucking bullshit.

Dimmler's eyes bug out. I'm telling you, I can't feel my arm!

In one smooth motion, Jones slides out of parade rest, bone-crunches Dimmler's shoulder, and snaps back into parade rest.

Better?

Before Dimmler can even scowl, the marines are called to attention, and the battalion commander strides to the front of the parade deck. He's lean and he's mean—a *marine's* marine. The kind of commander the marines want to emulate and annihilate. He starts in on some kind of dramatic monologue, replete, I am sure, with soldierly ethic and military virtue. He jabs, he knife-hands, he points into the distance. But with the roar from the airfield and the hot desert wind, he might as well have been screaming into the abyss.

What in the hell was that all about? Weidemer asks.

No idea, says Dimmler as he clutches his throbbing shoulder.

They route-step back to transient billeting, more perplexed than when they left. Rumors run rampant. They're headed to Iraq. They're redeploying to California. They're indeed tasked with cleaning hundreds of shitters.

Outside the canvas tent, they form a school circle around the lieutenant.

What'd I tell you, marines? he says, grinning like a schoolboy. There's still a war out there.

The marines eye each other warily.

In case you missed it, boys, the war's not over. Not by a long shot. They're sending each of the companies to Iraq for thirty-day rotations. You understand what that means, marines?

In unison, the marines shout, *Kill!*

The lieutenant nods. That's right.

No one sleeps. The marines check and re-check their gear. They clean

their weapons. And when Jones brings back news that Charlie company will be the first to go, they curse their luck.

Later that week, they line up above the airfield and watch Charlie load up into C-130s.

Lucky bastards, says Weidemer.

The marines all agree.

As the C-130s wink into the night, the marines drift into vague dreams of combat, valor, and medals pinned to uniforms. Dimmler's chest swells with thoughts of heroism. He imagines himself returning to Ali Al Salem, rough and rugged from a month of hostilities, and Viola waiting for him at the Green Beans, a single-shot coffee and a knowing smile, neither one needing to say anything more than what they've already communicated with their eyes.

For the next thirty days, training kicks into high gear. They rehearse and they rehearse and they rehearse again: room clearing, door breaching, hand-and-arm signals, patrolling, tourniquet application, speed reloads, buddy drags. They take a pallet of sea wire and a hundred sandbags and they build a defensive position outside transient billeting. They beat each other to a pulp during weapon-of-opportunity hand-to-hand combat training. And they load up on Rip It energy drinks and nutritional supplements, obeying the central dogma that no marine is sufficiently caffeinated without one thousand percent of the suggested daily intake.

At the end of the night, the marines collapse into their racks, drenched in sweat, physically exhausted, and sleepless with anticipation.

Our boys Dimmler, Delgado, Weidemer, and Jones huddle around an upturned box of MREs, speculating in hushed tones.

How bad do you think it is over there?

I've heard it's bad. *Real* bad.

My buddy from the schoolhouse was over there six months ago. Said the Iraqis couldn't hit the broadside.

Can we focus on the goddamn cards?

Christ, Weidemer, calm down already.

The broadside of a *barn*?

Yeah, that's what I said.

You did *not* say the broad side of a barn.

Are we playing cards or are we playing cards?

I heard you don't even need to shoot to get a combat action ribbon these days.

If your convoy gets blown up, they give you a ribbon.

Good luck with that ribbon after you get blown up.

Watch me.

For fuck's sake, whose fucking turn is it?

The game breaks up, and Weidemer says he has to take a leak and heads directly for Pamela Anderson.

Let him be, Delgado says. She's a better listener than we are anyway.

For Dimmler, the thirty days are a torment of anticipation and timidity. Each day is a missed opportunity with Viola. He knows the words he wants to say. He is certain she knows that he'll be leaving. But in the fleeting moments in the Green Beans, the time never feels right.

What'll it be, Dimmler?

Just a coffee.

How do you take it?

She leans over the counter. Holds his gaze for just a moment.

No sugar, no cream, shot of espresso.

She smiles sadly, a brief, self-conscious smile. She straightens herself up. Coming right up, she says.

