

Cope

A Memoir

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A Research Project

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by

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## Preface

Upon entering into Mount Saint Mary's MFA program I had a small inkling of what I wanted to complete as my thesis. I knew I wanted to relay my experiences in the military and reveal my stance as a woman veteran in the modern age. I knew I wanted to do all of this, but how I wanted to do it was still unclear.

I wanted to relay the military culture, my experience and the trauma I experienced in a way that anyone could understand. Non-fiction had already been a staple in my life before I entered into the MFA program and found solace in the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa, a Vietnam war veteran poet, who has inspired my writing and created a place for poetics in my war experiences. Specifically, his poem, *Facing It*, inspired me to write creatively about trauma and identity in the midst of war. An example that sparked such feelings:

“My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.  
I said I wouldn't  
dammit: No tears.  
I'm stone. I'm flesh.  
My clouded reflection eyes me  
like a bird of prey, the profile of night  
slanted against morning. I turn  
this way—the stone lets me go.  
I turn that way—I'm inside  
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” (Komunyakka).

There was instant connection I had with this poem. Although Komunyakka isn't a woman, and his service was in the Vietnam War, not really that much in common, but veterans share the same type of pain. There was something inside of me that was made whole after reading this poem for the first time. That feeling was belonging. Even though this bridge of belonging was connected by pain, and ultimately just touched the tip of the iceberg

During the first semester of this program, I found myself struggling, not with the material or workshops, but with writing down all of my experiences. I found some solace in a fiction course, where I was able to let go of my fear and mold myself into a character and reveal things I had never even told my family before. A short story I wrote called, *Shit Birds*, is a story that I wrote that fictionalized an officer that I served with while deployed. I was able to give life to his POV through fictionalizing parts of the story, while also fictionalizing myself, in a way, by developing a character within the story that interacted and possessed all of my traits and experiences. Later, during the revision process I changed the POV and took out the fictionalized parts of the story, but found that it didn't work with the overarching theme of self-identity.

I began to take hold of an idea, a genre that I had not even considered as something that was possible for me to be a part of because I felt too young. Memoir, to me, was reserved for those that had lived past thirty years and had traveled the world. My attitude towards the genre changed during an Auto Fiction class I took during my first semester, in which, we read authors such as Karl Knausgaard. Knausgaard's book, *My Struggle*, although it was extremely long, detailed, and sometimes excruciatingly pulled apart, it provided me a window into what I could potentially write about my experiences. I had something to say and I felt that memoir would be the best way to say it.

Even though, at this time, I'm twenty-eight years old, I feel twice that age because of the life I've lived thus far. I made the decision to do a memoir because I realized that it doesn't matter how old I am because I have an important story to tell. Not unlike, Knausgaard, I have laid out almost every part of myself in this memoir. I've talked about personal memories that I had a struggle putting on the page. "Desert Queen" was the hardest for me to write because it left me literally and figuratively naked on the page. But, that's what it's all about isn't it? If these pages were filled with just hopeful incantations and reflections on the good times in my life, I doubt that it would be relatable.

My voice was something that I had to ease into during the process of writing some of these memories. At times, I felt the tone was too robotic, harsh, and uncaring, but I learned that that was all part of finding what worked for me. It was more about getting all of what was in my head out onto the page and the tone and voice was built up later. Stream of consciousness is present in some pieces of this memoir, for example, "The Art of Drinking". I used clipped descriptions in this chapter to show a window into the relationship I had with alcohol after being in the military and deploying. I must admit, that this part of the memoir is still not where I want it to be, but maybe it's because it's not time to write that part just yet.

Circling back to the Auto-Fiction course I had in the program, I realized that there's many POV's that I could use to tell my story. As you may notice in this memoir, I used the first person past, but would switch between first person present when reflecting on the moment in a chapter. An example of this is "Pin-Ups For Vets 2016" and "Pin-Ups For Vets 2019". In 2016, the beginning, I use first person past tense. The goal of that was to try and bring the reader into the world of myself in a more present time. I chose this scene because it offered a dynamic look at my current identity and what I've become as a result of my military experiences. On the other

hand, in the 2019, the end, I used first person present tense because I wanted to wrap up with where I currently stand in my journey to purpose and self identity.

Touching on the identity aspect of my memoir, during one of my last edits, my thesis advisor suggested creating a logline and beat-sheet in order to organize my thoughts and memories. Before the beat sheet I had vague instances that weren't connected clearly by a thread. Using the beat sheet allowed me to flush out the journey to identity and see that this memoir can also be considered a hero's journey. I never thought of my own story being a hero's journey, but it hit all the marks when I plugged each chapter into the beat sheet. For example, the B story, the love story, is Francisco. Not only did the beat sheet help in the organization of the memoir in the final steps of the process, but as I rewrote and added, I found that dialogue suited me more, at times. The last chapter in this memoir has a lot of dialogue and it's mainly because I felt that telling what went on in that memory wasn't doing the job. Dialogue gives little inferences about what's really going on. I tried to make this dialogue reveal important subtext.

I also realized that this is something that I frequently do throughout the memoir, and may have not done it as clearly as I did in the last chapter. For example, in *Wooden Spoon Ritual*, I explain a conversation that I had with a friend in middle school concerning my race and the food that I would bring to school for lunch. There's subtext in the dialogue, but I felt that it needed to be explained more than the dialogue in the last chapter, "Pin-Ups For Vets 2019", because the reader wasn't set up with a lot of information at that point. So, there's a mix of techniques and parts of genres that I used at certain times throughout the memoir. Not unlike life, writing about yourself is never the same voice or tone twice.

There were days that all I had to give was a stream of consciousness on the page. Or there were times where there would be five half memories that didn't make sense in sequence with

each other, but I knew they were important somehow. Even the stories that I didn't include in this memoir served a purpose. When reflecting deeply on this process, I wrote over two hundred pages the first go around, but have ended up with roughly 150. During editing I wanted to keep them all because I felt I was cheating myself and my reader if I didn't include every single detail of myself. I didn't want to be one of those writers that don't tell the whole truth about a situation. That was my worst fear throughout this whole process. But, I learned, not only in workshop, but from my thesis advisor, that not everything is important in telling a story. I changed my mindset at that point, sat down for my first edit, and cut out some well-written memories. I cut out a memory about getting my first period, for example. You might think I cut it out because I was embarrassed, but on the contrary, I loved my prose and the story. It just didn't fall in line with the purpose of my memoir. There was no pivotal point in that memory that connected me to finding my identity or purpose. Yes, I was a young woman experiencing something all women go through, but it wasn't as strong as "Desert Queen", which challenges more than being a woman, but being a woman who doesn't really know herself in the military.

However, as I stated earlier, the period chapter had to be written to get to the realization and strength and weakness that "Desert Queen" portrays. I let go of a lot of stories in the first edit which changed the sequence of events on the page. I had trouble piecing them together in a coherent way because everything in my mind was still incoherent. To be honest, writing some of these stories, especially about deployment, were re-traumatizing and healing. There were days that I didn't want to write because I didn't want to face myself on the page. There were days that the process felt like I was pulling my own nails off with pliers. I wasn't ready for a lot of this to come out, but I forced it to.

So, the memoir might still have a tone of robotic uncaring in some chapters because writing a memoir is re-opening a wound and sticking salt there. The only way I knew how to keep going, to cope with it, was to desensitize sometimes and live on the outside of experiences. You might find this type of voice in “Bagram AFB Afghaistan”, “120 Degrees”, and “For Military and Prisoners”. I hope that this voice comes across as desensitized because that is a part of trauma and PTSD. I wanted it to be subliminal and underneath it all, but I also mention desensitization in one or two of the chapters. I did that as a way for anyone to pickup the book and have key references to what I was going through.

A challenge that I had while writing this was making sure I explained all of the military jargon and terms. Knowing my reader, or thinking of who would pick this up and read it was constantly on my mind. There is another language that the military speaks and it’s so easy for me to ramble on about things without thinking that civilians wouldn’t get anything of what I’m saying. I don’t know if I should be fully responsible for this and explaining terms in my memoir, but I did try to plant some references to help. Every chapter begins with a definition of some sorts to prepare the reader, or implant an idea before they jump into the scene. Some of the terms are slang military terms such as, Fubar, which translates into: Fucked up beyond all recognition. Other’s are straight from the dictionary to purposely inspire a feeling or thought in the reader. They’re meant to be markers, or places that the reader can digest what’s going to happen next, while thinking about what they just read.

I focused on the form in this memoir as if it were a long poem. During a class on long form poetry, I was inspired by Tyehimba Jess’s *Olio*, in which he gathered stories of slaves from the south and turned them into poems. Although my memoir is not poetry, I tried to succinctly separate events during the first draft of the memoir. I wanted to include poetry that I had written

in this class between specific scenes, but the voices clashed with each other. The theme was the same, but there was a stark difference in my poetic voice vs. my non-fiction voice.

I decided to keep the idea of separate memories and instances and hoped that they could stand alone and together, by the end of the process. I feel that goal was partially accomplished because some chapters don't need reference to the last in order to make sense to the reader. For example, "Tension Envelope", could stand on its own, along with "Ceremony" and "Wooden Spoon Ritual". All of those surround family dynamics, touch on race and identity, while providing enough insight into myself as narrator. My goal, with another edit, or two could be to meet this goal for every chapter. I felt that each memory within this memoir has the potential to break out on its own.

One of most inspiring books I read in the midst of trying to write out my trauma creatively was Sherman Alexie's memoir, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. His memoir, centered around his tumultuous relationship with his Mother, is filled with traumatic experiences of his youth, his struggles and successes, all written in language that's not only filled with imagery but humor, and poetry. He might have also been a muse during my long poem class. He set up his non-fiction in between poems that would reflect on what had just been revealed and end with a intro into the next chapter of non-fiction. His voice is also very conversational in nature, meaning he writes as if he's sitting down having coffee with you while you listen to him tell his stories. Alexie writes, "Grief is a scary and beautiful thing, too, I thought. I wondered if you can look at smoke clouds and see objects and animals like you can do with regular clouds floating in the sky. I wondered, if I had been standing beside my sister, if I would have seen our late mother's face in the smoke"(Alexie 241).



I believe his conversational tone and voice had a big impact on my own tone and voice in this memoir. As I take a look at it now I feel that there's a lot of times my writing is similar. I can pluck an example from "Titus:"

"I wondered about the black Labrador I had seen strapped down to a litter/gurney, his hind legs casted, Iv's running from his body for hydration and probably pumping some type of morphine to calm his pain. I looked at the fluffy puppies and imagined tiny flack vests on them, their puppy bodies lined up in formation, ready for the charge in battle. I didn't want to think about them being blown apart, but I did."

I think what drew me to Alexie's work was the shared sense of trauma and need to make connections to the present and the past in order to look forward to a future. I could say that Alexie has helped form my writing style and non-fiction voice.

I chose the name of the memoir before I even found out what my voice was. I was sitting in a bar (big surprise, or spoiler for later), and I thought about how I missed being called by my last name. There was that moment, that I'm sure happens to all of us, alcohol or not, that connected everything together into one word. Cope, that was it. The title of my book is a representation of struggle and overcoming and holding on until the end. The symbolism and dichotomy of my name had struck me in the midst of a whiskey and coke and that's where I started to construct what I wanted my story to tell.

My story is not only about finding identity but a coming of age story that details my life from childhood to adulthood. I use internal monologue to reflect mostly on instances and action that happens within chapters and scenes. My voice is present throughout, but as I touched on earlier, I'm mostly reflecting on the past. My intention, at first wasn't about making this a coming of age story, but it turned into one once I laid it out on the page. It's definitely not the

usual coming of age story because it's non-fiction. The change of the character is paramount in coming of age stories and there's a dynamic change in my character throughout my life, but some readers might not be satisfied with the ending.

The ending of the memoir was the most challenging part of this project. Since I'm still living with PTSD, it was to give this story any type of happy ending. I knew that there needed to be hope. I have hope, but it comes at me in odd ways, and not normally all at once. Examining the last scene in "Pin-Ups For Vets 2019," there's a Beatles song that was playing lightly in the background when I was visiting with veterans at the community home. I heard when interacting with a veteran and it gave me hope. It washed away, for an instant, all of the doubts I had about not knowing who I was, or what was my purpose. I wanted to leave the reader with an ambiguous ending because I feel that's how life is and should be written.

Lastly, I wanted to point out that I wish I could have added more to this thesis, not the stories that I cut out, but more detail regarding my mental state past and present. I tried my best to convey myself in the most honest and true manner possible, but wounds, especially invisible ones are so hard to heal. Sometimes saying less is better for the mind in these situations until it's time to reveal everything that's going on. I've also considered turning myself into a character as Geoff Dyer did in his book, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, in which he writes himself as Jeff. Looking back, this might have been a better option for me, at least to start off with, in order to ease myself back into the trauma of experiences. I did this with "Desert Queen" during a short story class and it was the most successful out of all the chapters you will read within this memoir. Fictionalizing yourself as a character has many advantages in non-fiction and auto fiction, but I felt like I needed to speak through first person POV in order for it to be more powerful and relatable to the reader.

I welcome you into my mind, although the pages here might not all be pretty, they are intentional and full of thought. They're full of trauma, fear, shame, pride and, a little bit of hope. There are times in this memoir I have created moments where I want you to put it down, be disgusted, but keep reading. I want to have these conversations with my readers and I want you to ask the hard questions when you read "Desert Queen" and "Bagram AFB Afghanistan." I want you to question me and the government, the military, family, and life itself. My truth is not pretty, but I'm sharing it because my story is not the only one. There are worse stories, women veteran's stories that have yet to be told, but hopefully, you and they will be inspired by this memoir. It's not perfect, but it's mine.

Cope<sup>1</sup>

/kōp/

*verb*

**Cope**; 3rd person present: **copest**; past tense: **coped**; past participle: **coped**; gerund or present participle: **coping**(of a person) dealing effectively with something difficult. Manage, survive, subsist, look after oneself, fend for oneself, shift for oneself, stand on one's own two feet, carry on, get through, get on, get along, get by, muddle through, muddle along, scrape by, bear up, make the grade, come through, hold one's own, keep one's end up, keep one's head above water, keep the wolf from the door, weather the storm.

A woman veteran's memoir of a journey to purpose, dismemberment, and reconstruction of identity.

## Pin-Ups For Vets- 2016

## Pin-up

noun

pin-, əp

1. A model whose mass-produced pictures see wide appeal as pop culture. Pin-ups are intended for informal display. Pin-up girls are often glamour models, fashion models, and actresses.

There in the mirror, a woman with victory rolls, cat eyeliner, and a 1940's pink polka dot rayon dress looked back at me. She placed a Gardenia above her right ear and lined her lips with terracotta red. Her nails, filed into an oval shape rested on her hips as she glanced nervously at herself, pulling up back seamed stockings over her knees and up her thighs. She was unrecognizable. She was me.

It was a far cry from combat boots and slicked back buns; ribbon racks and green tiger striped camo utility uniforms; shapeless sand colored T-shirts that muted out any olive tone in my skin and pinkness in my cheeks; nails that were always trimmed, never too long, or lacquered in loud colors; earrings no larger than 2CM in diameter.

I didn't know how much I missed letting my hair down, applying hair product, and styling it differently, in curls, straightened, chignon buns, and waves. The polka dot dress clung to my waist and made me self-conscious for a moment because I felt I was being too much, not hiding enough skin, or fearing that I could somehow be out of regulation in my civilian life. I mean what would people say about me when I told them I dressed up as a 1940's pin-up and delivered calendars to veterans? I knew what they would say. Some would say that it's demeaning to women and treats women as objects. Some would say why, why do you have to go and dress up like that to make a difference in a veteran's world?

As much as I had heard these preconceived opinions out loud from other people and within myself, I still felt powerful, in control, and able to express my femininity in a way that I had never been able to do before.

I was getting ready for my first hospital visit. The first time I had been around a group of veterans since I decided to leave the military. I was unsure of how I would be received. I gave my reflection one last passover, turning to the side and the back, making sure the seams of the stockings were well placed. Something was missing and the shoes needed to go. I slipped on my patent white peep toe sling-back kitten pumps and grabbed another gardenia hair flower from my collection.

The petals molded into my hair, almost as if they belonged there all along. Keeping with my military ways of being on time, I left my apartment an hour before I was told to meet everyone at the West Los Angeles VA Hospital. I called a Lyft to pick me up. A gray Honda rolled to the curb, and I got into it hurriedly as if I was going to be late.

“So West LA VA?” the driver asked.

“Yes.”

“Why you going out there for?”

“Oh, I’m part of a non-profit organization called Pin-Ups For Vets. We gift 1940’s style pinup calendars to veterans and raise money for better VA medical equipment.”

“That’s nice of you. The veterans probably smile when they see you, that’s for sure.”

“Well, yeah they do. They smile even more when I tell them I’m a veteran.”

He looked in his rearview twice, clearly surprised.

“Wow, you? I would have never guessed. I don’t mean that in a bad way, of course.”

“It’s okay. I get it all the time.”

“So what did you do while you were in?”

“I was attached to an aeromedical evacuation squadron, where I coordinated missions that took our wounded from Afghanistan back home to the states.”

“Oh wow, then you probably saw some shit.”

“Well, yeah,” I say and look out the car window.

“So how long did you stay, and why do you think you got out?”

“I was in for eight years. As far as why I got out, well, I wanted to be more than what I had become.”

“What do you mean? What you had become?”

“There’s this hierarchy in the military, you know the rank system, and you can’t question someone who’s above you without getting your ass reamed. I got tired of being taken advantage of and always being thrown under the bus when something went wrong. I was the best at my job, and the officers and my supervisors knew it, so they would give me all the work to do. I got tired of being used when I gave my 110 percent for them,” I answered, trying to keep my stare out the window and on the sea of cars on the 5N freeway, and away from his eyes in the rearview mirror. In a way the city, although busy, overcrowded, and at times triggering for my PTSD, gave some eerie solace and distraction from emotions that I tried, and still try to hide.

“Oh, so you just didn’t like taking orders?”

“No, that’s not it at all. I can take orders, but I don’t want to be treated like I don’t know anything about a job I’ve been doing and doing well for the past eight years of my life. I’m worth more than that; everyone is worth more than that.”

“Don’t you get retirement after 20 years? Why wouldn’t you have stuck it out until then?”

“First of all, I was a reservist, and reservists are different from active duty because when we retire, we don’t collect our retirement until the age of 60. I was okay with leaving that behind to keep my sanity.”

“Sanity?”

“Yeah, I felt like I was, losing myself, whoever that was. I deployed to Afghanistan in 2012.”

“Oh shit, really?”

He looked in the rearview again, eyes bulging.

“Yeah. I deployed and saw a lot of stuff, like you said. I saw guys my age, at the time, 18,19, 20, 21, some of them with only one limb left on their body. One of them we just sent back to Germany on a respirator so his family could say goodbye to him there. There was so much sacrifice going on around me, in front of me. I started to think about what I hadn’t done in my life and if I died there would I be happy. The answer was no. I wanted more.”

I swallowed hard and pinched the sides of my thighs to distract me from messing up my nearly perfect winged eyeliner.

“Well, I just wanted to say thank you for your service, truly, thank you. My brother is in the Army, and when he came back from his deployment he just wasn’t the same and talking to you, I think I kind of know why. He doesn’t talk to me at all.”

“I think a lot of veterans don’t talk because they feel like no one, is listening when they tell their story.”

“Oh no, I listen, I try to understand because there’s so much that you guys do for our country.”

“That’s good. I wish more people were like you, you’re easy to talk to.”



“Thank you; I try to be. Comes with the job, you know? People don’t want to be driven around by someone who isn’t at least listening to what they have to say.”

“Very true.”

We pulled up the lobby of the VA hospital, old veterans with walkers scooting along to enter the double doors for their appointments.

“Alright, young lady, we’re here. Thank you again for your service.”

I stepped out of the car peeking my head in one last time. “Thank you for listening to me.”

He smiled, and I headed inside the lobby.

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The chairs were filled with veterans. Veterans of different races, ages, and genders. A gentleman around 40, sat pulling at the shoes laces of his New Balance sneakers, while a woman pushed purple dyed pieces of hair behind her ears, dark circles shadowing under her eyes. Another man walked from down the hall, wobbling along with his walker and saying hello to everyone seated, as if they were his family. Veterans cannot be pinpointed out of a crowd, they blend in, as we were trained to do, and most of the time, remain silent about our service.

I watched them shift in their chairs towards the man with the walker and wondered what their stories were, what branch they served in, and if they felt as lonely in the civilian world as I did since leaving. I smoothed out a wrinkle from the hem of my dress, awkwardly trying to hide the fact that I had been staring at them.

A group of women had gathered near the front desk, dressed in bright blues purples, and pinks. Vintage style dresses, like mine that hugged the figures of the women in them. They were

all stunning, and I, myself, was surprised that all of them were veterans. The stereotyping had sunk into my brain too, force-fed slowly, bite-by-bite.

You see we were either considered a Butch, Bitch, or whore. Our femininity, our gender, our sex, marked us as the lesser in society and within the military. If we weren't labeled as a butch lesbian because of what we looked like, we were labeled a bitch if we took our work too seriously, and branded a whore if we slept with anyone on base, or were free with our sexuality.

Gina Elise was standing in the middle of the group, the woman behind the mission, the CEO of Pin-Ups For Vets. Her contagious smile greeted me as soon as she saw me approaching.

“Jackie! Over here, we're still waiting for the other girls to arrive.”

Although she wasn't a veteran herself, she genuinely cared for veterans and our quality of life. Her long brown curls bounced as she talked, a rose pinned in her hair, complementing her fire red lipstick. Her cat-eye prescription glasses were neatly arranged on the bridge of her nose. Her skin, a milky white, almost alabaster, reminded me of the burlesque dancer Dita Von Tease.

There are some people who radiate kindness, not that cheap kindness that people fake, but true, down to the heart kindness. They're rare, and damn hard to find, but Gina Elise was one of them.

She handed out each girl a grip of calendars from a rolling suitcase that sat in front of her.

“So ladies, when everyone gets here we'll head up to the rooms and visit with the inpatients.”

It had occurred to me then while looking at the other women listen to Gina talk, that I had not introduced myself at all. I turned to my right and stuck out my hand awkwardly to the woman next to me.

“Hi, I don’t think we’ve met before. I’m Jackie. I was in the Air Force, what branch did you serve in?”

She reached for my hand and shook it.

“I’m Fernanda nice to meet you. I was in the Army.”

The anxiety that was almost exploding out of my ears and seemed to vaporize slowly, the warmth of her response assuring me that I wasn’t as awkward as I thought I was. Or maybe she was just nice. Either way, we hit it off, along with all the other women, when I eventually introduced myself to them. There was one who served in the Navy, one in the Army, a couple of Marines, and another Air Force veteran. I felt like I belonged again.

When all the ladies arrived, we headed up to the inpatient rooms, crowding into an elevator that took us up to the second floor.

“Okay ladies, so we’re all going to go in together. There might be a couple to a room, so make sure we visit with everyone,” Gina announced.

We entered the first room, and the smell of bleach and plastic stung my nose, a man, gray hair and beard, smiled a toothy grin.

