

Drill & Sanctimony

By Peter Anthony

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Smashwords Edition

Front Jacket Photograph by Matt Carr

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Chapter 1. Airport

Am I not entitled to the full twelve ounces?

On the plane from Milwaukee, the flight attendant gave me a glass full of ice and a droplet of Coke. For a snack, she gave me a tiny bag of pretzels. I counted eight in the bag. To wash it down, I waited ten minutes for some ice to melt. To get the flight attendant's attention, I had to hit the call button six times before she came over to give me a refill.

"And leave the can," I said.

She pursed her lips at me. I returned to playing *Mega Man: Zero 3* on my GameBoy and listening to my iPod. At least she had the courtesy to smile when she set the Coke can down on my tray table.

Before I left that morning, Grandpa drove me to the airport, spewing advice. He kept interrupting me during a difficult level of *Mega Man*, forcing me to restart twice. Even though I had the cheat codes for the game, I really wanted to finish the level, to feel like I had accomplished something.

"Maybe now you'll wake up and see the real world," he said, "and get in shape for once. Your mother lets you slide, but I know you've been smokin' that reefer since you were about twelve. Those

friends of yours - they'll be doing the same thing when you get home, but you'll be a different person."

On and on, day and night, that man could talk about one pointless thing or another, whether it was history, books, or world news. He really pushed my button at the airport drop-off in Milwaukee when he snatched the GameBoy out of my hands.

"Put that gadget down for minute," he said, pointing his veiny, yellowish finger. "Listen to your Sergeants," he said. "Keep your head down, and don't volunteer for anything. It's all a head game. And it's easy if you remember that. Understand?"

The noise coming from the game indicated that Mega Man was now deceased. I said nothing, I only stared at my GameBoy until he returned it to me.

"Whatever, Grandpa."

"Good luck, Paul," he said. "Don't forget to write your mom and tell us how you are doing. Keep your head on straight. And for once in your life, don't blow those damned bubbles..."

I slammed the car door behind me. Silence at last. That's the thing about old people: if you don't cut them off, they will never stop. Every conversation I had with Grandpa, he basically forced me to walk out on him, because if I ever waited until he finished speaking, after his concluding sentence I could go straight to his funeral.

From Milwaukee, I flew into the St. Louis airport where I had to rendezvous at the USO lounge. Now that place was tolerable. The USO volunteers understood portion sizes, unlike the flight attendant. Some old man was wearing a funny Army hat from

ancient times. He said, "Order anything you want, young man," and it was about time, too, because I was starving.

I wasn't in any hurry to eat Army food. Grandpa often wheezed about the runny eggs and the potted meat he had eaten in the Army, so if this was going to be my last healthy meal, I wanted something to fortify me. I ordered a hotdog, a hamburger, a large fry, a chocolate shake, a piece of batter-fried fish, a bag of FunYuns, two ranger cookies, and a large Pepsi.

No sooner did I receive my tray when some Sergeant marched into the room and announced, "Twenty minutes. Don't order too much food," and then he looked at my tray and added, "That better be for you and two battle buddies, Private."

I told the Sergeant the score. "The dude said I could order anything I wanted."

"I can tell you right now that the world is no longer your napkin," the Sergeant said, "and that you gonna spend three weeks in fat camp, so maybe now ain't the time to pack yourself with grease like a doggone wheel bearing."

I looked at his shoulder to see if he had any worthy combat patches, or a Screaming Eagle or a Big Red One, but I didn't recognize his iron-on cartoon unit. He did have an Airborne patch (one that he probably bought at the PX or the Commissary). In light of this impatience, I took a handful of fries and stuffed as many as I could into my mouth. A TV in the USO lounge beckoned me with a Bud Light advertisement.

While I ate, I fished the GameBoy out of my backpack so that I could resume playing a level-in-

progress. That same Sergeant kept strolling around like a little Goomba, irritating everyone wherever he went. He continued counting down the minutes, yelling each one out. "Nine minutes."

Apparently, my bus was leaving for Fort Leonard Wood, and soon I would be on my way to becoming an Airborne Ranger. Missouri was just the first checkpoint to getting my tan Ranger beret, at which time I would be able to slay all comers.

I didn't even have time to eat the hotdog, so I stuffed it into my backpack next to my smokes.

I know, I know: I should have gone Navy SEAL. Already, with this Sergeant ragging on me, I could tell that the Navy would have been preferable. The truth is, after playing *SOCOM 2: Navy SEALs* for three years straight, I was tired of the SEAL life already. Grandpa, he was an Airborne Ranger in 'Dubya Dubya Two,' and my joining the Army seemed to make everyone happy, including my dad, an Army lifer, who was permanently absent from home with stepchildren like me in three states. When I turned nineteen, Mom said that I had to apply to college, find a job, or join the Army, so I was like: "Fine, I'll be an Airborne Ranger, jump out of airplanes and snatch people in the dead of night. If that's what you want, mother." By the time I joined the Army I had already set several multiplayer deathmatch records on *GoldenEye: 007* for Nintendo 64, so the military would be mostly review to me. I didn't want to be one of those Navy Seamen anyway. Movies about the Navy make me yawn and it seems like sailors hardly ever get shot at or killed any more.

The USO Sergeant looped around us one last time and yelled at me for watching TV, even though there were three other people sitting in the room.

"Didn't you hear me, Private?" he said. "I said your group is movin' out."

"What about these other guys?"

"Don't worry about them, Private. These guys are eight hours early because of flight scheduling. This ain't their bus." Then his eyes grew large when he did an extreme close-up on my face. "Waitin' on you, Private."

The Sergeant nagged for two minutes while I bagged my GameBoy and iPod. Full of unasked-for advice, too, this general of the USO snack shop.

"You don't need your headphones," he said. "Put that cell phone away. That's all junk for the amnesty barrel. Hope you don't have any food in that bag."

Talk about no privacy and zero personal space.

In the hallway outside of the USO lounge, we lined up like children. The Sergeant, along with some of his fellow underachievers, performed a roll call. A bunch of civilians ogled our formation, passing by en route to their connecting flights. Most of them smiled and took pictures like we were zoo animals about to mount each other. Kids nearly broke their necks trying to look back at us. The Sergeants made us stand there doing nothing for twenty-five minutes, which made me wonder why I couldn't have finished the hotdog and *then* got in line.

Finally, the Sergeant called us to attention. I thought he was pulling my taffy. "We're in civilian clothes," I said, "we're not supposed to march," but

he didn't hear me, because he called "Right, Face!" followed by "Forward, March!"

All the way to the airport exit, he called a loud cadence, making a scene. When he said 'left' he said 'lay-eft' or 'yo lay-eft,' like his jaw needed to be wired shut and reset, and sometimes he sounded like a skipping CD player that needed a good slap, saying "left" when either foot landed.

"Yo lay-eft lay-eft lay-eft lay-eft lay-eft rot lay-eft."

He neglected the right half of the body, or the "rot" half, as he called it. When I passed by him, he tried to stare me down, but I was like, "*Next time we meet, you'll be salutin' me and I'll be droppin' you like birdseed.*" I didn't actually say it, but he got the point. The Sergeant paused his cadence to tell me, "I'd love to smoke your ass right now."

Chapter 2. Missouri

Rushing down I-44, traveling from St. Louis to Fort Leonard Wood, I never expected to see a People magazine or hear a conversation about hand moisturizer on that bus, but I saw and heard both coming from the girls in the seats around me. The closer we got to the gate of Leonard Wood, the more nervous I became.

It was after midnight when we reached the interstate exit. On the final approach we passed various lighted signs, of strip joints, churches, and neon lights from roadside bars.

The bus approached the gate. I saw the guards. Underneath their caps and burning cigarettes, they waved at the bus driver to stop. In the guard shack stood four MPs, sleeves rolled up. Two men and two women took turns dipping their hands into a supersized bag of Doritos, their hands like snack-backhoes. One of the male guards climbed into the bus, mumbled to the driver, and disappeared again. The bus surged forward, past the perimeter of the fort, where my term of legendary service to the United States of America was set to begin.

A girl sitting one row ahead said, "I hope they have Caress body wash at the PX."

"I like Suave Herbal Care," said the girl sitting next to her, "or Neutrogena."

"Oh, yeah, Neutrogena is good, too."

Hair on my neck stood up - just thinking about the big Drill Sergeant getting on the bus to spread hellfire excited me. He would spout off, with sayings that would be both frightening and humorous, just like in *Full Metal Jacket*.

The bus rolled to its final stop in front of a brown brick building. Several shadows moved underneath an awning. Atop those shadows were hats, the famous Drill Sergeant hats. The venerable *brown rounds*. Seeing these brought me to the edge of my seat. I couldn't wait to get yelled at. I was eager to get off the bus, rush through basic training, graduate from Ranger school, and then, God willing, be strapped with a thousand rounds of ammo and radioing for an air-strike of ten tons of napalm while a helicopter evacuated casualties and I rescued a malnourished child villager. I didn't much care who the war was against, just as long as there *was* a war. The Army and Marine Corps ads had showed me a life that I wanted. That life was me in a high-speed low-drag United States Army battalion, with land, sea, and air capabilities, and heat-seeking missiles and drones and canisters popping up from underground and robot bomb squads and bearded special-ops soldiers rappelling into underground heroin factories. If the Army told me to charge into Ohio or Frodo's shire, I was ready. I was a third generation military brat and the greatest player of *Mortal Kombat* in all of Wisconsin.

The door on the bus opened and we heard the bootsteps of a Drill Sergeant coming up the staircase. All I could see was the outline of a hat - a real Drill Sergeant. Everyone quieted as they braced for him to erupt.

But he was a she.

And she spoke quietly.

"Now we can do this easy if you want," she said, "but if you want to act all crazy and screw around, I'll make it last all night."

A black woman, with cheekbones that jutted out like the fenders on Grandpa's old Mercury, stepped down the aisle and then I saw her eyes flash at me like the Predator's did to Apollo Creed in that one movie.

I waited for her to shout at the people in the front row.

"I want you all to go inside and line up along the yellow line," she said, "set your bag down on your right side and stand at the position of attention, and then we will get started with what we need to get done tonight. We have about an hour of business to take care of, and it can go quickly if y'all want it to."

We filed off the bus in silence, entered a building, and lined up along the yellow line. Two other female Drill Sergeants walked around and barked a bit, but not loud. So far, the event seemed all too civilized.

We filled out some forms with our personal information. Forms and forms, all requesting the same information. One form turned out to be rather important because it asked me to write down what I wanted on my dog-tags. For my name, I put, "Private

Chips Dubbo," just like the character on one of the best games ever, *HALO* on Xbox.

A guy with glasses sat next to me. He started to whine about the religion slot on the form.

"Just put down Baptist," I said, adding, "Damn, I want to put HALO for mine, but I don't see it on the list."

"But I'm not a Baptist," he said, "I'm agnostic, and there's no slot for it."

"What's the difference? What's this one? Atheist. Put down atheist then. Who cares?"

"Who cares?" he whispered with a scoff that made him appear to have lockjaw. "There's a huge difference. It would be like making a Baptist write down Catholic."

I said, "You can always put down Baptist."

The Drill Sergeant started to collect the forms, and the geek next to me hastily selected 'Atheist.'

A little Drill Sergeant came over and snapped at us. "Is there any reason that you're talking, Privates?"

This was the first meeting of many that I had with Drill Sergeant Pint, soon afterward known as Half-Pint, Pinto, Pinto Bean, Beanie, Little Beanbag, Chief Chihuahua and several nicknames not related to his name, such as Rear-Admiral and Douchebag. His mere presence in uniform told me that the Army did not adhere to its own height standards, because if he was fifty-eight inches tall, the Army minimum, then I was Optimus Prime in bot-mode. Even sitting down, I was at eye-level with Drill Sergeant Pint.

Pint provoked a response. "Do y'all have something important to say? Need to say something?"

The atheist said, "No."

"What?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

Pint said, "Something wrong with what we've asked you to do?"

"Actually," the guy said, "I would like to see Agnostic added to the list of religions, Drill Sergeant."

"What the heck do you think this is, Burger King?" Then louder, he added, "You cannot have it your way!"

I laughed.

The little Drill looked at me. "That's funny?"

"Sorry, Drill Sergeant."

"You callin' me a *sorry* Drill Sergeant? You're the one that's sorry, Private. Looks like you came straight from Burger King."

That was our first meeting.

A few minutes later, I saw Pint dragging a rubber barrel into the middle of the room and I thought he might use it to stand on so that he could see us all, but this was the 'amnesty barrel,' the barrel that the USO Sergeant at the airport had warned me about.

Pint's voice could really boom, out of necessity I imagine, since he might have been stepped on early in life without a good warning system.

"If you have anything that you know you shouldn't have, this is where it goes." He kicked the barrel and it skidded toward us. "You will have two minutes to put all unauthorized items inside this barrel. Unauthorized items include the following: cigarettes,

lighters, drugs, drug paraphernalia, books, magazines, alcohol, chewing tobacco, chewing gum, candy, electronics, weapons, and anything else that you know you shouldn't have in basic training. I strongly suggest that you dispose of any item that you have a question about, and if you have prescription drugs, come talk to me right now about them so I can inform you about what to do."

The list sounded like the inventory of my backpack, but there was no way I was throwing out my goods. If he expected me to throw out my GameBoy and the thirty batteries I had brought, he was crazy. My cell phone and my iPod? Forget it. My carton of cigarettes wasn't even opened yet. While the Privates around me dumped objects into the barrel, I chose to stay seated.

The guy sitting next to me had a complaint about this list, too. But he worried about the one thing that I would have gladly thrown out.

"What does he mean, books?"

"By books," I said, "I think he means those things with pages, and on those pages, words."

"Why should we have to get rid of them?"

The guy turned out to be a real activist. He fished some terrible book out of his backpack, clutched it in his hand, and walked up to this Drill Sergeant Pint to make inquiries. I couldn't help but laugh when Pint snatched the book, flipped through the pages, and slam-dunked it into the amnesty barrel. The guy came back to his seat with his tail between his legs.

I covered my mouth and snickered. "How'd it go?"