Dimmler sequesters himself on one of the computers. Watch him now: pecking away at the keyboard, absorbed in yet another letter destined for the drafts folder. Do you see the look of concentration? Can you feel the way his chest has tied itself in knots? Have pity on the boy. Pay no attention to his pupils, floating like driftwood as he blinks back tears. Look instead at the cardboard coffee cup, and notice what Dimmler does not: that Viola has written his name in careful cursive, and that she has dotted the *i* with a small, delicate heart.

The C-130s hurtle out of the sky and cut to idle on the runway. The marines race to meet their brethren. Charlie marines lumber out of the aircraft, staggering under the weight of their main packs and seabags.

Warriors, Dimmler whispers.

Fucking A, says Weidemer.

Shut up, I'm trying to get a count, Delgado says, carefully scrutinizing the scene below.

Charlie trudges to their transient billeting tent. Before long, privates and lance corporals are streaming out for the exchange and the chow hall.

Joranstad! Dimmler calls to a private he knows. Hey, Joranstad!

Joranstad gives a small wave of recognition as Dimmler and Weidemer jog to catch up. His hair is orange, and his skin is burned. He spits

tobacco juice into the dust.

How was it?

Iraq?

Yeah, no shit. Iraq.

Joranstad smirks and sticks his thumbs through his belt loops.

Fuckin lit 'em up.

Dimmler's whole face opens wide. Joranstad smirks again and heads off to chow. Dimmler and Weidemer lock eyes.

Holy shit.

They can hardly contain themselves. Destiny grips them. All the mind-fuck games they played in boot camp? All the buddy rushing in the Kuwaiti sun? It was all worth it, after all.

They are decidedly mistaken.

At the tent, Jones pulls the team together. Joranstad was full of shit, he says. Charlie spent thirty days sitting on their bunks. Never left base. Thumbs up their butts.

Why in the hell would they go to Iraq for thirty days to sit around base?

Jones snorts. You know what happens after thirty days in Iraq, right?

Dimmler, Delgado, and Weidemer glance at each other and shake their heads.

You fucking boots. It takes thirty days to get a campaign medal.

They glance at each other again, but only Delgado seems to understand.

They're sending us to Iraq so we can get a ribbon?

Technically, it's a medal.

Dimmler and Weidemer lock eyes.

Holy shit.

Things go real south, real fast. The Three Ds keep the game up of mock attacks and full-speed buddy rushing, but the juice ain't worth the squeeze. They storm the hill, they take the hill, and they curse beneath their breath. Baker company heads out for their thirty days in Iraq, but no one lines the airstrip to see them off.

Some fucking war, Weidemer gripes.

Delgado nods. You know how at NASCAR, if you crash, at least you can say you raced hard?

What are you talking about?

I think I'd rather crash than lose.

Weidemer nods. They all feel it. A philosophy of cynicism and loss takes hold. The lieutenant and the staff sergeant make themselves scarce,

as if nervous of getting fragged if they come around the tent. The marines don't seem to notice.

The careful stacks of supplements lose their luster. Delgado's clinically-proven doses of BCAAs and pea-derived protein are forgotten. Just get me out of this hellhole, he grumbles.

It's their fifth month in transient billeting. The rancid mattresses remain rancid, the fetid tent remains fetid. Weidemer claims his nostrils are permanently damaged.

Swear to god I'm filing for disability when we get home, he says.

For his part, something perishes inside Dimmler. At training, he goes through the motions. At the Green Beans, he can barely look Viola in the eyes. She tells him about her latest graphic novel, and it's all he can do to mumble a reply. His eyes downcast and ashamed. Soon enough, he takes to avoiding the Green Beans altogether. He drinks weak coffee from the chow hall and tries to shake the feeling of being a fraud. His sketchbook lies unused beneath his bunk.

After thirty days, baker company lumbers out the back hatch of the C-130s. They trudge to their own tents, hangdog and dispirited. No one bothers to call after them.

And now it is time for animal company. Forty-odd marines lash their main packs and seabags to a pallet while the Three Ds prowl the billeting area. The lieutenant and the staff sergeant loaf about. The marines dip. They smoke. They make hurried last trips to the shitters. They bandy about small, meaningless words and wait for their dreams to slip away.