“Hello! What’s your name?” Gina asked.

“Don,” his smile wide across his face.”

“We’re here to visit you and give you a calendar that we made. Most of these ladies are also veterans themselves and featured in the calendar.”

She opened one of them up and presented it to him.

“Well, this is a nice surprise. All of you are beautiful. And you were in the service too?”

“Oh yes, we have Jenn from the Navy, Jackie from the Air Force, Fernanda from the Army, and Tess from the Marine Corps. What branch did you serve in?”

“Navy, fighter pilot, Vietnam.”

“Well, thank you for your service,” Gina said.

I didn’t expect Don’s reaction when he bowed his head and tried not to fall apart.

“You have no idea how much it means that you all visited me and that someone appreciates me. It’s hard sometimes being here. I’ve been moved around a lot.”

I looked around and saw the women around me looking at him and wanting to hug him, but their military bearing kept them in check and calmed Don down by suggesting they sign his calendar.

I couldn’t take Don’s emotion. I kept thinking about the people I helped lift on planes and whether they had to sit lonely in a hospital like Don. I started to feel ashamed that I didn’t stick it out as my Lyft driver suggested. Being able-bodied, and semi-sane, at least enough to get the job done, I couldn’t help feeling I let someone down.

I noticed the walls by his bedside were bare, not a single card, or even a picture of his family were present for display. As this man trembled in his sheets, trying to hold back his own tears, I couldn’t help but feel my own vulnerabilities creeping into my tear ducts.

I stepped out of the room before I was able to talk to Don because I couldn’t hold it in any longer. There was a window at the end of the hall that I looked out of, back facing the room, just in case one of the other girls came out. I didn’t want them to see me. I mean tears were always a weakness, especially in the military. Plus, again, what did I have to cry over? I still had every physical piece of me attached. I wasn’t a fighter pilot in Vietnam like Don, who most likely, killed people, and experienced more trauma than I ever did.

I turned back to the doorway of the room when I had more control over everything. I reminded myself that I had a job to do, a mission to complete, calendars to give out, and that the

day was not about my happiness, but about other's. I checked my eyeliner in my compact to make sure everything was perfectly in place, no smudges.

We moved through every room, greeting and talking to all the veterans, listening to their stories, personally signing calendars, some girls leaving lipstick kisses on pages. I would have felt alone if it weren't for the ladies I had just met: they made me hopeful--women, no matter the circumstance, will always play a part in the military and find ways to connect with each other. But they also made me afraid. One day I might end up alone, a woman veteran, someone that no one wants to listen to, and no one can really relate to, not really that different from my present situation. I pictured myself in one of those beds; aged skin purpled with bruises, hair wispy and thinning, and how it would feel to see a group of women veterans dressed up just to visit me and listen to my story.

We gave out calendars for hours. I kept peeking my head into every room, hoping that I would see a female veteran in a bed that I could talk to, but there was none, at least not on that hospital visit.

Namesake-1990

nām, sāk

noun: **namesake**; plural noun: **namesakes**

1. A person or thing that has the same name as another.

My last name isn't extraordinary. It's the whisper and the smoke after the gun goes off, not the gun itself, a remnant of the past, not present. I've looked on genealogy websites and followed my ancestry to Ireland and England. The literal meaning reads: "English (common in the Midlands): from Middle English cope 'cloak', 'cape' (from Old English cap reinforced by the Old Norse cognate kápa), hence a metonymic occupational name for someone who made cloaks or capes, or a nickname for someone who wore a distinctive one."

Thinking of my ancestors as cape makers gives me the image of people who turned others into superheroes (or we can be boring and just say they kept people warm). Either way, they weren't anything special themselves, at least not anything interesting to talk about over drinks at a party or restaurant.

I was branded with the last name Cope on September 17th, 1990, two days before my Father's 26th birthday. Cope was the name I carried into the military, a fitting verb that almost foreshadowed the types of hardships I would encounter in the future. It was a brand that was preparing me to live with what got thrown at me. It is the name that I became more familiar with than my first name; it became my identity.

It's also a name so white that I, and everyone else, forgot my Mother was brown, for the majority of most of my childhood. The terracotta tiles of our patio in my childhood home would soak up the moisture after new rain, keeping it inside their porous clay, darkening them red-brown: that is the color of my Mother. Her maiden name was Garcia. Gar-see-a, Garcia, Garcia,

Garcia, Garcia. No matter how many times that name rolls out of my mouth, and in my mind like a rock tumbler, it never convinces me that it used to be part of her.

She left her Father's name for my Father's name, and was reborn, or wanted to be. Poor, all of her life, she was raised by my grandmother, Modesta De-Luna Garcia. Five kids shoved into a house in Montebello, CA. Government cheese, tortillas, and beans kind of life. Sleeping with four sisters to a room kind of life. She wanted more, and who wouldn't?

Garcia is a typical name, but it has more flavor than Cope. And, as much as the definition of Cope is appealing, there's always been nothing about it that I wanted to accept. I didn't want to accept that I would always be the brunt of jokes and puns. I didn't want to accept the identity prescribed to me. I wanted so badly to be a Garcia.

When I hear Garcia, I think of my Grandma Modesta's wrinkled hands, patting tortillas between them, the same tortillas my Mother told me she used to watch her make, every night at dinner. I think of the butter that ran down my Mother's chin as she enjoyed them, swallowing mouthfuls of salt and fat, and how warm they must have been on her tongue. I wish I could change my name to Garcia sometimes because I don't want her to be forgotten.

A professor at my community college, a mythology professor, asked me how I pronounced my last name in class.

"Is it Co-pay like the French say or Cope?"

His questioning surprised me, but even more surprised by how delicious my name sounded, as he mentioned, in French.

"It's Cope, like can you cope with it? But I don't mind, either way, is fine."

"No! It isn't fine!"

He yelled at me from across the room, I was seated in back, as per usual. I immediately shrank in my seat, feeling everyone else's eyes linger on my embarrassment.

“Never say it's just fine. Names, they have power, and your name deserves to be said the right way.”

“Okay, uh, yeah. It's Cope, not Co-pay.”

“Names have power, Miss Cope. They can be used to control, love, and release.”

It had never occurred to me until that particular moment that names hover above everything like invisible signs. I guess, what's a carrot if it's not called a carrot? Or how do you get a misbehaving child's attention? Call their name, and they are controlled by it. Say goodbye to a loved one, and they are released.

Names have power. Cope isn't the name I chose nor the identity that I wanted, but I endured to endure and made it my own power.



Scar-1993

Running my fingers over the scar on my forehead, I only remember certain images in my mind about what caused the fissure of flesh. Sinews tearing, splitting open like cherry skin, I can still feel the throbbing and pulsing.

Sometimes, I wonder if it impaired my intelligence level. If a child experiences sheer terror from pain when they are young does that affect them later in their lives? Does everyone have an incident where they run into a wall and split their head open? Are we all doomed to experience this type of pain at least once in our lives?

My Father jokes that I had horns removed, since I have not one, but two scars, the other from running into the corner of the wall at the age of eight. I hated it. I still hate it. The scar has no significance to me so it makes it silly to even speak of. I wish I had been injured in a different fashion, maybe when I was older in a roller-blading fall, maybe the scar would be more significant to me.

Someone told me once that scars tell stories. I agree, but I find myself grasping for more. I try to re-open the scar, trying to reveal the layers underneath. I can't remember what it's like to feel that helpless. To feel pure pain, pure terror, but not fear death. Death and fear are partners, but when did I realize they were?

I am getting older and I know it will get deeper. When it does, I don't want to be ashamed of it and I don't want to run away from telling the story merely because I don't remember the details. I get reminded of the fragility of translucent skin when I open a doorknob, twisting its mechanical parts to the right, or to the left. The sound sends me into my three-year-old mind.

I was wearing a blue and green jumpsuit that had ties and I kept trying to tie them but couldn't. Aja, my sister threw an orange ball at my face. The same ball I was gifted for my birthday and kept rubbing my nose up and down the plastic to savor the artificial scratch and sniff scent.

She ran away and I ran after her, trying to hurl the ball at her head too. I was too young to understand that running in the house wasn't the best idea. The patio door had shown a glimmer of light through the frosted glass.

My sister ran to the door, slamming it behind her to stop me from following her outside.

That's when it happened.

A globe of silver sparkled as it moved swiftly into my face. The knob swung into my apple-soft forehead and I felt the cool metal of the knob puncture my skin. Pain didn't set in until the shock of the bloody, sticky mess ran down my face. Terror. Pure terror of not knowing exactly what was happening to me.

I wailed a wail that only a Mother could hear from across the house. She appeared, screaming, panicking, and I went to her, blood running into my left eye. She pointed at my sister and everyone blamed her for "doing it on purpose". I faded in and out of consciousness. Half of my vision covered by a cotton cloth, I could barely see any faces. I hadn't really known what my blood was. Hadn't really seen it but once, until this incident.

It was in the bath tub. A pink razor was left in the corner. I had seen my mother run it smoothly over her legs, but didn't know why. My small fingers grasped the plastic handle and I ran a thumb over the top of the blades. As with some razor cuts, I didn't know that I had cut myself. I felt no pain...until. Until the blood appeared in symmetrical horizontal lines and I screamed.

This time, there was much more blood. Blood that made everyone around me wide eyed and panicked. My mother heaved her words, words, that I didn't understand, into the air, into my lungs, and I breathed them in. My father yelled, "Get out of the room Pauline, you're just making it worse!"

My father pressed harder on the washcloth. I recoiled, pushing his arm away from the cut.

"I know, I know, it hurts, but we have to stop the bleeding."

His grip was tighter and he held my arms down so that I wouldn't move the cloth away.

Everything began to gloss over; a film that muted colors immersed my sight.

I was on the plush couch in our living room one minute, and the next, I was in the hospital.

My father was still holding the washcloth to my head and I could feel the throbbing through the wetness of the blood. I wriggled and writhed in his arms. I cried, but all he could do was tell me that it was going to be okay. I still couldn't see out of my left eye and blood crusted on my eyelashes. It had dribbled down my cheek and rested on the crest of my top lip. I ran my tongue over the crusting and tasted the salted irony liquid.

A lady next to us had a hand wrapped in ace bandage, she leaned her head against a man, or a woman, I can't remember. She kept saying she couldn't move her fingers. This made me squirm even more and tried to push away the washcloth. Pink water dribbled down my nose and onto the untied ties of my jumpsuit, soaking them. My mom sat next to my Dad, turned away from me. She rang her hands between each other.

I tried to climb over my Dad's lap and get into hers but she stopped me and told me she couldn't. My sister wasn't there but they talked about her.

A nurse called from behind the door, "Cope, Jacqlyn Cope."

I was set on a gray examination chair. Tissue paper crinkled when I moved, so I moved even more.

The doctor came into the room. His hair, a pepper colored gray black, and his face wrinkled at the sides of his mouth like my first dog, a char Pei, Chew Chew.

(Chew Chew got her name because, well, she chewed everything up. She started acting out when I was born, pissing on the carpet and the floor. She would go wild on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, tearing into the vent of the dryer, battling it as if it were a Kraken from the sea. A Picasso of blood was left on the floor because of the cuts that came from digging her gums into the aluminum metal of the vent. I know she must have felt pain.)

The doctor took the warmed cloth off of my forehead.

He stared and turned my tiny head in his hand, feeling the outside of the cut. I squirmed and automatically didn't trust him anymore. He turned to my dad and said,

“Well it needs stiches, but we'll numb it first.”

I sat, legs dangling over the chair, unaware of the needle he now pressed into the opening of my wound. It pinched and brought back the feeling of the initial smashing of the doorknob. I looked towards my Father and gave him a furious look, if I could have articulated the word hate, I'm sure that would have been the first time I uttered, “I hate you.”

I used to say that a lot, to my Father. I think we have a longstanding unemotional relationship because neither of us likes to show affection towards each other. Even as a three year old with her head split open, my father had gruffness about him and expected me to take the pain and not overdramatize. My mother always coddled me, as mother's do. She couldn't bear to see me in pain; she couldn't even come in the room when I was ready for stitches, even though I needed to hold her hand.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, it will be all better in two seconds,” the doctor reassured.

He was right. I watched as he threaded a needle and came at me again trying to stick my cut with the end of it. I jumped off the table and tried to run to the corner. My Father picked me up on his lap and reassured that I would be okay.

The doctor came towards me with the needle and I closed my eyes when he told me he was going to stitch up my cut. I opened my clenched eyes when I realized I felt nothing. I watched the black thread dangle back and forth. Thread grazing my nostrils and my nose began to itch. I pushed air out of my tiny lungs, aiming it at the string, and unsuccessfully blew it up further into my nose.

They both laughed.

I found out later that the stitches the doctor used were not the ones he was supposed to use and they caused further scarring.

Like I said, I can barely see the scar and if others notice I hope they think a fantastical story about how I received it. They probably already do anyways, once I mention I served in the military, who knows.

## Tension Envelope-1996

## Tension

/'tenSHən/

noun: **tension**

1. the state of being stretched tight.

synonyms: tightness, tautness, tenseness, rigidity; More  
pull, traction, stress, strain, straining, stretching;  
*raretensity*  
"the tension of the rope"

- the state of having the muscles stretched tight, especially as causing strain or discomfort.
- 2. mental or emotional strain.

She handed down her pain to me, discreetly, covered in butcher paper like meat, nearly spoiled, nearly ripe. Her face, granite, smooth, stoic, unwavering, and eyes creased at the edges with sadness. My Mother taught me to fold pain up like laundry, flattening the surface, crisping the corners, and storing it away in a drawer or a cabinet.

The disk in my Father's back had made a nice home for itself, growing rotund, its belly resting against his spinal cord until the pressure caused permanent damage. He was thirty-two years old and had to re-learn how not to shit or piss himself. Being reborn again so late in life, with paralysis from the waist down, took him and split him in the middle, a tree struck by lightning, half gone, half there.

My Mother, a factory worker, at Tension Envelope, the same company my Father got hurt on the job, continued to take extra shifts while he was in the hospital for six months. My sisters and I saw her moving through life, floating, feet treading, but never staying on the ground

for too long. I look back and know now that being on the ground meant facing her own pain, unfolding the T-shirt, and publicly dressing in front of everyone.

I was five years old when I visited him for the first time in the hospital. The linoleum floor was an expansive sea of nothingness, small black dots isolated like tiny islands in water, decorated the plastic tiles. A nurse had pushed the door that opened to reveal my Father open, and I could smell the sickness seeping out. Curdled milk, like the time I decided to stupidly drink out of my baby sister's bottle, little did I know it had been there a week. The smell was like that but mixed with bleach, a sort of clean rot.

When you're five, there are not many things you remember, especially small details that are usually glazed over by even the most in tune and adept adults, but I distinctly have linked, in my memory, spoiled milk, and hospitals.

Not even bleach could remove the stain and the stink that rested on the phantom of a man in the bed. A hospital gown, untied at the top of his neck, revealed pale skin, tempered with a red rash, a rash I now know was bred from frustration because I was gifted the same hereditary trait when nervous or flustered.

Dark circles set his eyes back, a hollowed bobble head, unshaven with yellow-tinged skin. His voice cracked like a loudspeaker or like one of those static devices that captures the voices of ghosts. I was unsure of him and didn't step closer than the end of the rails by his feet.

"It's okay; It's gonna be alright. You can come give me a hug on the side over here," he said, motioning to his side. Tubes cascaded from the top of his hand to his nose, and under his gown by his lap, clear spaghetti carrying colorful liquids, in some. I fit my tiny body up next to him and hugged him with an arm, crunching some of the tubes in between us.

My Mom had stood in back of me watching this moment take place, and now looking at this from above, like a scene in a snow globe; I wonder what she was feeling. I don't remember feeling any one emotion. Maybe I was scared, or afraid of what was going to happen to my Father next, or maybe since I can't remember, it means my Mom took all of those bad feelings, pulled them out like a cipher, filtering my experience. Or maybe I had learned to adapt already, folding my own piles of laundry, putting them away for later.



Chanel N5-1996

After my Father had come back home, out of the hospital, my Mom became his sole caregiver. Latex stretched over her hands, she cleaned her husband, her friend, her lover, till death do they part, she cleaned up the shit, piss, and tears.

I was watching from the outside when this was happening, almost movie-like. What was something out of the ordinary became ordinary and mundane. Wheel chair wheels running over toes, banging into doorjambs, catheters in sinks, toilets that you sit on but your feet dangle from the extra height.

There was always nights waiting up for her to come home off the swing shift because she needed to be home during the day. Wrapping one of her old black bomber jackets around me I would inhale Chanel N5, it's clean and powdery scent. She always got it by the bottle for her birthday as a present from my Father, her signature scent.

I'd sneak into her bathroom sometimes, look above the counter on my tippy toes, and blindly try to grab at the bottles and hair products organized there. I'd feel the squareness of the black cap of the bottle and would drag it along the granite counter top, creating a sound that made me stop every now and then because I thought I might get caught. It would finally reach the edge and my small hand could grab hold of the whole thing.

The amber color of the perfume always made me think of caramel. I would pull the cap off, examine the shiny gold of the spritzer and see my reflection within it. I wouldn't completely press down on the spring, only slightly, to run some of the smell over my wrists like I had seen my Mom do.

Her black makeup bag would also call out to me, the lime green and rosy pink Maybelline mascara tube almost winking to come and use it. By that time, I knew better than to give into temptation. There's a picture floating around in our family photos of myself in a white T-shirt covered in smudges of red lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara. I'm three and crouching in the corner of our gray L-shaped couch, tears and an unforgettable rage on my face. It's a snap shot after I was punished, spanked for getting into my Mom's makeup. My Father was the punisher before he got into his wheel chair. I hated him for it, so much, that sometimes, after I figured out he couldn't run after me anymore because he couldn't walk, I rejoiced. I feel terrible about that now, but as a kid punishment creates anger incomparable within a child, at least within me.

My Mom was always the one to stop the punishment, although she had her fair share of moments where she couldn't control her anger too. She was the one I looked to, to console me, to stop my Father's hand mid-swing.

"That's enough Jim, that's enough," she'd say.

Don't get me wrong; I did plenty of things that deserved those spankings and punishments. Stole a can of bicentennial quarters from a jar in the laundry room and used them at the student store in elementary to buy mechanical pencils and erasers. I've looked up how much those would have been today, five times 25 cents, and I don't blame my Dad for giving me a beating of a lifetime. I was notorious for taking my older sister's clothes, lip-gloss, jewelry, etc., and then lying about it later.

I was a pain in the ass, according to my Dad. So, I distanced myself from him, believing he just didn't want to understand me because of how he already felt about my behavior. I hated the days I had to spend with him alone with my sisters and counted down the hours after I got out of school until I could maybe see my Mom.

I tucked myself into her side of the bed, wrapped in her bomber jacket, Chanel N5 masking the smell of everything else in the room. My Dad would sit quietly next to me, watching the T.V. fixed to the bedroom wall. I made sure I was as far away from him as possible. I waited for her there, but I always fell asleep before 12:00, and sometimes, as I drifted off, I could feel my Dad tucking me into the covers.

Rosary-1996

*/ˈrɒz(ə)rē/*

*noun*

noun: rosary; plural noun: rosaries

1. (in the Roman Catholic Church) a form of devotion in which five (or fifteen) decades of Hail Marys are repeated, each decade preceded by an Our Father and followed by a Glory Be.

"the congregation said the rosary"

- a string of beads for keeping count in a rosary or in the devotions of some other religions.

My Mom was placing a new pair of underwear on me, my right hand on her shoulder to steady myself. The orange T-shirt I wore was wet, soaked with what I didn't know was pee. I woke up halfway, hysterically laughing and watching her put them on, one leg at a time.

My laughing tapered and I tried to re-orient myself into reality. There was something dangling off my neck, a beaded necklace, that I didn't know was a rosary at that time. My mom signed the cross in front of me, her face serious. What a sight I must have been, six years old, and laughing in my sleep while wetting the bed. I'm surprised she didn't call a priest.

I was thirsty after laughing so much and asked her for a glass of water. As she went to the kitchen to get it, I was in the dark, holding the beads between my small fingers, rolling their smoothness in my palms. They were black beads, and disappeared into the night as if I wasn't holding them. She came back, handing me the plastic cup of water.

"Mama what is this?" I asked her.

"It's a rosary, it's going to protect you."

"Oh, from monsters?"

"Yes, now lay down and I'll say your prayers."

She tucked me into bed and at my request folded the covers into my sides all around like a burrito. She recited the Lord's Prayer as I tried to follow along with her and she licked her thumb, as she always did after prayers, and drew a spit cross on my forehead. I didn't know what a rosary was, but I felt the power in the word protect, so I latched onto it underneath the covers, and kept it close on nights I felt like something was breathing under the bed. I brought it with me later on deployment and kept it in my right cargo pocket, periodically sticking my hand in to feel the wooden beads on my skin and realized that monsters still existed in my mind, they just took a different form.

Gordon Douglas Cope-1998

Gordon

“From a Scottish surname that was originally derived from a place *name* in Berwickshire *meaning* "spacious fort."

His name was Gordon, he wasn't the one that started the passing down of the name Cope, but definitely a culprit in the crime. A WWII veteran, he served in the Navy driving a supply truck stationed in the Philippines. There are pictures of him in the hallway of my parent's home, he grins, almost laughing, his white cracker-jack uniform pressed and starched, pristine. He is young and not yet an alcoholic. He's frozen in the frame that way, forever.

He used to sit with the garage door open, in a lawn chair, drinking a Budweiser, while dusting off the ash of his cigarettes in between swigs. His pants were high-waisted, old school khaki work style from the 50's. A plaid shirt was always tucked into his waist, cinched by a belt, beer belly making the clear buttons more pronounced.

He was the surveyor of the elementary school lawn that was directly across the street from his house. He would watch and keep track of how many students trampled on the long bladed grass, smashing it flat, and tell the principal of their obvious disrespect to school property. The principal and him were good friends. Sometimes, he brought a box of donuts to her office when he gave his report. She was also my principal. You see, my grandparents lived right next to our house, up a small hill, and I would spend most of my time there after school.

He gave kisses on both my cheeks when I came over to see him. They always were wet and had a lingering scent of alcohol that was left on the sides of my face. My little sister's favorite place was on his knee where he would tap it and recite the most ridiculous song that he

made up himself, “Grandpa’s little shit bum, shit bum, shit bum, grandpa’s little shit bum, yes you are.”

Ellie would giggle and look up at him. We didn’t know much about him. We were just kids. So, when he died, it was hard to cry at his funeral. This was my very first experience with death.

My Mom and Grandma had waited for him that day outside in our Blue Ford mini-van. He told them to give him a minute to smoke one last cigarette. I wasn’t there when it happened, but could imagine him sitting at the dining room table in their house, dusting off the end of his very last cigarette in an ashtray.

He had an appointment to go to concerning some irregular bowel movements, in other words, diarrhea. I had been there the night he ran into the house for that one. He couldn’t hold it in any longer as he barreled through the front door and small puddles of brown left a trail all the way to the bathroom. His dog, Buster, a white Shar Pei, followed after him licking it up.