"The Drill Sergeant asked if the book was for my religion, and I said no. Then he threw it away and

told me that the only authorized book in basic training is the Bible. Or the Koran."

"That was really dumb to go ask him."

"You know, you are really starting to..." He paused. "What...what's your name?"

"Paul Sprungli."

"I'm Erik Waters. Can you please try to be less condescending when you speak, Paul?"

"Can you be less of a bitch?"

He looked away.

"Dawg," I said, "I'm jokin', dawg."

He searched in his bag. "At least I managed to keep one book." Then he showed me his paperback book with the title, *The Divine Comedy*. But judging by his actions so far, I doubted that the book made anyone but him laugh. He began another rant about books, showing me the three tiny Gideon's Bibles he had received on his journey to St. Louis, and he just wouldn't shut up about it. So I showed him my Gideon's Bible, the one I'd received in the airport, opening it up for him to view. "Do you want my Bible?" I asked.

"Didn't you just hear what I said? I already have three of them." He showed me his trio of little green Bibles.

"Well, you seem to like them." The thin paper of the tiny Bible reminded me of rolling papers.

"Ok," Private Waters said, "I think you and I should stop talking before we get in trouble."

Thank God.

Hollywood expectations fell apart. The Drill Sergeants walked us to a barracks - walked, not

marched. The cicadas buzzed like a thousand weed-whackers. Those noisy insects were the first of many Jurassic-sized bugs I witnessed in Missouri, including horseflies that justified the name. In the humid air, I started to sweat, but smiled when I heard the soothing hum of air conditioners coming from the barracks where we would sleep that night.

In a mass formation outside, the Drill Sergeants transferred us to a group of Barracks Sergeants who would help us locate our beds for the night. Another Sergeant took charge and started to speak loudly.

"We are going to separate you now. Male gender over here in front of me. Female gender over there in front of Sergeant Sykes."

Being in the correct group, I stood like a Ranger and waited for the others to move. A girl standing next to me did not move. Thinking that she didn't hear, I said, "Female gender goes over there."

Her response surprised me. She said, "There's no such thing as gender," and she did not move, but instead swore at me as if I called the command. I double-checked to make sure she was a she, and although her short, uneven hair looked like she had laid down and let a lawnmower run over it, she appeared female. I stared for a bit, perhaps an ounce too long. For some time actually, I inspected her. And when I looked up at her face, she yelled sharply at me:

"Get out of my head!"

No one had ever accused me of that before. Her voice drew the attention of the nearest Sergeant, who rushed over like a hunchback, teetering to and fro as he dodged Privates, pointing his flashlight in faces

and shouting, "Who said that? Who said that?" He stuck the bill of his cap - a regular cap, not a brown round - into the face of a recruit.

"Who said that?"

The recruit pointed behind him, not at the girl, but at me.

The Sergeant asked the girl, "What did he say?" Before she could answer, the Sergeant interrupted by shouting into my ear, with great gusto:

"PUSH!"

When the word flew out of him, so did a little slobber, which dappled my ear.

That's how I got dropped for the first time, and I have to admit, I enjoyed it. This was fine, because I expected this type of treatment, as seen on TV. Without letting him see my enjoyment, I did three push-ups and stopped when another noise drew his attention elsewhere.

When I stood up, the Sergeant returned and asked the girl why she hadn't moved to the female side.

She said, "There is no such thing as gender, sir."

The Sergeant's eyes bulged like marshmallows. His voice dropped an octave and he sounded like Clint Eastwood. "Don't you ever call me sir, Private. Don't you ever call me sir again. Listen to me, Private: I work for a living. Do you see a dag-gum copper bar or a black bar on my collar? Do you see on my collar railroad tracks or a maple leaf or a bird or stars?"

"No," the genderless Private said.

"No what?"

"No...Sergeant?"

"Now move to the female formation right now or I'll get a hickory smoke southern-style barbecue going with you two yet tonight." Then he said to me, "What are you smiling at tons-of-fun? I don't remember telling you to get up?"

I shrugged.

He pointed at the ground and said, "Then push, Krispy Kreme."

On the ground, I did another push-up. My nose was close to my backpack. I could smell the hotdog inside and I was comforted by knowing that it would soon be eaten.

The girl picked up her bag and ran away. The Sergeant laughed.

"No such thing as gender." He adjusted his crotch. "Is that what she really said to you, Private?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Is that what she said?"

"It is."

"It is, what?"

"It's what she said."

"It is, *Sergeant*," he said with hostility, but then he laughed. "No such thing as gender. Dag-gum, Privates and their ideas. Y'all got some good ones. She must've thought she was gonna stand here and grow a pair. Hey, keep pushing! Did I tell you to stop? Do twenty more push-ups and get up. Is she your girlfriend or something?"

"No, Sergeant."

"She'd better not be. Ain't no girlfriends here, Private." He watched me. "Dag-gum, Private. Can you even do ten push-ups? What McDonald's did the

bus pick you up from? What the heck do you call that, silly?"

Silly? That was a major disappointment for me. Anything but silly would have been fine: maggot, knucklehead, idiot, fairy - whatever. But *silly?* That word actually hurt my feelings. If he had kicked me in the gut or choked me like they did in the movies, or if he had rolled me up in carpet and tossed me down the stairs, I could accept that - that would make sense.

But *silly?*

It hardly seemed fair.

As I reeled from the underwhelming insult, the Sergeants separated the boys from the girls by sex, or gender, I can't be sure. The Sergeant walked away mumbling to himself about his Privates and soon he found another Private who he called *crazy*, which hardly seemed an improvement over silly.

Chapter 3. Breakfast

In the morning, after only a few hours of sleep, the Sergeants roused and flushed us toward breakfast without letting us shower first, even though we had the same clothes on as the day before. I could have used some extra sleep that morning - maybe only one or two hours. I was irritated to be treated like such a newbie, especially after logging so many hours playing *Close Combat: A Bridge Too Far*. I deserved to look like them, the Sergeants, to be dressed in nice shiny boots and a pressed camouflage uniform.

We could have easily slept an extra two hours, because the breakfast line took that long. Waiting in the line, I grew ravenous. Drill Sergeants wearing blue mesh vests circled the cafeteria floor like the sentinels in *The Matrix*, making sharp turns and taking quick steps wherever they went. Now and then, one of them would pop out and scare the bejeezus out of some Private. We weren't supposed to be watching, but it was hilarious entertainment. Every few minutes, some Private would fill his glass from the soda machine and then receive a sticky shower when a Drill Sergeant screamed: "What in the heck do you think you're doing, Private?!"

Nearly everyone laughed when one of these idiots dropped his cup onto the floor, but anyone caught

laughing lost his position in the line. If a Private laughed while eating, the Drill Sergeants escorted him or her out of the cafeteria. I was glad to see people getting kicked out, because their exit brought me closer to those runny eggs.

But that turned out to be a myth. The eggs were not runny at all.

When I neared the doorway that led into the serving counter, the promised land, I leaned inside to take a peek. A woman with a hair-net was squeezing a large clear-plastic sack, playing it like bagpipes. But rather than producing music, she oozed out a yellow liquid that turned into a solid-gold scramble when she troweled it around the hot griddle.

While I was leaning forward, my ear suddenly tingled with pain from a very loud and very near noise. I turned around and saw a Drill Sergeant.

"Private! You are at the position of Parade Rest. At the position of Parade Rest, you must keep your eyes at the position of attention, and you will remain silent unless otherwise directed."

I turned and said to the Drill Sergeant, "Yes, Drill Ser..."

"You do not turn your head. I repeat: your eyes remain at the position of attention."

He was really angry. Everyone was watching me. Without even thinking, I got spooked and started blowing bubbles. It just happened. I can't help myself. It's a very neat trick, really, and none of my friends can do it. I can create a bubble by manipulating and curling my tongue. I can even

launch the bubble so that it floats away, into the air. When I was a kid, my neighbor and I were eating lunch one day when I decided to put some liquid soap into his soup. After I saw him blow a bubble, it looked so cool that I put some soap into my soup and that's how I learned. But I hate that guy now, ever since one day while we were huffing thinner in his garage when his mother walked in and we were both grounded...

"Just what in the hell are you doing, Private?!"

I released a bubble into the air and watched it float away, up, toward the Drill Sergeant and it popped near his chin.

"Bubbles at Parade Rest. Private." I could not stop. "Private! Step out of line, Private."

I snapped out of it when he yanked me aside. "But Drill Sergeant," I said, "it took forever to get up here to the front of the line."

The Drill didn't respond. Instead he pulled a chair away from a table and placed it in front of everyone in the dining area.

"Get on that chair and tell everyone about the position of Parade Rest."

"What? Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. Get on up there. What's your name?"

"Paul Sprungli."

"Springlick, I will permanently put your head deep inside your fourth-point-of-contact if you do not stand on that chair right now." He made an announcement to everyone. "Parade Rest is commanded only from the position of attention. The preparatory command for this movement is *Parade*.

On the command of execution, *Rest*, move the left foot ten inches to the left of the right foot. Keep the legs straight without locking the knees, resting the weight of the body equally on the heels and balls of the feet. Simultaneously, place the hands at the small of the back, centered on the belt." He looked at me. "Now you say it, Private."

"Say what?"

"What I just said."

At that moment, I considered going Green Beret instead of Ranger, with the hope that I might get reassigned, but...

"Say it!"

"Ah, ah, Parade Rest is like this...this movement...of balls on your feet." I moved my hands and feet.

The other Drills gathered around, including little Drill Sergeant Pint. Apparently he remembered me from the night before, and at first, he seemed pretty cool. I thought he might save me from further embarrassment.

"Hey, I know this guy," Pint said to his peers, and then to me he said, "How's it going so far today, buddy?"

"Ok, I guess," I said.

"Did you sleep good?"

"Pretty good."

"Was your pillow ok?"

"Mmm, so-so. A little lumpy. The blanket had a hole in it."

"Oh? Sorry to hear that. Did you eat yet?"

"Not yet."

"Good, good. We'll get that for you right away. And when you finish, let me know. I'll be over by the exit, ok? Sound like a fair deal to you?"

"Which exit?"

"The only exit."

I nodded. "Sure, no problem."

Then he stopped smiling, raised his voice, and turned red. "Now can I get a bloody dag-gum *Drill Sergeant*, please! Where do you think you are, roundy, back on the block? Am I one of your buddies?"

"No, Sergeant."

"That's Drill Sergeant! Do I have to spell it in ketchup for you to understand?"

"No."

"Now tell us what Parade Rest is!" Pint wailed.

"Parade Rest is a thing that we do at the position of attention. Ah...rest is something found...at a parade..."

The Drills surrounded me and screamed from all cardinal directions for a full minute. I was surprised to see them all leave, all at once. I waited a full five minutes to get down from the chair, but when I did, I grabbed a tray and a fork and entered the serving line.

Pint returned, following me like a shadow. "I'm going to watch your portions, Private Sprungli."

How could I tell that to my stomach? I was so hungry. I said, "But Drill Sergeant."

Suddenly the Drills, the Sentinels, swarmed me again, sensing me by sonar. They shouted in unison for another minute.

When they finally backed off, I reached the first lunch lady in the serving line. The cooks were as mean as the Drills. I never saw such a sassy lunch lady. In high school I ripped on the lunch lady all the time, but these creatures were not to be poked. Even the bagpiper with her liquid eggs sneered at me, exposing a row of golden teeth. I felt the need to blow bubbles, but that little Drill Sergeant Pint followed me through the whole line.

"Sausage or bacon?" said the lunch lady.

Pint shouted. "Sausage or bacon? Decide! How about neither! Face forward. Side-step. Move! Step, heel, step, heel, step heel step, uh-huh. Step, heel, step, heel, step heel step, uh-huh."

It did have a nice rhythm. Holding my tray, I tried to reach out for an extra mini-box of Frosted Flakes, but Pint was waiting. He snatched it out of my hands.

By this time, I was shaking, and for goodness sakes, I just wanted to eat, but even then my stomach quivered as much as my nerves. If I could only manage to get something to drink, I could just sit down and stare at the food, maybe eat quietly for an hour, perhaps go back for seconds.

I grabbed two plastic cups from a tall stack and went to the Coke machine for my favorite mixture of MelloYello, Root Beer, and Cherry Coke, but when I pushed the cup against the fountain lever, another Drill Sergeant popped up and bellowed like a charging elephant in *Age of Empires*, video game of the year, 1997.

"Water only, Private! Hydrate! Drink water!"

I dropped the cup and spilled cola on my shirt. Somehow I managed to hold onto the tray. Behind me I heard all kinds of snickering.

A girl bumped into me. She whispered, "Get some water and move." I filled two cups and followed her to an open table. When I sat down, she stared at her tray and whispered, "Girls can't sit with boys. Go away."

Because she was cute, I said, "Thanks for the tip. By the way, I'm Paul Sprungli."

"Why would I care? I'm not going to shake your hand."

"Don't you have a name?"

"West."

I was on the verge of smooching her when that Pint suddenly grew like a new branch out of the rubber plant on her side of the table.

"Sprungli," said Pint, "use that biscuit to cork your mouth. You too, West. I heard you two flirting. Better not be flirtin' up in here." Pint chased me away from the table, away from that beautiful West.

At last, I started to eat. Even with starvation at hand, the food did not taste good because Pint commanded me to stuff my mouth at once, and to eat as fast as possible. No time to savor the eggs.

Somehow, we became something of a trio: Drill Sergeant Pint, myself, and Private West. We went through everything together, from platoon to platoon, from inprocessing, to Fat Camp, to Echo Company.

By the way, I only went to Fat Camp because of my height. No way I should have gone to Fat Camp, but let me explain that whole business.

Inprocessing became a real nightmare. My recruiter didn't tell me about a week of sitting on wood benches, reading a manual called a *Smart Book*, and standing around with my thumb up my "fourth-point-of-contact." For ten hours a day we occupied lines in the hallways of a squat building, getting shushed so often by Goody Privates and Drill Sergeants that the place sounded like a Starbucks brewing cappuccinos. Finally, after my feet cramped up, we'd enter some doorway and pop out the other side holding a new piece of equipment, uniforms, field jackets, boots, and so on. We hardly had time to try any of it on. I asked for jungle boots or tanker boots, and they gave me the most vanilla boots on the market.