Five months ago, on a tarmac in California, they strutted and posed, a devil-may-care façade to conceal frayed nerves. Now their indifference is sincere.

The staff sergeant calls the marines to attention. Grab chow, he says. Wipe your asses. Be back in one hour.

Dimmler and Weidemer trudge off for one last meal at the Ali Al Salem chow hall. It's Sizzler Night, but the meat is less snap, crackle, and pop than limp and overly moist.

Weidemer looks up from his fries. Hey, uh. Dim?

Yeah?

A trim figure in jeans, plaid button-down, and apron taps Dimmler on the shoulder. Our hero half chokes on a chicken strip.

Viola!

Hey there, stranger.

She sits beside him at the table, a glint in her eye, and socks him one on the shoulder. He pretends it doesn't hurt.

I deserve that.

Yeah, you do.

Our gasping hero grins sheepishly.

I brought you something, she says.

She presses a book into his chest. You've *got* to read it.

Dimmler holds the book up and smiles like a total goober.

Dune! he says.

I left a note on the title page. But, uh, you should read it in private.

He beams.

Oh! he says. Hang on.

He reaches into his cargo pocket and fishes out his bear figurine.

It's a bear figurine, he says.

Viola laughs. I can see that.

Keep him for me 'til we get back?

She places the bear in her pocket and nods.

I will.

She looks into Dimmler's eyes. He looks into hers. Neither needs to say anything more. She grabs hold of his cammies, pulls him in, and kisses him. Right then and there.

Weidemer coughs.

I gotta go, Dimmler says, breathless.

Hurry back.

Dimmler flushes red. On the way out the door, he catches Weidemer's eye and grins—what the marines would call a shit-eating grin. The whole flight to Iraq, his heart leaps in his rattling chest.

The C-130 falls from the sky in a tight spiraling descent. When the rear hatch groans open, the marines walk heavily down the tarmac. A sun-bleached sign, in English and Arabic, reads, Al Hayawan Air Base: Home of the Animals. Serendipitous naming. The marines hardly notice. For all they care, Al Hayawan might as well be Ali Al Salem.

They footslog through base, past hardened structures, k-spans, and shipping containers. Billeting tents with air conditioning and decent-looking mattresses. A Burger King and a Starbucks and a movie theater with showtimes on a marquee.

Could be worse, Delgado says.

Weidemer sneers. Just wait.

It doesn't take long. The company heads to the outskirts of base, to a series of repugnant canvas tents. Transient billeting.

Delgado is crestfallen. You've gotta be shitting me.

The reeking tent and the threadbare mattresses are standard issue, night on twin siblings of their counterparts on Ali Al Salem. The Three Ds have lost the last of their salt: they don't even pretend to bother with cleaning. The marines settle in, pretty much in the exact bunk configuration they kept in Kuwait.

The days tick by. The marines have no duties. They spend epic quantities of cash at the Burger King. They re-watch the same two films at the movie theater's nightly double-feature. Entire days are frittered away with little more than eating, shitting, and bellyaching.

The base is enormous, which only confirms their lack of purpose. Whole battalions from the national guard and the army are posted for security. Some special operations marines lope around in between real missions. As in, outside-the-wire missions. But animal company is an uninvited houseguest, shunted out of the way and told to keep quiet.

Dimmler reads and re-reads *Dune*. He writes love letters to Viola in his notebook. He only halfway pays attention to their murderous games of spades.

With two weeks to go, Delgado comes panting into the tent.

You've *gotta* see this.

He leads them on a hurried trek to a row of shitters on the far side of the base. He opens the door to the fourth one down. There, dazzling and brilliant, is an amply proportioned Pamela Anderson.

Their mouths drop agape.

You should thank me, Dimmler says. I gave my left nut for that artwork.

Their final day in Iraq arrives: no bang, all whimper. The company forms up outside their tents. Their flight isn't until later that night, but another unit needs the tents. As they say: transient billeting.

Delgado looks around. Spades?

The others shrug.

I gotta take a dump, Dimmler says.

Pamela?

No man, an actual dump.