My Dad was worried about him and made him make the appointment for a general checkup. So, since my Dad was still unable to drive because he didn’t have hand controls on his car yet, my Mom was left to the duty.

Gordon smoked his very last cigarette and hobbled out to the van, opened the door and secured himself in the passenger seat. According to my Mom, he was gray and colorless. Twenty minutes into the ride, she heard him exhale like air escaping a balloon. She thought he had fallen asleep, but the exasperated sigh was what made her suspicious.

“Gordon, Gordon, wake up,” she said.

My Grandma, in the back seat, began to get worried and tried to shake his shoulder. There was nothing. He had left them. My Mom tried to get to the hospital the fastest she could,

but he was declared dead soon after they arrived. All of this, I heard second hand, after my Dad got the call at home, I was eight. What's weird is I don't remember him crying, my Dad, I mean.

At his funeral everyone took turns going up to the casket and saying goodbye. I went up with Ellie and my Mom. Gordon was motionless, the Grandpa I knew for a short while, but not him. His skin *was* colorless, or gray like my Mom had said. He looked plastic, mannequin-like.

My Grandmother sat in the front chair at the funeral home, her black medical sunglasses covering her face.

"That's not Gordon," I remember her saying to my Mother. His death didn't shock me at that age. And it makes me wonder now if that moment and the moments I encountered death later in life were linked. Is there a childish ignorance that people who experience death in front of them revert to?

I tried to force myself to cry at his funeral, but nothing came out. Everyone else was leaning on each other's shoulders. My Mom hugging my Dad and Aja hugging my Grandmother. I still can't get myself to cry over his death. I only mourn his lost stories as a veteran, the ones that no one in my family knows about because he drank more than he talked.



Wooden Spoon Ritual-2003  
Ritual

Masa made, bowls of grainy corn lard, the girth of a small birds wingspan, maybe a pigeon, or something more majestic, yes, a hawk. My Mom folded in a jar of white solid fat. Fat that's kind of like school glue but more opaque, clouded, a car window in a night fog. Her wooden spoon, a talisman, tool, occasional punishment paddle, stirred the mixture, thickening, combining spices.

She had broke one once after I mouthed off to her in the kitchen, straight across the ass, then snap. "See, you see what happens! Get out of the kitchen while I'm cooking!"

She bought five more. I made sure not to talk back in the kitchen after that, only because I was at a disadvantage when there was a weapon in her hand. Five foot one, but she could swing a good spoon and after giving a beating she would return to making dinner as if it was all part of the process.

In a blender, five-soaked red chili's danced around the glass pitcher, a stained red heat. In wide circles the spoon went, figure eight, red sauce muddled the color of the masa, ripe peach.

Cornhusks sat in the sink soaking up the warm water, and bent their frail shells into pliable little jackets. Overnight they sat there, drowned and held down by plates, weights that kept them submerged, awaited the next step of their becoming. My Mom took them out the next day, water droplets on carving boards, settling in grooves and in the grain.

She ripped pieces of a husk vertically, creating ties to close the jackets filled with masa. My oldest and youngest sisters were across from me, Aja twenty-two, cut cubes of pepper jack cheese, Ellie, age eight, thinly diced black olives, her hands smaller than the rest of us, better for

the job. Myself, at twelve year's old, hated spreading the masa on the husks, but was made to do it every time, and every time I complained with smoothing stroke of my spoon onto the husk. Ellie and her chicklet looking buckteeth stared at me from across the table. Her honey brown, naturally sun kissed hair hung in scraggy pieces across her forehead from a DIY bang cut. She was always trying to make jokes and get the attention of everyone. She would never shut up, which bugged the hell out of me when we were younger.

I gave her a dirty look when she wouldn't stop staring and rambling about random facts on tigers. She threw an olive at my face in retaliation, and I sprung forward to grab her, splashing the red chili sauce onto the plastic tablemat, set out for the ritual.

“You're stupid!”

I lunged with my own wooden spoon to strike down her smugness and vanquish her, but our Mom said, “Enough!” and I dropped back down, wooden chair squeaking.

“I don't want any of that shit today, you hear me?!”

Ellie sticks out her tongue from across the table and I picture myself cracking a wooden spoon above her head.

It was Christmas Eve and we had to spread the masa on the cornhusks. We had to steam them in ancient pots, handed down from mother to daughter, mother to daughter. Metal pots that hold 40-60 tamales perfectly, depending on who stacks them. Mom always made sure not to crowd them, let them breathe, and give them time to express all of their flavors while they cooked. I used to image little tamale people in the pot, standing against the walls, steaming their faces as they became fluffy, solid, and whole.

Untied, on plates, fried with an egg, buttery crisp, red chili and olive stabbed with a bite of pork. It melts itself into your cheeks and feels like it could stay there for a while, maybe even a whole day. Salsa Verde, salsa roja, poured over the last morsel, still as good as the first.

Every year they were shuffled out of our house in zip lock bags, given to family friends, friends at school, eaten for lunch in middle school, elementary, high school, a whole month. We didn't know that lard was that bad for us so when Mom and Dad started getting on us about our weight, we blamed ourselves for eating too much of anything. I still blame tamales for that roll of fat on my stomach. You know the roll you get when you sit down and it protrudes over the top of tight jeans? I still hate that roll.

I remember pulling a tamale one out of my lunch box in sixth grade, Christina, some girl that also called me a dog face and considered herself my friend, squinted, grabbed the corner of it with her dirty fingernails and said, "Do you have a piece of trash in there with your lunch?"

"No," I told her.

"It's a tamale."

"Oh. Isn't that Mexican?"

"Yeah."

"My Dad told me that that's what Mexicans unwrap for Christmas," she laughed.

"Oh."

"But you're not Mexican, so you must have got that from the store."

"Yeah, that's where my Mom bought it."

I looked down at the yellow-husked pocket of masa, something that I knew I helped make, picked it up like Christina did, avoiding full contact with my hand, and tossed it on the floor.

“I didn’t want it anyways,” I turned to her.

She was already digging into her turkey sandwich on white bread and offered me her other half, cut diagonally, no crust.

The mayonnaise, was sweet, disgusting, and I kept looking at the tamale I threw on the ground, thinking that if Christina would just look away I could grab it and stick it back in my lunch box, to eat for later, or in the bathroom.

It stayed on the floor and I watched some kid step on it by accident and give a face.

“What is that?! It got all over my shoes.”

He rubbed the remains of the red chili off of the insoles of his black and white converse against the bench of the lunch tables.

I almost cried then, mainly because it could no longer be salvaged like I hoped and I was still hungry.

Ceremony -2003

cer·e·mo·ny

/ˈserə,mɒnē/

*noun*

noun: ceremony; plural noun: ceremonies

1. 1.

a formal religious or public occasion, typically one celebrating a particular event or anniversary.

- an act or series of acts performed according to a traditional or prescribed form.

rite, ritual, ceremonial, observance; More

service, sacrament, liturgy, worship, mystery, office, celebration;

synonyms: performance, act, practice, order, custom, tradition, convention,  
institution, formality, procedure, usage, habit, form

"a wedding ceremony"

Every Christmas, no matter the weather, my Father would roll out the pre-historic vintage bulbs from the work shed and gather my sisters and I to install them around the outside of the house. The faded lights had been passed down from Christmas to Christmas, for as long as I could remember. I knew they were older because they weren't able to twinkle or flicker like our neighbors' lights.

Our neighbors in that quiet suburb of Temecula would dazzle and decorate their windows, doors, and lawns with snowmen, Santas, and strings of every color light, a suburban passive aggressive competition.

I was the one that stood at the bottom of the ladder and held the coiled wire for my older sister as she stapled them to the underside of the roof. My little sister would replace the broken bulbs that inevitably shattered because glass was never meant to be kept for that long in storage, nor handled by children. She would run over, a stupid grin on her face from being able to be

useful. I must admit that she annoyed me. Her enthusiasm wasn't shared and I couldn't put into words why I wasn't as happy as her to be helping.

I was so mean to her sometimes, since the day she was brought home from the hospital. I took a look inside the crib at the pudgy red face and immediately felt that I wasn't new anymore, wasn't going to be loved as much.

“Are you just going to throw me out on the street with a box of my stuff now?”

I had asked my Mom, poking at one of her little pink toes sticking out of her onesie.

It seems like the typical middle child syndrome, disliking the younger sibling because more attention was paid to them. I turned away from her advances to be close to me, but I realize now we were all floating in the same boat.

I know now that I was angry because of the trauma I was unknowingly and had unknowingly went through regarding my Dad's long road to recovery after his accident. I knew what it was like to hear my parents fighting late at night, my Dad, stating that we would all be better off without him. My tiny ear pressed up against their bedroom door, I listened in on all their conversations. He thought he was a burden. I didn't think Ellie knew anything that I knew because she was only a year old when he first went into the hospital. I know now my resentment stemmed from my unhappiness and my inability, at such a young age, to express what was going on in my head.

During the Christmas light process, my Dad was master of ceremonies, pointing and yelling at us to straighten out the line of lights, or hold onto the coil so it didn't drag the bulbs on the concrete. From his wheelchair he raised his voice up at my older sister and examined her workmanship.

“I told you staple the other side! The other side!”

Her quiet nature, and demur, but strong, sun-browned shoulders calmly stapled, stapled, and stapled, the sound drowning out my Father's commands. Her long braid of black hair was securely pinned into a bun on top of her head. I admired her, looked up to her, like all little sisters look up to their older sisters. Aja had bifocal glasses, thicker than two quarters stacked on top of each other.

I found out around age ten, three years before this moment, that she was my half sister. Our Mom had had her at 22 with a good for nothing man that wanted nothing to do with Aja. He left her waiting for him on weekends too many times and my Mom finally accepted that he would not be in her life. Then, she met my Father and he legally adopted Aja as his own. He was only 21 when he gladly took on the role.

It was a Christmas tradition to put the lights up, three young girls and their Father working together, decorating for the fun of it, at least that's what I think my Mother thought.

She was with us too, placing lit up candy canes and wreaths on garage doors, wrapping them in wrapping paper as if they were giant presents. Her decorating was something she enjoyed and I could see it took her to a different place, a place before everything was so hard on our family, a place where everything was okay again, a type of meditation.

She would rearrange the patio and front porch furniture to accommodate the wooden bear carving wearing a Santa hat, welcoming visitors to our front door, even though the NO SOLICITING sign was in conflict with it. She was always quiet and let my Dad yell, point, and demand, probably because she knew he would rather be doing it himself, if not for his legs.

Maybe that's why he was so mad when he was doing something that was supposed to be cheerful and calming. His frustration seemed to rise with every breaking bulb and my little sister would scuttle along, subconsciously trying to fix the something she didn't know how to fix.

In the end, the lights would be raised, stapled, fashioned, and molded to their old worn in holes and crevices of wood, illuminating our faces as we all stood at the end of the driveway, in our routine brokenness, admiring them as if we had seen them for the first time.

Chad-2005

I feel like we all try to hide out true selves in relationships, at first. He never gave me the feeling that I should be worried. As first loves go, he was enamored with me; we were enamored with each other. He dressed in Ecko Unlimited clothing, a brand that was popular with R&B rappers, at the time. His handsome features caught my attention first.

It was the first day of sophomore year during R.O.T.C. class and we lined up outside for our weekly uniform inspection. My hat fell on the ground and he picked it up, dusted it off and gave me a smile that's still cemented in my memory. The 1

We used to make-out at school during lunch on the first floor, in a corner, of a two-story building. Melting first love kisses into each other faces, believing that we would last forever.

I asked him one day if he wanted to date other people when he graduated, hoping that he may want to so I didn't feel as guilty for wanting to myself. He said he would never.

We were in ROTC together.



## A Hole to Fill-2006

A table of panset, lumpia, and ube desserts, doused their fried and sugary smells in the dining room. Marble tiled floors ushered me towards the banquet of homemade Filipino dishes. Deep-fried shredded coconut and rice balls on skewers dipped in brown syrup. I used to eat three or four sticks of those things, the sticky texture of the rice as I bit into them still lingers in my mouth.

Chad's Mother always had a spread of food when I came over for family get-togethers and insisted that I eat everything and anything I wanted. Golden battered shrimp, noodles with egg, stir fried carrot, mushrooms and veggies. She loved to feed people. The look on everyone's faces when they were enjoying her food was enough to feed her.

I was exposed to a culture I wasn't familiar with every time I sat at their kitchen table. They spoke in Tagalog, sometimes, but not all the time when I was around. I know they tried not to because I didn't speak it too because his Mom would stop mid-sentence in Tagalog and begin speaking English. To be honest I loved hearing another language.

It fascinated me that Chad had another culture, another story to tell besides the American identity that he lived in every day at school. I wanted part of his life. I wanted to be able to know the language my Mother once knew when she grew up. I wanted the un-Americanized version of her enchiladas, tostadas, and sopita. I felt that I could be in Chad's house and absorb some of his culture for myself. I wanted to desperately be connected to my own culture, but my Mom refused to reach back into her memory to pull out the Spanish words that once danced on her tongue.

I could have been a part of Chad's family. I could have eaten his Mother's food everyday. His Mom passed me a plate of coconut rice balls to take home and I kept them to myself. I ate all of them before I went to bed, and they made me feel better while I swallowed them. Every stick I laid on the plate I laid a little bit of guilt down until I picked up another one, and another one. Then there was nothing left, and I didn't have anything else to mask the guilt I had from eating everything. The guilt that my Mother and Father placed there for getting a little too chubby in middle school. The guilt that I might become fat and that would be my ultimate identity.

In the end, no matter how much I ate, the euphoria wouldn't last, I was only left with the feeling that there was a piece of myself not found yet. No matter how much I tried to pretend that I knew everything about my Mom's culture, or try to eat myself into feeling better, it didn't fill the hole that stayed there after the guilt disappeared.

A.F. J. R.O.T.C. -2006

Drill

**Military Drill – Troops** standard **marching** (shoulder-to-shoulder) square-bashing. **drill** on a barracks square of concrete. Type of: **drill**, exercise, practice, practice session, recitation. Systematic training by multiple repetitions.

Every Wednesday, 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I shined my black leather uniform shoes. I pasted shoe polish in small circles on the tip, turning the polished front into the flame of a lighter, browning it, the fumes making me cough. I would open the sliding door to the living room to push the smell out and let one shoe rest in the air while I worked the same process on the other one. After two or three coats of polish I took a rag and wiped away the blackness, applying hard pressure until the leather's surface became reflective.

Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, A.F.J.R.O.T.C, or just R.O.T.C., was the only class I put effort into in high school. My parents had wanted me to participate because they thought I needed structure and discipline, and also because I kept failing math, but I don't know how marching in lines and shining shoes was supposed to help with that one.

At first I resisted and completely showed no interest in the class, just to spite them for making me do it. My internal strike didn't last but a week because this class was different. The first day we filed out of the classroom to a blacktop lot at the back of the portable classrooms.

The retired Air Force instructor's wore their uniforms to work and it made me interested in all of the gadgets and chatchki's attached to the front of their button up blue shirts.

They lined us up in formation and taught us how to march.

"The most important part about standing at attention is not buckling your knees. You will faint if you are in the position there for long periods of time. Eyes forward, feet at a 45 degree angle, heels together, not itching, scratching, or talking," the instructor commanded.

Instead of taking it as someone telling me what to do, I took it as a challenge. I wanted to be the best. So, every class I made sure that I studied my Air Force customs and courtesies and practiced my drill movements at home in the backyard patio.

Left flank, right flank, column right, column left, about face, right face, left face, to the rear. I practiced calling out the commands myself and trying to get the hang of which foot needed to be on the step. I messed up, time and time again, but I was persistent and wanted to be the only one in my class who would be able to correctly follow the commands.

I went to class one day, after practicing for hours and weeks at home, and followed every command, with precision, snapping my body to the direction I was turning. I didn't mess up, not even once.

"Well, Miss Cope, It looks like you are a natural. Why don't you become out unarmed drill team commander."

"Sir, unarmed drill team?"

"The unarmed drill team. You could command it and compete in competitions with high schools across the state."

I picture myself, in uniform, accepting awards for first place at national competitions. My parents in the crowd, proud and surprised that I could even win anything.

“Yes. Yes sir! I want to be the unarmed drill team commander.”

After school, we would meet, the ten of us, practicing the routine that we made up, along with the routine that the drill competition committee sent to all high school unarmed drill teams.

I felt like a leader, and watched videos on Youtube about being a better leader to create a cohesive bond with my team. All of my team members, a mix of girls and boys, older and younger than me, didn't listen to me at first, until I proved that I was there to push all of us to win at competition.

I made them run the routine five, six, seven times, in every direction of the squared of dimensional space used in competitions. If we crossed a line during performance we would lose points, which took away from the collective total in placing in any category.

We attended SCIDM, Southern California International Drill Meet in 2007. All of my team members had come to my house the night before to prepare their uniforms for inspection from real military personnel. They put on quite a show if anything was out of place.

We sat around my kitchen table, clipping strings from patches and belts. Shining belt buckles and showing each other the best tips and tricks in shining shoes. All of our blue shirts and pants were pressed and clean, in dry clean plastic wrap. Our nametags measured exactly to regulation, on the right hand side, grounded on pockets for guys, and between the first and second button for girls. My Mom, French braided my hair and the other girls, so we all had the same look, even more uniform.

On competition day, we all lined up, three by three columns.

“Sir Cadet Cope Temecula Valley High School unarmed drill team, requests permission to enter,” I said, while facing the drill instructor and saluting.

“You may proceed.”

His brown Smokey the Bear marine hat tipped forward as he waved me permission onto the drill pad. We had gone over inspection, standing at attention while being yelled at, and keeping our cool while asking questions.

The drill sergeant stalked down each element checking everyone's appearance. He stopped at me first.

“Why do you have a disgusting string hanging from your belt?”

“Sir, there's no excuse, sir.”

“Aha, well you just remember that next time you want to step out here on this drill pad as a commander. You must be the best out of all of them.”

My legs quivered, the black top so hot that my toes seemed to burn through the soles of my shoes, as if they were melting. I heard, from of the back as his taps on his shoes slid from person to person, click, click, and the sound of all of my team members keeping their cool and answering questions to the best of their knowledge. It was over pretty quick, and we exited the drill pad, only to be told the exhibition portion had changed directions in where we entered the drill pad.

It would have been a problem if we didn't practice the routine from all angles, all possible ways to enter the square drill pad. A drill pad is usually a rectangle or a square pad of concrete marked off in designated measurements. If a team steps out of the marked lines, during the marching sequence, points are taken off. Drill competitions are comprised of three separate sections that teams can take 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> in, respectively: Exhibition-An original drill routine, Inspection-uniform inspection, and Regulation-prescribed list of military drill commands.

I took up the list of commands the drill sergeant presented to me before Regulation and folded it in my pocket. I had memorized every single one, along with my team members prior to

the drill meet. Granted there were over fourteen potential lists we could have received, but we were ready for them all.

We stepped onto the drill pad and owned every square inch of space, not crossing the perimeter of chalked lines. Left flank, right flank, column right, to the rear, halt, at ease. As commander, I marched along side the columns of three by nine, calling the commands and remaining in line with the middle row. We had practiced that routine and everyone was on step, on time, and turned at the same time. We hit every command.

I halted the team, turned to the drill instructor, and asked permission to exit the drill pad and we all sauntered off, shoulder to shoulder, perfect alignment, perfect cover, perfect bearing. We had made it to the invitational drill meet for a reason.

At the awards ceremony, we were all quiet when they announced third place for inspection, not us, second place, not us, first place, not us. If that wasn't a blow to the ego, I don't know what was. Then they announced the 3<sup>rd</sup> place exhibition I began to wring my hands in nervousness thinking that third place is something is better than nothing at all. When the announcer called second, Erika, my third element leader, gasped thinking that he was about to say Temecula Valley, but instead said Temescal Canyon.

At that point, I had given up that we were going to win anything. We were sharp and put together for inspection and one of the best. We all knew it, as we watched the other schools get torn apart by the drill instructors for not having haircuts, or socks that were crazy colored. One kid's glasses were covered in spit because he didn't know how to answer his general knowledge questions properly.

As I let go of the thrumming in my chest that was my hope of winning, something happened.

“And first place for Exhibition goes to the Temecula Valley High School unarmed drill team.”

Everyone started screaming and I looked towards out instructor, Colonel Sweetnam, he pointed to me and to the stage.

My first steps didn't even feel like I was hitting shoe to pavement. I walked up the small set of stairs at the stage and approached the drill sergeant from earlier. Shake, take, take, salute, that was the courtesy. I held the weight of the trophy in my hands, a silver cup with a silver man, standing at attention at the tip. I could see my team, my school in the crowd, screaming and jumping in the air.

“TVHS, TVHS, TVHS!” they chanted.

I also imagined my parents there, because they weren't. I didn't invite them because I still had that internal strike going on, not with myself and R.O.T.C, but something different, something other that made me want to exclude them from all of my successes.

I imagined them chanting too, whistling and yelling from the back row. I hugged the trophy close to my chest as we drove back in our school van, taking turns with my teammates laughing about how nervous we were during competition and all the stupid questions the drill instructors asked us during inspection.

“Did you shine your shoes with dirt!?” was the funniest one because all of our shoes shined like mirrors and we knew it wasn't true. I knew they shined like mirrors because I inspected them myself. And if there's one thing I knew about myself at that point, it was that I could lead and we could win.



Mediocre-2007

“You think C’s are going to get you anywhere in life?” my Dad said. He held up my 11<sup>th</sup> grade report card.

“You know what C’s are Jacqlyn? They’re mediocre. You’re going to be mediocre all your life if you keep getting these grades.”

I rolled my eyes at him, as usual.

“Don’t give me that attitude, god Damn it!”

He throws the remote control from the side table of his recliner. I stood a good ten feet away in front of the T.V. and duck before it hit me.

“Get your ass over here,” he said, gesturing to the side of him.

Unlike other days, where I would have made a scene and turned on the waterworks in hopes of conjuring some sympathy in him to go easy on me, I took two steps and stopped.

“No,” I glared.

“What did you just say to me!”

His eyes closed into a squint, his moustache crinkling around his chapped lips.

“No, I won’t come over there.”

I turned and started back to my room as he rustled his wheelchair next to his recliner to try and get into it. He wasn’t fast enough, and I already knew that. MEDIOCRE was shifting

around in my mind cutting its sharp edges into the soft parts of my self-esteem. I closed myself into my bedroom as I heard the familiar sound of my Dad's wheelchair wheels hitting the sides of the hallway. I climbed to the corner of my bed, out of his reach again, and waited for his wrath. But the noises stopped. I heard him go back down the hallway. I had won that day.

It was in middle school where my grades started to slip into the abyss, at least my math grades. I hated it and the teacher that made me feel stupid for asking for help in class. It didn't help that my Dad and my Mom didn't have the time, nor the skill, to help in that subject. I was on my own, and my Dad was right, I gave up.

It wasn't my plan to remain mediocre in the eyes of my father. I was going to prove him wrong.

