

A VET

"Fight for your country! Defend your freedom! Join up! That's how they get you. That's their pitch man. They appeal to your instinctual desires to fight and defend what's yours," I preach. It's mostly to keep my mind off the sweltering heat and terrible odor. I am not happy.

We are on a routine search mission for a pair of journalists who had not been heard from for over forty-eight hours. Our squad is clearing a house on the outskirts of an Iraqi town. Duncan and I were left outside to cover the backyard, which just so happens to be a massive landfill.

"I don't see how risking all our lives looking for these two writers, in the most dangerous part of the world mind you, has anything to do with my freedom," Corporal Duncan angrily states.

"You mean journalists?" I jokingly query.

"Whatever bro! Not the point." He spits aggressively, probably not for punctuation, but because of the grainy taste in his mouth. Sand gets everywhere out here and there's not much spitting in the desert; waste of water.

"Hands down this is the worst smell I have ever endured."

"Agreed," Duncan seconds, "the absolute worst place to keep watch."

"Why did LT tell us to cover this dump? Not even some doped up jihad radical is going through that to backdoor us."

"You're right man. That should smell bad even for them. Nobody here uses deodorant! A hundred plus degree heat, unbelievable," he remarks. "Hey, you see that? Two o'clock, ten yards deep."

"See what?"

"Is that a goddamn leg?"

"Ah, yeah, that definitely looks like a leg and a foot." I swallow hard in the dry heat. There's never an uneventful day when we go off base.

"I'm going to check it out," he shouts over his shoulder as he wades knee deep into the trash.

"No! Not a good idea bro."

"Just going to get a better look, cover me."

"Dude wait, I'm calling for backup," I warn and connect to the platoon leader.

"Oh man it skinks!" He plugs his nose and swats at flies as he approaches. "Bad news, we have a body." He turns for my reaction.

"Damn, all right, stay where you are. Backup's on the way." I walk to the edge of the dump to get a better angle.

"Been out here all day, maybe two. Scorched by the sun, real bad. Looks like a woman, can't see the face."

"What color hair?" I ask, instantly regretting the question. I shouldn't encourage his investigation.

"Light brown. Her skin is burnt to hell, but looks too light to be Iraqi. She might be American."

"All right well, don't touch her Dunc."

"I'm just going to roll her over so I can see her face," he says mostly to himself, overwhelmed with interest.

"No! Do not touch..."

BOOM! A shock wave knocks me to the ground. There is a deafening ring in my ears and as I grasp for breath an iron-like wet taste fills my mouth. My eyes are plastered open.

"Duncan!" I know I'm shouting, but it sounds like I'm under water. Duncan is gone. Burning trash and ash is falling all

around. The smell of burnt flesh invades my nostrils. I struggle to focus, but finally I look left and right: arm, leg, and a vest covered torso with a faceless head are scattered amongst the trash. I am frozen with fear. My friend's body was split apart by the explosive device boobytrapped under the naked corpse. I'm splattered with blood. I feel him on my face. I taste him.

I hear yelling, but it seems distant. I'm dragged backwards by my armpits. I still haven't blinked. I can feel my body, but it's numb, heavy and noncompliant. An acrid cloud of smoke distorts my vision.

My wife is tapping my shoulder. Her concerned eyes are assessing mine as she slides up close to me.

"Hey. Hey! Are you okay? Babe, look at me," she asks, clearly alarmed.

"Yeah, uh, sorry, I'm fine. Um, I was just thinking about something there for a sec." I stammer through this poor excuse.

I'm not fine. This is a big problem. One second I'm in a desert landfill with my best friend's blood on my face, the next second my wife is squeezing my hand at the dinner table asking if I want more snap peas for the third time. I can't tell if she is more pissed off or worried.

The doctors say this is a symptom of PTSD called a 'flashback'. It's hard to describe what they are like. Have you ever been stuck in a horrific nightmare only to be startled awake in panic? Well, it's similar to that, only it happens to me during the day and without warning. Plus it all actually occurred, a living nightmare of sorts. I can't control it. It scares the people I love. It scares me. I always try to cover it up, which is becoming less successful by the incident.

"How are the pills working?" she asks me. I feel like this is a trap.

"Okay. They seem to be helping at work a little bit." I lie through my teeth. My partner on the force has been concerned about me 'zoning out'.

"Hm, that's not what your partner said."

"What do you mean?"

"He pulled me aside at the BBO last weekend and said he was worried about you," she admits.

"He told you that?" I attempt to sound upset, but I'm not. I'm glad to have a partner who cares.

"Yeah. He told me your episodes have been happening more lately and he doesn't know what to do, it's unsafe. He doesn't want to report you, but he said you need help."

"Dammit! I'm doing everything I can. I'm taking the stupid pills I do the stupid breathing exercises, I go see these different doctors - they're all quacks - who never give me any real help. Please, just give me some time and I'm going to get through this. I swear I will."

I'm not sure if I believe what I just said.

"All right, you're right sweetheart. Whatever you need. I just... I'm worried all the time, I don't know... I want my husband back. I want the real you, the old you back," she pleads to me with tears in her eyes.

I try to console her. She cries in my arms. She sees through my fake smiles and reassurances. Neither of us know if I'll get any

better. She loves me for not wanting her to worry. I love her for playing along. She is the one that deserves a medal for what I've put her through, and an award for best supporting spouse.

I want to live a normal life, free from my haunting past and the darkness that surrounds it. Every day death revisits me in terrifying flashbacks. Like old friends who had a falling out, there is an unspoken sense of familiarity mixed with a painful ancient grudge every time we meet. "Oh, you again! Ahhh! Leave me alone!" my inner voice screams, but only after the damage is done I am absolutely convinced I'm back there every single time. This disrupts every aspect of my life, and has doused my happiness with blood and pain.

I consider the paradox of my own death being the only escape from the constant death that is intertwined in my daily existence. Maybe the world would be better off without me. One less killer, whether ordered to or not. Atleast everyone could stop worrying about me.

I keep my service pistol in the night-stand for easy access. I'm not concerned with intruders. Something must change.