So Dimmler heads to the shitters and shuts himself inside. He leans his rifle in the corner and steadies it with his boot. Unclasps his belt and

lowers his trousers. Frowns at the scent of his own briefs. And from his cargo pocket, extracts his Bible, his Torah, his Quran: his battered and dog-eared *Dune*.

And he's sitting there like that—with his boot against his rifle, his trousers around his thighs, and *Dune* held open to the title page—when the first shell goes overhead.

The marines hear the whistle before they feel the thump. There they are, lounging on their packs and shooting the shit, listless after thirty monotonous days, when a single shell rushes overhead. One, maybe two seconds the shell shrieks, but to the marines it could be an eternity. To the marines, time seems as thick as molasses. So slow they could pluck the shell right out of the air. Launch it back into the desert. Smother it in an earthen burial.

Then an orange-red dust cloud leaps from the earth, and shrapnel explodes in all directions. Tents are lacerated. Shipping containers are scarred. And in the wake of the thunderclap ensues a ringing silence, all taut and electric.

The staff sergeant cries, take cover!

And now the marines take cover. They dig into the sand. They clutch kevlar to their heads. They dive under artillery bunkers and against concrete walls.

Do ten shells pepper the base in cool, indiscriminate fashion? Fifty? A hundred? No one will remember. All they know is that one shell became many, and the shells are impacting everywhere, sending shards of shrapnel ripping through the air. The blasts are deafening. The blast waves are concussive.

Our boy Dimmler crashes out of the shitter. He's got a roll of toilet paper in one hand and his trousers in the other. His rifle slung awkwardly over one shoulder. And the last thing he sees before the next round impacts is the man-child from Tuscaloosa, screaming at him to get down. Get down, you idiot, Weidemer cries. *Get down.*

In a certain kind of war story, Dimmler does not get down. In a certain kind of war story, Dimmler dashes into the open and kneels by the side of a wounded marine. Hang in there, buddy, he says, as he tightens down on a tourniquet and stuffs gauze into a sucking chest wound. And when the shell explodes that carves him into ragged strips of broken flesh, they would call it the ultimate sacrifice, made in service to his brothers. Remember old Dimmler? they'd ask. Rash and reckless, they'd say. Gallant and intrepid. In keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

But this is not that kind of story. And old Dimmler never even had a chance.

The marines hold in place until there are no more shells. The air smells of burned flesh and charred metal. By the time Weidemer pulls Dimmler's head into his lap and cradles him in his hands, Dimmler is already pasty white and choking on blood. But they don't need to speak. Weidemer nods his head and strokes Dimmler's cheek, and Dimmler's pupils swim behind a sea of tears. For as long as it takes, Weidemer does not look away.

The marines pack into the cabin of a C-130. Eyes glazed. Jaws tight. An impregnable silence over the roar of the engines. All the way to Kuwait, an impregnable silence.

The C-130 touches down, the rear hatch groans open, and the marines lumber onto the tarmac under the harsh white lights. They heave their packs and weapons and walk heavily back to their gaping canvas tent. They dump their gear, stow their seabags and main packs, and lay out sleeping bags. And they rest there under the midday sun, the tent like an oven, sweating and indolent.

At midnight, Weidemer, Delgado, and Jones make their way to the chow hall.

Weidemer! A voice calls. Hey, Weidemer!

Joranstad jogs to catch up. His lower lip is packed with chew.

Sorry to hear about Dimmler, he says.

Weidemer nods. Delgado and Jones stand there and stare. Joranstad coughs.

Heard they gave you all combat action ribbons.

None of them speak. They stand there and stare, and finally Joranstad nods. Well, alright then, he says.

The wind whips about them. Sand flies up and around and grits in their lips and down their necks. The moon is a mere sliver. In the distance, the airstrip lights glow white.

I'll catch up with you, Weidemer says. He turns from the others and, with slow, measured steps, walks down toward the Green Beans. And with the wind whipping about, and the sand flying around, it doesn't take long for his footprints to grow indistinct. Doesn't take long for the sand to build up, until all traces of his steps are gone. Within minutes, none of their prints are visible. Within days, it's like they were never even there.