When my dog-tags came, I was so excited to see my name, "Private Chips Dubbo," as requested, but some pencil-pusher discovered the mistake and tattled to the Drill Sergeants, who took me outside for what they call 'Front-Back-Go.' They stood around me while I performed push-ups (Front), flipped me over for sit-ups (Back), and then stood me up to run in place (Go).

My new dog-tags came a day later, with my real name on it: PVT Paul Sprungli, O-positive, Baptist, US Army.

On the third day we had to do a diagnostic Physical Training test. I passed the test, doing fourteen push-ups, eighteen sit-ups, and running one

mile in the fastest time of anyone who wasn't disqualified.

Everything was going fine until the tape measure and scales came out. My height, not my weight, was the problem. When I stepped off the scale, a female sergeant checked my height against my weight on a wall chart. She said, "You goin' to Fat Camp." If only I had been five inches taller, Fat Camp never would have happened.

On that morning before breakfast, I really started to get discouraged. Everybody was talking about starting real Basic training, but here I lacked the height and had to think about Fat Camp.

"That was so easy," one guy said. "When I was doing the push-ups, I could have done about eighty."

"Did you see me run past you?" said another.

"When I heard them yell out, 'twelve minutes,' I started running fast. I was like 'No way I'm going to Fat Camp.'"

What a bunch of braggarts. To make things worse, no sooner did I sit down to eat, when Pint said, "Time's up!" and he chased me out of the building and rolled me in the grass for another session of Front-Back-Go.

At first I protested. "But I just finished eating."

"Do you think Osama Bin Laden gives a crap if you just finished eating?"

Now how would anyone know how Osama bin Laden feels about breakfast?

Chapter 4. Fat Camp

That night, while I was packing up my stuff to move to the Fat Camp barracks, a wiry little black kid started poking fun at me about my weight. He kept referring to me as Cookie Monster. Earlier that day, we had received our vaccines, like ten of them. I felt like a pin-cushion. My rear ached from one of the shots, so I assumed his hurt, too. So when he turned around in his locker, I punched him in the sore spot.

"Ow!" he whelped.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Thought I saw a spider on you."

"Don't worry, I'll get you back," he said, holding his pants.

"What? What for? I did you a favor."

The little flea dived across the bunk and tried to punch my rear, but I stiff-armed him. A bunch of people gathered around to see me dominate this worm. With a lucky move, he managed to turn me around and connected with my upper left cheek, right where the vaccine needle had landed.

"Ow! Knock it off," I said. He got lucky three times.

He said, "Have fun at Fat Camp!"

"What are you talking about, Major?" somebody said to him. "You're going to Fat Camp, too."

He backed away from me. The name on his uniform said "Major."

"But," he said, "I ain't going to Fat Camp because I'm fat."

"Then why are you going?"

"Because I have a business to run. I got wares to sell, man."

"Business?"

The others laughed and dispersed. When Private Major turned around, I gave him another shot to the butt, and then he kicked me twice, but eventually settled down, accepting his defeat.

Together, Private Major and I walked to our new barracks, along with a bunch of other people. Half the barracks was moving to Fat Camp. Among this hoard, I wondered if anyone had passed the diagnostic Physical Training test. Obviously, the height restrictions were too stringent. Surely not so many of us could be too short to fit our weight.

The very first night in the new barracks, Private Major set up shop on his bunk. I knew right then that Fat Camp was the place for me.

Private Major said, "I get top bunk."

"Fine," I said, but regretted saying it as soon as I saw Major push open a ceiling tile. He shoved the tile over and asked me, "Sprungli, are you cool or not?"

"I'm a playa, dawg."

"Yeah, you a playa," he scoffed. "Ok, *dawg*." Then he started pulling things out of his bag and planting them in the ceiling with great care. His locker was a mess, but his warehouse in the ceiling was faced like a pharmacy.

Like me, Private Major had abstained from the amnesty barrel, keeping contraband for better purposes. That night, he started a racket that I had to respect. By midnight, we were the best friends ever, making money hand over fist, selling everything we could, providing a service to desperate Privates.

The Fat Camp effect really made people sad. These Privates still had the money that mommy and daddy had given them for their big trip to basic training. And spending that money made them feel better.

Word spread quickly about the bazaar taking place on bunk seventy-four. Privates began to walk by, peeking in like boys outside a lingerie store. After a furtive glance at Major and myself, they circled the area and returned a few minutes later.

Private Major shuffled one dollar bills like a pit-boss and upsold every customer that stopped to talk. Together we sold three-quarters of our inventory. We had people coming back for a second and a third visit. My cell phone turned out to be the most popular item, because all of these pudding-lovers wanted to call home. Five minutes of phone time cost them three dollars. They lined up to use the phone. Prices started to rise.

"Don't run them off," Major said, "I want to sell everything tonight if I can."

By ten o'clock, our products and services had leveled off to market prices:

Individual cigarette: \$3.00

Cell phone usage: \$1.50/minute

Chewing tobacco, small dip: \$3.00

Chewing tobacco, large dip: \$6.00
GameBoy single game usage: \$.25/minute*
iPod usage: \$.25/minute
Double A Battery: \$10.00
Swig of Bourbon: \$5.00
Private viewing of Hustler Mag: \$2.00

* Additional \$.50/minute to play *Mega Man*

The barracks buzzed with excitement, but the happiest bunks were 74 and 75 where Major and I counted our money at the end of the night. Major tapped my shoulder and pointed at two guys who had put dry cigarette tobacco inside their mouths, thinking it would work like chewing tobacco.

As we counted the money, Major sorted the bills so fast in the dark that I couldn't figure out what the amounts were.

"Wait," I asked, "was that a ten or a twenty you put in my pile?"

"What?" he said. "Ah, it was a twenty." He reached into the pile and showed me a twenty. I kept watching him and the piles appeared even, but in the morning, when the lights came on, I counted up a pile of mostly ones, a few fives, and a single twenty.

"Dude," I said, eating breakfast with him, "you didn't split the money equally."

"What?" he said. "What are you talking about? You accusin' me of stealing?"

"No. But I'll punch you in the ass again unless you give me my half."

He insisted that he wasn't stealing, but I said, "Tonight, I handle the cash."

"That's cool," he said.

Unfortunately, that night we had fewer transactions, all thanks to the tiny nuisance, Drill Sergeant Pint. He worked us over all day like slaves, marching us around, up and down hills, teaching us cadences, and worst of all, monitoring how much food we ate at meals. For at least an hour he talked about our mission, our goals, our reason for being in Fat Camp, motivating all of our customers.

"I experienced Fat Camp myself," he said, trying to win us over with his life story. "I couldn't do the run fast enough at first, but I worked at it, worked very hard, and within two weeks, I was able to go to basic."

Sitting on a square of concrete, we listened to Pint tell us tales of coming up short. A few times he had us laughing, but then he became serious again.

"I'm telling you these things because I want you to succeed."

Cue the piano music.

"You will all get through basic, if you just keep trying. All it takes is some effort every day."

While he motivated us, Private Major and I, sitting in the rear of the group, started getting chatty. Time was eating our profit margins. Major and I tried to figure out how to sell stuff to the barracks next door, to open up another market.

"You two, in the back," Pint said. "Stop talking. This isn't your time, it's my time. Listen up. Don't mistake my kindness for weakness. This is for your benefit."

Kindness? I yelled as loud as I could and I dragged the words out: "Yes, Drill Sergeant!" Everyone laughed. Except for Pint.

I looked over and saw Private West, the female who I had dined with during that first breakfast. She rolled her eyes at me. When I turned back to the front, I saw Pint staring me down.

That night we took in less money and Private Major blamed me for being too slow with the deals.

"You act like you are working at Wal-Mart," he said. "If they make an offer that seems low, just say *hell no*. Don't even consider it. Send them away so they can tell their friends that the amount they offered isn't enough. They'll come back. They come back with a higher price in mind. Right now, these guys aren't our *friends* - they're *customers*."

Since sales were slow, we closed shop early and sneaked into the stairwell, quiet as *Bushido Blade* ninjas, up to the top of the barracks and opened a window to get some air and enjoy our wares. Private Major stuck his head so far out the window, I thought he might fall out.

Later that night we laughed ourselves to sleep over Cheetos and assorted snacks obtained in barter for services rendered. Fat Camp was cool.

Just when things were good, the next morning one of our clients left a cigarette sitting in his open locker. The lone Marlboro rolled out of his locker, onto the floor, and settled near a Drill Sergeant's shining boot. The Drill Sergeant picked it up and sniffed it, tasting it with his nose. The fool was removed from the

building for an epic session of Front-Back-Go. We observed from the windows, until Pint arrived, full of energy, and brought all of us outside to join the exercise. Pint, who looked like a cannonball with a head in his PT shorts and t-shirt, all muscle and no neck, stormed around on the blacktop. What amazed me most about his size was how many loud words fit inside him. A polyp on his forehead strained, nearly exploded, but held long enough for him to announce a shakedown. Out came the amnesty barrel again.

"I'm taking this barrel to the entryway of your barracks. You will have five minutes to get rid of any personal items that do not belong in initial active duty training. After that, your lockers will be dumped and anything that we find will be punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. If you are not in compliance, you will receive an Article 15."

"Oh damn," Private Major said, "I can't get another Article 15."

"You mean you already have one?"

"More."

"Two?"

"I've been inprocessing for a month now," Private Major laughed. "The colonel, he calls me 'Article 30.'"

"Why?"

"Cause I have two Article 15's."

"I don't get it."

"Never mind, Sprungli."

Upstairs we went, and Pint followed with his beloved barrel. All sixty Fat Campers piled into the barracks and scrambled to rid their lockers of illegal items.

"Our stuff is in the ceiling," I said to Private Major. "We're safe."

"Hell no we ain't," he argued. "Right after they dump the lockers, they'll look in the ceiling. It's time to cut-and-run. Get rid of it, man."

"All of it?"

"Well, not all of it, but most of it. Keep the electronics. I'll find a place to hide them."

With sadness we dumped the bulk of our remaining wares into the amnesty barrel. The other Privates marveled at how much we filled the barrel. I had some difficulty moving away from the barrel.

Private Major said, "You gotta let it go, man."

"But the magazine..."

"Look away. Don't make it harder than it already is."

The shakedown went exactly as predicted by Private Major. After the Sergeants emptied every locker and flipped every bunk, into the ceiling they climbed, like miners, flashlights in hand, scouring the tiles for contraband. They discovered stuff that no one even knew about, including us. Some of the magazines had dates from the 1990's, and featured the likes of Jenny McCarthy, the women of World Wrestling Federation, and the entire cast of *BayWatch*.

By the time Pint and his cadre finished spelunking and plundering the ceiling, the barrel was overflowing with loot. Not only magazines came out of the ceiling, but so did empty bottles of malt liquor, vodka, and ketchup. Other items included a knife, melon rinds, petrified black licorice, soda bottles, movies, a hot plate, and even a small microwave, all

artifacts from the ghosts of Fat Camp-past. The licorice, though graying, still looked edible.

Happiness left the barracks with the barrel. Private Major and I felt the loss most of all, because our product had gone to waste. We felt for our customers, too. The pleasures we had sold were ripped from so many joyful hands.

To forget the day's events, that night Private Major and I joined some other guys who were practicing their freestyle rap. When I told them that I did some rapping myself, they didn't believe me.

"Wonder Bread," Major said, "get outta here."

"I got skills."

"Fine," Major said, laughing. "Let's hear it, Sprungli."

"Oh," I said, "I don't know, man." I felt just like Eminem in the movie *8-Mile*, against all odds.

"Here...we'll even get a beat going," Major said. "Here you go, Sprungli."

One guy started a bass beat using the flat of his hand against the wood of the bunk. Major said, "And you just start, Sprungli, when you're ready."

Two other guys paddled the metal on the bunk to add some flavor to the beat. In my room at home, where I was feeling my flow I could really rap. But I could work with this. Some of the other Privates around us yelled, told us to quiet down. They were the ones that got up on time and had no appreciation for music.

At 22:00 hours Drill Sergeant Pint killed the fun. He walked around, dropped a few people, and then made an exit speech.

"This barracks already smells better from getting rid of all the filth that you had in here. Get some sleep for tomorrow. You should have fewer distractions tonight."

As soon as he left, we imitated him and then started freestyling again, but this time using Pint as our muse. Mid-lyric, Private Major became inspired with an idea.

"Hold it," he said. "I just thought of something."

On the edge of the bed, Private Major pulled us into a huddle. "Where do you think they took all that contraband?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I bet they just tossed it in the dumpster."

Private Major and I started to sneak down the staircase toward the sergeant in charge of quarters. One of the other rappers crept down the rear staircase to set off the silent alarm by pushing the handle of the emergency exit. Private Major waited until we saw the Sergeant on duty get up from his desk and run down the hallway, through the first-floor of the barracks to the rear exit. With him out of the way, Private Major and I ran down the stairs, out the front door, toward the dumpsters, where we opened the lids and looked for the contents of the amnesty barrel.

In a few minutes, we raised a signal to one of our boys in the window, and he signaled another guy, who descended the stairs and touched the emergency handle once again. The Sergeant ran down the hall a second time, in the same direction. And Private

Major and I lugged two enormous bags of vice up the stairs, back into the barracks.

The extravaganza that followed would have made any used-car salesman envious. The pouty faces of those Goody Privates lined up in front of us, clutching in their sweaty hands their final dollar bills. We ransomed their tobacco and smut, exchanging their cash for happiness. Some of the product we were selling for the second or third time.

The cell phone buzzed all night, costing some guys quite a bit of money in the end. One Private ordered a pizza, but the Domino's delivery driver was intercepted. Debt collections became difficult when Privates lacked the money to pay. We held their field jackets as collateral. The ancient Playboy magazines sold well, but the microwave and hot-plate did not, so we placed the unsold artifacts back into the ceiling, where they belonged - in the ceiling museum of Fat Camp history.

Private Major insisted on being the clerk that night. No matter how I tried to keep tabs on the money, I could not follow every bill that passed through his fingers.

I tried to sleep. I laid my head on my bed, but my head was too light to settle down. My boys couldn't sleep either. The beat-box started again and we rapped, and we rapped.

