

Christopher Marek

Graceland

The first time I heard “Gumboots” by Paul Simon, Chatter pointed to the boombox bungee-corded to the dash with one hand on the wheel. I smiled across the cab of the truck and said, “This is like my personal message to Kelly Kapowski. Remember her, Brando?” Then—and this is where it gets hazy—suddenly I could no longer see the horizon line ahead of us. I could no longer see the fuzzy heat coming off the road like long-ignited coals, but stared through the windshield at the full sun, a breath-stealing thunderclap erupting beneath us—all of this outside of Fallujah, Iraq.

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“There are people in there—lots of them,” Denise said and pointed from the driver’s seat of our parked car in the driveway to our unlit bungalow, half-masked by the dark winter night. “I just think you should know that.”

I laughed from the passenger seat. “What do you mean—there are people in there?”

“It’s supposed to be a surprise welcome-home party: pick you up from the airport, walk you into the house, everyone jumps out from behind the sofa, runs in from the kitchen, and shouts, ‘Welcome home, Brandon!’ I liked the idea,” she said, and I could sense her sudden pensivity. “I did, but now that we’re here, it scares me. It worries me.” Denise placed her hands back on the steering wheel and squeezed. I watched as her knuckles turned white. “I’m worried it might be too much too soon,” she said in a small voice. “You’ve been through a lot.”

“Denise,” I said. “I’m fine.” The truth is, I didn’t know what to say. The happiness and excitement from the airport and the ride home—elation of just being able to see each other and touch each other and be in the same country as each other after so long apart—seemed to have deflated, and it caught me off guard. Did she really think that, I wondered, that a surprise party might be more than I could handle?

“Brandon,” she said and reached for my hand.

“Yeah?”

“There is a dog in there, too, a German Shepard,” she said.

“A dog? A dog is fine. Who brought a dog?” I asked and hoped she didn’t somehow think I may be afraid of dogs now, too.

“No one brought a dog, Brandon. I adopted one. We’ve always talked about it, and I thought now would be a good time. I read about soldiers who get hurt or have traumatic experiences and how the VA and other groups have been giving them dogs to, you know, cope with what happened. I know you’re not a soldier, but you were over there. And after

what happened, I just thought a dog might help.”

“Denise, I don’t know what you think, but I’m okay, really,” I said and squeezed her hand. I looked through the dark at our house, the house we had shared for close to 10 years, the house I had seen little of in the past two, and suddenly realized that I didn’t want to go in, not because I didn’t want to see the people waiting inside, but because I didn’t want them, my friends and family, to look at me like Denise looked at me now—like I was broken.

“I didn’t name him yet,” Denise said. “Maybe we can pick out a name together.”

“The VA gives service dogs to soldiers with PTSD, and I don’t have PTSD. And you don’t even like dogs. What are you going to do when I go back?”

“What do you mean—go back?” Denise said in disbelief. “Do you really think you’re going back there?”

I could feel my shoulder on the pillar of the car, my thigh pressed against the console, my elbow squeezed against the door panel, and the closing proximity of the headliner. Of course, I’m going back, I thought.

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Grumman-Hobart, the defense-services contractor I worked for, prohibited listening to music on transports. Have to be ready, they said, always aware, and the dashes of the garbage trucks we drove all had black holes filled with loose wires where the factory AM/FMs had been. Every team took radios anyways though. You almost had to just to break up the monotony of 15 or 16 hours of continuous driving, of staring at nothing but the hot sun and the debris that littered the broken roads. Most civilian drivers I knew drove through the half-sand-covered roads blasting Metallica or 10-year-old rap music, boomboxes velcroed to the seatbacks. These were the high-octane, waiting-to-die, Redbull-slamming, hands-clenched-to-the-wheel guys, the guys who thought they were active combatants in a war, not civilian contractors making 40 grand a quarter hauling loads of trash to G-H burn pits to be ignited with jet fuel. These were the kind of guys who, sitting at home with a new suitcase between their legs, pack five bulletproof vests and two pairs of underwear. Chatter and I were not these guys. We weren’t. Chatter, on his fourth re-list, sold his own Grumman-supplied vest on eBay, reported it stolen, got another one from the company, and sold that one, too. My vest sat unpacked in the barracks, five months into a six-month deploy. We didn’t need to slam energy drinks or listen to heavy metal to summon the courage to do our jobs or try to grow mustaches like the Army Delta guys. We knew the deal; as long as we didn’t act like idiots, we were safe. We knew it.