MEPS-March 2008

1. Military Entrance Processing Station.
2. Once you have gone through initial questioning phases with your recruiter and have discussed your options, your recruiter will set an appointment for you to go to the nearest

I could feel the tingle in my stomach. It was turning up the fear inside of me; I started to question my resolve and if I could really go through with enlisting. My parents dropped me off outside the building where a line of people had already started to form.

The MEPS station in San Diego processed thousands of people through its doors. The employees are as bad as DMV workers, maybe even worse. I got up to the front desk and a woman asked for my social security number. Slowly, I pulled out the card, unsure it that was what she was asking for.

“Hello, your social?” she said sarcastically.

“Um, I think it’s this,” I said, holding up the card.

“Don’t show me read it to me.”

I read it off and she signals me to sit down.

There was a widow in the waiting room that looked into a room where people were getting their blood drawn and I started to shift myself in my seat out of nervousness. I examined

the people to the left and right of me, all them looked around my age, 17 or 18 years old. I didn't dare try to talk to anyone.

"Cope, Cope is next for blood draw," a nurse calls into the room.

"Here," I raise my hand like an idiot.

"Well, what are you waiting for," holds the door open.

The room had three blood draw chairs, two of them already occupied by two guys. The nurse sat me down, tied a rubber band around my forearm and prepped my arm with an alcohol swab. I'm not going to lie, I was sick to my stomach. Mainly because of the needle that I was just about to be stuck with, but also that I was actually going through with the enlisting process. I thought I was going to faint when the nurse stuck the needle in my vein, but I held onto the stress ball he gave me.

I watched the vial fill with blood, the thickness of it building up on the sides of the glass. The guy next to me must have been more nervous than me because he actually fainted in the chair before they even pricked his skin. I looked at him as he slumped over in the chair and the nurse that had just finished pulling the needle out of my arm rushed to him, pulling out smelling salts out of his pocket. The kid grumbled and slowly woke up, opening his eyes.

"You okay killer," the nurse said.

He mumbled some incoherent nonsense and sat back up. I looked down at my own arm, a little river of blood running down to my wrist.

"Um, I think I'm bleeding," I said to the nurse.

"Just take one of the cotton balls from off the table there and apply pressure."

I grabbed about three of them and soaked up the blood on my arm. I waited there for a moment and watched the guy that fainted fully regain coherent consciousness and realized I was tougher than him. I was going to make it through.

#### Basic Training- June 2008

17 years old, I packed bags, raised my hand, and swore an oath; I was off to serve a higher purpose. Airports are the happiest and saddest places that I know. At Ontario airport, families kissing cheeks of children, sisters, brothers, mothers. Staring up the escalator there was a line to get bodies scanned.

There was two hours until take off. Sweaty hands in pockets, Chad's kisses on my forehead, and Mom and Dad held back some tears. I Watched them disappear going up the escalator. I had never been away from home and barely memorized my social security number.

The plane rumbled an unfamiliar sound as wheels rolled on the asphalt, jerking bodies forward, then up, then up, then up. Towns became blips, ants on an anthill, and I might have felt like God if the sinking feeling didn't stick in my stomach. The feeling of not knowing.

\*

At the San Antonio International Airport, other kids my age carried large manila envelopes, every corner taped up, and envelopes like mine. We followed each other to a lobby where a man with a shaved head pointed to us.

“YOU! Yes, that’s right you, all of you, sit over here. The fun’s just about to begin.”

For a moment, I felt like running in the other direction and forgetting about doing any of it, but the pull of authority scared the shit out of me.

“Get up! Get up! Get up! In a line, you’re gonna follow each other in one straight line to the bus outside these doors.”

His eyebrows rose with the vein in his forehead trying to talk to us too. A tall boy in the front led the way and started running. My tight shorts and belly roll almost hanging over, never worked out before, I struggled to keep up with the boys ahead of me as my manila envelope slipped from my grip. It fell, and I fumbled to pick it up and catch up to the line, but the bald man was in my ear.

“Pick it up, pick it up, pick it up!”

I picked it up and hurried to my seat, on the bus, in the dark. We all slept as it took an hour or so to get to base. We were in waiting, we were young, we were unaware of what we would become.

\*

We would become one mind, one body, following the same orders. When we arrived to base, we filed out of the bus as quickly as we had when we got on at the airport. Divisions were made, women split in one flight, men split into another, brother and sister flights. We would see our brother flight only during joint training exercises.

Our sleep deprived eyes dipped in and out of awareness, even when the drill instructors were released upon us. Staff Serrgeant Russel, a woman with a foul mouth, rushed all the women standing outside of the bus.

“Get inside! What the fuck do you think this is a runway! I have something in store for you trainees, you are all mine these next six weeks. Now get those asses moving with a purpose,” she yelled.

Her raspy voice was akin to a chain smoker and sounded as if she gurgled rocks as a part of her daily dental routine. A girl in front of me, a layer of orange foundation on her face, dropped a compact in the wake of moving in line with everyone else to get into the building.

“Oh, makeup! What the fuck are you going to do with that here trainee?” she says.

Sergeant Russel stopped to get into her face, her blue smokey the bear hat resting on the girls blonde eyebrows.

“Pick it up cover girl,” she says.

The girl picks it up, averting her eyes in submission away from Russel.

“That’s your new name now, congratulations cover girl, now fucking get in that building and out of my sight.”

The girl’s body locks up and she freezes in place. Maybe out of fear.

“Hello! Rude, answer me trainee.”

Cover girl tries to talk, but only gets out mumbles.

“Okay, looks like we have an idiot too. When I ask you a question trainee, you give me your reporting statement. You got me? Trainee idiot reports as ordered, then you answer yes or no.”

It was excrutiting to watch because cover girl never got it right, so Sergeant Russel had her fun and let her in the building eventually. She sniffled into the sleeve of her Winnie the Pooh sweater.

I knew the game already. I tried to stay low and under the radar. The last thing I wanted was a unwarranted nickname to start off my journey.

M16-July 2008

*noun*

noun: **M16**

1. A lightweight, fully automatic assault rifle that shoots small-caliber bullets at an extremely high velocity, used by US troops after 1966.

I learned how to take apart and rebuild an M16 in a 1 minute 30 seconds in basic training. Every part, foreign to my knowledge, until I handled the greased up bolt, firing pin, magazine, stock. Every name, every piece, I memorized, a deathly puzzle, which was one of the tasks that was between graduation and me. It was a task that I treated lightly until I shot it for the first time. Prone position, I laid behind the line at the firing range to qualify. The target, a black shape of a body on paper about 300 yards away. I imagined a person there and it sickened me.

“Put your right cheek on the stock now, and look through the sight. Aim, breath, and shoot trainee!”



The range instructor screamed in my ear, but I could barely hear him because of the issued earplugs.

The sweat dripped into the crevices of my neck and it made me itchy. My cheek squished down on the stock of the rifle, butt secured in my shoulder pocket, I pulled the trigger. There was recoil that sent a shiver into my body and reverberated down my back. It didn't hurt like I thought it would have. I stared down the line through a tiny hole in the belly of the target and couldn't help but picture a person there.

#### Gas Chamber-July 2008

*/'gas ' ,CHāmbər/  
noun*

1. The gas chamber is a room that has a controlled concentration of CS (ortho-chlorobenzylidene-malononitrile) gas, more commonly known as tear gas. Tear gas is the active ingredient in Mace™ and used for self-defense and for riot control by the police.

The most dangerous form of warfare is chemical and that includes, but isn't limited to, Nerve agents (such as sarin, soman, cyclohexylsarin, tabun, VX) Vesicating or blistering agents (such as mustards, lewisite) Choking agents or lung toxicants (such as chlorine, phosgene, diphosgene) Cyanides. Incapacitating agents (such as anticholinergic compounds).

Trainees that go through boot camp, or basic training must endure the gas chamber in order to graduate their training. It happened during the fourth week of basic and I thought it would be easy, compared to everything we had already been subjected to.

Flight 544, 326<sup>th</sup> Bulldogs, myself and my military sisters, filed out into a concrete bay. A bay resembling the back of a grocery store where groceries are discreetly delivered to replenish the stock on the shelves. We lined up in formation, 8X4, chem-bags pulled open, camouflage plastic pants and hood readied to wear. Gas mask's stared back at us looking toy-like, only because I had only seen them in the movies.

"All of you will have thirty seconds to put on your chemical suit, boots, hood, and get a proper seal on your gas mask. If you do not you have failed."

The drill sergeant look through our ranks, eyes peeking out from under the bill of his Smokey the Bear hat. Those eyes were bloodshot and more human than I had ever seen them since we all arrived on the bus four weeks earlier. There was almost some worry in them that made them tremble. I don't know if the tremble was for us, or for the fact that if his flight failed he would have to answer to the man above him.

"Three, two, one..."

I shimmied my pants on my body in two seconds, grabbing the large rubber boots and slipping them over my running shoes. The top and the hood were trickier, snap buttons and ties. My fingers fell clumsily over them while I rushed to pull the straps of the gas mask over the back of my head. Placed a hand on the side of the canister, covering the holes and breathing in to create suction, a tight seal.

"Times up."

It was hard to see out of the clouded plastic lens of the gas mask, so I wasn't able to see down my row and behind me very clearly. I had made it in time, but I was worried about the rest of my flight. Chavez and Ybarra, two girls I became quick friends with had their suits on, and I was relieved. There must have been some slow ones because the drill sergeant wasn't happy.

“Are you kidding me! All of you on the ground take it off, we're doing it again until every one of you gets this right on time!”

It was so hot that day, in the Texas humidity that they made us wear our PT uniform instead of our camo, probably afraid that one of us would faint in our chem-suits. What made it worse is all of us had to take our hair down to fit the gas mask's properly over our heads and get a tight seal. My hair stuck to the back of my neck, tucking into my cotton Air Force T-Shirt, tickling the middle of my spine.

We tried the drill five times until it was just right and everyone was on time. By the end of it there were tiny pools of sweat in the tips of my rubber boots that drenched my socks. We were ready for the gas chamber.

Lined up, single file, we were ushered into a room wearing our gas masks and chemical suits. Cinder block walls created the perfect square of a space, in the middle of the room a tiny pit with a grate on top waited to be filled with smoking chemicals. All of us against the walls watched as the drill sergeant left the room and handed over the reins to two people wearing white chemical suits. One of them, a woman, took her gas mask off and explained what was about to happen to us.

“Okay there's only one way out of here, you got me?”

In unison, “Yes Ma'am.”

“When this door closes, all of you will remove your gas masks and your hoods and you will walk up to me, one by one, and say your reporting statement before you’re allowed to leave this room. You got me!?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

I buckled my knees.

“If you run or panic, or mess up your reporting statement you will stand in here until you get it right.”

Some of us looked at each other through the lens of our gas masks trying to see if we were not alone in our worry.

The woman put on her gas mask and shut the door right behind her back. She took a wad of something from under the grate in the middle of the room and lit it with a lighter. The white smoke filled the room and became sauna-like, curling through the air towards us.

“Alright, everyone remove your masks.”

I didn’t expect it to feel the way that it did. I had always been prone to watery eyes when cutting onions, but this was twenty times worse than any of that. It felt as if I had to sneeze, but at the same time my eyes started to run with tears that burned my face as they traveled to my lips. Cayenne Pepper rubbed in the tear ducts type of fire. A ghost pepper exfoliating the face after a bad sunburn type of heat. Breathing it in was even worse because the coughing stopped any rational type of thinking and when I got to the woman at the door I tried holding my breath when I spoke,

“Ma’am, trainee... Cope... reports... as... ordered.”

Simple, easy, I had finished the sentence and tried to run toward the door before the cough that was building in my chest had enough time to surface.

She stuck her arm out, catching me in the chest, and stopped me from escaping the hell smoke.

“Now, I told you not to run, say your reporting statement again and don’t hold your breath.”

There was panic in my mind and all my body wanted was relief, any type of relief, but this woman wasn’t letting me have it. I sucked back the spit that gathered in my mouth and wiped the snot dripping from my nose and attempted it once more.

“Trainee...Cope...re...ports as ordered.”

I walked to the door this time and she pushed it open, the greenery of the trees reflected by the sun. I followed my other flight mates, some of them stopping on the sidewalk to throw up. All of us dripping snot and spit from our noses and mouths, hair swirled up in knotted messes from sweat and being contained under gas masks. I couldn’t see anything but shapes of things and colors. Every time I tried to open my eyes fully it felt as if bees were stinging the soft gelatinous makeup of my eyeball. Everyone was groaning in pain, shared pain, a unison of voices echoing in the concrete bay. All forty- five of us had filtered out of the room and the woman in the white chem suit came out to direct us in attending to the burn.

“None of you should be touching your faces, it’s just going to make it worse. Put your hands to your sides like a cross and walk it off. Should take about thirty minutes.”

We all put our arms up. All of us walking around in circles like human airplanes waiting for the tear gas effects to fade away. I couldn’t think of anything other than what it would feel like to stand at graduation in my dress blue uniform. The word mediocre was set on fire in my mind as I spit out mucous onto the blacktop and stared down the woman who stopped me from

leaving the gas chamber. I could see my Father in her eyes and I gritted my teeth, tied my hair back up, and wiped the spit off my chin.

### Warrior Week-July 2008

*/'wôrēər/*

*noun*

noun: warrior; plural noun: warriors; noun: warrior pose; plural noun: warrior poses

1.(especially in former times) a brave or experienced soldier or fighter.

synonyms: fighter, soldier, fighting man, serviceman, combatant  
"fearsome warriors"

Skinned knees, bruised arms, off balance, and falling into pools of water suspended under rope swings. Crawling in dirt, barbed wire scratching backs of trainees who couldn't perfect their low crawl. A boy, from brother flight, telling me, "You got this." I lifted my head up from the

dirt and pulled myself out of the pit. I wanted him to go away; he stayed the whole time, placing a knee out to boost me up to the rope ladder. Drill sergeant so and so paid no mind. There was no finish line, just more digging, heel into mud, left, right, left, right, left. I don't remember the boy's name.

#### Basic Training Graduation- August 2008

Texas humidity corrals smells caught in fluffs of moisture. Tree spores, flowers, brother flight's body odor, my body odor, dust from The Alamo's bricks, ancient DNA, all filter together create a miasmic scent. Crisp blue pants, black shined shoes, mirrors reflecting the clouds, turning the sky on its end, where the land and air become one. We become one as we march, left, right left, right, left. Unison, sound, lined up, manicured, women with sock buns pulled taught, creating small bumps on backs of necks that turn into pimples from pressure. Eyes forward, we march together, one body, one heel, one lung.

The bleachers are full, family, friends, and lovers, gasp, howl, whistle, in tune with the slick sounds of the soles of our shoes hitting the asphalt. Band flight, the flight made up of

anyone who was smart enough to raise their hand if they played an instrument, plays the Air Force song and we sing.

We chanted, we chanted and sung, to our parents, to our friends. We had completed a task, a task only a small percentage of Americans has completed. A task that would lead us in every direction. A freedom, like wind, but we didn't know that we would have to live captured in glass jars, on shelves, ready for the use. Used up, used up air. But we celebrate, and we celebrated, mother's, daughters, sisters, brothers, sons, and fathers. Our dreaming was brimming on the outline of our fingerprints, we dazzle for them today, we sparkle and glisten, stars in the distance that don't realize they've already died out.

Pocket-August 2008

Lupe sat boldly at the back of the room, her presence demanding, her black sock bun pulled up into perfection behind her head. Her hair was always groomed with gel and an off-center side part in a perfect line. Her eyebrows were tweezed into thin lines above her round doe-eyes. Her accent subtle, distinctly Mexican, but lived there when she said certain words, and reminded me of my cousins and aunts. She was the epitome of chingona.

She was a kind face in a crowd of people I didn't know. She offered me a seat and it all started there. She had been re-classed, or recycled from the medical technician career into my career field, our career field, Medical Administration. We ended up in the same technical training class together, beginning the next step in our Air Force journey.



What she taught me wasn't in any class that we attended. She was older than me by a couple of years, married. Her last name, at the time was Campos, and as everyone did, I called her that. We went out on weekends and partied at the Airman's club and various other clubs in Wichita Falls, Texas.

"Cope, you need to let these people know you mean business,"

She told me this when I decided to command a drill team of nine people for the medical squadron. She was a black rope, that's what they called the Airmen on the armed drill team. The rope caught the attention of our fellow classmates, showing that she was doing more than just the bare minimum of passing classes and graduating tech school.

There was a prestige being on a drill team, a discipline that stoked the work ethic that I had been bred into. I wanted to be greater than mediocre, greater than someone just floating along. I was a leader and knew it, but I just needed the chance to be great.

Lupe handled a M1903 Springfield rifle, tossing it in the air in synchronized routines that took hours of practice in her free time. She was the only woman on the team and she held herself under pressure better than the men. I watched her practice as she stood stone faced, unflinching as a rifle was tossed by one of the team members from across from her. The moment of suspense where you think she was going to drop it, but she caught it, her hands firmly grasping the stock. The sound of wood cracking and splitting filled my ears with every measured movement.

She stood at attention, eyes forward, never breaking her concentration, and I knew that I wanted to do what she did. Unfortunately, the team was already full and I picked up my own unarmed drill team, just like my high school J.R.O.T.C. days.

Lupe was the first one to join my team and helped me recruit eight others.

“Yes, Cope you need to be able to take charge of them and let them know that they are going to practice when you say so,” she pointed her finger at me while we waited for everyone to show up for practice.

“Here, I’ll teach you something,” she pulled out the inside pocket of her jeans.

“Hold my pocket.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Just do it Cope.”

“Ugh, fine.”

I grabbed a hold of her tiny cotton pocket.

“You’re my bitch now.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, you hold my pocket that means you’re my bitch.”

I was offended.

“I’m not anyone’s bitch.”

“No, Cope you’re my bitch,” she laughed.

I was clearly irritated, which she must have picked up on.

“Okay, okay, gimme your pocket.”

I un-tucked my pocket and she pinched it.

“Look we’re the same now.”

“Oh you mean you’re my bitch.”

“Yeah, we’re both each other’s bitches. But don’t let anyone else call you a bitch Cope, we’re friends. You need to let them know you’re the boss.”

I tucked my pocket back in and all of the recruits filtered into the room.

“Alright, then, my name is Cope, I’m your drill team commander, fall in and I’ll explain the routine we’ll be learning.”

Lupe waved her little pocket at me as she fell in and I called them to attention.

Sergeant Parsley-October 2008

Parsley

pärslē/

*noun*

1. A biennial plant with white flowers and aromatic leaves that are either crinkly or flat and used as a culinary herb and for garnishing food.

Sergeant Parsley was everythin his unique name suggested, Italian, bold in flavor/attitude, and a little bit of extra that no one really asks for. There’s a saying in the Marine Corps, “Once a Marine, always a Marine,” Sergeant Parsley was a Marine before he was an Airman. Marines are crass, to the point, relentless, and most importantly, loyal. He embodied all

of these. Parsley was slightly balding, but he didn't hide it, nor did he pay it any mind. He was the first person to walk right up to me on my first day in my new squadron.

“Hey, you're new right, I'll show you around, leave your shit in the orderly room.”

“There's a lot of rank around here, officers that don't know what the fuck they're doing,”

Parsley quipped.

A Major walked by, hair too long on top to be in regulation with dress and appearance standards.

“Hey Parsley! I've been looking for you. Come set my computer up with the O drive. I haven't been able to get it up on that thing.”

“Sure Major Conmy, sure, I'll get right to it. This is Airman Cope she's new to the squadron, an admin too.”

He stuck out his hand, hairs curling around knuckles while identical hairs poked out from under his flight suit from his chest.

“Ah, hopefully you're as helpful as Sergeant Parsley here.”

“Alright Major Conmy, be right with you for that O drive, just going to finish the tour” he says while winking.

Major Conmy took around three steps away and Parsley leans in to my ear, “He's a fuckin' idiot. Don't see how they gave him a degree.”

Even though he slightly lowered his voice I was alarmed that he said such a thing about an officer within his earshot. I turned and looked at Major Conmy, heading down the hall, oblivious to the insult that came out of Parsley's mouth.

“One thing you need to know around here Cope is we take care of our own. If one of these shit head officers comes around asking you to do stuff for them, you come to me first.”

Le Vian –August 2009

Lay-vee-an

Surname

1. The **Le vian** surname comes from a Middle English given name Lefwine, which in turn comes from the Old English elements "leof," which meant "dear" or "beloved," and "wine," which meant "friend."

The drive up the 215 that day put us four hours in traffic from Temecula. There was bumper-to-bumper traffic that I had never even seen before. L.A. was one of those places I had

planned on visiting after I came back from basic training, but didn't want to do it alone. Chad's arm was browning in the sun from being so still on the steering wheel.

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked him.

"It's a surprise."

Just like when I was a kid and I would steal the key to the closet my parents kept the Christmas presents in, I had already researched Chad's surprise on the internet and was kind of already aware where we were going. We were going to *The Getty Villa*. I thought that that was L.A. at the time and we would be close to the Hollywood sign and the walk of fame.

I had one piece of information to work off of and that was the name of the place he had mentioned casually in a conversation a month prior, *The Getty*. I was brimming with the idea of new experiences, which I wanted more of since my first taste of travel in the Air Force.

Texas was the first place I ever visited outside of Temecula, and although it was tied with memories of marching in 104 degree heat while sweat puddles collected in my underwear, it conjured feelings I had never felt before. The feeling of not having to tell my parents where I was or what I was doing, the feeling of getting my belly button pierced during technical training, the feeling of the humid nights in short dresses that I was never "fit" enough to wear until basic training trimmed off the inches. Dancing in the Airman's Club, an 18 year old self conscious girl, enjoying the attention that was paid to me by so and so's and what's his names.

Chad had a problem with me going out when I was so far away.

"Why do you have to go out there? You don't even know the people at the Airman's club and there's no one there to make sure you're safe."

"I'll be fine. I go to class everyday and this is my time to just have some fun. I have my friends with me, we won't leave without each other."

“Well, make sure you call me when you’re back in your room.”

“Okay, I promise. I love you so much.”

His texts would flutter in on my phone throughout the night. I’d stand by the bar and text him back, enjoying the attention from everyone else, but wishing he could be there too.

I remembered those times on the 215. I took his hand off the wheel and laced my fingers in between his, breathing in his fresh cologne, *Armani Code*. He smiled and pulled our two hands to him, kissing them with his Carmex covered lips. He always had a jar or tube of chap-stick on him and applied it every thirty minutes. He called it his addiction. His lips were smoothest, but he swore that if he stopped using Carmex they would crack and scab over.

“I think they put something in these things,” he told me, scooping out some jelly from a cherry Carmex jar. “Something that makes your lips go to hell if you stop using them. I tried going a day without putting this on and my lips hurt so bad.”

I looked at the invisible kiss mark, petroleum catching light fractals on my hand, and smiled at him. I was genuinely happy to be going on an adventure, with him this time.

We reached the lower level of The Getty Villa parking. Chad maneuvered his black Toyota Tacoma into the tiny opening, turning right and stopping to talk to the parking lot employee. He paid them the fee and the truck slowly made its way up an incline and into the parking garage.