I could have rapped all night.

Chapter 5. Bunk

Fat Camp lasted three weeks. The smaller portions paid off and I lost enough weight to move on to basic training. Prior to the weigh-in, I swallowed various laxatives and wore saran wrap around my waist for a full day. Private West and Private Major also received their walking papers. Together we mounted a cattle car that carried us to a new desolate part of Fort Leonard Wood.

The heat in the cattle car choked me. Before leaving Fat Camp, I'd made the mistake of eating a large lunch. I stood next to Private West and rubbed shoulders with her.

"Gross," she said when a burp escaped me.

"West, what's up?" I asked her. "Think we'll be bunking together?"

She played hard to get. "You stink worse than a shoe, Sprungli."

"See, I told you," said Private Major, waving his hand under his nose. "You gotta start showerin'. It's getting nasty. Dog-god, I told him to scrub his crevices and crevasses, but do you think he did? Hell no."

Private Waters, the confused soldier who liked books, said, "Hey Sprungli. Is that you?"

The cattle car had so many people in it, I couldn't face him, but I turned my neck far enough to get a glimpse.

"What are you doing here, Waters?"

"I got recycled. Sprained my ankle on the first day. Be careful getting out of this truck. I had to sit out a few weeks and now I'm starting from day one."

I ignored him, favoring Private West's company. "West, let me know if you need anything. I've got some connections."

"If I need what?"

"Anything." I winked.

"What," she said, "like a blubber transfusion?"

"Sprungli, it's hot out," Private Major said, "but it just got cold in here. Brr!"

When the truck stopped, we heard boots outside on the sidewalk. The doors opened with a sudden jolt, reminding me of entering a room in a first-person shooter game, like *HALO*. Actually, more like *Wolfenstein 3D*, since the graphics of a Missouri Army base had fallen way behind the video game industry in terms of design.

But outside of the cattle car awaited a strange obstacle course of authority. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw twenty Drill Sergeants. They all began shouting at once, moving like programmed cyborgs, attacking Privates and pulling them out the cattle car door. We tumbled out like rubber balls, weighted down by our duffel bags. Private Waters fell to the curb, this time hurting his shoulder. As I ran away, I heard him groaning.

The noise, the stinging sweat, and the trampling boots made the heat worse. The whole scene was so

confusing that I stopped to drink water from my canteen and collect my thoughts. Even warm water tasted good, but on my first swallow, six Drill Sergeants assaulted me, shouting words that didn't even make sense.

"Get your dog-gone rabbit cover straight now move what is this the water-trough into the dad-gum gym."

Inside the gym, we lined up and dropped our bags. Someone spoke on a microphone that echoed and I'm certain that no one understood him. The alignment of our duffel bags irritated all of the Drill Sergeants, as if the alignment of the bags meant life or death. We had them aligned, but had to do it again. And again. Again. Then suddenly, the lead Drill Sergeant on the microphone ordered us to "Drink water!"

A minute ago, I was doing just that - drinking water - and I was yelled at. Now they were commanding it.

"Drink the entire canteen. Start drinking, now!"

I sipped on the water and wiped sweat out of my eyes. It was hot. Prior to joining the Army, I rarely ventured outside on days like this one, except to hit Kentucky Fried Chicken or Dairy Queen. I started to pour water over my face to cool off.

"Drink water, don't dump it on your head!"

Drill Sergeant Pint showed up. He stared up at me like a closely-shaved shih-tzu.

"Drink it. Drink it all. And then hold the canteen upside down to show me it's empty."

"Huh?"

"Learn to listen!" He pointed to his head. "Are you on dope or something?"

"I wish," I said.

Suddenly his hand seized the canteen and tipped it into my mouth, hard enough that he gave me a fat lip. I guzzled hard, guzzled until I nearly hurled on the man, but luckily only dry-heaved.

"Unbelievable," he said, looking down at the clipboard in his hand. "You're on my roster, Sprungli. You're in my platoon. God have mercy on you."

Three other Drills hustled over and scolded me for dry-heaving without permission. The stress got to me. I could not help myself.

I started blowing bubbles.

Three bubbles wafted out before I even realized it.

"What are you doing?" They screamed. "What in holy hell? Are you blowing bubbles? What are these bubbles doing floating in my gym, Private?"

They didn't understand. I will forever blow bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air. Unless they take my tongue out, I will never be able to stop myself from blowing these bubbles when the mood strikes.

"Blow one more," said Pint. "Blow one more and I will smoke you until next week."

On the edge of my tongue, a new bubble teetered, and I couldn't help but set it free, into the atmosphere, where it belonged. The bubble escaped, ascending into the gymnasium rafters.

The smoking did not last until the following week. After rolling me for some time, Pint handed me over to another Drill Sergeant, who promised to

"personally deliver my carcass" to the platoon after he took a turn smoking me. The dusty gravel and sweat made everything about me a mess, right down to my standard issue tan undies.

I arrived at my barracks dripping in sweaty mud. When I entered my barracks, standing between a tall female Drill Sergeant and an even taller male Drill Sergeant stood Drill Sergeant Pint, arms akimbo, like a life-sized Mario or Luigi.

"Up here, Private Sprungli," Pint barked. "It's a bad sign when I know you're name on the first day."

Dragging my duffel bag, I bumped into several people and jarred them out of their stiff position of attention. When I reached my spot, I sighed relief when I realized I stood right behind Private West. She stood ramrod straight and made me do the same.

Drill Sergeant Pint began an eternally long and dull speech, showcasing his ability to say the same thing in many different ways.

Pint gave a command.

"Parade, Rest!"

"The first thing I am going to talk about today," said Pint, "is fraternization and Gender Integrated Training. Let me inform you that there will be no relationships, no note-passing, no finger-fondling, no prolonged eye-contact, no lewd remarks, no verbal abuse, no casual touches, no consensual sexual relationships, no dating, dancing, dining, no interaction of any kind between males and females beyond what is necessary for training. The penalties for this will be severe under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I will lobby for the full penalty to be

asserted against any member of this platoon, company, or battalion that violates this, for the purpose of basic training is to create warriors. The purpose is to become soldiers, not sweethearts. Love and relationships do not belong to this period of your life. For those of you with relationships back home, forget about them. Even if you have a spouse at home, your focus is here, not there. Your summertime boyfriend or girlfriend is already on your best friend's lap, so don't worry about her. However, for those about to be dumped, don't look to satisfy your urges here. You will find no pity from me or my staff."

The tall man said, "That's absolutely right, Drill Sergeant Pint."

"Don't even think about it, Privates," the woman added.

Pint continued. "If you come to me with complaints about home, if you tell me you are missing your brother's wedding, your grandma's hair transplant, or your dog's birthday party, I will make my response to all those requests right now: too friggin' bad. I just finished a second tour in Iraq - maybe you noticed my tan. Like me, you are here for the duration of basic training. Any legitimate excuse to go home will be evaluated, but most likely you will not see anyone besides the people in this room until your graduation day, in nine weeks.

"Your world is about to get small. Smaller than you've ever imagined. Focused, and puckered tight. Starting today, you need to get motivated to become a soldier and forget about everything else, and I reiterate - especially forget about relationships. As

for myself and the other Drill Sergeants, we will have no contact with Privates for anything other than training. If you need to report an issue, if you feel pressured sexually or romantically, in any way, report it to me, and I will suffocate and kill the source of the problem."

He paused.

"Actually, I can't say kill anymore. This is the kinder, gentler Army these days. I will resolve your issue by passing the complaint up the chain of command for investigation. Be advised: if harassment is happening, I want to know. If feelings crawl into this barracks, I am their exterminator."

At some point in the speech, I lost track of what he was saying, because in front of me, a curvature of camouflage hypnotized me under the spell of Private West. In her uniform, she seemed oddly sexless (or genderless, I don't know which). I forgot where I was, until the sharp voice of Pint startled me like a flash grenade in *Resident Evil*. But for once the subject of his scorn targeted another.

"Private West!" he snapped. "I'm going to correct something on you right away. You are standing at what is called *Parade Pretty*. Do you know what Parade Pretty means?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

"It means don't tilt your head, don't smile at your superiors, don't bat your eyes, or do any of the crap that worked in high school on your teachers. This ain't the night club. This ain't the block. This ain't cheerleading practice. You're not here to get sympathy or entice anyone, just stand at Parade Rest and look straight ahead. Don't blink or push a hair

out your face, don't fix your collar or wink or adjust your cover or shrug or flirt in any way. If you are thinking about anything other than what is straight ahead of you, then you have the wrong answer. Understood?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant. But I wasn't..."

"Don't correct me, Private West."

"But I wasn't..."

"Platoon, Attention!"

For that remark, Pint dropped the whole platoon.

"Front-Leaning-Rest-Position. Move!"

Although the "Front-Leaning-Rest Position" sounds relaxing, it is the opposite.

Pint shouted. "Now when I say 'down,' you reply, 'Attention to detail,' and lower yourself to the floor. Down!"

I said, "Attention to detail!"

"Now when I say 'Up,' you say 'Teamwork is the key.' Up!"

"Teamwork is the key!"

"Down!"

"Attention to detail!"

"Up!"

"Teamwork is the key!"

"Down!"

"Attention to detail?"

"Up!"

"Teamwork is the key?" How long could I go on like this?

"Down!"

I saw stars.

"Up!"

Fork me, I was done. Three push-ups were enough to flatten me. The previous smokings rendered my arms useless. I started lifting my head only, doing my best impression of a bear rug. Everyone around me kept going but I was quite wasted from my earlier dustings.

Pint said, "Get your belly off the ground, Sprungli." But he moved on to another Private after he realized that I could not even loll about on the floor without moaning.

When the last person reached muscle failure, Pint ordered us back to our feet. Then he made us do an exercise called "The Overhead Arm Clap," which consisted of holding your arms straight out and then, yes, clapping them overhead.

"Oh my God," I whispered to West, "this is easy."

Two-hundred repetitions later, I realized that I had spoken too soon. My shoulders seemed to be cracking like walnuts. Splitting pain from my neck to my feet, all from clapping my hands over my head.

The rest of the day, a blur. Somewhere along the way, I think I blacked out. Every meal was shoved down our throats. Even though we ate, starvation set into my belly. In the civilian world, my evenings did not function like this at all. Usually I took a good three hours before bedtime to wind down by watching reruns of *South Park* or playing *Quake*. God, how I missed *Quake*. To master that game would have been my greatest achievement. I played the game so much that my TV at home had an Ogre permanently burned into the screen. Some might wonder why *Quake* was worth so much fuss, but I would say to them: the constant destruction was a

daily thrill. Inside that game, I had but one hundred lives to give for my country. There I could set the high score for enemy kills against the Death Squads coming through the Slipgate. Every night I wreaked havoc until the streets bawled in retribution and then I would push pause for some nachos and cheese. I took my snack with dignity, in my pajamas. Then after a quick hit off the bong, I pushed play and rushed back into the bloodless throng.

Here, cheeseless and sober, I had to prepare my bunk for sleeping. It was then that I met my bunk mate, who introduced himself.

"My name is Darius Shipman."

"Congratulations," I told him.

He wanted to talk, too, of all things. I took the top bunk, hoping to stash future contraband. He took the bottom bunk without argument and somehow he made his bed in about three seconds. He helped me make my bed, a task I despised as beneath me, unworthy of my skills.

As I tucked myself in, he started to talk to me about his life. I think he took the battle buddy thing seriously. I just wanted to sleep, but Darius Shipman oozed the kind of boredom that did not allow sleep, and once he got started, a sock and ball-gag could not stop him.

I knew I shouldn't have asked.

"So how come you joined?" I asked, and cringed when he started talking again.

He smiled at me. "I was working at a bank before this. The idea of joining the Army did not excite my co-workers. I was a junior loan officer, very junior.

My friends at the bank said, 'Don't do it. You could be sent to war and die.'

Darius paused and pursed his lips before going on.

"But I fully understand the dying part. That part is fine. The response that I wanted to tell my good colleagues was this: 'Worse than dying, I could stay here in Champaign... and live!'"

The way he laughed at his own joke, I yearned for him to stop...

"To my way of thinking," he said, "if adventure meant the risk of death, then it also meant the risk of life. I'd been indoors for three years. I needed an outdoor memory. And not the Peace Corps kind of experience."

"Wow," I said, "that's interesting and all but..."

"I almost joined the Marine Corps," he said, "but my father, who was a Marine, said I had half a brain, which was too much. At first he said, 'don't join at all,' meaning no branch of the service, for reasons he would not articulate. To steer me off, he urged me into finance and banking, hoping it might take. But before long, after a few years in that sterile and polite place of soft-spoken men, I felt the pull toward the military again. I needed to punch my ticket of life in a barracks. The fear of lost time threatened my every waking moment. I felt the state of being young and strong waning in me. At the bank they tried to talk me out of joining on several occasions. 'Are you sure you want to join? It's not like you,' they said. 'It's imprudent. You seem more sensible than that.' I argued with them, quoting Blake: 'Isn't prudence just a rich, ugly, old hag, courted by incapacity?'"

Again he laughed at his comment. I think he expected me to do the same.

"Honor. That's what I'm after, Sprungli. Not for college money, not for benefits. Maybe there is no good way to describe it. This will seem strange to you. To most people, it makes no sense at all."

I wanted to push mute.

"I enlisted in the Army," he said, "to understand all that I had learned in books. As early as Sunday school, when I learned about the great generals and leaders, Joshua and David. Actually, the idea to join came even before those Bible stories and ideas of rank, when someone told me that Grandpa died at the Battle of the Bulge. Regardless of how he died, there in our living room, mounted on the wall was an engraved case that held a purple heart. In my childhood, I looked at that case every morning while I ate my cereal. If it was supposed to scare me away from joining, it didn't work. It made joining that much more inviting.

"But in the end, Sprungli, it was stories that recruited me, the books. Everything my teachers stuffed into my eager little hands encouraged my enlistment. All of them invited me down to this party in Missouri. *The Red Badge of Courage*. *A Farewell to Arms*. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*."

"Wow, the memories," I said, "but I need to get some sleep..."