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Denise and I met playing bar-league softball. A 19-year-old nursing student, Denise played second base for her dad's excavation and demolition company and turned a plain softball uniform into a sight of wonderment and awe. I played shortstop for Abbot's Tavern. I was a 21-year-old, almost-burnout who ran the bases with reckless abandon because Jim Abbott's favorite player was Pete Rose, and I hoped—prayed—the extra hustle might equate to more than just the one free pitcher after the game. Denise came to bat in the bottom of the second inning, got in her low-to-the-ground, Rickey Henderson-like stance and hit the first pitch hard on the ground to my left. I quickly sidestepped to get in front of it and watch the ball into my open glove—or at least that was the plan. The ball, coming fast in the warm afternoon sun, nicked a stray infield stone and skipped up high just before reaching my glove.

“Just get up,” is the first thing I thought after Denise's hard-hit ball clomped me on the head. Maybe I could jump up, find the ball, and still make the throw to first.

Maybe I could avoid the embarrassment of being hit by the ball. Maybe nobody even saw what happened, I thought. Maybe I could play it off like it wasn't a big deal. I just had to get up.

So I did. I quickly jumped off the ground, looked for the ball, felt woozy, realized getting up was a mistake, lost my balance, and fell back down again. I stared up at the spinning blue sky above me, my head throbbing with pain, and the first person who appeared above me was Denise, an apparition with her red hair softly blowing in the wind.

“You are so beautiful,” I said to her from my back.

“Brandon Parker,” she said, peering down at me. “I believe you have a concussion.”

Maybe I did, but Denise and I married eight months later. And after 12 years of marriage, the entire time I was in Iraq, when I thought of her, I thought of her standing above me on the field, staring down at me like an angel. It wasn't all perfect—our life together. But some of it was.

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I came across the ad in the newspaper while eating breakfast. “CDL Drivers Needed for Overseas Transport,” it read. “Top-Dollar Paid.” I had long heard that defense contractors paid big money to civilians willing to work in or near war zones—Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan. I had no real desire for a new job; I had worked for Denise's dad since a month after we met. I felt curious, though. How much is “Top Dollar,” I wondered? In between bites of buttered toast and sips of coffee in our half-lit kitchen, Denise still upstairs sleeping, I folded the paper around the ad, creased it, neatly tore it out, and put it in my pocket. Maybe I would call later—just to find out.

But I didn't. I forgot about it, and when I emptied my pockets on the

dresser before jumping in the shower after work, the now wrinkled ad sat in a pile of change.

As I kneaded shampoo into my hair, warm water spilling on my back, I heard the bathroom door open. “Honey, what’s this?” I heard Denise’s voice ask.

“What’s what?” I said as I peeked out of the shower curtain to find Denise sitting on the fuzzy toilet lid in our cramped bathroom with the ad in her hand.

“Are you looking for a new job? Is something wrong at work?”

“That’s for a truck driver, overseas—probably in Iraq or Afghanistan,” I said over the shower water. “Remember, we saw that *Dateline* episode about a diesel mechanic earning, like, 200 grand a year working for a defense contractor? I think that’s the same thing. Things are fine at work. I thought about calling to see what ‘Top Dollar’ really is. I’m just curious. That’s all.”

Her tone changed from one of worry to one of wonder. “I remember that,” she said. “Ha! We should call.”

That’s how I got the job. We called and Grumman-Hobart sent a representative to the house—they insisted on it. But when he came, he asked the questions: What were my qualifications? Did I have a passport? Arrest record? And when it came time for us to ask the questions, the rep couldn’t help us. We would need to sign a privacy agreement, he said, first. Then a physical was scheduled—just to see if I was fit. I didn’t want the job. I didn’t, but this was our adventure, Denise’s and mine, so I went. I could always tell them later that I wasn’t interested—if Grumman-Hobart even offered me a job.

A few weeks later, Denise called me during lunch and told me an envelope had arrived in the mail from Grumman.

“Inside is a plane ticket—a fucking plane ticket, Brandon! Did you take that job without talking to me? Did you?”