Chad’s white T-shirt was pulled taut to his chest and his broad shoulders carried most of his weight, an upside down V shape that was one of those body types most girls find attractive. His short hair was quaffed in the front, gel carefully combed upward like a tiny wave. The tan of his skin contrasted the white shirt and made him almost able to be one of the marbled statues from the gardens himself.

There was something pressing about the day. Something I had pushed on him in conversations over the phone and in person. I wanted the fairytale, the wedding, kids and the home, the American Dream. We had been together for four years, since I was fifteen and he was seventeen, high school sweethearts. The normal progression that I knew of at that age was to get married, and with movies out like *He's Just Not That into You*, I was beginning to panic and push my way into his mind.

The nude statues of Roman and Greek gods casted their reflection in the fountains placed near foliage that stretched across the length of courtyards. The gossamer shine of the marble, as slick as the invisible Carmex kisses left on my hand, playcated my need for romance, but wasn't enough to keep the knowing feeling of wanting to push my agenda.

We sat on a bench covered in ivy, crawling up and through trellaces, white gardenia petals falling near my toes. I let my anxiety swirl there in my head asking questions that fell into one another, *Where is this going? Why hasn't he asked me to marry him by now? Should we even be together?*

As all of the questions whirl pooled in my psyche, I radiated the words through my pores.

"Is something wrong?" he asked."

"Well...I don't know. You probably don't want to hear it."

He pinched the hem of his cotton shirt.

"Please, I want to know."

"You know how I asked you when are we going to take the next step? I just don't know how long I can just do this without knowing you want to be with me and take it to the next level."

"Jackie, I told you, I want to marry you, but I don't think it's the time yet."



“Well, when will it be then?!”

“Look, let’s just enjoy this day. We still have more to see.”

I looked into his eyes and saw that he was hurt that I wasn’t enjoying myself and decided to turn away from the questions in my mind and be in the moment.

We got up from the bench and he pulled me closer, smoothing the goose bumps on my arms that had risen there because of the cool of the evening. There was an amphitheater that was supposed to be replica from Greek or Roman times. The steps, rounded and corralled the center stage, widening in length as Chad and I made our way up the them. It seemed to swallow us into it’s gaping mouth, holding us there at the top, the tip of the tongue, it’s precipice.

“Wow, this is how it really was back then huh? Must have been crazy to have this as the only form of entertainment.”

He smiled and traded his glasses for sunglasses, carefully cleaning them with a microfiber cloth, and placing them on the bridge of his nose. The sun was beginning to set and softly light the white steps in orange glow. Everything would have been perfect if the questions in my mind had shut up.

I let them sink back in again, piercing their teeth into my good mood, and destroying the moment that should have been a beautiful thing.

I huffed like a child and let all of the questions circle around us, not a whirlpool any longer, but a tornado.

“I think I want to leave.”

I cut into him with that stale statement, sharpening its edges on the claws that began to grow out of the questions on my mind.

“Fine,” he said, and that surprised me.

I thought that he would have put up more of a fight to stay, but I guess he had just had enough of my attitude and juvenile tantrums. He stood straight up and walked down the steps towards the parking garage, not saying anything, or looking back to see if I was following.

I started to think other things then, worse things. *This is the day then. He's going to break up with me.* As much as that was a scary thought to me, there was also a feeling of lightness and wonder. A wonder about *what would happen if we weren't together?*

I sat myself in the passenger side and waited for him to get in the truck so we could leave everything behind. But he didn't get into the drivers seat. Instead he opened the back seat door and started rummaging through the storage compartment hidden there.

I didn't know exactly what he was doing, but I felt that what I wanted was about to come to fruition.

Our best friend, Elliot, had recently talked me down from one of my spirals of *where is this relationship going*, and let it slip that Chad had been looking at rings. Even still, knowing this information didn't stop my inpatience from poking about the topic throughout the day.

Chad pulled something out of the storage compartment, slamming the top shut, along with the driver side door. I watched him in the rear view mirror walk around the back. He pulled my door open.

“Get out of the car.” His face serious, but soft.

I unbuckled myself and stood in the parking garage before him as he got on his knee, opening a small box.

“Will you marry me?”

A blue topaz stone, surrounded by chocolate diamonds, looked up hooraying the moment with the shine of its stones. Chad's eyes rimmed with tears, which looking back now, I don't know if it was out of happiness or sadness, or both.

"I love you and I want to be with you forever."

"Yes!"

I answered before I could ask myself the important questions. The questions I should have been asking all along. *Did I need him because I loved him, or was I just afraid to be alone? Most importantly, who was I if I wasn't his girlfriend? Who was I?*

But it was too late and I thought I was too in love to go back, so I ignored my subconscious.

The ring was three sizes too big for me, but I took it from the box and slid it on the finger I had always imagined something living there.

"It's beautiful and so unique."

"I know. It has that vintage look that you like. It's also made by a company, the only company that makes chocolate diamonds."

I took the ring off and examined it closely, the name Le Vian engraved written inside the band.

"I love it and I love you."

I put it snuggle on its new home, saying that name, Le Vian, Le Vian, Le Vian, like a chant or incantation, a spell, driving away the questions and the part of me that I didn't know laid dormant inside of me, waiting to figure out what and who I really wanted to be.

### Interpersonal Communication-2010

Community college was a bust because I'd show up in my uniform after working eight or nine hours at base, typing, filing, being reprimanded for no reason, and expect that my brain would be in for learning too.

During that time I was embarrassed to be in my uniform in public because it felt like it drew too much attention and people would constantly talk to me about what I did. I was sitting in a class aptly named *Interpersonal Communication*, a Gen Ed class that thankfully covered the communication requirement, which got me out of giving actual speeches. I was sitting there as the professor described how we need to know ourselves and how we interact with people in order to be successful in life and personal relationships.

She wrote on the board in red dry erase:

*Interpersonal communication is the process of face-to-face exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions between two or more people. This includes both verbal and non-verbal elements of personal interaction.*

Interpersonal communication had already happened and was happening in my life? I thought, *what could I even learn from this class?* The commander of my squadron, Colonel New, barely knew who I was, but she knew enough to give me every task to do, even if it wasn't in my job description. I handled her toe tapping and nail clicking pretty well, if I do say so myself. She once pulled me into her office and told me to shut the door, so no one else could hear her scream at me for not getting a list of 20 to-dos complete by 3:00pm.

Her voice cracked because it was one of those cartoonish types, a cross between Betty Boop and Louis from Family Guy. Her head shook a little bit when she looked at me in the doorway and pensively pointed her finger at me to close the door.

“I TOLD YOU THOSE LISTS NEEDED TO BE DONE BY NOW SERGEANT COPE! WHEN I SAY I WANT SOMETHING DONE I MEAN IT!”

I followed her order and was taking out the doorstopper as she was screaming and then my body told me to stop, to refuse to be treated that way and abused behind closed doors. I knew that I did the best that I could to get the job done, but other people; people higher than me had ignored my follow up with them to gather required information.

Instead of lowering my head and taking the routine bashing I normally did, I put the door stopper back in place, pulled taught the front of my uniform top and said *fuck you* in the most proper and professional way I could manage.

“Ma’am, Colonel Newhouse, I’m not closing this door because I don’t need to be yelled at for something I cannot control. I updated you as to where and why those lists could not be complete by 3:00pm via email. Rest assured those tasks will be complete by close of business, but they cannot be complete by 3:00pm, the personnel whose information I require simply are not here to give it.”

I didn’t wait for her reply, nor for her to excuse me from her office because I was trembling, my hands shaking and throat stretching to hold back the anger built up like a thickness there. I remember her staring at me, shocked that I disobeyed, but she didn’t say a word after I left her there, sitting at her desk.

The interpersonal communication class just reminded me of the times I had been shit on by officers and fellow enlisted personnel in the military. We were deconstructed machines, emotionally stunted, and put back together by a master who attached strings to us, living in our consciousness and pupeteering our responses.

My professor said that interpersonal communication was essential to success. The military is successful, at war, at keeping people away from their personal selves and interpersonal relationships. I know I looked for a door, even a window to jump out of at some point, but they brainwash the part of you that knows how to work latches and knobs.

Scott AFB, Illinois -2010

I was on a state side deployment, the first time I saw the consequences of war. Bundled up in my issued snow jacket, I drove out to the flight line, unloaded the medical equipment for the flight nurses and their patients, and waited for them to set up their stations.

The ambulance bus pulled up to the back of the C17, the cross on the side of the bus fading in the shadow of the plane. The back opened up, two handles pulling heavy doors aside, revealing people on litters.

One man, a bandanna wrapped around his head, covering his eye, was propped up reading a novel. His one eye, bouncing back and forth from page to page. The other's were sleeping, tucked into homemade quilted blankets, various tubes attached to their hands.

We tried our best to make sure that they were covered when we lifted them off the bus. It was always snowing and the planes broke half the time. When they broke the patients had to wait longer in the hospital, which kept them hours, days, minutes, seconds away from their families.

Ice on the flight line, three or four inches thick, took a couple casualties during patient on load. Sergeant Carillo, one of the only mentors I have had in the military slipped and fell, but never went to get it checked.

A woman who came to this country from Puerto Rico as an immigrant, she took her military service serious and was always working, even if she wasn't working.

Her hands, swollen from arthritis and whatever else she endured while serving in the military, pulled at the wooden handles of the litters as she held her end of the weight when we secured the patients in the stations on the plane.

On weekends, we went shopping, TJ Max, Marshall's, and Ross. Her favorite, the jewelry counter at TJ Max. We would shop and fill our baskets with name brand purses, half price, trying to forget the bilateral amputees, and brain damaged patients we saw during the day's missions.

She had my back during missions, ensuring that I had what I needed to load the supply truck with the equipment for crews. She made me beans and rice on the weekends. Brown pinto beans cooked to a softness, green olives and onions seasoning the water, adding flavor to the boil.

Her rice browned even more in olive oil, covered in tomato sauce and finely sliced garlic cloves. I scooped mounds of it up onto plates and gained around ten pounds the six months we were out there because of it. I even failed a fitness test because of it, but that's a different story.



She had a purple heart. She told me the story one day, while lowering the flame on the pot of beans. She said she had been in front of a building that exploded and she fell on her stomach. She felt a stinging in her back, but saw others lying on the floor, unable to get up. A trained medic, she brushed the dirt off, and started to triage the wounded. She rounded a couple up, applied pressure to wounds, kept them calm, all while having her own wounds, shrapnel to the back.

She told me all this in a way that didn't praise her actions, but showed that she was just doing what she was trained to do.

She spooned mouthfuls of beans as she paused on certain words, like shrapnel, amputee, and it wasn't until I loaded my first patient onto a plane that I understood why.

Desert Queen July-2012

1. Female in a deployed location that on a scale of 1 to 10 is about a 4 states side and sometimes an 8 in the desert.

2. Soldier 1: Hey whos that hot chick over there?

Soldier 2: Who, becky???

Soldier 1: Is that becky she's so hot!!

Soldier 2: She turned into a desert queen wait till we get back to the states.

He pulled his phone out and casually took a picture while I laid on my stomach. The Soju had started to wear off, and my liquored brain thought that there might be something wrong with

this action. I looked at him and know that my expression must display something off because he says, “Don’t worry I’m not that kind of guy, I’ll erase it.”

He showed me the photo on his iPhone: my white body on his black comforter, hair covering my face. I watched his finger press delete, and it disappeared into the ether, forever, I hoped. I ended up falling asleep next to him, and he tried to wake me up, wanting more.

“No, I’m too spinny,” I said.

“Come on; I can’t keep my hands off you.”

“I don’t know I feel...”

He stucks his hand down the front of me and started to circle up and down, but I couldn’t feel anything. I told him not to, but he kept going. I figured the only way to get him to stop is to fake it, so I faked it and he finally stops. We fell asleep.

In the morning, I looked over at his face, still as handsome as I thought he was when I was drunk. His haircut lined up around the edges of his forehead, accentuating his cheekbones like small, perfectly formed mountains; mountains formed by Gods hands. His tattoo reads “Lobo” under an ethereal, Our Lady of Guadalupe, on his bicep, and it ripples slightly, and her face seems to wink at me. I stretched my hand over his head to grab my phone off of his nightstand. Five missed calls from my fiancé, Chad, flashed across the screen and seared into my conscience. *Why did I do this?*

Chad and I had been together since I was fourteen. We grew up in a small town, Temeculs, just thirty minutes away from San Diego. He was my first love, my first everything. I thought that I loved him, I’m thought that I still did, why else would I have felt that bad? When I decided to join the military, he encouraged me, told me I could do and be anything I wanted. I needed a way out of a small town and the money to get an education, so the military provided me

with opportunity, and a place to become something. It was chance to figure out who I wanted to be.

After six years of dating, I pushed, almost forced him, to ask me to marry him. He hid our engagement from his family, almost as if he was ashamed. I never stopped bugging him about how uncomfortable I felt about it. That year, we had grown apart, not speaking about how we felt about each other. Our phone conversations had no substance. He didn't hold my hand in public anymore and seemed to stay a good distance away from me when we would walk anywhere. I thought the next level of commitment would cement our love for each other. I thought it was what I wanted, or what I needed.

Coming out Edwards, AFB, CA was the next move in my military career. Attending Airman Leadership School would allow me to promote to the next rank of Staff Sergeant. When I first arrived for duty, I realized that I was the only female in a class of 15 males.

Senior Airman Rico Lobo had glanced at me on that first day of class, his eyes filled with green and golden prisms reflecting color like crystals, beckoning attention. I looked away from him because something stirred inside of me. A feeling that I had never felt rose from my stomach and warmed the tip of my nose. I positioned my ring in everyone's line of view, resting my head in my hand, any time that I got a chance. I tried to use the ring as some talisman to ward off evil or unwanted conversations. When it was time for introductions, I threw Chads name out like a catapult, demolishing enemy advances. If only I knew that none of this mattered.

Rico became a person I tried to avoid, for fear of connecting even more with him than I already had. He seemed to know that I felt some way because he always waited for me after training was done. We talked about my fiancé, and he asked me questions about myself that I don't even remember ever being asked before. He wrote songs, poetry, and enjoyed

contemplating art. He would casually throw out lyrics he wrote during lunch breaks and looking back, it was all a game. But still, my interest mounted, and I couldn't not deny I had a crush.

I stared at Ryu's bedroom ceiling, examining flecks of moulding paint festering in the corners and crevices of his room, still trying to recount what exactly happened to me that night.

I had been invited to go out with the boys for Korean BBQ. They kept buying bottles of Soju, and I didn't want to seem like a light-weight because I had just turned 21. I couldn't taste the soju after about the fifth shot; it started to taste like water. All of them whooped and hollered when I out drank, Senior Airman Michael Welton, an aircraft maintainer, known for drinking.

"Cope! Cope! Cope!" they chanted as I slammed the shot glasses onto the table.

We headed to Senior Airman Robert Choi's house for the after party and I got into the car with them.

When we arrived, Choi opened the door to his garage and let everyone in. I made my way towards the entrance, but Rico pulled me back by my waist. His hands warmed the cold flesh of my mid-drift, and I collapsed, melted, into him. I tried to focus on Rico's face, but my vision was wobbly, lines blurred like children's drawings. I did notice Choi nodded his head after Rico looked back at him, and he shut the door.

Rico pressed his body against me, pushing my back into the wall of the garage.

"C'mon I know you like me. I see you staring at me in class. It's ok I stare at you too. I know you caught me. We are just two people who like each other," he whispered.

His lips hovered over mine, suspended. I turned my head to avoid his kiss, even though I wanted it.

"I like you, I do, but you know why I can't..."

“Look anyone who doesn’t see what they have right in front of them and doesn’t treat someone like you like a queen is a loser. Mami I would treat you like a queen.”

He pulled my face to him, and I gave in.

I felt he was able to see into all of the dark places I hid my vulnerabilities. I felt wanted. I didn’t feel guilty, mediocre, or fat. He made me feel seen and I fell for it. I had been fighting the feelings he conjured inside me all night. I let them wash over me. His tongue was wet and warm, and everything I wanted it to be. He kept whispering into my ear, everything I wanted to hear, holding the bottom of my ass with his grip. My hands wandered to his biceps, flexing and taut. He scooped me up and held my body against the wall until he asked,

“Do you wanna go to my place?”

I nodded, and laid my head, eyes closed on his chest, waiting for him to carry me away.

I remember Rico loading me into his Mazda Speed 3, and we arrived at his house. After that, I think sex. Yes, sex that I wanted. I think. I know I wouldn’t have done it sober, but he said I asked him to take me back to his house. I only remember telling him I couldn’t go to his place because I didn’t have a toothbrush.

It didn’t matter anyways. I was there. I made a mistake, and I had to figure out how I was going to tell Chad. He would have been broken by what I had done. He would never take me back or wanted me to be in his life. I didn’t want to be alone. I had fought so hard not to be.

Rico turned to his side and faced me.

“You should probably get going now. We should go in at different times, so no one thinks anything,” he said, smoothing a stray hair from my face.

“Ok. You’re right. Best to keep everything professional.”

At least we were on the same page with separating work from play. I took my work very seriously, and I didn't plan on anyone or anything interfering in my progression to the next rank. I kissed him on the cheek and got ready for class.

While putting on my clothes in Rico's bathroom, I felt the need to take a shower, but I knew that it wouldn't do any good for the cleansing that I need. I couldn't get Chad out of my mind, so I chose to turn off my phone and handle the issue later. Layering a new toothbrush Rico gave me with toothpaste, I scrubbed my gums until they bled, spitting the rust colored foam into his unclean bathroom sink. I put the clothes on from the other night, left and caught a cab over to my on-base hotel room to ready myself for class.

Opening the door to the classroom, I took a deep breath and headed to my seat, at the end of the U shaped conference table set-up. Rico tried to get my attention from across the room, but I ignored him. He walks over to me and took Choi's seat.

"You don't sit there," I said.

"Now I do. Have to sit next to my favorite girl, Mami."

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Welton wink at Rico. Rico shielded the side of his face with his hand, just in case I decided to turn my head and figure out what they are saying. I knew what they are saying, I didn't have to read their lips. They snickered, and I turned my body away from them, hands trembling in my lap. I pretended to flip through my coursework trying to make it seem like I wasn't paying them any mind. When Welton says,

"Oh yah she'll be a real desert queen if she ever gets deployed."

I didn't quite know what a desert queen was, but it couldn't have been an endearing term. I looked it up on the lunch break. It referred to a female that gets deployed overseas. A female that is not particularly attractive in the States, a four on a 1-10 scale becomes at least an eight

overseas. She becomes a desert queen because of all the attention that is garnered by the men around her.

I sat outside the schoolhouse building, clenching the sides of my uniform pants. I glanced at my reflection created by the glass on my phone and wondered if Rico was lying when he told me I had beautiful eyes. The boys walked by me talking to each other, not looking back, or inviting me to eat lunch with them. Rico was the last to leave the schoolhouse. I feel like I wanted to call to him, but I decide not to. He walks by me like all the rest, as if I was someone he never met before.

I tried to call Chad during that time and tell him about what I had done, but the gravity of my sin scared me. Not only was I a whore, but a liar and a coward. I talked to him on the phone that morning and he didn't suspect anything was wrong. I tried to make our conversations briefer than normal, simply because I couldn't stand to hear myself talk anymore.

“Can't wait for you to come home,” he said.

“Me too. Me too.”

Airman Leadership School ends, and I was sent back to my Unit at March Air Reserve Base. The opportunity to deploy to Afghanistan arises and I decide to volunteer.

I break up with Chad over the phone. Explaining that I just didn't love him anymore. I still couldn't tell him the truth.

“Are you kidding me! How does someone just stop loving someone after six years?!” he cries.

“I don't know Chad. I'm just not in love with you anymore. I love you as a person, I do, but I can't be with you anymore.”

I felt that Chad was better off without me anyway.

I wasn't afraid of deploying. My mentality at that point was that if something did happen to me while I was over there, it would be karmic justice. That was my punishment.

Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan-17 September 2012

It was on my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, ducked down under a plywood desk like a grade-schooler in a fire alarm drill, in a wooden shack on the flight line, when I realized that I was in for some shit. In a shack that they told me would be my workspace for five months. After flying through, what I thought, was every single time zone the world has to offer, my eyelids slipped lazily over my glazed pupils as Staff sergeant Mays ran down her list to train me.



“Look, first you have to make sure the crews get enough crew rest. If you don’t do the math correctly then we burn a crew and they have to start that crew rest again. Believe me this is one of THE MOST IMPORTANT things on the checklist.”

I stared at the Zulu time converter chart and the numbers shook and blurred blinking like neon lights. Let’s note that I failed Algebra three times in high school and a simple 24 hour calculation might be easy for some, but I always need to make sure I double, triple, and quadruple check my work if it has anything to do with math.

Her words started to blend into each other and the helmet on my head pushed its weight on my brow making me feel older than I was in the moment.

“You....have ... to... put on...your... flack... vest,” she said, and I swore that she was doing it in slow motion or like one of those dubbed movies that take all of your brainpower to focus on not getting annoyed at the extra mouth movements.

She looked at me as an alarm went off from some loudspeakers outside. It mustn’t have woke me up enough because I waddled over to my vest-stand and slowly put it on. I thought I might have caught a break and we could just pause the training for a moment, but she gathered the clipboard and sat next to me under the desk.

Her breath smelled of curry and BBQ sauce and gave me an idea of what I should expect at the chow hall during my time deployed. What I would find out later is that everyone who arrives in country, for at least a week, experiences the worst case of the runs that anyone can imagine.

It happened the second day in country when I realized the curry or whatever the meat in red sauce was, had unknowingly been contaminated by an alien spore and I felt like Sigourney Weaver in the last scene of Alien as the little bastard burrowed out the inside of her stomach, but

worse, in my case it wasn't my stomach. I was in the restroom so long that someone sent a search party for me, knocking on the door and making sure that I was still alive to return to duty.

"Uhhh Sergeant Cope, are you okay in there?"

"Yup. Uh... I think I'm dieing a little... I'll be right out."

"You'll be okay. Happens to everyone. Stay away from the salad next time they wash it in chlorine."

"Chlorine!"

Let's just say I didn't touch it again the rest of my deployment.

Back to Sergeant Mays and I under the desk, it didn't occur to me at the time that death was so close, no, not food poisoning, but in the form of IDF attack. When you're 22 you think that nothing can happen to you. You think you can go unscathed because you're just too young to die, even if you're sitting in a flack vest with a helmet, M-16 strapped to the front of your body, and rockets flying in the air that might or might not hit you where you stand.

Staff sergeant Mays was still talking and going over procedures, the pulsing alarm screaming in our ears.

"As mission controller you HAVE to be by the phone at all times. They call in here for accountability so we can make sure everyone is all clear after an attack."

My head rolled up and down, agreeing to everything out of exhaustion.

"All clear. All clear," the big voice rumbled on the speaker, God-like.

I let my eyelids close just for a bit, but I almost fell forward onto sergeant Mays.

"Maybe we should take a break. You've been up for about 18 hours might be time." she patted me on the back.