He intervened. "I mean, isn't Hemingway is the greatest recruiter of all-time? Anyone who wrote about how war is hell, somehow at the same time made it glamorous to me. Another recruiter, I

remember, named Graham Greene, he got me here. And Tom Clancy. And well - let me think...."

I waited. I thought he might be finished...

"Then there was Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Achilles sitting in his tent while his countrymen fought and perished. Hector fighting for his worthless brother, Paris. Odysseus, Alexander, Aeneas, Charlemagne, Patton. I could go on and on."

I waited for Private Shipman to go on, but he stood there gazing over my bunk like he had just cashed a bowl. I asked him, "Are you a preacher or something?"

"No, I'm not a preacher," he said and snapped out of his trance. "I'm no preacher. Just a member of the Church of Christ."

"I've never met a Mormon."

"No, Church of Christ, not Church of Latter-Day Saints. And you?"

"Baptist. Is that the end of your...ah...story?"

"For today." He rubbed his hand over his shaved head. "The journey continues tomorrow."

"Ok, goodnight," I said, and rolled over and shut my eyes before he could think of anything else to say.

Chapter 6. POSH

The entire company piled into a large room where we received the official briefing on POSH, or Prevention of Sexual Harassment. Pint held the floor. The other Drills patrolled the crowd in search of people dozing off. Several times I was scared awake. Waving his arms in the front of the room, Pint explained POSH and he baited me for trouble.

"Can anyone give me an example of sexual harassment?"

Someone said, "Improper touching."

"Right. That means no contact that goes outside the scope of training. What else?"

Another Private said, "Calling someone names or saying crude things."

"Like what?" Pint asked. "What might someone say that would be sexual harassment?"

I raised my hand.

"Sprungli. Give us an example."

I took the bait. He seemed to be begging for a joke. "'Suck me,' Drill Sergeant?"

The laughter barely reached my ears before I was chased out of my chair by several Drills. Outside, into the grass, a fresh smoking ensued. My bunkmate Private Shipman was forced to join me in the grass to partake in the punishment. Because of

my comment, I missed the remainder of the briefing, which included watching part of a movie.

Front-Back-Go was followed by an endless session of the Overhead-Arm-Clap and lastly, they rolled me on the ground like bread dough, back and forth, left and right, right and left, until the POSH briefing ended and a new briefing began. Shipman and I spent little time on our feet that morning, except when we were doing the side-straddle-hop, known more commonly as jumping-jacks.

Stewing with rage, Pint marched Shipman and I back to the barracks and seated us in the Drill Sergeant's office, where he administered official disciplinary action.

"Private Shipman, I'm also writing a counseling statement for you."

"Me?" he said.

"Yes, you. You're his battle buddy. Sprungli is out of line. It's on you to correct him. Whatever happens to Sprungli will go into your file as well."

"But, Drill Sergeant, he was way out of line in the briefing."

"Out of line?" I said. "Drill Sergeant Pint, you asked for an example of harassment, and I just gave one. I had a good example, too. Wouldn't it be harassment if someone said 'Suck me', Drill Sergeant?"

Pint said, "Sprungli, trying to be clever is putting nails in your coffin on this counseling statement."

"I'm not trying to be clever, Drill Sergeant."

Pint said, "It sounds like you are saying 'Suck me, Drill Sergeant.' Because that is what you are saying."

"Is it my fault," I said, "that I have to add 'Drill Sergeant' to the end of everything I say? If I was saying 'Suck me, Drill Sergeant', I would have to say, 'Suck me Drill Sergeant,' Drill Sergeant."

"That's it, you are both getting statements."

"But," said Shipman, "I agree with you, Drill Sergeant - he deserved to be punished."

"No buts, Shipman," Pint said. "Now where did I put those counseling statement sheets?"

Pint rustled through the drawers in his desk, fingered every folder, and tapped a pen against his chompers until he said, "They must be in the female barracks. Follow me."

We followed him outside, onto the white gravel that I already knew so well. Pint paused at the door of the female barracks. He said, "Always call out, 'Male on the floor' before entering the female barracks, do you understand? But no one should be in here right now, so we'll just go inside." He entered the door with us following close behind. Twenty feet inside the darkened barracks, he stopped and held up a fist, the infantry hand-signal for halt. He looked back at us.

"Did you hear something?"

We both shook our heads. Like a trail donkey, Pint had his ears up.

The sound of a singing woman filled the barracks. Beautiful singing, high-pitched, and the bare tiles seemed suddenly filled with flowers. I half-expected to see a bird passing through an open window. None of us could move. What was the song? Was it something old or something new? I could not place it, nor did I want to because I could not think. I could

only listen and observe a shadow lengthening on the floor as the owner of the voice emerged from the latrine and shower area. Her singing seemed to hypnotize even her, because the woman came out with her eyes closed, singing loudly, pouring out her soul for her secret audience of three men lost in the echoes. I saw a pair of feet first, perfect feet, ankles unblemished, followed by calves that rose into my view like twin vases. Soft and tender knees led upward to dark thighs neither thick nor thin but an ideal curve that surrounded a soft area of olive-drab toweled mystery. Then her hourglass hips tapered into a slender waist, her arms were bent at the elbows, her hands were lifted and drying her dark hair like in a shampoo advertisement. I forgot the singing altogether and let my mouth hit the floor with a clang.

It was Private West.

None of us spoke. We couldn't. Electricity passed through the room, just like that time I reached into the toaster with a butter knife to retrieve a captive bagel.

The barracks changed all around me. I felt like I was sitting on a beach looking at an exotic woman lying out by a grand ocean. But surely any ocean's grandeur was second to this. I was not in the Army anymore. I was on that beach with her. She and I were together in a foreign land, with a blue backdrop, and her bottom was dusted lightly with sand. The sun traveled over her to the West - the West! Arching, she bathed in drunken kisses of sunlight, while simultaneously begging for (I imagined) the touch of my thumb and my hand. There were no

words exchanged, for her singing stopped and her lips settled into a slight part as she invited me in to kiss...

"Oh my God!" she screamed at me. Was it ecstasy? No, it was definitely fear.

"Get away from me, Sprungli!"

"Oh sorry," I said, unpuckering my lips.

She ran, leaving behind wet footsteps, ghostly evidence of a lost artwork. Again, I wondered how she ever became a Fat Camper. She must have arrived in tubland by human error. This Private West was the kind of woman that gamers would dedicate their high scores to, using her initials instead of their own. If she strapped a gun to each thigh, she would have been a ringer for *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*.

At that point, I felt like turning to both Pint and Shipman to congratulate them, like baseball players after a good game.

Pint shook his red face. "You two - pick up your jaws. Now get into that office." He marched to a small corner office and unlocked the door. "Wait in here. Quietly." His voice trembled. "I need to find out why she is here in the barracks instead of at the POSH briefing. I may need to write up another counseling statement."

When I sat down in my chair, I looked at Shipman and his face was as flushed as Pint's. I asked, "Is my face red, too?"

He ignored me. I said, "Yoo-hoo, Shipman."

His head snapped to attention, as if something broke in him, and he spoke like a fool.

"It's over," he said.

"What's over?"

He scrambled and grabbed a piece of paper off the desk and started writing a letter.

"Dear Erin?" I read as he wrote. "Is that your girlfriend? Are you going to tell your girlfriend that you saw a naked lady?"

"Sprungli, it's none of your business, but yes, I'm breaking up with my girlfriend at home. We left on bad terms and I've had an epiphany. Silly as it seems, I now know that I don't want to repair things with her."

Soon after Shipman's admission, Pint returned with his military bearing around his ankles.

I asked Pint, "So what was she doing in here?"

"Never mind that, Sprungli."

Shipman said, "Did you apologize to her?"

"Quiet," Pint snapped. "She was at Sick-Call this morning and the line of people was very long. She has a...ahem...a sore throat."

Shipman put his hand on the desk and leaned forward. "Is it strep or just a cold?"

Pint looked down at his trembling hands.

"The doctors don't know yet." He looked up. "But her throat culture will be read by tomorrow." Pint started opening and closing desk drawers. For a moment, he searched frantically in the office, even standing on his tip-toes to swipe his hand over the top of the file cabinets.

"Ah! Found them. Drill Sergeant Brown always keeps some around."

"What are they?" Shipman asked.

"Vitamin C tablets and throat lozenges."

"May I," Shipman asked, "give them to her?"

"Sit down, Private. I'll give them to her. And can I get a Drill Sergeant? Is that too much to ask?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"I should write you up for that, too," Pint said. "I'll be right back to fill out your counseling statements."

Pint did not come back for fifteen minutes. I think he needed some privacy.

Chapter 7. Jell-O

What made basic training worse for me than anybody else was that my Shipman acted as our 'Platoon Guide,' getting the assignment simply because he was a college graduate and his rank was Specialist.

I should have been the Platoon Guide. Nor was I alone in this sentiment. Many others envied his post and yearned for the title.

His first failure as a leader came early, when Drill Sergeant Pint pointed out that out of sixty people, only Shipman's boots were shined. His boots sparkled, but selfish Shipman *didn't even bother* to see to it that the rest of us shined our boots. His second failure came when Private Major slept through guard duty. Any good Platoon Guide would have been there to wake Private Major, who suffered from a tendency to return to bed during his guard shifts. The Drill Sergeants punished Shipman for these failures. Because I was his battle buddy, I was punished alongside of Shipman.

These failures caused a band of Privates to form and declare war on Shipman's reign of terror. We wanted to throw a soap & towel party like we had seen in the movies, but every night we were too tired to organize anything. Shipman stayed up until

almost 23:00 writing letters and reading his Gideon's Bible. Not only did he stay up late, but he woke early, at 4:30, before the lights even came on, so scheduling his beating proved difficult. When the lights turned off at night, I stared at the ceiling for ten minutes thinking not about Shipman but about breakfast. That's what I prayed for. I dreamed of the French toast that in the morning I would slather with butter, syrup, peanut butter, raspberry jam, and four packets of sugar. With my restricted diet, sugar packets became necessary supplements for maintaining my strength. I started smuggling condiments out of the lunchroom, pocketing them as snacks for my daytime activities.

When the lights turned on in the morning, by instinct I pulled the covers over my head. Within five minutes, my mother, Shipman, started tugging at me to rise and shine.

"I'm sick of making your bed for you, Sprungli."

"Then don't," I said.

"Come on, buddy. Time to get up."

"Leave me alone. Go marry your sister."

"Knock it off with the Mormon thing. It's Church of Christ, Sprungli. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

When I finally did get out of bed, I only had about five minutes to get outside and into formation. In basic training, I never once brushed my teeth - no time for it. While I put my boots on, my squad leader, a waif who walked around with her head down, rushed inside to yell at me. She would say, "Get outside, Sprungli. The company is already standing at attention!"

"Already?" My voice echoed in the empty barracks. "Seems a little early."

Someone was always stealing my stuff, too, so I usually couldn't find one of my boots, or my poncho, or my iPod, which forced me to borrow from someone else. That morning it was my field jacket.

"Hurry up, Sprungli!"

I always stepped out of the door a minute too late, and then I would get dropped on the gravel. Shipman also got dropped for being unable to assemble his platoon properly. Drill Sergeant Pint threatened to fire Shipman every day, but for some reason never followed through on the threat. Shipman remained the Platoon Guide for the entirety of basic training.

My squad leader loved to scold me, too. Shipman became good friends with her, enough that I had to mention the cozy relationship to Drill Sergeant Pint, just in case the Platoon Guide had a romantic interest in mind, a violation of POSH. They looked ridiculous together, with him being at least a foot taller than her, or maybe more, because she always stared at the ground.

Drill Sergeant Pint asked me, "You think Shipman is what?"

"I think he's having an affair with Private Vang."

"An affair? Sprungli, do you even know what that means? First of all, he's not married. Second, he's the most squared away soldier in the company and she's his first squad leader. He's supposed to talk to her." Then he looked down at my boots. "Holy hell,

Sprungli, watch out! Snakes!" He started to stamp the ground with his boots.

"Snakes?" I felt a bubble forming in my mouth.

Pint stopped stamping the ground and yelled into my chin. "Tuck in your bootlaces, freak. Army Regulation manual six-seventy-dash-one clearly states that the excess lace is tucked into the top of the boot."

"I knew that, Drill Sergeant."

"Beat your face, Sprungli."

"Beat my face?" I softly punched myself on the side of the head. "Like this?"

"Yes, like that." Then he waited a second. "No, you dummy. Beat your face means *do push-ups!*"

I'd rather have literally beat my face than do that horrible exercise. By this time, my shoulders ached like I was having a permanent heart attack.

Worst of all, as Shipman's battle buddy, I had to be present for all of the interactions between Shipman and Pint. Shipman read to Pint from a list of scribbles in a little waterproof notebook.

"Private Waters needs a new poncho," Shipman said. "Someone stole his."

Pint said, "Why is Waters always losing things? Who's taking his stuff?"

I looked away, up at the sky. Missouri has amazing clouds. Almost daily, I found a cloud in the sky that resembled Donkey Kong.

"Private Vasquez says he needs to make a phone call," Shipman said. "Her mother's exploratory brain surgery was yesterday. Also, Private Jackson is experiencing a really bad reaction to something. He doesn't know if he has an allergy or not, but he is very

swollen in the face and, it seems to me, his lymph nodes."

"Did you diagnose him, Doctor?" mocked Pint. "Send Jackson to Sick-Call. Don't tell me about the symptoms."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

Sick-Call? I had heard of the term before, but for some reason, this time the words sprung into my brain like a broken mattress coil.

Shipman tore out his list of requests and handed the paper to Drill Sergeant Pint, who frowned and accepted it.

"Shipman, what is it with you and these little pieces of paper? Every day you hand me a little list. Do I look like a dag-gum refrigerator to you?"

"No, Drill Sergeant. I write the requests down to ensure that the communication is accurate."

"What are you, an accountant?"

"Drill Sergeant, I was in finance."

"Jee-pers frickin' Kris-muss. And what are you doing here? Finding yourself? Trying to make the world a better place?"

"Sort of, Drill Sergeant."

"Mother Theresa. Are we done, or do you have another list for me?"