“No, I didn’t take the job,” I told her. And I didn’t. I mean, did I? There was no offer, no handshake, no yes.

Two weeks later I left for Iraq. I went because of the confusion, because I felt responsible for it. I went because this absurd hypothetical suddenly seemed logical. I went because of the bonus check that came with the plane ticket.

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After the attack—after the IED—I woke up in a hospital room. My mouth and the entire length of my throat felt like sun-baked dirt. I didn’t care that the fluorescent lights above me were too bright, that tubes and wires seemed to emanate from every part of my body, that the white cinder block walls were hung with signs I couldn’t read, that some skinny kid

with the a too-tight polo shirt paced the waxed red brick floors ahead of me, that I didn't know where I was, that I didn't understand what happened, that I didn't know how I came to be there, that everything seemed viewed as if through some stranger's prescription glasses. I didn't care about any of it. I just wanted water. I needed it.

"Whaaa," I said. "Whaaa." It came out like a guttural grunt.

Polo shirt stopped, pivoted, and focused on me. "Morning, champ," he said. "I knew you'd be fine, even if you had us worried for a moment." I could just make out the Grumman-Hobart badge hanging around his neck. He couldn't have been more than 23.

"Whaaa," I said again, still unable to make the second syllable.

He didn't understand. "What happened?" he asked. "What happened is that you're going to be fine. And what's important, Brandon, is that Grumman-Hobart is going to take care of you—remember that."

"Whaaa," I said. "Whaaa!"

I was in a hospital in Damascus because Chatter and I had been hit by an IED three and a half days ago en-route to the Grumman burn pits. Investigators believed it had been concealed in the road and detonated by an insurgent with a clear view of our approach. An army recon team found us, the truck overturned and me 20 feet away from what remained of the truck and Chatter's remains. His funeral would be held tomorrow, back home in Chesapeake. I sustained a grade-something brain trauma, lacerations to my chest and face from going through the windshield, and burns to my neck and arms—not from the explosion itself but from sun exposure. We weren't found until close to seven hours after the attack. I had been in a medically-induced coma since my arrival here. This is what Polo Shirt stood there and told me, but all I could focus on was my painful, scabbed-over-feeling throat and mouth. And at some point, in between olive-skinned nurses and doctors checking my pulse and blood pressure, shining lights in my eyes, and speaking a language I recognized but didn't understand, Polo Shirt put his too-big cellphone to my ear and told me someone wanted to speak to me.

It was Denise. In between crying and gasping she said, "Are you okay, Brandon? No one will talk to me. I call the hospital, and no one speaks English. I call Grumman, and all they want to talk about is a radio—a radio Brandon."

"Whaaa," I told her. "Whaaa." I didn't care about brain trauma or IEDs or funerals or Damascus or radios. I just wanted water.

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I felt like I was accomplishing something in Iraq, that I wasn't just getting by. I took the job at 31, and up to that point, my life passed by in a flash of sameness. I became aware, in the time I worked there, that if

I hadn't taken the job, my life would still be flashing by. I would still be imprisoned by my daily tasks and thoughts, the minutiae that made up my life. She would never admit it, but Denise liked it, too.

"Where is Brandon?" her friends and coworkers would ask.

"In Iraq," she would say. I was no longer just her husband, I think, her husband that delivered excavation equipment and demolition debris for her dad and always had, this too-familiar husband that didn't quite live up to all of her expectations, that let life get boring, that not only forgot he had dreams, but forgot what a dream was. I was this new and exciting thing: a husband with a dangerous, high-paying job in a foreign country. I had done something different. I broke the mold.

But after the attack, living in the reality of it, I'm not sure if either one of us wanted to continue on the current path or backtrack to the old one.

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I woke to the explosion erupting beneath me, the G-force of it shocking my body taut, to the 12-ton garbage truck spinning upwards away from the earth. I woke to the overwhelming sun replacing the road through the shriek of unbreakable steel bursting apart in the desert heat.

And I woke to my bedroom, to the soft familiarity of my sheets, and the ceiling fan spinning slowly overhead. I woke to my heart thumping frantically against my chest, sweat beading down my face, and to my lungs devoid of air from screaming.

I realized I was still screaming, that I hadn't stopped. I could hear the reverberation of it, the internal echo. I could feel it pouring out of me.