She set me up in the supply room, laid a litter on the ground; I curled up on it, flack vest pinching me at the sides, helmet scraping my ears. Oh, but it was glorious. I slept, only for about fifteen minutes and the world got put on hold, everything suspended in a moment and the sound of the alarm still rang in my ears.

Paint it Black -September 18 2012

The next day I stepped into the makeshift plywood workspace, a shack that reminded me of an all-boys tree house, the clubhouse from *Little Rascals*, to be exact.

A 52" T.V. screen sat on the wall displaying multiple open computer windows. Mission information, a flight path program tracking military aircraft in real time, and an excel spreadsheet

recording crew rest and patient load. All of which, I was a master at juggling, except for crew rest calculations.

From the corner, music floated from a Sergeant's personal Bluetooth speaker sitting on his desk, distracting me from the tour the Chief Master Sergeant was giving us. *Paint it Black* by the Rolling Stones, a low humming buzz, caught me with its melodic tune and I started to sing it in my head. *I see a red door and I want it painted black.*

I had never heard the song before, not a big fan of the Stones, at the time. Bruno Mars and Lady GaGa was more my taste, typical nonsense ballads about love and partying. I was only 22, and had only just begun to dabble in my creative interests.

I started paying attention again when the Chief said, "We've been hit a lot this past week because of September 11<sup>th</sup>."

IDF, indirect fire was explained during the briefing meetings we had before we arrived in country. To my understanding, there was a number of weapons including rockets, that the enemy uses to fire onto the base with an idea of a target, but only roughly. Most of the time, they would try to hit the flight line, where all of the Air Force's aircraft were parked awaiting to transport patients.

*I see a red door and I want it painted black*, my boot tapped. The music had entangled itself with the talk of rockets and explosions and kept lingering there in between thoughts.

The tour ended in a break room. If the tree house vibe wasn't already cemented in the fung shui of the place, this solidified the aura. Two beat-up leather couches rested in the center of the small room, which was only about 200 Sqft. Flags of various sports teams, Dallas Cowboys, New York Yankees, New England Patriots, Philadelphia Eagles, among others, in screaming oranges, sarcastic blues, triumphant purples and reds, hung around the perimeter of

the ceiling, showcasing the team and city spirit of those that purposely placed them there.

Another T.V. played a pirated version of *Prometheus* for a couple people from the crew we were there to replace.

“Welcome to the Stan, guys.”

One of the men on the couch waved, put his hands behind his head and yawned sleepily. Two members of my team, Technical Sergeant Amezcua, and Master Sergeant Dybski, walked around me to have a seat on the other empty couch. Dybski, was a Boston born and raised native who had an accent that was straight out of the show *Family Guy*. I sometimes pictured Peter Griffin’s cartoon head on Dybski’s body, when I closed my eyes and listened to him talk.

He sat and tried shootin’ the shit to the guys and I could see that they wanted him to just shut up. This is how most people looked and felt about Dybski the whole five months I spent in Afghanistan, but he was only trying to be liked by people and his crass jokes and over talking was a sign of that. He wasn’t a terrible person, in between spits into water bottles from his chew, and his snide comments, there was a sweet person who longed for the human connection, as we all do. A comm guy, he set up and was in charge of all communication including, LMR radios, wifi, internet issues, etc. He was also, as we learned later, dubbed the NCOIC (non-commissioned officer in charger) of the night shift.

A siren started going off, but no one acted like it was a big deal. All of them still sat on the coach until the Chief came in and made us all put on our flack vests. Just like the day prior, the shrill shrieking sounds of the alarm last for five minutes but faded out and the loudspeaker called and ALL CLEAR.

“Yup, since I’ve been here been happening like that every day.”

“Dybski, you’ve only been here a week before us,” Sergeant Amezcua laughed.

“Well, yeah, but that’s enough to know by now. They don’t hit shit really.”

“That’s not true,” one of the crewmembers on the couch chimed in.

“Yeah, they hit a Shanook a couple weeks ago. Three people were on it and it burned up.”

“Damn,” Dybski shook his head.

“The problem with these IDF is you never know what’s going to be a dud and what’s really going to hit and fuck shit up.”

“Best to be safe than sorry,” I say and hug the sides of my flack vest.

“You look ridiculous Cope,” Amezcua pokes.

“It’s not my fault they didn’t have a small vest.”

The vest was at least a size too big for me and made me look like I was a turtle. There’s no way I could properly run away, or run to anything. My M16 was even worse because it was almost the same size as me and longer than my arm span.

“Here, let’s try something here,” he said, handing me his M-9 pistol in its harness.

“What do you want me to do with that?”

“Put it on, you’ll look bad ass with an M16 and an M9.”

“Fine, gimme it.”

I took the holster and threw the straps over my shoulders, making me feeling an old school gunslinger. I placed one palm on the insides of the harness and one on the butt of my m16 dangling across the front of me, sight to the ground.

“Alright, smile!”

It was hard for me to smile while placing my hands on guns. Even still, I smiled anyways, a big cheesy one, a non-threatening one, which made the photo even more laughable. I gave him

back his pistol and set my M16 in its stand, un-doing the velcro of my flack vest. From the corner of my eye, I saw Prometheus, the robot played by Michael Fassbender, melting into the alien landscape. I later understood how much that image was a foreshadowing of our circumstances.

The Stones were still playing from someone's desk and I couldn't help but pairing it as the soundtrack to his death, to all death. *I see a red door and I want it painted black.*

#### For Military and Prisoners-November 2012

I didn't know until two months into deployment that there was a prison on base. I overheard Sergeant Amezcua mention prisoners in passing, and shrugged it off thinking that it just might be a prison from another base. After all the U.S. military had a lot of prisons everywhere and it was very commonplace. The idea was solidified one day when I pointed out a wooden crate outside the chow hall spray-painted, *For Military and Prisoners*. Two nouns juxtaposed seemed to naturally go together.

We were served surf and turf every Friday. Lobster tails, steak, and breaded shrimp. The Air Force always seems to have the best food, even on a deployment in the sandbox. Every Friday I pointed to the white flesh of split sea creatures, their brine and butter smothering them in the serving tray. My first time ever having lobster was in Afghanistan, and now having had lobster back in the states, it's quite a different experience.

All of us looked forward to those Fridays and piled as much as we could onto our plates. Maybe a part of that was missing home and worrying we might never get to eat steak and lobster again. Or maybe it helped us forget.

The feeling of the rubbery crustacean between tongue and gums. The salt of the butter dripping down our palletes, cleansing them, like new. The steaks dry flavor that kept you from swallowing it without a sip of water, but even still it was just enough reminiscence of the real thing to keep us going

The breaded shrimp, battered, golden brown, dripped oil on my plate and I let the crunch fill my eardrums, until all that existed was myself chewing and breathing, and not the low hum of men's voices talking to each other about their crude fanatasies or jokes. There wasn't anything else that I would have wanted in those instances, just enough crunch to meditate myself away into a distant place.

The bottles of hot sauce on the table always stared back at me and I would grab them by the necks and violently sprinkle everything on my plate, red. I never really liked hot sauce before Afghanistan. The spice that stings the nose, some vinegary ones that clear sinuses like horse radish, all of them, I would've never used if the food was good enough to make me feel more than a false sense of home and numbness from the grim situation of war.



120 Degrees- September 2012

The dirt caked, hardened, around the bottoms of my tan steel-toed boots. Heat encapsulated my body as I lifted the heaviness of my feet up from the mud and pushed them forward, one after another, one after another. It was Sunday, a day off after six days on. The morning was bright and I swallowed, dryness in the back of my throat gathering like wrinkles in the mouth. My canteen had been empty for hours because I neglected to fill it up after the last mission.

Never thought that thirst could be that bad until I ended up in a part of the world where the summers reached 120 degrees. Sweat rolled down my spine as the helmet pressed itself into my brow, leaving a red line on my forehead. M-16 dangled diagonally attached to a strap on the front of my body, the stock of the rifle loosely clanging against my flack vest. I kept pulling at the strap because the muzzle of the rifle dragged on the ground, collecting earth that I would have to clean out later.

The outside of the chow hall had a line of Airman, Soldiers, and a few token Marines. It had been six hours since last chow and I wanted to hit everyone in the face. Amezcua asked me, "You miss home?" I looked away, watching an Afghan local chow hall janitor sweep crumbs into a dustpan, taking gulps of poisoned burn-pit air. I couldn't feel anything anymore and the sureness of who I was never more unclear.

"Do you miss home," I answered back.

He coughed into his hand, "Only the food."

"Yeah, me too."

#### Orders-October 2012

(a) A command proceeding from a **military** superior. An association of **military** persons under a bond of certain peculiar rules; especially, such an association of knights in the Middle Ages, or a body in modern times taking a similar form, membership of which confers some distinction.

On October 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, during my first IDF attack, I sat there thinking that I could save everyone, even if that rocket, or whatever it was came in and tore me in every direction. I looked

at my teammates, the Chief Nurse, Major Dee, and said to myself that I would sacrifice myself for them. But it was also a selfish attempt at making amends with what I had done to Chad. We've all heard the stories of someone jumping on a grenade to save their comrades or the medal of honor stories that explain inhuman feats, I figured if I was going to go it would be with a bang.

There was also thought in my head that one last act, the act of dieing, for nothing really, as I look back, would have erased the mistake that I thought I had made. I was trying to be a martyr in my own mind.

Sergeant Moya, a witty and sarcastic kind of guy, had been wandering around the first floor of the building, using the toilet maybe, or just down there for fucks sake, looking at the medical equipment. Either way, when the alarms sounded he calmly made his way up the stairs into the control room where everyone was readying to head down to the concrete bunker that should have protected us all from shrapnel, at least.

He gave a *what's up* look to everyone who had already put on their flack vests, IBA, etc. The alarms trumpeted outside and vibrated the walls, but Moya didn't seem to mind or care. You see, he'd already deployed, this was nothing new, to him these foreign sounds might have been a monotonous soundtrack. A soundtrack that just became a commonality of being deployed, but that was my first time I experienced the soundtrack.

What became more natural to us was the idea that if something was going to happen it was going to happen and we would just have to take that coin toss with vigor, trying, at best, to enjoy simple things like the way Dybski fell asleep and opened his mouth at his desk. We'd place things on his sleeping body, covering him one time with candy bars and women's

underwear that had been gifted to us by concerned civilians back in the states. We'd all have a good laugh at the photos until he found out what we were laughing about and got butt hurt.

Those are the times we needed because the moment the shit hit the fan and the noises started, there's no doubt that everyone had a thought of death.

I looked at Moya's calmness and really couldn't understand how his heart wasn't ripping out of his chest running for the bunker on it's own. I remembered what Sergeant Mays had told me about staying next to the phone at all times and I was insistent on doing so and staked my claim by my computer monitor, helmet strap squishing my chin and cheeks.

"I have to stay here, you guys go," I said to them.

Major Dee looked to me, kind of bewildered in what was really going on, but all the same trusted my judgment and nodded. His helmet stuck halfway on his stringy white hair and his bifocal glasses had clouded up, I don't know how, but maybe because he was laying on the ground like the rest of us.

He turned his back and waved Amezcua, Dybski, Moya, and Castillo to follow him down to the bunker.

"No, no, no, Cope what the hell do you think this is?"

Castillo rushed my desk, pointing his finger vigorously at the phone as I sat in my roller chair, situating myself for the worst. His thick Ray-Ban glasses rested on his nose, holding up most of the weight of his helmet from pressing down on his forehead. He had placed a joker from one of the card decks gifted to us by more civilians in order to resemble Joker from the movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

"I have to stay here. If the crews call I have to be here."

“What?! You really think there’s going to be people wanting to call here with this is going on?”

I wanted to push him down the stairs right then because he was taking away my moment of heroism, my moment where if I was to die, that people would say I died at my post, ready for anything that was thrown at me. Looking back now that would have been a stupid thing to put on a gravestone: “Died in the line of fire sitting at a desk waiting for a call.”

“Sergeant Mays told me I had to stay here especially during an IDF attack,” I spat at him.

“No one is going to be calling for you at that desk, everyone is in their own bunker taking cover right now. You’re not going to do any good here. Come with us.”

His voice raised, as if it were an order, but he couldn’t give me orders, he was neither my supervisor nor the NCOIC (non-commissioned officer in charge) of our AEOT (aeromedical evacuation operations team).

“I’m staying, you go.”

My resolve was unbrandished and I wasn’t about to lose that gunfight. I was more willing to lose my life than argument with Sergeant Castillo, even if he ultimately ended up being right. No one ended up making their way to the bunker because in the midst of our argument the Big Voice called, “All Clear.”

Amezcuca looked out the window of the door towards the flight line where we heard most of the noise come from. It made me nervous how close he was to the glass and even though the All Clear was given I imagined his face being shredded by shards of glass from some unknown blast that could have hit at any moment.

“What the hell are you doing by the window? Get away from there,” I scolded.

He looked over and grinned at me, thoroughly enjoying that I was worried about him.

“Wait, you mean this window,” he stuck his face even closer to the glass.

“Ugh, yes, don’t be stupid, you don’t know if they’ll attack again.”

“Ah Cope you’re too worried, just calm down.”

“Calm?! Okay, stay by the window then see if I care.”

He pushed the handle opening the door and stepped out on the top of the staircase, where he held onto the railing and examined the flight line.

“Looks like one hit a C-130, all the fuel’s spilled on the ground.”

When I heard fuel, I didn’t realize that C-130’s have a capacity of 6,700 **gallons of fuel**, and any rocket, that wasn’t a dud, would have ignited everything within a football stadium radius. I took this information and stored it, trying not to give it much thought.

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radish, all of them, I would've never used if the food was good enough to make me feel more than a false sense of home and numbness from the grim situation of war.

Sleepwalk-February 2013

*/ˈslēp, wôk/*

*verb*

gerund or present participle: sleepwalking

1. walk around and sometimes perform other actions while asleep.

synonyms: somnambulism, noctambulism;



Screaming in the living room, in my sleep, my Mom would take me by the hand, age 5, 6, 7, 8 and so on, and lead me back to bed. She learned not to wake me the first time, after I tried to climb the hallway walls. I don't know when it started because I never remember waking up, only what my Mom told me in the morning.

Clinically, the doctor said I would outgrow it, claiming, "It's just a phase."

A phase like the moon maybe, an ever changing cycle that peaks and wanes in the darkness, solitarily.

There was a dream I remember, an obese man sitting in a jail cell, covered in hair monkey-like. He grabbed me by the neck squeezed it, dangled me over a body of dark water, a sewer, next to him and exclaimed, "Don't come back until you get me more tea."

I remember this because I talked in my sleep to my sister and told her that, "Monkey man needed more tea." I didn't see his face, so I can't speak to what he really looked like, but it's the only dream from my childhood that I still remember vividly.

I woke up once taking a shower at 2:00am when I was in highschool. I let the water rollover me for a minute or two until I was in the right mind to ask myself what the hell I was doing. Another time, I woke up outside in the driveway, staring up at the sky, unaware of how my feet were able to move me when I slept, or how my parents didn't wake up to the sound of the garage opening.

The doctor must have been wrong because I kept sleepwalking until Basic Training, jiggling the lock to my locker and dressing in full gear. The girls in my flight didn't try to wake me up, I had already warned them not to. Instead they led me back to bed, took my gear off. Sitting up straight in bed was the new trend. I was told I would snap up look around for a minute or two and lay back down.

I miss sleepwalking, it even though I can't remember the dreams. I just know that I had proof of sleeping, proof that I could sleep, at one point, through anything.

Titus-September 2013

After deployment, I felt like I needed something in the real world to hold onto. I had always had dogs as a kid, sometimes five or six at a time. My Mom has an affinity for chihuahua's and kept collecting them as the years went on. Peaches, Pearl, Pepper, Penny, we almost had all the P names covered.

On impulse, while I was driving back home from the grocery store, I stopped by Pet's Mart. Collapsible cages covered the black top of the parking lot, puppies and adult dogs of every breed yapping and yowling at people passing by. I stuck my hand above an open cage filled with fluffy white cotton ball coated puppies, all of them running over each other to jump on my hands.

They were nothing like the bomb dogs used in Afghanistan. Nothing like the ones that were also airlifted and aeromedically evacuated like their soldier counterparts after taking shrapnel to the body and face. Those dogs stayed in my memory as something else, something unnaturally holy. These dogs were the epitome of freedom comparatively.

I wondered about the black Labrador I had seen strapped down to a litter/gurney, his hind legs casted, IV's running from his body for hydration and probably pumping some type of morphine to calm his pain. I looked at the fluffy puppies and imagined tiny flack vests on them, their puppy bodies lined up in formation, ready for the charge in battle. I didn't want to think about them being blown apart, but I did.

Their little tongues lapped at my fingers as I reached down and patted the head of one of them, little squeaky barks coming from their throats.

What caught my eye were three puppies in a corner cage, one in particular, a sand dapple color, slumped up next to his brother and sister. Both of them were white and black, amber eyes, and looked as if they were part sheep dogs. I only assumed that the big-headed brother was also part sheep dog, but he was different. He was slower and didn't show as much interest in jumping on me as his brother and sister. He slowly clambered over and sat near my feet, looking up at me, the bluest eyes I've ever seen, even bluer than any person's eyes I had come across in my short lifetime.

I had to have him.

“How much is it to adopt this little guy?”

I asked one of the workers who were fixing papers under clipboards.

“Oh, it’s a total of \$300.00, but that covered neutering, microchip, and all their shots.

He’s good to go.”

“Oh okay. Do you know what type of dog he is?”

“He’s an Australian Shepard mix.”

“A mix? What’s he mixed with?”

“Oh hunny, I don’t know. I think the Mother was an Australian Sheppard, but the people at the shelter don’t know what the Father was.”

The puppy still looked up at me, his wide head reminding me of a pit bull, kind of, tendrils of long hair framed his face.”

“By the way, he’s had some diarrhea since we moved him from the shelter, but that’s usually completely normal when they’re moved around too much from place to place.”

It didn’t occur to me that that was a bad sign. I ran my card, paid the adoption fee, and picked up the furry little guy and placed him in a shopping cart. He seemed slower than the other two, but was pretty alert to what was going on around him. His wet tongue slobbered on my chin when I picked him up like a baby and held him.

A neon green collar fitted around his neck, I passed by the personalized ID tag machine and thought about a good name for him. Achilles, Bruno, and Bowser, were all three in the running, but I decided upon Titus. Titus, a name I remembered from playing Final Fantasy as a teenager. The character also had blue eyes. The name fit him and I paid the \$5 for bone shaped dog tag, Titus engraved on it.

At the time, I still lived with my parents and when I brought him home and set him down they both rolled their eyes.

“What the hell did you get a dog for?”

“I wanted to have my own dog.”

“You know that you’re not going to have the time to take care of it. We’re going to end up feeding it and raising it.”

They weren’t wrong. It was a whim purchase and I wasn’t fit to keep anything else alive, but myself, at that time. I ended up going out every weekend to mask what was going on inside me. Every time it would be the same story:

“Just going out this one day, can you watch Titus for me?”

I had purposefully made myself an absentee Mother and had given this puppy a life where he never saw me. Sometimes, I disappeared for three or four days, stuck in a drunken stupor with friends, partying away the feelings. My Mom worked 8 hours a day and couldn’t keep watch of Titus in addition to her five other dogs at the time, and he would spend most of his days in a caged 10’x10’ dog run with three of the five Chihuahuas.

When I was home to take care of him, he wouldn’t take solid shits. From the day that I brought him home, he continued to have diarrhea. His little body would coil upwards like an accordion when he would poop; the liquid stool falling wherever it would may, almost as if he couldn’t control it.

I took him to two vets, where they tested him for all of the common puppy diseases, Parvo being the most common killer in puppies his age. When it came back negative, and all the other parasite tests negative too, the Vet suggested changing his diet and seeing what would happen.

I bought a \$60 bag of easily digestible dog food from them and filled his silver bowl to the brim. His head would dip into it as he scarfed down the kibble, his back legs lifting into the air as he swallowed it down. His appetite was always growing and he never refused a meal, which made me believe that changing his diet would fix everything.

I made sure to stay home that week I found out about his dietary needs and fed him, cleaned up the puddles of liquefied poop around the house, and played fetch with a tennis ball that I rarely ever touched until then.

It didn't last long. The weekend called and I needed to be away from everything again. I needed to be away from myself. As I slammed down shot after shot in San Diego, my sudo-child was alone, outside with three asshole Chihuahua's that always ganged up on the smallest dog in the pen, and that no doubt snapped at him every time he tried to play with them.

It wasn't until one day that I came home, leash in hand, ready to take him on a walk, that I noticed something hanging out of the back of him. It looked like a rag from far away and I thought it might have been a toy or a cloth that was draped on his back end. As I got closer, little dots of brown dried blood covered the area of the dog run.

His paws up on the chain link gate he howled and wagged his tail to greet me, his insides dripping out of his backside. He was calm and happy, no sign that he was in pain. It was like a sausage, covered in red mucous and protruding almost to the ground.

I picked him up into my arms and rushed to show my parents.

"Oh my god! What is wrong with him!?"

I yelled shoving him into the faces of my Mom and Dad, who were sitting at the table.

"He needs to go to the Vet. Oh no, poor, poor thing."

My Mom covered her mouth, gasping at the smell that was now present to my nose too.

“Is it his insides?! Is he rotting from the inside!”

“Calm down. Calm down, I’ll call our vet right now you take him there with your Mother.”

My Dad smoothed things over before I started to spin even further into my hysterics. I loaded his portable dog crate into the back of my car and placed him in it, his blue eyes tracking me.

I tried to steady my hands on the wheel and stop them from shaking. My Mom in the passenger seat, telling me I should of taken better care of him, while saying that I never should have adopted a dog in the first place.

Upon arrival, the receptionist at the desk asked me to sign in, but I couldn’t contain my anxiety any longer. I lifted him up to her, desk level so she could take a good look at his anus and whatever had been leaking from him.

“Sit down, I’ll prepare the room for you right now.”

It took but a minute and she called us back to a room, not unlike the rooms I had seen so many times before in human hospitals, rooms where nothing but sadness lived in the curtains and bedside tables.

“He will be right in here to look at your puppy.”

Titus was placed on the table by the vet tech and she left to get the Veterinarian. He wagged his tail at me, jumping up and trying to get on my lap, where he would have rather been. I kept staring at the piece of flesh dripping on the metal of the table and I couldn’t piece together how he could be fixed.

The door opened slowly, a bald man in a white coat stepping over to Titus.

“So, I heard that this is pressing, and taking a look at this little guy, I can see why.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

He turned Titus on his side, his fluffy ears resting above him, as he stared at me.

“Well, this is an advanced prolapse, which means his intestines have accorndianed in on themselves, which has made them push out of his anus.”

“Oh my God, so that’s his intestines?”

“Yes, and it’s very dangerous, especially for puppies. How old is he?”

“Six months.”

“Okay, well, we can perform surgery on him, but it’s around 3,000 and there’s not a guarantee that this won’t happen again.”

“I can’t afford that.”

My voice cracked and I felt something that had once been weighed down and secured away releasing latches. I knew what the other option had to be.

“Or we can put him to sleep.”

That was it, the unlatching of the last latch. I let myself cry there, in front of a stranger and my Mother as I nodded my head.