"I just want to mention again, Drill Sergeant, that Private Waters has been missing his poncho for a whole week now, and I believe the rain is getting to him a bit."

"All right already. I'll get him a poncho. You sound like a broken record." Pint looked over my shoulder and shouted at the platoon. He yelled, "Private Vang, did you lose your dog or something?"

She shouted back. "My dog, Drill Sergeant?"

"Did he run away or get hit by a car? Should I print off some flyers and we can go around post them on telephone poles? We can call out his name if you like? Is this about a dog?"

"I don't have a dog," she replied.

"No? Well, then it must be something else. Did you throw-up on your boots? Are you counting the rocks on the ground?"

"No..."

"Are your boots a crystal ball? Can you see the future in them? If they are, can you tell me what's for lunch today?"

"I don't know, Drill Sergeant."

"Then quit staring at the damn ground! You're always looking down, Vang. Keep your head up! Be aware of your surroundings, Private Vang. It just might help you spot the enemy someday."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

Shipman defended her quietly. "Drill, Sergeant, I should point out that Private Vang grew up in Cambodia, Drill Sergeant."

"Oh?" said Pint. "How interesting? What region?"

"Region? I don't know Cambodian geography, Drill..."

"Like I give a hoot, Shipman. What does that have to do with her staring at the ground? I don't need to understand her cultural heritage. You know what: you just go ahead and beat your face, Shipman, for jabbering without purpose."

"Land mines, Drill Sergeant," Shipman said while he started bouncing out perfect push-ups. "She walks with her head down because of land mines."

"Land mines." Pint paused and then smiled. "Really? Land mines?"

Shipman nodded at the gravel. "That's right, leftover mines, Drill Sarnt."

"Well, then," said Pint, in a respectful tone. "That little woman is more of soldier already than either of you will ever be, ain't she? Land mines, I'll be damned. Sprungli, that little girl could kick your ass."

"Yeah right!" I scoffed. "At ease on the bullshit, Drill."

That comment exploded on Pint like a carton of sour milk. He forced Shipman and I to bear crawl everywhere we went that morning.

After two hours of bear crawling, I could not wait for breakfast. My back was killing me and the line moved toward the doorway so slowly that I became enraged. Watching the other platoons and companies eat drove me to madness. I couldn't help but make comments to those eating whenever I passed someone smiling and playing with their food.

"Take your time, Richard," I whispered to the eaters. Anyone from another platoon I called *Richard*. "Enjoy your food, Richard, think about yourself, Richard. Screw your buddy, Richard. Never mind us standing in line. Don't worry about me or anybody else, Richard, just take your sweet time."

To keep Pint at bay, I learned to speak without moving my lips. Noise to him was like stench to a housefly. And the Dining Facility had enough of those already. Bugs landed on everything, but I was

too hungry to care. If the tapioca turned out to be maggots, I would have ate it and asked for thirds.

That morning, and most others, I had a single goal: French toast. Above all else, that. I also craved sausage, bacon, biscuits and gravy, Frosted Flakes, and at least two packages of Pop-Tarts, if they weren't already stolen by the many Richards clawing into the boxes, but nothing quite as much as French toast. Nothing on this earth compared to my French toast in the morning.

Dessert, however, became a power-struggle as fierce as the Cold War. And I needed dessert just to feel human. The Dessert Wars made animals out of people. Jell-O never excited me until basic training. I learned to crave it. Green, orange, red Jell-O. What made Jell-O extra double-plus-good was the suspended fruit that floated on top like a hovercraft. I became ravenous for the flotillas of fruit cocktail, mandarin oranges, or straight up pineapple wedges. The dessert trays were all too visible to those of us standing in line and we extended our necks like goats through a fence to observe the wobbling trays of Jell-O. When one of the hair-netted lunch ladies brought out a shining pan of that colorful bliss, my heart raced. But as battle buddy of the Platoon Guide, I was required to stand at the end of the line with him. Every meal, without fail, the Jell-O supply dwindled as I neared the front of the line. Standing there, I would watch Richard the First, Richard the Second, the Third, onward to the Tenth, emerge from the serving line with a full plate of food and he would proceed to pile on the Jell-O, as if Jell-O came down from the heavens in endless quantities. Once or

twice I yelled out, "Take it all, Richard!" or I said, "Hey Richard, it's all about you, Richard! The Jell-O is all about *you!*"

That day when I reached the serving line, the Jell-O supply appeared to be at a safe level, but when I entered the serving line, I lost sight of the dessert tray. As I filled my plate with entrees and as many condiments as possible, I tried to be polite, which meant speaking loudly so that one of the deaf, snarly, crystal-methanized servers wouldn't mistake "Chili-Mac and peas" for "A gram of smack, please." Finally, plate in hand, I rounded the corner toward the Jell-O trays and I felt like someone had shot me in the chest.

The horror.

The empty horror.

Repeatedly, like a grand conspiracy against me, I witnessed the final serving of Jell-O being flopped onto some undeserving Richard the Fifteenth's plate. That last Jell-O thief was the legacy of all the squandering Richards before him. I dubbed him King Richard.

Whenever I saw the Jell-O tray empty, I called out to the workers: "Excuse me, Ma'am," with my voice cracking from urgency, "we need some more Jell-O."

But the Jell-O bearer never appeared like I hoped. Instead, Little Drill Sergeant Pint buzzed over and stole the condiments from my plate.

"You don't need Jell-O, Sprungli. Have some pears or pineapples. It's nature's candy. It's good for you."

In basic training, desserts disappear like that. Because of the greed of the Richards, I was forced to take reasonable measures to protect the scarce goods. When desserts were available, I made up for my missed opportunities. In the morning, they offered Pop-Tarts and Rice Krispy Squares, and believe me, I loaded my cargo pockets and snacked all day long. After I learned how the system worked, I knew that it was a dog-eat-dog world in the Desert Wars.

Speaking of dogs, when I first arrived in Missouri, I thought all of the Army girls were dogs, or Koopa-Troopas from the Mushroom Kingdom, or creeps from *World of Warcraft*. But after a week or two, the olive-drab fashion started sticking to them. Girls never looked so good sporting lawnmower-cut mullets, hats pulled down tight over their eyes, baggy uniforms, and black combat boots. This phenomenon affected everyone in the male barracks, where none of us had experienced arousal since receiving our vaccinations.

Private Waters brought up the topic of our newfound impotency, asking, "Am I the only one who hasn't had an erection since the needle sticks?"

Of course, no one answered him, but he was right. Regardless, he received another nickname for admitting it: *Private Wilted*.

Private Major - he always stayed ahead of the game. He already had a steady girlfriend. One of the girls in our platoon, a short girl from southern Mississippi, warmed up to him right away. No later than one week into basic training, I was standing in line behind Private Major. Right there in the chow

line he squeezed her like a Nerf ball. With one hand at Parade Rest, his other hand went wild under her brown shirt, like a badger trying to escape from a gunny sack.

I asked him, "Can I have a feel?"

"Never, Sprungli." He ignored me. "Get your own."

"Oh I will, Major. As soon as I meet you on the bayonet range, I will," I whispered. I was joking. But I wanted him to wonder: was I serious?

Major laughed without breaking fondle.

Chapter 8. Range

Of all the weapons I've used - pistols, revolvers, submachine guns, laser cannons, machine guns, rifles, grenade chuckers, tanks, zip guns, mini guns, rocket launchers, and ballistic missile silos - not once on a video game did I ever have to zero a weapon. Maybe Nintendo should run the Army.

I thought rifle training would be great, as seen on *Jarhead* and other movies, but to simply draw our weapons from the armory, we stood in line for an hour and then we stood in a parking lot for another hour, counting how many weapons we had just drawn. Sixty people were in the platoon, meaning we had sixty weapons, and somehow we could not count to sixty. Someone was always screwing it up.

The female Drill Sergeant said to me, "How did you pass the ASVAB test to get here? I'm moving you to first squad, right in the center. Can you count to seven, Sprungli?"

Private West and I were now in the middle of the first squad, both facing Shipman, who stood like a green fencepost with eyes painted on.

"Quit looking at me, Shipman."

The fencepost spoke. "Just do the count this time, Sprungli. Say it right so we can go to the range."

I looked at Private West and she was expressing a sneer. I said, "Put that attitude away, girl."

"Just do what Shipman says," she replied. When West smiled at Shipman, he gaped back at her like Barney the Purple Dinosaur. Seeing them happy forced me to take action. This time I would purposefully yell the wrong number.

Shipman gave the command, "Count - Off!"

"One" "Two" "Three" "Four" "Five" "Six" -

My turn. I thought too hard about saying "Eight" and yelled the correct number:

"Seven!"

West followed with "Eight!" and everyone counted off correctly, meaning we could finally go to the range and start shooting.

But that's not what happened. We did not go to the range and start shooting. Instead, we drove to the range and stood under the sun and burned like day-old charcoal, waiting for a chance to get on the firing line so we could zero the weapons. All day long the Drill Sergeants walked back and forth between the targets, marking bullet holes and adjusting the settings on the rifle sights. Only three shots at a time were allowed, with at least five minutes between each round of firing. The rocks under my boots were hot, so much that I didn't have an appetite for the Pop-Tarts in my pocket. When I did reach the firing line, I had to work my lane with Private Waters and Private Shipman. They became fast friends. I thought they might sign each other's yearbook and spoon one another in the foxhole.

Shipman went first. He jumped into the hole and popped off three shots. While Shipman tried to shoot

straight, I listened to Waters prattle about butterflies and caterpillars. The heat either took him to the edge that day or he needed a professional psychiatrist.

"Don't you think it's funny," he started, "that butterflies, without a care in the world, fly around on a rifle range?"

"No, Waters," I said, "I don't find it funny that butterflies fly on a rifle range. I find it beyond funny, I find it hysterical." I chortled a laugh, letting him know his humor floored me.

"Maybe it doesn't interest you, Sprungli," he said, while putting an oat stalk between his teeth, "but I think it's an amazing contrast. Here we are, the dominant culture, training to kill our own kind, and look out there, amid the singing bullets, these butterflies dance around as if a rifle range was the safest place in the world. Look at them, Sprungli. We see paper targets, silhouettes of men, while the butterflies see only the flowers of Missouri."

I asked, "Two questions. Do you think any of that grass out there is weed, and, if the answer to the first question is yes, is that what you are chewing on?"

"I wonder if the butterflies have seen all of the wars of mankind. Maybe they flew around at Gettysburg that day, just like they do here."

As he spoke, a butterfly flew near us, over us, around us, and then landed on the barrel of Private Waters' rifle, which was leaning on a rock. This nearly caused Waters to swoon with delight.

"Look, Sprungli. On my weapon, right on the tool of conquest, the butterfly uses it as perch. That's all a weapon is to him - just a place to land. He knows no fear, lodges where he pleases. Imagine."

"The artillery range is near. How do you think he would fare over there?"

Waters put his nose near the butterfly. "This little guy is not worried about empire, not concerned with when his last breath will come. When his time comes to die, he will be living unafraid."

"Were you court-ordered to join the Army?"

"No."

"Why are you in the Army, when you should be in a group home?"

"I joined to pay for school. Why else would I join?" Waters spoke quietly as he focused on the butterfly. "Actually, Sprungli, I hate to be the one to mention it, but since you are poking fun, I've been wondering about you. You like to stare in the shower a wee bit too long. None of the guys can tell if you are staring because of lust, or plain envy."

I took off my helmet and tried to smash his precious butterfly, but I missed. The insect darted away. Private Waters did not move, but chuckled quietly when I retrieved my helmet.

The Sergeant in the control tower spoke over a megaphone, "Is there a problem at firing line seventeen? Why is your Kevlar not on your head, Private?"

Drill Sergeant Pint hustled over and kicked sand onto my boots like a Minor League baseball manager to an umpire. "Sprungli, put your K-Pot back on your head and quit dicking around."

Shipman fired his rifle again. He zeroed his rifle in the first few rounds of shooting.

"You're done, Shipman," Pint said, seeming to transport himself downrange instantaneously.

"Perfecto, Shipman. Beautiful. You know what you are doing with that rifle. Switch out with the next guy." Shipman crawled out of the foxhole and Waters crawled in.

The sound of bells came from somewhere behind me. Recognizing the jingling music, I turned and expected to see an ice cream truck. The sound did come from a truck, but not exactly an ice cream truck. A man leaped out of the driver's side and shoved up a side-panel, which unveiled his storefront.

This man was driving Candyland.

I could see the Kit-Kats from a mile away. My mouth began to water and my stomach writhed. Could it be a mirage? Just to control the saliva, I had to swallow repeatedly. I attempted to get a Drill Sergeant's attention, waving frantically. Finally, a female Drill Sergeant moved toward me.

"What is it, Sprungli?"

"I really need to use the bathroom?"

"Have you fired yet?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant," I lied.

"Go ahead, but hurry up. You'll have to come back between firings."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant. Hurrying, Drill Sergeant."

Behind me, she said, "And don't go near the Gut Truck. I don't know what that driver thinks he's doing here. He must have the wrong range."

Gut Truck. So that was the name of this oasis on wheels.

The First Sergeant, who followed the company everywhere but said nothing, tended to his humidity-measuring wet-bulb. The First Sergeant could always be found standing by his wet-bulb, checking the

temperature, tapping his instrument, pulling on his knob. To us Privates, he seemed a like a poor old man pulling around an oxygen tank. We pitied the First Sergeant. When I passed by him, I heard him speak for the first time.

"Make sure you drink plenty of liquids, soldier."

"Oh, I sure will, First Sergeant." I gave him my biggest nod, which I reserved for the elderly, and walked past him, straight toward that singing Gut Truck.

"Three Mountain Dews, please."

The guy said, "That's five dollars, Private."

"Oh, I'm not finished. I would also like seven Kit-Kats, sir."

"I doubt your Drill Sergeant would approve."

Private Major would have been proud. I greased the Gut Truck man with a twenty dollar bill and he handed over the Kit-Kats and the Dew.

"Could we maybe make an ongoing arrangement?"

"I don't know," he said, leaning against the truck. "That's not easy to do. What are you? In basic?" He looked at our banner. "You're still in Red Phase."