I woke to Denise standing over the bed, her shaking hands held over her mouth in panic and tears streaming down her cheeks. I woke to the dog standing guard next to her, his ears pointed up, and his tail arrow straight.

"I don't... I didn't... Brandon," she stammered. "I didn't know if I should wake you up. I didn't... Brandon, what were you dreaming about?"

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I saw the Iraqi landscape flashing by the passenger seat window. I saw Denise's angelic face peering down at me on that softball field. I saw the ground evaporate beneath the wings of a plane on my first flight over.

"The Bengals," I said. "The Bengals were in the Super Bowl, and the quarterback... I dreamed that Andy Dalton threw interception after interception. I dreamed..."

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For two years, on the first and fifteenth of every month, I could log into my checking account, and by mid-morning EST, I could see the Grumman-Hobart payroll deposit, but leaning against the breakfast bar

at home, three weeks after returning home, I suddenly couldn't. I waited, I read an article about the new school millage, I took the dog out. I put a load of laundry in the wash. I came back, leaned against the breakfast bar again, re-typed the password, and still didn't see the deposit. I poured a glass of orange juice and took small sips. I hit refresh. I still couldn't see it.

I fished the Grumman-Hobart business card out of my wallet, dialed the number, and navigated the automation. I waited on hold. I waited and waited and waited, and then I finally heard a human voice on the other end of the phone. I told them my payroll wasn't deposited.

"Mr. Parker," the voice said. "You aren't eligible for pay while on disciplinary suspension."

It must be a mistake, I thought, an error, something they could be remedied. "I'm not suspended," I said. "There must be some mix-up. I'm on medical leave."

"Mr. Parker, I'm looking at it right here. You are on disciplinary suspension, pending investigation."

Later that day, the mailman delivered an envelope from Grumman, an itemized bill—\$61,000 for emergency flight services, travel expenses, medical expenses, and a whole laundry list of other things, all neatly listed.

Denise immediately called an attorney.

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The Iraqi nationals always offered up their cigarettes if they knew a contractor or soldier smoked. They were brown, acrid tasting things with no filters. "Take one please," they would say and act offended if you didn't. After smoking these things more than I would have preferred, Chatter let me in on the scheme.

"They are asking you to have one of theirs so they can politely ask for one of yours. American cigarettes are like gold here, Brando. They can trade your one cigarette for an entire pack of theirs."

I didn't care. I still smoked with them. I respected their ingenuity.

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Denise insisted we take the dog to our appointment with the attorney. He could wait in the car, she said. It wouldn't take long.

"Is he helping?" She asked while I stood bare-chested, waiting for her to finish ironing my one good shirt.

Helping with what? I wondered. The dog was a big deal to Denise. I understood that. I was damaged from the attack, she thought, and the dog was the cure.

I didn't feel damaged, though. I thought about what happened. I did. I thought about Chatter only being 25, about how he bobbed his head in the cab of the truck, played drums on the dashboard, laughed, and made

days and weeks and months of driving bearable. I thought about how he dominated the barracks ping-pong table, about the one time I tried to play him and how I couldn't even return his serve on account of the ball having so much spin on it. I thought about the girl back home he talked about, how he would clip her picture to the sun visor and look at it for hours as we barreled down the desolate Iraqi roads. I thought about how she had a boyfriend and only considered Chatter a friend. I wondered if she showed up at the funeral, and I thought about whoever planted the IED and what motivated him, if he smiled in glee when he hit the detonation button. It kept me up at night—these thoughts. And I didn't understand how a dog could help any of it.

"It would help if we could potty train him," I said as she handed me the warm shirt. Judging by the look on her face, it was the wrong thing to say.

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"You have been suspended for the duration of a misconduct investigation. Grumman-Hobart believes you violated company rules that resulted in the injuries to yourself and to a Mr. . . ." our attorney said as he leafed through his legal pad on this dark stained desk. ". . . To a Mr. Chatman. They believe you were in dereliction of duty as the result of having a musical device—a radio, in this case—on transport, and they point to this as a contributing factor in the incident."

"Incident?" Denise stammered, sitting in the chair behind me. "My husband didn't have an *incident*. He was the *victim* of an attack." Denise was a thinker, and always calm resolver, and I had rarely seen her truly angry. But she seethed fury in that moment. "And Grumman has the nerve—the nerve—to suspend him? He is on medical leave. He is *supposed* to be on medical leave. He is insured by Grumman. He has been insured by Grumman. And they send us a bill for the injuries he sustained—like it's his fault. How is that possible?" she asked. "How?"