“Okay. Do it.”

He filled the syringe with the poison as I laid my hands on Titus, rubbing his ears between my fingers.

“Don’t worry, it’s just like falling asleep he won’t feel anything,” he said.

I sniffled.

Titus’s eyes, sparkly blue, sky blue, crystal blue, God blue, looked into mine as the needle dove into a vein in his paw, his tongue licking my fingertips as his lids closed on the color of his Iris’s, for the last time. His chest fell and his tail, that had been wagging, stilled.



I collapsed above him, hating myself for everything. Hating that I had used him to escape from something that he never agreed to be a part of. Hating that I neglected him to escape even further, into my selfishness. I would have traded places with him in that moment. What shame I felt for being still alive.

I let it all out in that room, rolling out not like waves but bullets, onto the metal table, over the sleeves of my sweatshirt, into his dead fur. I let myself feel the death of Titus, the death of the ones I never got to know about, and the death of a past self. My Mom placed her hand on my back, “There, there, now, it’s over, it’s over.”

But she didn’t know that it had just begun.

Francisco-2013

He was Clark Kent, not Superman cute. Thick black 1950’s style Ray Ban glasses, black hair long in the front, short on the sides to stay in military regulation. I saw him while walking into my squadron on a drill weekend and awkwardly ignored him when we passed and he said hello.

A flutter in my stomach appeared and I beat it down with my mental bat telling myself, *“You’re engaged, you can’t think anyone is cute.”*

Anyways, I didn’t think that he would like me, even if I *were* single. My thought was that Chad knew everything about me, even the bad parts, my selfishness, my ability to turn every good

mood into a negative one. I didn't think twice about anyone else being able to love that about me or accept it.

Francisco Castillo. No one called him Francisco, of course, he was Castillo and I was Cope. We ended up having lunch on drill weekends, talking about things that friends talk about, but not what I talked about with Chad. He wrote poetry and dabbled in music, and had an inquisitive nature in the way he talked. His eyes creased at the sides and looked as if he was thinking hard about a question or scheming about the wonders of the universe and trying to find the best way to relate his thoughts out loud.

He had a nerdy type of James Dean cool; that made me blush. I made sure that I was never alone with him when we went for lunch because I had already started to feel bad for being attracted to him, in any way, shape or form.

After the incident in Afghanistan, my breakup, and everything else that happened during the day we almost died, we finally gravitated towards each other. The military warns people when they go back home about jumping into situations too fast; whether that be sex, relationships, alcohol, etc. They advise everyone to realize that we all might make rash decisions to cope with the trauma we experienced.

I guess you can say that Francisco was my coping mechanism, and his, I. We fell into each other when we came back from deployment, twin pools of pain, wanting to feel something again. Purpose, pain, pleasure, we didn't care. He knew what I had done to Chad and didn't judge. We wanted so badly to purge our old selves and begin new, but we didn't know how hard realizing our shared traumas would be.

Crystal October-2013

1. From the English word crystal for the clear, colorless glass sometimes cut into the shape of a gemstone. The English word derives ultimately from Greek κρυσταλλος (krystallos) meaning "ice".

Some tell their secrets to arouse some sort of sympathy in others, something to make others feel sorry for them. I've heard the term emotional vampire that piqued my interest, while listening to the radio. The thought of a person pulling out invisible energy from the people around them, sucking them dry, collapsing their heads like a juice box, was pretty frightening, but a familiar feeling.

I've felt like that every time I let a civilian, a regular person, in my life as a friend. Crystal was the first, her eagerness to call me *best friend* played into my need for belonging in a world after the other-worldly experience of deployment. I met her working part-time at Best Buy before I deployed.

Her waist length black hair flowed around her hands when she talked to me. She moved it around, constantly shifted it at the top of her crown in order to hide a thinning spot that she was severely self-conscious about.

She would melt the ends of her eye liner pencil with a cigarette lighter, softening the blackness into the wood. She applied it in her upper and lower lid, smudging it with a makeup applicator, accentuating? the shape of her almond eyes.

Her staple was eyeliner, no mascara, no lipstick, no foundation. Her skin was baby soft and smooth like a satin sheet pulled over a mattress. The tenor of her voice, a childish trill, that would rise in frequency as if speaking to puppies or babies. Maybe I liked her because I could subconsciously tell she had been through trauma.

Turns out, she had things that had happened to her, not a twin trauma to mine, but a distant cousin. I felt like I could fix her. At the time, I didn't know that I also needed the fixing, or more so, healing. I latched onto her friendship she offered so openly. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights drinking ourselves into her room of her family's home, where she would always lose herself and end up in the bathroom, puking herself into the toilet bowl.

I held her hair there every time. She let herself go into her dark place and I was there to pick her up, undress her, and place her in the bath tub, running the warm water over her naked body until she sobered up. She'd proclaim her hurt to me, in those moments about her past, about

the love of her life that cheated on her, and I comforted her, finding a weird pleasure of being the one that someone else was counting on.

Her raven hair sopped up the water and became stringy and thin. Her eyeliner running dark rivers down her cheeks. She never did completely take off that black eyeliner. I never saw her with clean eyes. They ended up racooned and crumbly, flakes resting on her pillow.

She became someone who attached herself to me so much I started to forget about my own problems. The alcohol, the puking, the baths, it was a new cycle, a new routine that I desperately wanted in order to feel normal again.

I wanted to make her happy, be someone she could count on, but I know now that she was the emotional vampire, feeding on my empathy, ignoring my own hurt. In a way, I'm also to blame because even when I realized she was using me, I still stayed.

She kissed Francisco when we were out at a bar. The back of her silk hair grazed the top of her ass from across the room as she reached up to grab his face. He stared at me, wide eyed, silently pleading with them; *I don't know what's going on*. She was drunk, granted, and that's the excuse I gave for her when Francisco came to apologize for the kiss. I didn't even have a tinge of jealousy. Nothing sprang from inside my chest, as I know now would have been the normal reaction. Instead I brushed it off and told him, "It's okay, that's just how Crystal is. She kisses everyone when she's drunk."

Francisco raised his eyebrows, pretty surprised that I wasn't slapping him because of it. She was skinny and pretty, that type of exotic pretty that people like to fetishize in movies like *From Dusk Till Dawn*. She was like Salma Hayek in the face, but with fewer curves around the map of her body. All the sex appeal came out when she drank and it was easy for her to have every man falling for her.

Her personality was flirty and kind, a weird mix that seemed to create a feeling of overwhelming positive vibes. There's no doubt she was a popular girl in high school, even though she swore to me she wasn't. It was hard to picture her running in the loop with cholas and gangsters, but it's what she told me about her past.

What's even more surprising is that she had worked with Chad at Best Buy for over four years and I knew about her, but never hung out with her. I was only after I broke up with him that she gravitated into my orbit. She wanted to have fun, but also wanted a human connection. Sometimes, I think about Chad and how he couldn't let himself fall for her. He probably did. She had given him a birthday cake once and I thought it was weird that some random co-worker would show up with a birthday cake for him.

I was jealous then, but didn't admit it to him. I pretended it didn't bother me and moved on. Crystal wasn't ever a second thought in my mind after that incident.

With Francisco, I can only put together that I didn't care about Crystal kissing him because I didn't really feel a lot of things after I came back from deployment.

I let Crystal suck out the emotions I did have left inside me in order to feel even more numb about what I hadn't faced yet. She was addicting and I had a hard time breaking away from her. I started to realize that we were no good for each other the night of my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

We were in San Diego at some club, that cost more than we were willing to spend for cover, but got in for free. My first club experience, I was a little intimidated by the strobing lights and the bass from the speakers. The sounds made me jump and want to hide in the corner at first, but I bought a vodka cranberry and it took the edge off. Crystal suggested we get a round of shots, which I agreed to.

The Jager bombs burned the back of my throat, a black licorice aftertaste sticking to the insides of my cheeks. I turned to thank Crystal for buying the round, but she whispered in my ear she forgot her card.

“I’ll pay you back.”

“It’s okay I got it,” I said and handed my debit card to the bartender. *Happy birthday to me.*

She ran away with some random guy she had started dating by the end of the night, but luckily Francisco was there to keep me company.

I came home that weekend, took out a piece of paper, and began to write. It was an exorcism of sorts to let go and tell Crystal that we needed to part ways and grow in separate directions. I wrote it all out, the frustration, the hurt inside my own head and signed it at the bottom with a wish you well and my signature.

I mailed, changed my phone number, and never looked back.

#### Art of Drinking-2014

No one ever tells you but drinking is an art. An art in the way that every taste and smell of particular liquors, wines, and spirits reminds you of a moment in time that you can never get back, but you try and try with every downed glass.

21, The Magic Castle, a secret password, a first taste with my first love. Three lemon drop martinis. Yellow shavings floating above a cloudy base, condensation resting on the outside of a triangle glass. I could look through and see the ornate art deco molding lining the top of the ceiling, seeming to spill into the walls as I felt my first buzz.

Chad resting his hand on my shoulder to steady me down the stairs. A magician guessing random facts about the audience, but I took a look and saw mirrors on the ceiling after the show. Resting my drunk head on Francisco because he was there with other people from my squadron. Unknowing that he would be my future.

The owl at the entrance, its ruby eyes fading to black.

21, Vodka cranberry, a cheap drink that masks things. A low tolerance, surrounded by men. They buy one, two, three. Laughing because I feel like one of the boys. It spins, the car, the wind from outside helps, but I feel the bile build up. The boys that bought me drinks, next to me, hand a grocery bag. I regurgitate into the plastic, all of them still laughing.

The next night, Soju at Korean BBQ, tastes like water, no flavor, if sipped. A shot burns like rubbing alcohol, the third tastes like nothing again. I drink someone under the table and they cheer. They cheer and I think I'm part of the team. I end up in someone's bed.

22, tiny bar sized bottle of whiskey smuggled into Afghanistan through Francisco's mail. I take it on my day off, six weeks into deployment, tolerance still shit. Gives a nice buzz, but there's no place to get away from everything that's happening.

Square boxes lined with chalk, designated smoking areas. Someone flicks off the ash end of his cigarette, the cold nipping up my nose. It wears off quickly, and I wander to the chow hall to eat myself away from boredom.

23, Back from deployment, vacation, Hawaiian Mai Thai's on beaches. Pineapple juice blurring in grenadine, sweet taste of rum. The stars above Francisco and the way his face looks against the color of his maroon shirt. Three more days, extended stay. He stays too, the Mai Thai's, balconies to hotel rooms looking out to sea.



The darkness swallowing our entwined bodies in a king sized bed, feeling like loving, but not quite there yet. Fingers laced through each other's hair, believing that they belong there.

23, San Diego, Jack and Coke, another get away, run away from things that we can't face yet. Francisco brings his pea coat, double breasted, black English style. A black wiggle dress accentuates my curves that were carved out and defined by daily running on deployment.

The bottle of whiskey the bartender pours, amber brown, clinking glasses, sweating Jack Daniels through pores. Room service pizza on floors, holding onto to porcelain toilets, feeling the cold comfort. Bath's run and soaked pruny in until sober.

24, hard cider and Michelada's in La Cita Bar. Beer requires more to be drunk to get the same buzz. Salt on rims, tomato juice fizzing in beer, tangy and mouthwatering. The sounds from the speakers make me jump, remind me of Afghanistan, makes me nostalgic, makes me miss the purpose behind it all. A purpose bigger than these bars, drinking, and myself.

Light bulbs above a patio, Christmas lights like my families, but they're brighter, blinding, and I get lost.

25, Vodka Cranberry's, still haven't learned my lesson, puking up my whole stomach in the dorms at Cal State L.A. I can't find a purpose anymore.

Sergeant Priest-2015

Priest

/prēst/

noun

1. an ordained minister of the Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican Church having the authority to perform certain rites and administer certain sacraments.

As her name suggested, she was priestly in her manner, her arms welcoming every new, green-horn Airman that arrived at the squadron. Her hair in an A-Line bob cut just above her chin, moved a little when she got upset. Glasses thick, eyes brimming behind them gave looks to officers that would have earned her a court martial if they could speak. But she was tactful, been in the game longer than most butter-bar lieutenants straight out of college, or even some Majors and Captains in the squadron.

She wielded her administrative knowledge to her advantage and made everyone in the squadron bend to her, most of the time. An affinity for Country music she would always play Carrie Underwood, Blake Shelton, and Toby Keith, on her bluetooth speaker by her computer monitor, sometimes singing along to the lyrics. She regularly frequented Stage Coach in Indio every year, basically the Coachella of Country Music.

She was stern in her manner because getting things done was her first priority. The epitome of service before self, she gave her everything and then some when provided a task by the commander. Her nails tic-tac, tic-tacked, on the keyboard, gel polished nails, always neutral colored, in regulation, following the rules.

Her nude-pink nailed index finger pointed to a term in my CDC volume: UTC, Unit Type Code. A little raspy twang to her voice, she softened her eyes when she spoke to me, butter melting in the sun.

“Unit Type Code, that’s actually really important, it tells us how many of our members from each career field are ready to deploy overseas. You are part of that too.”

Sworn to dial, file, and compile, our Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC), was 4A0, Medical Administrator. Every person who serves in the Air Force is given an AFSC, each one unique to their specific career. Our AFSC has long since been treated as secretaries, doing the

administrative bitch work for commanders and anyone else who ranked above us. I didn't know that we were considered as such until I saw it happen to Sergeant Priest.

A new commander arrived at the squadron; let's call her Colonel New. Petite woman, golden blonde bob, almost the same as Sergeant Priest's, but you could tell that she spent at least an hour round brushings, rolling, and styling her hair. She had a voice that could only be described as cartoonish, a hybrid of Betty Boop and Harley Quinn. She asserted her dominance by piling paperwork on Sergeant Priest's desk and filling her inbox with menial requests that could honestly have been said in a conversation considering her office was only 20ft away.

Sergeant Priest never said no, even if it wasn't her job. Colonel New would overload her with work, as with every other officer in the squadron. That's the thing with officers, majority of them don't recognize that the backbone of any military branch is the enlisted personnel. We, the enlisted, the ones who do the menial tasks and wait for the orders from above, are the ones who are the backbone of the military. What they also didn't realize is that most of the people that they shit on wouldn't ever take a bullet for them if they were deployed with them overseas. It's hard to find a shiny penny in a pile of rusted up nails.

A shiny penny, Colonel New was not. Those that don't know how to lead are just bad leaders and those that serve under them are unfortunate, but the job must still be complete, the mission is always first.

Too many times I saw Sergeant Priest swallow the grit in her mouth from being force fed more orders to take-on every additional duty in the squadron. Her experience alone would rank her higher than the whole lot of them put together.

She told me stories of her daughters and her son, how she was proud of all of them and the ways their lives were unfolding. A Mother hen if I've ever seen one. She mothered me too. Preparing me for skill level tests, mentoring me on my military career, and comforting me when I was an eighteen year old Airman who had no friends and ate in my car at lunch.

She had dug the hole with me, got down in there on her knees and lifted me out first, showing me the right way to lead others. It's funny how these relationships form in the military and you gain a sudo-family.

I'll never forget the day I saw her break. She was a sturdy iron bell that weathered the storm, being struck over and over and over again, every time producing the same distinct and perfect note. I saw the fissure in her foundation, I was there the day she just couldn't take any more hits. A barrage of officers came to her desk, shoved things in her face, asked her questions, told her to have work done by deadlines, and she took all of it in, smiled, "Yes Sir, Yes Ma'am."

When they left, and it was just her and I, typing away at our keyboards at our desks she began gasp. The type of gasping someone does after being underwater for too long, trying to pull it back in to the lungs again. An exhausted gasping, a gasp that broke the bell down the middle and she began to waver, tears, I had never seen her cry.

I don't remember what I said to her, but I know that I wanted to get up, put my arms around her and tell her I appreciated her and everything she did for me. I didn't do that though. I didn't even lay a hand on her back in comfort. It was like our uniforms created an invisible barrier around us that reminded us that emotion and showing other people that we cared about them branded us weak. As women in the military we never wanted to be considered weak.

She tried to hide her face away from me, as she heaved and sucked the air around us, her hands trembling, she picked up her keys and she went home for the day. I could see what I would become from watching her that day.

I don't remember what I told her but I wish I could tell her now, and I hope she's reading this, that she was never weak for breaking, every damn person in our squadron was weak for not caring.

#### Reenlistment- January 2016

re·en·list·ment | \ (,)rē-in-'list-mənt  
 , -en-\

variants: or re-enlistment

plural reenlistments or re-enlistments

1 : the act or an instance of enlisting again (as in the armed forces) or the state of being enlisted again  
 reenlistment of soldiers.

2 : the period of service for which one has reenlisted; a four-year reenlistment

A Captain dropped a pile of orders requests on my desk as I was about to go to lunch.

“Those need to be in the end of the day, per the commander,” she said

“Well, they’re going to have to wait I’m going to lunch.”

“Really? You need to get them done by close of business today,” she pointed at the stack.

“I know. I can do that and still go to lunch.”

She gave me a look that told me I couldn’t, even if I could, so I stayed and asked one of my Airmen to pick me up some lunch.

The clicking the keys on the keyboard in the empty office was almost soothing, maybe even a little bit mesmerizing because there was no one around to bug me while I worked.

After sending out twenty odd emails, I set the stack of orders requests in front of me and began to create and cut them according to the dates listed. The clock on the desk kept ticking and it seemed the minute hand was moving to the rhythm of my heart. I took my re-enlistment papers up from the bottom of the stack of orders requests and started to think about what it would be like to leave all the bullshit behind. To leave the potential of getting deployed again, to not have to complete a fitness test every six months, or complete computer based training every drill weekend. I thought about having freedom to change my hair, nails, and place of employment.

I thumbed the corner of the paper work, staring at the box that was labeled, sign here. There I was, skipping lunch because someone else suggested, or told me without telling me to, because they wanted the work done right then and there. I kept thinking that I was going to end up like Sergeant Priest one day, shaking and trembling in front of my keyboard because everyone expected more out of me.

I must have been zoned out for a while because everyone started to filter back into the office. Sergeant Armstrong, one of the Airmen I supervised, handed me the sandwich I asked

him to grab for me and I was in the middle of unwrapping it when Sergeant Davis stepped up to my desk.

She smiled curtly, no teeth, and I knew she wanted something from me.

“Hi, Sergeant Davis. What’s up?”

“So, Sergeant Cope, as career advisor, I see that you’re up for you re-enlistment. Did you find the paperwork I left for you in your box.”

I took a bite into the white bread of the sandwich.

“Yup.”

“Oh, okay so will you have it filled out by the end of the day?”

While dusting crumbs of my keyboard, I swallowed down the dry bread.

“No, I’m not re-enlisting.”

She started laughing and I took another bite of bread.

“Wait you’re not serious are you?”

Before she could get another question in and I could answer her I had accumulated a line of people waiting for me to help them with drive storage issues, email problems, and orders requests.

She pointed to me as she walked away and mouthed, *We will talk later.*

I finished the half warm half cold pastrami sandwich as I listened to the line of people who needed me to walk them through things that some of them had asked me to show them two, three times before. I was good at my job and I knew it. I took pride in being the only person in the squadron that knew how to perform certain functions, work certain programs.

There was only one slot open for Master Sergeant, E-7, for my career field and there was absolutely no chances of me getting promoted into that position because I would have had to

transfer squadrons. As it was, I had been in junior college for eight years trying to get a degree to transfer to a four year university.

I missed multiple classes and semester deadlines because of training and deployments. I sat there staring at the remaining crumbs resting on my camo pants and I didn't have the energy to dust them off. It was a crazy thought to me then, a crazy thought. I was running out of my comfort zone into a uncharted territory. I had never known anything else.

I dipped my head behind my computer monitor so no one would see me texting Francisco.

*I'm not re-enlisting.*

*F: Wow, really?*

*I'm not happy here. They don't appreciate all that I do.*

*F: Well, it's true. If you aren't happy you shouldn't stay. It's going to be hard though.*

*I know, but I can't finish school and do this at the same time.*

*F: I think you should do whatever makes you happy and what your gut is telling you to do.*

A tapping of fingers raises my attention from my phone and Sergeant Davis looks down on me from above the monitor screen.

“So, we need to talk about why you aren't re-enlisting.”

“Okay, right now?”

“Yes, come to the resource Advisors office.”

She led me down the hall to 1Lt. Lambert's office, where the commander and 1Lt. Lambert sat around his desk.

Both of them looked up and offered me a seat across from them.



“Sergeant Cope, Sergeant Davis has told us you don’t want to re-enlist. Can you tell us a little bit of where you are in that process at the moment?”

The commander asked in an inquisitive tone.

“Ma’am, I just don’t believe that the Air Force is the right fit for me right now. I’m trying to get my Bachelor’s degree and it’s really hard to focus on my education when I have all of these other requirements I have to fulfill.”

Sergeant Davis took a seat and furrowed her brow, trying to think of the right words to say to convince me to re-enlist.

“So are you sure it doesn’t have to do with you getting promoted? We can make sure you put on Master Sergeant, we can make that happen,” she said.

“Yeah, actually I do want to be promoted, but I also want to get my education.”

“Well you can still do that and stay in.”

“No I can’t. I’ve been in this long and it hasn’t happened because my focus is 90 percent here and only 10 percent in my studies. I don’t like doing anything halfway, or part way.”

“Okay, what about this, you can re-enlist for two more years, but you don’t have to participate. You can go Non-active ready reserves.”

“So, all of you would be able to get my paperwork done so that I could do that?”

“Yes, of course. We can do that for you so if you choose to come back during those two years you don’t have go through MEPS and the whole process of getting screened to come back to work,” the commander proposed.

I started to have second thoughts about completely letting go of the past eight years of my life and what the commander suggested sounded like a good handhold. It felt like something that

could catch me if I fell, or at least brace the impact of completely submerging myself into civilian life.

“Okay.”

“So you’re on board with that plan?”

“Yes, I’m okay with that I just want to make sure before I sign that I’m guaranteed that the paperwork for NARS is going to go through.”

“The paperwork will be complete, you have my word,” she leaned over to shake my hand.

She was definitely a better commander than Colonel New and might have been a reason that I would have stayed if she would’ve taken command sooner. It was all too late and I knew it was time to move on.

I felt lighter as I walked through the office. Everything was changing around me and I felt myself unburdening myself of work that would have bogged me down mentally for hours. I did the rest of the orders requests the Captain had given to me, making sure I left on a good note. After all, I was jumping into a world without the military. A place where I would have to go full-on civilian. No more yes sir no sir, ma’am.

No more hiding what’s really going on underneath piles of paperwork and deadlines. I sat back in my chair and took a deep breath, realizing that everything would be different. I looked down at my name tag, traced the outline of the letters, C..O..P..E and realized I didn’t know how to be anyone else other than COPE.

Mental Health Evaluation #1 (12 January 2018)  
mental health

noun

1 : the condition of being sound mentally and emotionally that is characterized by the absence of mental illness and by adequate adjustment especially as reflected in feeling comfortable about oneself, positive feelings about others, and the ability to meet the demands of daily life also : the general condition of one's mental and emotional state

2 : health care dealing with the promotion and improvement of mental health and the treatment of mental illness —often used before another noun

Dr. Gustafson hands me a survey to check my mental health for the week. The bubbles are never in the same place, even if I wanted them to be. I have a thought of scribbling in anything and wondering if I could shock her by my choices. Same questions, every time, all of the time.