"That's right. Patriot Phase," I said proudly. "Is there a drop-off location you could regularly stash Kit-Kats at, a place where I could pick them up?"

"Could be. There could be. But it would cost you up front."

"I gotcha." I gave him an additional ten dollars.

"Ten," he whistled, "is nice, but I got risk involved, too. These Drills don't like me hangin' around the barracks."

I slapped another ten on his counter.

"I'll put a Kit-Kat underneath the staircase of your barracks. Which barracks you at?"

"Echo Company."

"Ok, kid. You'll get your candy."

I ran to the latrine, hugging my cold Mountain Dews and chocolate bars. The latrine is not the most appetizing place to eat, but it was safe. I opened the door and was greatly disappointed to see every plywood hole occupied by Privates with their pants around their ankles. Private Major was among them.

"Hey," said Major, "what the heck's happening, Sprungli? Looks like you got something to share."

"Look again, Major." I opened a candy bar and stuffed the whole thing into my mouth, chewing it for all to see.

The smell in there was awful. The heat activated something awful inside that outhouse. The condensation beaded on the plastic bottles. While I guzzled the first bottle, I held another against my forehead.

"Sprungli, I can't believe you won't share with me. I thought you was my friend?"

"Oh, I'm your friend," I said, opening another Kit-Kat, "and I'm a hungry one."

"Give me a soda," Private Major whined. "I've been sitting in here a long time. I could use something cool."

Between guzzles, I asked, "How long have you been here?"

"Since we got out here. I ain't standing out in that sun all day. Come on now, are you my boy or not?"

"Fine, you can have one."

"My nigga!"

"No," I said, "you my nigga, Major."

At that moment a Private from fourth platoon walked into the latrine, dripping in sweat from standing on the range too long.

"I can't believe my ears," he said. "What did you just call that black man right there?"

"Who, Major?" I said.

The guy looked at Private Major. "And that's ok to you, that he just called you a nigger?"

Major said, "Woah, back up. Sprungli is my boy. And can't you see I'm on the can?"

"Yeah, dawg," I said, "can't you see he's on the toilet?"

"This is a black conversation," the dude from fourth platoon said, "so why don't you just *white* yourself out of it."

"Oh, hell no," said Major, standing up from the latrine and starting toward the other Private. I threw in whatever insults I could to help Major's cause. Unfortunately, the argument's volume increased and drew the wrong kind of attention.

Drill Sergeant Pint busted into that latrine like the Kool-Aid man. He chased all the squatters out. Worse, he stripped me of every Kit-Kat, wrested my Mountain Dew, and all of it went down a plywood hole.

Outside we marched, onto the hot rocks, where Pint rolled us and rolled us until we nearly passed out.

"Ain't no color here but green," he said. "If I hear any of you talking about race again I will skin you alive, make y'all *red*."

When Pint found out that neither Major nor I had zeroed our weapons yet, he double-timed us back to our positions on the firing line and stuck us in our foxholes.

"Now the whole company got to wait for you both to finish," said Pint.

"Too easy, Drill Sergeant."

I wish I hadn't said that. With my sweaty hands, I couldn't get a grip on the rifle and for a long time everyone stood looking at me, waiting for me to finish zeroing.

After an hour, Pint said, "That's thirty rounds fired, Sprungli, and you are aiming further from the bulls-eye every time. Are you sure you didn't mean to sign up for the Coast Guard?"

It drew big laughs, big dopey laughs from everyone. My shooting entertained everybody like I was a one-man USO show. Shipman and Waters, who stood behind my foxhole laughed, too. Private Major, several firing lines down from me - even he laughed. Luckily, right when the laughing was loudest, I looked down into my foxhole and saw a helper crawling over my boot. A Black Widow spider had found her way into my foxhole. The spider seemed to be begging me to bring her into the barracks for a little fun, for some laughs of my own. Perhaps Private Waters would find my Black Widow as amazing as the butterfly. I scooped the spider inside my plastic ear-plug casing and laughed along with everybody else.

Chapter 9. Bayonets

"You are all going to Iraq. Get used to the idea. You will be going to Iraq."

A megaphone squeaked, squelched, and pierced the parade field as a Drill Sergeant spoke into the mouthpiece. *"Get Iraq into your heads."*

"Stab me in the face," Private Waters said to Private Vang. "No, in the heart. Whatever you do, just kill me."

"Don't worry so much," said Private Vang. "This bayonet couldn't kill you anyway. It's plastic."

"Then I guess you'll have to jab it pretty hard. Try to pierce my breastbone in the first shot if you can."

"You should be more concerned about a *buttstock-to-the-groin*." Vang swung her rubber rifle upwards and aimed for the center of Private Waters. With his rubber rifle, he blocked her approach.

"Vang, what is your job going to be?" he asked.

"I'm a forty-two-lima."

"And what is that?"

"Administrative Specialist."

"So you're a secretary?"

Vang shrugged. "I guess so."

Waters, the agitator, said, "So what the heck do you need bayonet training for? So you can stab a ream of paper?"

"Hey!" She jabbed the bayonet at him several times.

"No, I'm not saying...wow, you're quick. I'm not saying you can't do it, Vang, I'm just saying, what's the point?"

"It's to make us all warriors. Why, what's your job?"

"Water Treatment Specialist."

"Maybe you can stir the water with the bayonet."

Waters laughed. "You know, you look really good holding a rifle and bayonet. There's something very sexy about it."

"Thank you!" She posed with her killing-spear like it was her senior picture.

While I listened to Waters and Vang, I stood across from Private Ganger. She was the three-toed sloth of our platoon. Luckily, next to her stood my favorite soldier, Private West. While I stabbed at the flesh vat known as Ganger, I watched West fight Shipman. They were fast, too, like Johnny Cage and Kitana in *Mortal Kombat*.

This was what the Army called Hell Week and I could feel myself becoming stronger every day because I went to the doctor every morning. Sick-Call became a daily affair. I leaped out of bed in the morning to get outside before the sick truck left for breakfast. Not only did I get to eat earlier, but at the doctor, they treated any illness I could imagine. My sore throat went away and the soreness in my legs began to improve, mainly because I missed the morning exercises every day.

I told Shipman, "Go to Sick-Call and you can skip morning workouts."

"That's not why I'm here, Sprungli. How can I understand what it means to be a soldier, if I don't fight through adversity?"

"Just make something up. Say you've got a compound fracture or something."

That's what I did. In the Doctor's office, I drew up a list of maladies and complaints. The Doctor said that I did not have "goiter of the ankle" and asked if I meant to say "gout." The pain in my feet, I assured him, could be symptoms of one or both conditions. After he examined my ankle, inspected my feet, and criticized the scent of my socks, he wrote with his magic pen, granting me a highly coveted 'soft-shoe profile.' No more boots for me. I wore Reebok tennis shoes all day long, skipped the exercises, and only took part in marching and the other enjoyable parts of basic training, such as bayonet practice.

My partner, Private Ganger, was also the recipient of a soft-shoe profile. She was soft all over, kin to a snail. Because she and I both arrived late after sick-call that day, we became stabbing partners.

Waters continued flirting with Vang, sickening everyone in earshot.

"Ok, my turn," he said. "Slash-to-the-throat, buttstock-to-the-head, C-130-to-Iraq."

Drill Sergeant Brown spoke into the megaphone without much vigor. "*What makes the green grass grow?*"

I answered with vigor. "Blood blood blood, bright red blood!"

"Oh my God this is stupid," said Waters.

The Drill Sergeant continued. "*What makes the green grass green?*"

"No," Waters said, "God, no. I can't even say this crap anymore..."

"Guts guts guts!" I said and stabbed at my porkie partner, Private Ganger. "Kill!"

Ganger said to me, "Are you retarded or something?"

"What?"

"I was just wondering. You remind me of my cousin. He's retarded."

"Listen up, Gang-Bang," I said, pointing at my collar. "I outrank you. I'm a PFC, that's Private First Class. You're not there yet. Respect the rank. You know the rule. Don't hate the player, hate the game."

On my left, I heard some laughing coming from Shipman and West. They were tangled together, almost cheek to cheek if not for their helmets, and Shipman's bayonet neared Private West's face.

And what was that I saw? I saw a squeeze of the hand, a short touch, and a soft love pat. The quiet squeeze happened when West and Shipman switched sides to charge each other again.

On my right, I heard more laughing, this time from Private Waters and Private Vang. Perhaps only a foot apart, they stood leaning against cross-checked rifles and Vang, who usually stared at the ground, looked up at Waters' face. And what were these sweet nothings? Waters spewed flattery onto Vang, asked about her home, and wished, yes, he *wished* that he knew more about her native land, Cambodia. A date was arranged for the next outdoor boot-shining, where they would apply Kiwi and spittle onto each other's footwear. They leaned on the rifles and did

not battle each other, not at all. Instead they held each other in place like an isosceles triangle.

The Drill Sergeant continued to speak into the megaphone. "*Kill! Kill! Kill!*"

Private Ganger said, "I'm hungry."

"I'm starving," I said. I decided to offer her a gift. "I have some ketchup packets. Would you like one?"

The Drill Sergeant spoke again. "*In war, only the strong survive.*"

"Sure," Ganger said, "I'll eat a ketchup packet."

She tore the top off the ketchup packet with her teeth and sucked it dry.

Soon enough, before Shipman and West could squeeze again, before Waters drowned poor Vang in sap, along came Pint, prancing along like a proud miniature schnauzer, encouraging us to stay motivated, to remain swollen with anger so that we would one day "Kill!" in epic battle. Wearing a helmet, neckless Pint reminded me of Mega Man from *Mega Man 2*, which was less pixelized than the original character.

"Sprungli!" he woofed. "Perform the moves in the order called out by Drill Sergeant Brown. The order was: Smash, Slash, then Buttstock. It was not Buttstock, Smash, Smash."

I performed the moves and Private Ganger tried to block me, but I was too quick for her.

"Ow!"

"Sprungli! You're not supposed to actually try to hurt her, you knucklehead, just practice the motions. On the bayonet course we have dummies you can try to kill."

"In war," I said, "only the strong shall survive."

"In that case, you'll be the first one pushing up daisies." He looked down at my feet. "Why are you wearing shoes?"

The magic document in my pocket would answer the question for me and neuter Pint of any chance to drop me.

"I have a profile." I smiled.

"Let's see it. Wipe that stupid stripe off your melon."

I reached into my pocket, and felt around for my soft-shoe-profile, but I felt nothing. Perhaps I had misplaced it. I checked my cargo pockets, my breast pockets, and every corner of my uniform.

Pint said, "Can't find it, huh?"

"It's a serious condition," I said. "If I don't take it easy, I may have to have my foot amputated, Drill Sergeant."

"Well, I don't see any profile. Start running laps around that track over there. When you find your profile, stop running. Otherwise, just keep running."

I said, "But my foot! If I am going to be a Ranger..."

"A Ranger?" Pint exploded. "A Ranger? A park ranger or a United States Army Ranger? No, Sprungli. You're going to eighty-eight-Mike school and then straight to your duty station. You're not going to Ranger school."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sprungli, you're going to be a truck driver, not a Ranger. A Motor Transport Operator. Didn't your recruiter tell you? The only Ranger you'll ever be is a Code Ranger with a specialty in Sick-Call." He laughed. "Sprungli, the Airborne Ranger. Lead the

way, to the buffet." Pint turned his attention to Shipman and West. "Private West - you have CQ duty this afternoon with me in the Drill Sergeant's office."

While Pint spoke to West, I tried to absorb the shock of being lied to by my recruiter. At the office in Milwaukee, the recruiter said that after basic training in Missouri I would go straight to RIP School - Ranger Indoctrination Program - and soon after that I would join the 75th Ranger Regiment. A truck driver? Ever since playing *Big Rigs* on my PC, I hated trucks. Even *Monster Truck Madness*, with its destruction, didn't excite me for long. What kind of truck would I be driving? Would it be a nuclear missile transporting semi-truck, armed to the teeth, or would it be an Army deuce-and-a-half carting bedsheets? I had to ask. "Do truck drivers get to blow stuff up, Drill Sergeant?"

"Oh sure, lots of explosions. Only problem is, it's usually the truck that does the blowing up," said Pint, with a grin on his face. "Cheer up, Sprungli. You'll definitely be going to Iraq. Lots of truck drivers needed over there. Now start running."

Chapter 10. Fast Food

That night I got to thinking about the injustice served upon me. The situation was unacceptable, but instead of sending a letter to my recruiter, I decided to contact my Grandfather to find out what was going on. I wrote:

Dear Grampa,

Wutz up? Not going very well here. Right now I'm on guard. Lasts for two hours in the middle of the night. I'll probably catch some Z's cuz the drills already checked on us once tonight. Lulz. My palms hurt from doing push-ups on the rocks, so yer lucky I'm writing at all.

Drill sergeant said I'm gonna to be a truck driver not a Ranger. U know if that's true? Recruiter lied to me.

And you lied about the eggs. Were you even in the Army? The eggs are yum - no runny eggs. Favor - can you send some snacks? Be cool if u did. Maybe use a bubble-mailer and tuck some chocolate bars up under the shrink? A dude was supposed to leave me some Kit-Kats under the staircase out front, but I've checked it every afternoon and I

haven't found jack. So I'm like wut? That was a gyp.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. It's hell. It's so hard. Can you send me some \$\$\$? The more the better.

By.

General Sprungli

After borrowing an envelope and a stamp from Shipman's locker, I sent the letter. By the time I received a reply, I had almost forgot I had written it. But Grandpa's reply really irked me because it confirmed what my Drill Sergeant said. No matter how I tried, I could not swerve my future in trucking.

Grandpa can be a real jerk sometimes, too. He wrote:

Paul,

I tried to write a nice response to you, but you don't deserve one. Haven't you learned anything yet? Frankly, I'm disgusted. You have caused a pain in my shoulder that I thought was heart attack, but it was only the feeling of the greatness of this nation slipping down the drain.

I don't know where to begin with your letter. I guess I can start by saying NO. No, I will not send you money or chocolate. Can't you go through two months of your life without chocolate? What could you possibly need money for in basic training? I

hope that you are in with a good crowd and not some idiots.