I couldn't process it, what the attorney said. They suspended me because of a radio—because Chatter and I had a radio? They blamed the attack on it?

"This is not a traditional, American-style legal situation, Mrs. Parker," the attorney said. "The disputed incident didn't occur here. It occurred in another country with a different legal system, and Grumman-Hobart isn't an American corporation either. As a result, almost any legal action brought against them wouldn't have jurisdiction in our courts."

"It's a hornet's nest," he said, and I will never forget that. He told us to wait for Grumman's official decision before pressing forward, that he would continue to look into it. Then he asked me if he could ask me a few questions. I fidgeted in my seat.

“Did Grumman-Hobart provide you with a list of rules that may or may not have covered their policy regarding musical devices on transports?”

I gripped the arms of the chair. “Um, they gave us a regulation packet before deploying, but I’ve never really read it. I don’t think anybody does. It’s, um, probably close to 40 pages long.”

“Okay,” the attorney said. “At the time of the incident—at the time of the attack—did you have a radio present in the vehicle, brought by either you or Mr. Chatman?”

Chatter always brought the radio. I mean, if he didn’t, I would have. Everyone took a radio. It had nothing to do with the attack—nothing. It didn’t cause it, and not having one wouldn’t have prevented it. And... “

“No,” I said. “We didn’t have a radio.”

“Grumman-Hobart has reported that the remnants of a radio were found in the truck, Mr. Parker. That’s why I’m asking.”

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I knew she would ask, and she did. She spoke it softly from the passenger seat.

“Did you have a radio, Brandon?”

The still unnamed dog lay across the backseat with his head down, and a steady midwinter drizzle turned the dirty snow along the highway into a cold slush as we made our way back from the attorney’s office.

I said nothing because I hoped that would be enough, because I hoped the question would go away, be forgotten. I didn’t want to talk about a radio, about if we had one, about if it killed Chatter. I wanted to forget, to push it from my mind, to make it home, to find the bed, to block out the cruel dream with sleep.

“Did you? Did you have a radio?” Denise asked again.

I didn’t answer. I focused on the road ahead, on the trees lining it, on the cars in the opposite lane speeding past us, on the people in these cars. Were any of their lives being torn down around them for something simple, for something they could have never guessed mattered? I wondered about this.

“I’m asking you—did you have a radio? Answer me!” She demanded. She screamed, and I could hear the break in her voice. “Answer me, or pull this car over right now!”

I did. I checked the rearview mirror and calmly hit the turn signal. I pulled onto the shoulder, and I sat there and told her. I told her that trash trucks don’t get blown up, that insurgents target troop convoys, supply runs, and armament transfers, that the path to Allah is not paved by splattering 40 yards of ketchup smeared paper plates and week-old feces across the Iraqi desert, that this was a known fact. I told her that we

had a radio. I admitted it. I told her that it didn't matter, that everyone had a radio, that it had no right to matter, that I was being blamed for a technicality that no one acknowledged until this very moment—this exact moment—in time. I told her that it wasn't my fault, that listening to a radio, a second-hand Sony CD player, did not increase an insurgent's willingness to engage in jihad, that Chatter and I were safe, that we had discovered this, that trash trucks don't get blown up.

"They don't," I said. I felt the tears coming down my cheeks, and I watched as Denise unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the passenger door to the cold outside.

"But you did get blown up. You did," she said as she lifted herself off the seat and out the door. "I'm walking, Brandon. Don't come after me."

I didn't. I turned to look at the dog in the backseat and then at Denise, walking away in the rain. I closed my eyes and thought of Chatter, of this smiling face. I felt my heart beating through my shirt. I struggled to breathe and to push that thought, any thought, away. I turned on the radio.

"You don't think you can love me, but I feel you can," Paul Simon sang from the speakers.

I jumped out of the car. "Denise!" I screamed as cars flew past me. "Denise, who is Kelly Kapowski? Denise!"

All I could see were her soft footprints in the slush. She was gone. I got back in the car, closed the door, turned to the backseat, and asked the dog why did everything have to be so hard.