I figured that there would be some overlap from the last Psychologist that asked me the same questions, but I was wrong. She begins with readying herself on her computer to document any and all evidence I state about my diagnosed condition. She asks the same questions and I begin to open up, pouring out the same details I told to the last person assigned to evaluate my situation.

I give up trying to relay myself and my feelings when I notice her inattention to me and her focus on the documentation. Was this an interrogation? Was there something I said that she took as a lie? Fuck her.

She looks at me past her computer screen, “So you told me about all of the injured patients you saw, but that couldn’t be the only thing that caused your PTSD.”

I imagine myself jumping on her desk, pulling the fake plant out of the pot she has in the corner, and shoving it down her throat. *The only thing?*

“You’re going to have to tell me more about your experiences in order for me to properly place you in a program here in the VA.”

My face starts to burn and I have to calm myself before I tell her to shove it. Getting better doesn’t really seem like an option because of all the hoops I have to jump through in order to find myself again. I start to re-examine Dr. Gustafson from a different light and she

begins to remind me of an officer I deployed with who sat in the office while we conducted missions and lifted the critically injured on planes.

Colonel Marks was forty something, wore her hair in a tight low bun, which stretched her eyes t to her forehead. She stepped on my hat one day because it fell off my desk. She picked it up, asked, “Who’s hat is this?” I claimed it, and she threw it in the waste- basket.

“ Should teach you not to set your cap on your desk next time,” she said.

The matching anger of the incident begins to surface as Dr. Gustafson asks questions in her care-free manner. I calm myself through the rest of the interrogation. Answering the questions with one goal in mind.

At least there might be a solution this time? I can leave here and know that I can be fixed, that I am fixable.

“Okay Ms. Cope, I can prescribe you anti-depressants and Zoloft, are you open to that?”

I shake my head, heat welled up in my cheeks, “No, I won’t not be taking any type of medication.”

I’m numb enough. I stand up and leave before she can offer me anything else.

Uniform -2017

adjective

uni·form | \ 'yü-nə-, förm

\

1 : having always the same form, manner, or degree : not varying or variable uniform procedures

2 : consistent in conduct or opinion uniform interpretation of laws

3 : of the same form with others : conforming to one rule or mode : consonant

4 : presenting an unvaried appearance of surface, pattern, or color .

I thought it was normal, to think of death, all of the time. I thought it was normal to be aware of every sound that happened to happen around me. It occurred to me that dying, was just part of the job description. I didn't care; at the time the rocket hit the wall. I didn't mind staying in the building while everyone else ran to the bunker and saved them selves. I figured I would go down as one of those people who sacrificed themselves for their teammates. To be one of those people who threw themselves on the grenade. I thought that. I thought that there was glory in that, but I don't think that now.

I've come home to a person I can't recognize. I've come home to a family that doesn't understand. A family that doesn't know how to fix what's broken inside my mind. I've wondered if I bleed the same color blood as everyone else, or if I bleed oil, like a robot, a mechanized machine of pre-programmed feeling and thinking. What does everyone see when I talk to them? What would I be if not a veteran? Can I exist without proclaiming this?

Am I a writer, or a writer that's a veteran? If I separate the trauma from my writing, will I still feel the trauma? There once was a time where I was oblivious to war. I don't remember what it felt like to be her. I don't remember what it is to be "normal" anymore. Today, I look at my hands, and wonder if I could have pulled the trigger, if I could have killed the enemy.

I don't know about then, but now, I can't stand to look at my hands even though they never took a life. The horror is in what might have been. If I didn't care about my own life, back then, how would I have valued others' lives? My uniform sits in my closet, covered in dry cleaners plastic, and I haven't had the heart to throw it away.

One day, I hope, I'll burn the fucker, but right now, it occupies space, hiding in the corner.

Mental Health Evaluation #2 April 2018

“Your future self is watching you right now through memories” an eerie meme calls to me while I scroll with my sea foam green nails, selecting the VA appointment time I added into my calendar a month prior. Another doctor, another psychologist that I had been shuffled around

to like playing cards. I couldn't even drive my car that day because my nerves had gotten the best of me.

I sat in an Uber, the man that picked me up, eerily silent in the drivers seat, but I was thankful. I was going to do enough talking in that room. The security guard at the front of the building asks to see my purse and ID, as a couple of old men walk right past him into the doors.

"Veterans ID please," he sticks his hand out waiting for me to produce the ID.

Irritated, I shuffle through my wallets and hand him my ID, with a picture of me and my pink dyed hair.

"Alright, go ahead," he gives the ID back.

In the elevator two veterans hold the door for me, one of them attached to an oxygen machine. They both stared for a minute at my hair, which was a faded pastel pink, at the time. They looked me over to guess who I was there at the hospital for. Luckily, they remain silent and I don't have to tell them, why yes I am a veteran too.

The third floor dinged, doors open, awaited my exit. I walked out of the elevator, not looking at the men and head down the hallway towards the women's clinic.

I signed in and sat down in a chair right by the door.

"Cope, Jacqlyn Cope," the nurse calls.

"Yes."

She leads me to a back room and weighs me, takes my blood pressure, the whole bit. She hands me another damned questionnaire and I scribble down the same answers I always put.

You have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

Do you have intrusions about the event in at least one of the following ways?



- Yes  No  Repeated, distressing memories, or dreams
- Yes  No  Acting or feeling as if the event were happening again (flashbacks or a sense of reliving it)
- Yes  No  Intense physical and/or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event

Do you avoid things that remind you of the event in at least one of the following ways?

- Yes  No  Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations about it
- Yes  No  Avoiding activities and places or people who remind you of it

Since the event, do you have negative thoughts and mood associated with the event in at least 2 of the following ways?

- Yes  No  Blanking on important parts of it
- Yes  No  Negative beliefs about oneself, others and the world and about the cause or consequences of the event
- Yes  No  Feeling detached from other people
- Yes  No  Inability to feel positive emotions
- Yes  No  Persistent negative emotional state

Are you troubled by at least two of the following?

- Yes  No  Problems sleeping
- Yes  No  Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Yes  No  Reckless or self-destructive behavior
- Yes  No  Problems concentrating
- Yes  No  Feeling "on guard"
- Yes  No  An exaggerated startle response

Yes, on all of the above. She looked over the answers, and asked if I've felt like hurting myself in the past couple of months.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head.

“Okay, you can go out and wait until I call you back in to see the doctor.”

I took the same seat in the waiting room. A seat that I could see every exit point, and my back wasn't in front of anyone. She calls me back again and sits me in a room with a plush armchair across from a desk. A knock came at the door and slowly opened.

A woman smiled warmly outstretching her hand. Her raid hair falling loosely in ringlet to her collar bone.

“Miss Cope, you're here because you have been diagnosed with PTSD and we are trying to find out what the best form of therapy for you to move forward.”

“Okay.”

“So can you tell me about what happened to you? What specific event or events do you remember?”

I was pretty perturbed that I had to re-tell the psychologist, this new psychologist, the same story I had told to the last one. It was just irritating that the last one had been typing away while I was talking, documenting I guess nothing.

I retold the incident and she started to ask me the same questions as the survey.

“Okay, when do I get the actual help,” I finally asked.

“We just need to go through these questions again in order to see what type of therapy you need.”

“Okay.”

I couldn't stay in that room any longer without trying to hold back my anger.

“Can you just write me a letter so I can get a service animal or and ESA animal?”

“You want a letter for a service animal.”

“Yes, my apartment doesn’t allow pets and I want to get something now that may help me and I think a dog would help me.”

“Alright, I can do that for you.”

She turned to her computer, and click clack, click clacked with her nails until she printed out the official ESA/ Service animal letter.

“I think you might also benefit from an immersion therapy where you sit down and talk about the incident and desensitize your feelings about the situation.”

Desensitize, isn’t that what I had already been doing in my life?

“Okay, thank you.”

She gave me her card and on top of the letter from the printer.

“Okay so I’ll have someone call you to set up an appointment with you next week to start the therapy.”

“Excellent, thank you,” I forced a handshake and left the office, tossing her business card in the trash can by the security guard that stopped me on the way in.

22 a Day (August 2017)

A guy I once knew and worked with, hung himself from a banister, in the middle of lodging on base. I was told the maid found him, strung up by his belt, note in his pocket.

He was quiet and shy, but always made the effort to talk to me, even when no one else would. I keep thinking about the conversations I had with him and wondering if there were signs there.

I keep picturing him dangling in his flight suit, bruised face from loss of oxygen, and I wonder how bad of a place he was in to go in such a gruesome manner. I mean, at least if I were to do it, it wouldn't be in public, it wouldn't be bloody, nor violent. I want to read the letter he wrote to the world. He wanted the world to see him and know him and understand why he did what he did. They didn't let him speak. The squadron didn't discuss what the note said, but I can only figure that it had something to do with being in the military.

There's this statistic out there now that the VA calculated: roughly 22 veterans are dying by suicide per day, or one every 65 minutes. I'm definitely not the mathematician, but 22 a day is a ridiculous number. There are five military branches and only .5 percent of the U.S population is currently serving in the armed forces.

I keep thinking back on old conversations, at dinners, where he sat across from me quietly scooping his food into his mouth, until someone asked him a question. He was a medical technician and had been deployed a couple of times, taking care of the wounded in the air.

After I decided I wanted out of the military, I went back to visit everyone in the squadron. I thought I could stay away forever but it pulls you from the core and makes you miss it. A pull like an umbilical cord, but it's never the same once severed, shriveled and crusty, saved in a box.

He talked to me on my visit and asked me how I was able to go inactive reserves and not be required to complete the last two years of my obligated service. I didn't know what to tell him, but that it was a process, like anything else in the military, and he just needed the right approval.

His head completely bald then, and a new septum piercing that I noticed was shoved up into his nostrils, so no one can call him out for being out of regulation. He nodded his head and gave me a smile and disappeared before I was able to say goodbye to him as someone else came up to me to catch up.

I picture him waiting there for me to ask him how he was doing and hoping that I could save him from the last resort, the choice he was eventually going to make.

I watched pictures of his funeral pop up on Facebook, squadron member's dressed in blues, carrying his casket, three on each side. I wanted to be there, but I didn't know how to be there without feeling guilty. His squadron photo flashed on a memorial service pamphlet, his smile, wide and pure, the only smile I will remember him by.

## The Brownie (2017)

It was for existential research, I told myself, thumbing the brownie bite labeled, 50mg. My roommates had bought it at a weed shop in Alhambra, close to campus and I was eager, to say the least, to experience something I never had before. As soon as we got back to the dorm I unwrapped the thing and plopped it in my mouth. I rolled it around in there trying to taste the weed that was baked inside. It was like buttery grass, chocolaty, but a strong bitter aftertaste lingered on my tongue.

I thought about how much trouble I would have gotten into if I had tried weed in the military, while I was still enlisted. No doubt I would have been kicked out. They have zero tolerance for drugs and if you pop dirty in a random pee test, which they do frequently, and then out you would go, carrying your dishonorable discharge over your head like a sign twirler for the rest of your life.

Bring someone else's pee, you say? Nope. That doesn't work because personnel are selected to be in the room with you, advise you to take off your pants (if female), sit down, and press your genitals up to the plastic cup and slowly let it out, all while trying to make sure you don't pee on your hand when the cup becomes too full.

I was the lucky winner about five times, which doesn't seem so random because there were people in my squadron that never got selected.

About an hour went by and I felt nothing. I mean I thought that I just didn't eat enough of it and decided to eat four tacos and take a walk with my roommates. I had a deep desire, at the age of 26, to be a regular person, to experience normal people experiences.

Everything slammed into me at once like a pillow filled with down, which I let myself float in, barely keeping my eyelids open. I was on the phone with Luis, telling him I thought I

was immune to weed. My roommates, sitting in armchairs across the room turned their heads towards me and my voice began to slow down, I couldn't get the words out anymore, they were rolled up in my tongue that was too relaxed to budge.

It was hilarious to me, so I uncontrollably laughed until it turned to tears, in an instant. I couldn't control the emotions that I could keep in check so nicely, locked in a safe box in the corner of my mind, that I only had the combination to. I felt like my roommates were laughing at me because they weren't high and I was just a show for them. My mind planted insecure thoughts in my head that I hadn't had since middle school.

*Did they like me? Did I fit in? Why would they want someone so screwed up as a friend?  
Am I the joke?*

I was a mess. I could feel the world turn sideways and I couldn't stop myself from turning with it, so I sat down. My body twitched. I moved every time I felt someone's invisible fingers poke at my forearms, thighs and stomach. My eyelids bore down, sending their weight curtaining my pupil. I let it happen, thinking the darkness would be my savior.

An elephant turning into a pair of scissors, balancing on a blade of grass. The colors expanded kaleidoscope-ish in nature and I spun into another galaxy, my body flipping around on the ground like a fish. Later, I was told that I looked like the girl from the exorcist, involuntarily moving myself up from the floor.

The other world scared me, only because I felt I left my body behind to get destroyed by something that might come through the window, the blinds, a rocket that didn't kill me the first time around.

I forced my eyes open and stared at the face of one of my roommates, her features completely different from how I remembered them. She was holding onto my arms. I clearly

heard her say, “Do you have something to tell us?” and “You need to calm down, we don’t want to be taking care of you all night.”

There was something swirling, whirl-winding inside my chest, becoming tighter, and tighter, a rubber band pulled to it’s taught point. I did have something to say to them. I was afraid. Afraid to become close to people who might not understand that I had broken pieces inside me. I had everything to say, but didn’t.

After the effects wore off, I learned that it was an extreme rookie move to take more than 5g of any edible your first time. Even though my skin still tingles when someone pulls out an edible around me, recalling of the sensational trauma of everything, the experience wasn’t the one I was looking for, but it was the one that I needed.



## Burn Pit Dance-2018

### Burn Pit

1. Burn pit refers to an area in military sites devoted to open-air combustion of trash. The phrase was first used to refer to the common way of getting rid of waste at the U.S. military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since I've come back from Afghanistan, I gratify my need for nostalgia and purpose by feeling the rush of cars half an inch away from me as I pedal my way down the streets of Glendale, no helmet, swallowing the smoggy air. A zero adrenaline junkie, I won't even get on rides at the amusement park, no, not even now, but there's something inside that switches on recently that brings me back to the mountain ranges around Bagram Air Force Base. The L.A. air is doused with chemicals, smells of food, oil, and brine, not unlike a burn-pit, fewer carcinogens, but it harkens back the feeling of lungs tightening, burnt air sifting through my nose, and a flak vest restricting my movement.

A persistent cough is always present after I complete cardio-intense workouts. The military even made me register online confirming that I was deployed to an area where there were burn-pits. My guess is it's this generation's agent orange. At least the VA offers fertility treatments in the case of service-connected infertility, that's if you can prove it.

I ride up and down Brand Boulevard, hoping not to get hit by the cars that speed past going 55mph in a 35. Will I die today? Will my brains be picked up off the asphalt? I'm sure I

wouldn't survive, especially without a helmet. I've meant to buy one; it's been sitting in my Amazon cart for three months.

I have a car, and I could drive it to my gym, but I'm afraid of dying in the car. The idea of dying inorganically smashed up in metal, not being able to tell where flesh and glass begins and ends, is not the way I would want to die. It might sound ironic.

But, do people really care how others die? Maybe they do, and that's why they marvel at accidents on the side of the road. Will I be one of those marvels one day?

I almost got hit. I pressed the button for the lights on the pedestrian crosswalk and waited until the cars were almost to a stop. A Prius wasn't paying attention and flitted past my front tire, missing it by half an inch as it curved its rigid body towards the sidewalk. The tail end of it nearly spun back, avoiding spilling me on the ground.

I was instantly petrified and exhilarated. My heart flitted and thrummed pounding its way through my wrists up to my temple like any Olympic sprint runner. I had to stop on a curb for five minutes to catch my breath.

The same day, on the news, a ten-year-old boy was hit by an F250 while crossing the street with his family and died instantly. He didn't even get to think about dying or maybe didn't even know what death really was. Would I give my life for his? I don't know. I don't know. There was a time where I would have given my life for a million people, children, women, brothers, fathers, sisters, mothers, my country. I didn't know. I didn't know.

FUBAR-2019

/ˈfoʊbər/

Acronym

*adjective*

adjective: fubar; adjective: foobar

(Fucked Up Beyond Any Repair or "All Recognition")

1. out of working order; seriously, perhaps irreparably, damaged.

"the clock in the hall is fubar"

Francisco is working for a non-profit that helps veterans who get in trouble with the law.

A non-profit that is all volunteer staff veterans that help other veterans worse off, with DUI, drug, and battery charges, among others.

He told me he's working with a Marine diagnosed with PTSD. "He has it bad, I mean real bad. He says he get angry for no reason and sleeps with a gun under his pillow."

I nod and take it in, thinking, how are we, both him and I so different? We both stood in that room, working until that rocket hit the plane outside of our building. His corner, by his desk, is where most of the shrapnel was found lodged into the side of the building. He saved a piece of the destroyed metal, brought it back with him in his carry on, and no one stopped him.

He keeps in on his desk, by his computer, a memento, a memory, a nightmare. We both can't let go of the nightmare, that's the problem. We want to run away from it, but we would miss it too much.

So, the Marine, and us, Airmen, we have the same stuff going on up here, in our heads, we just don't want to admit it to ourselves. We're ashamed to say it in person, in public, and in private. So we go on comparing veteran to veteran, believing that we are better off than most.

## Pin-Ups For Vets- January 2019

I find myself in the Loma Linda Veteran's Community Home. Yet another place society stashes away veterans. We are all supplied stacks of calendars and lipstick smiled. Located near Lancaster, this little community is smack dab in the middle of nowhere and nonsense. The heat slinks up my stockings and makes my thighs stick together like what used to happen when I wore the skirt option of my blues uniform.

As always, Gina accommodates all of the women veteran Pin-Ups by offering to carpool from L.A. It's a two hour drive, but we all make it there, unload the car and assemble our ranks. The click clacks of heels stay in step with each other, reverting back to our military mindsets. No one seems to notice, and if they do, they don't say anything about it.

That smell of bleach still weaves its way up my nostrils when the sliding electric doors open up for us and allows us passage into the facility. A community home still smells as stagnant as a hospital.

"Are you the Pin-Ups for Vets?"

A smiling security guard says to us as we file in.

"Yes we are. We're here to visit in the lunch room today," Gina states.

He pulls out a clipboard and pen.

"Alright, all of you are just gorgeous. Just sign here and we'll get you in there."

Everyone signs their name to the list.

The lunch room is filled with Korean War and Vietnam vets, with a few WWII sprinkled in. We can usually tell because of the service caps they wear, base ball caps that solicit the war across their foreheads like a brand. It's their identity now.

Immediately, I spot a woman. After saying some hello's and small talk, I make it a mission to get to know her story. Her grayed hair is curled short and brushed out, reminding me of the short style Marilyn Monroe used to sport. She sits next to other women that have already engaged in conversation with the other pin-ups.

"Hello, may I sit next to you Ma'am?"

She looks up and waves me over.

"Yes, yes, that's okay come sit down with me."

I stick my hand out to introduce myself.

"I'm Jackie, what's your name?"

"Doris," she smiles.

"Nice to meet you Doris."

I take a seat next to her, taking a quick look over the room at all of the conversations happening around me.

"You don't know how exciting it is to see women veterans on these visits."

"Oh yes, it's just myself and these two ladies here," she gestures towards the women to her left. One of them wears black medical glasses and the other one's hair is so red it's hard not to notice her in a room. Both of them look around the same age as Doris, in their mid 70's-80's.

"So what branch of the military did you serve in?"

"The Air Force, right when it was separating from the Army Air Corps."

A song plays on the inner comm, a faint sound, the volume so low as to not disturb the visit.

*"Here comes the sun (doo doo doo)  
Here comes the sun, and I say  
It's all right*

*Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter  
Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here..."*

I'm fascinated by her answer.

"Me too! Well I was in the Air Force, not during that time of course."

We both laugh.

"What was your AFSC?," I ask.

"Finance."

"Oh, yes, everyone wanted to be friends with you so they could get paid on time, right."

"You bet they did. We always had people trying to bribe us with candies, food, and gifts when I was stationed in Italy."

"Italy?"

"I was sent there during the war."

"You were stationed there for a while?"

"Just for three years, and I had to make the decision to get out. I chose love."

"Love?"

"I worked with my husband in the finance office and got pregnant, and during that time, when you got pregnant you had a choice to leave."

"You chose to leave?"

"I did. He stayed in and we stayed in Italy where I had my daughter."

"Did you ever miss it?"

"Of course, I loved working, I loved my job, but I loved him more than anything else."

"I bet your daughter loves to hear your stories of the time you served."

"Not really, she's never asked me about it."

"Really? That surprises me. I find what you have to say so amazing. Probably because I

was in too. Both you and I have an unspoken bond.”

“We do, don’t we.” She places her time worn hand on mine, a soft touch of warm skin.

“Now tell me dear, do they still use footlockers in boot camp?” she asks.

“Oh my God, they do. Absolutely a horrible time to keep everything organized for inspection in there.”

The song continues to play in the background and I listen to it,

*“Little darling, I feel that ice is slowly melting  
Little darling, it seems like years since it's been clear  
Here comes the sun  
Here comes the sun, and I say  
It's all right...”*

Gina calls my name from across the room.

“Jackie, we’re about to leave,” she says while holding the handle of the suit-case in one hand and sharpie markers in the other.

I turn back to Doris and wish that I had more time. I examine her face, surveying the wrinkles around her eyes and around her mouth. She looks at me with longing, as if she wants to tell me more, or go back in time.

I take up her hand to shake it again and decide to go in for a hug.

“Doris, thank you for being one of the first women to pave the way for everyone else that came after you. You have important stories to tell and I hope you get to tell them more often.”

She receives my hug openly, sighing a little, either out of frustration or relief. We linger there for a moment and we let go.

“Thank you dear, for listening.”

I give her one last smile as I head out to the lobby with the other women, a lingering feeling that I’m leaving a family member behind.

On the wall in the front lobby hangs thirty-some photos of all the residents of the



community home. They're all so young, in their military uniforms, smiling those unaware smiles that we all have in the beginning. There's one that catches my eye, a woman in an Army Air Corps uniform, the lipstick on her lips forming a perfect cupid's bow, a movie starlet face like Heddy Lamar. Doris looks into the camera in the picture, looking past the photographer into the future, looking at me. I run my finger along the fake gold frame, staring into her eyes, as I did in the lunch room. My reflection, layered on top of hers as if we become one. I find myself here, situated between the past, present, and future, an outlier and insider, but distinctly me, distinctly Cope. The song stays stuck in my head and I can't stop myself from believing in fate.

*"Little darling, the smiles returning to the faces  
Little darling, it seems like years since it's been here  
Here comes the sun  
Here comes the sun, and I say  
It's all right..."*