You know, when I was in the Army, if we were caught sleeping on guard duty, they would punch us awake, put us on KP for a week, and make us peel potatoes with a blunt knife and scrub pots and pans with a tiny rag.

My hope is that you will get squared away by the Drill Sergeants. I hoped that being there would make you want to improve yourself, but now I'm not so sure. At the very least, I hope to see that you've lost some weight.

The one thing I did do was get in touch with your recruiter. Yes, you are going to be a truck driver. He and I both laughed when we tried to imagine you as a Ranger. Truck drivers are vital to the success of the Army. MacArthur said, "Nine times out of ten, an army is destroyed because its supply lines have been severed." Take pride in your work, Paul. The trucks bring the lifeblood to the front. It's something to be proud of. So quit your complaining and drive on. Believe in yourself and what you are doing!

Respectfully yours,

Grandpa

So the recruiter did lie. That sent me over the edge of my bunk, into Shipman's locker for another envelope and stamp. Before I shut Shipman's locker

door, I noticed that he possessed an excess of clean and folded socks. I decided to borrow some.

My locker - what a mess. I scrambled through all the Army junk in my locker to find my ear-plug case, where I had stored that Black Widow spider.

As carefully as possible, I opened the case, but quick as lightning the spider jumped out, forcing me to chase her on my hands and knees. She holed up in a crack in the wall beside my locker. I became angry and started smacking the wall, trying to encourage her to come out of hiding. I could even see her inside the crack, but she would not move. Before I could think of a way to lure her out, the time came for lights-out.

In the dark, I couldn't see anything but a glistening spider-eyeball in the crack. Nothing would work - I clapped my hands, stamped my feet, blew air into her hiding place, but she held her position. By then I was tired. In the morning, I decided, I would get the spider.

As I climbed the bunk, Shipman asked, "Did you shine your boots, buddy?"

"Yeah," I said. "Three times."

"Come on Sprungli, you have to find time for it. I know it's hard." He sighed. "See you in the morning, Sprungli."

All night I thought about that spider. Actually, I thought about French toast, but sometimes I thought about the spider. My stomach growled every three minutes. That may have been the only night I stayed up as late as Shipman, who scratched away at his waterproof notepad and read his New Testament under the red-filtered flashlight.

At one point, I leaned over the bunk to see what he was doing and he sensed my presence.

"Hi, Sprungli."

"How did you know I was looking?"

"Because usually you're snoring."

I said, "Whatcha doin'?"

He turned over a piece of paper so that I couldn't read what it said. "Writing a letter," he said, "to someone."

"Private West?"

Jerking his head sideways, he looked up at me in surprise. "Who told you?"

"Nobody. I saw you two flirting."

Shipman sat up in his bunk and looked me straight in the eye, upside down. "Don't say anything, right?"

"Why would I say anything?"

"I mean it. I would really appreciate if you keep it quiet."

Then by instinct I felt the power enter me from this newfound leverage. I said, "No one will ever find out. Wow, I can't wait for breakfast. I love those desserts. Do you think you could grab me an extra Pop Tart tomorrow morning?"

Shipman smiled and said, "No." But I nodded at him to let him know that I meant business.

"Fine. Just this once, Sprungli. Just don't say anything about any letters."

"Oh, of course, just this once. What letters?"

I tried to lift myself back up to my bunk, but the blanket underneath me started to slide. I tried to grab the railing, but my hands slipped. My toes, my last line of defense, I dug them into the mattress.

Too late. In a flop, I fell to the floor, landing on my head. I swore and woke up several people. Shipman shined his flashlight at me where I lay on the floor.

"Why aren't you wearing any underwear, Sprungli?"

A scratching, tickly sensation started on my abdomen. It was her, the Black Widow. She had come out of hiding and was now attacking her patron. By the time I pulled up my shirt and convinced Shipman to point the red flashlight at my navel, the Widow had already worked her way down to my special area. I screamed, waking more people. The spider sank her teeth into my special area. I trapped her right where she had bitten me. I waddled over to my locker. The sound of a door slamming did not distract me at all.

"Get in bed," Shipman whispered, "someone just walked in."

"Wait!"

With the spider trapped, I searched in my locker for the ear-plug case, which had fallen into a pile of unfolded clothing on the bottom of my locker. I picked up the case and flipped open the lid. I placed the case near my hand. To transfer the spider into the case required some quick hands. I rocked back and forth.

"Yep, that's it, right there. Ok, I'm ready now." I said, "Hey Shipman, shine a light on this so I can see what I'm doing."

A flashlight illuminated my special place. I leaned over and said, "Ok, here we go. I'm going to count to three and do this. One, two, three!"

I removed my hand and dumped the spider into the case. The lid snapped and the Widow was trapped. "Oh yeah, I did it. Oh, wow," I said, but then the venom seemed to take effect. I looked at Shipman, but he was pretending to be asleep. The light was not coming from his flashlight. No, it came from Drill Sergeant Pfeffer, the psycho Metroid from fourth platoon, and standing behind him was Pint.

Pfeffer spoke first. "Did I just see what I thought I saw?" He paused. "Because it looked like you just wanked into your locker."

Before I could explain, I became dizzy, maybe from nerves or from the Widow's poison. Bubbles began to pop out of my mouth, even as I felt myself wobbling.

"Jesus," Pint said, "it was that good, huh? Look at him."

Their faces became distorted, then dark, and I fell to the floor right in front of them, face-down, ass-up.

When I woke, it was morning. I found myself sitting in the Drill Sergeant's office. Private West sat across from me, answering the phones.

"Echo Company, this is Private West speaking. How may I assist you? Yes, can you please hold?"

On her left sat Pint, poring over my file. Behind him hung an old yellow Army poster with the words, "Be on the watch for: DISAFFECTION - DISLOYALTY - TREASON - ESPIONAGE," and under each word a definition written in bold explained what each word meant. Having played Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell*, I knew all about the backdoor deals that went down in the name of

national security. Someday I would work for the NSA, after I finished being an Army truck driver. I knew how to deal with espionage. In *Splinter Cell*, when dealing with non-signers of the Geneva convention, the only method of combating the enemy was to send out teams of commandos on missions of complete deniability. Also, I knew that these commandos must wear green goggles with a thermal lens and a night vision lens. Gaining the trust of terrorists takes time. Espionage must not be rushed, but the act of treason must be swift and decisive. I learned all of this one night in an online pitched battle, from a janitor from Stockton, California, who was supposed to be my ally, but became a turncoat and gunned me down in a digital street.

In the Drill Sergeant's office, lots of posters hung on the wall. Seven posters trumpeted the Army Values. I let my eyes hop from one poster to the next. The seven Army Values: *Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Integrity, Honor, Personal Courage*. Each of the seven Values was represented by a picture of a soldier climbing a rope or looking up at something. Between *Honor* and *Integrity* was the coolest poster, one of a sniper emerging from a swamp and pointing his rifle at the final Value, *Personal Courage*.

The surroundings made me optimistic about my future, and that one day I would be a hero, like the sniper. But then I learned why I was sitting in the Drill Sergeant's office.

"Indecent exposure is the charge," Pint said. "It's in your Smart Book, Sprungli. Did you read that part? No, you didn't. I'll read it to you." Flipping

through the pages, he chewed on his lower lip. "Ah, here it is. It states: *The accused soldier exposed a certain part of his or her body to public view in an indecent manner and the exposure was willful and wrongful. The maximum punishment is six months confinement and a bad-conduct discharge.*" He frowned at me.

Private West said, "They could have chosen a better word than 'discharge' for that sentence."

Suddenly, I remembered the spider, and understood why they accused me. Without waiting, I looked down into my shorts and inspected for bites. I counted three bites. Three!

"Sprungli!" Pint barked. "Don't you start playing with yourself right here."

"But Drill Sergeant, I was bitten..."

"Don't try to talk your way out of this one. I could have you discharged, er, ejacu...ejected from the Army for this offense. But I'm only going to give you a counseling statement. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer wanted to crucify you. Dammit, Sprungli, you need to focus. I want to see you graduate, so I am going to make it my mission to be your shadow for the next four weeks."

"But Drill Sergeant, I was bitten by a spider, right on the..."

"That's baloney. That's worse than 'the dog ate my homework.' You were spanking your monkey."

"But Drill Sergeant, I..."

"Don't lie, Sprungli."

"I'm not!"

Pint refused to let me go to the doctor that morning because he insisted that I perform one full

day of training without any mistakes. As promised, he followed me, making it impossible for me to get any snacks. Luckily, Shipman owed me. I managed to get a Pop Tart from him.

But other than that measly 500-calorie snack, the only time I ate that day was at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The hunger, along with my venom-injected loins, forced me to drink water, gallons of it, which sent me shuffling (in my mandatory underwear) to the bathroom time and again. While I stood over the urinal, I thought of food and imagined seeing a delicious pink donut in front of my eyes. So real - was it real? I picked it up. The donut, still moist and warm - I could feel it. My teeth opened wide and came down on the donut, but instead of being soft, the donut jarred my teeth, nearly knocking out one of my incisors.

I pulled the donut away from my mouth, only then noticing that my donut was not a donut, but a pink cake from the latrine.

"Ha! Sprungli, you're sick, baby." Private Major stood naked in the bathroom, rounding the corner just in time to witness me with the donut. "You sick. I love it. You're crazy, baby." Major punched me in the shoulder, slapped my back, and then gave me a wedgie, pulling my underwear almost to my head.

"Ow!" I threw the cake at him and it ricocheted off his forehead.

"Oh, gross. Oh, God. Oh! Nasty!" He started scrubbing his face in warm water. Between scrubbing, he asked, "Is that how you're trying to get out of the Army? By eating?"

"Get out of the Army?" I asked. "Why would I do that?"

"Yeah right." Private Major turned off the water. "Ain't that what you tryin' to do? I'll tell you something, Sprungli. You don't need to eat out of the toilet. There's a better way. Just wet your bed."

"That works?"

"I don't know," Major said. "But I'm going to find out. I've tried everything else."

"What if I don't want to get out of the Army?"

"Are you messin' with me?" Private Major laughed and started to inspect his nose in the mirror. "Sprungli, at the rate you're going, you'll be home before me. I'm impressed. I got love for you. That thing in the locker, damn, that was crazy! One more trick like that and you might just get your ticket home."

"But I wasn't..."

"That's good." He shook a finger at me and then resumed trimming. "Yeah, you got the game down, Sprungli. You know how to sell the lie. That's what will get you out. Never back down from your story, no matter what stress they put on you. I like that about you. Never thought you could teach me anything, but there you go teaching me. That means you can get out, Sprungli, as long as you don't flip-flop on your claims. Don't say boo until you're back in Milwaukee with one of your large ladies."

A few of Major's buddies came down to the latrine and before long we had a free-style rap session underway. The distraction was nice because for ten minutes I forgot about my hunger. Me and my boys dropped beats like the latrine was the Death-Row

studio. When I enlightened them with some of my lyrics, Major exploded with laughter again, nearly falling into a commode.

The noise level of the latrine soon brought Shipman through the darkness to investigate.

At first, his presence did not interrupt us. He smiled and even danced a bit, exhibiting his lame moves. He joined in the beat by tapping on a mirror with his dog-tags for a moment. But his cool act could not last, because at the end of a loud verse, Shipman said, "Fellas! Sprungli. Major. Hey, listen up for a minute. You have to quiet down. Everyone needs sleep, including you guys." His eyes squinted in confusion. "Major, why is your pecker sitting on the sink? You know, people brush their teeth over that spot. Do you always do that?"

Major laughed.

"And Jesus," Shipman said, "can you spare a few inches for the needy?"

We fell over laughing on the latrine floor. Shipman made a joke.

But always the spoiler, Shipman waited in the latrine until everyone returned to their bunk. When the rapping stopped, my hunger returned. It was an angry hunger, whittling and lathing my stomach like my high-school shop teacher on a piece of birch.

A withdrawal started to occur within my body. Every cell called out for a bit of trans-fat, some molecules of lard to allow daily operations to continue as usual. I needed some fast-food. I needed a large fry - a Biggie Fry from Wendy's, perhaps a bowl of Wendy's chili on the side. Wendy's didn't compromise, they personalized. Square hamburgers

and Frosty malts, Lord, I prayed, let there be a drive-up window in the sky.

One memory of fast food led to another. The hunger prodded me like a boy at a dead cat. Chick-fil-A came to me not in a dream, but in a biscuit. I imagined myself huddled over Chick-n-Minis, remembered all the times I enjoyed a coupon lunch of 3-for-2 Chargrilled Chicken Sandwiches, and laughed at the night I spilled Lemon Pie into my lap.

Then I recalled my first love, that redhead - Ronnie. Oh, the extra value he brought to my life. I don't believe all those haters - everybody trying to knock Ronald down with McLibel, saying things like worm meat, choko pies, cow eyeballs, pig-fat milkshakes, bird-feather McFlurries, beef-tallow tainted fries, but I know the truth. I say judge not, lest ye have tasted a Triple Thick Shamrock Milkshake.

And Burger King. That was my senior-year sweetheart. The King knew how burgers should be. He welcomed me in, took my order, gave me my first Whopper. I was nervous and intimidated. He showed me the world, introducing me to exotic tastes, such as the Croissan'wich as well as the Double Croissan'wich. The exotic seafood in the BK Big Fish reminded me that fish, just like cattle, can be pressed into bun-fitting shapes.

There is one Colonel I will always salute, long after my Army career ends. He gave me homestyle mashed with Twisters on the side, not to mention buttered corn and whipped-cream Chess Pie. Sometimes things started out hot & spicy, on occasion extra crispy, but with his gravy at the ready,

things never got dry. Once I had a Puffy Meat Pattie in one hand and a Tender Roast in the other. I didn't know which way to turn.

I also had a lot of fast food one-nighters: White Castle, Krystal, Jack-in-the-Box, Hardee's, Carl's Jr, Long John Silver's. They were all a little dirty. To have those moments back.

In my bunk, I recalled those late evenings. To taste those fries again. To let the buns fall out of their paper dresses. In my mind, I still pump so many ketchup dispensers.

But of all the relationships, the old flame that never stopped burning inside me was for Taco Bell. Day or night, I could make a run for the border and fetch some food. No matter what altered mental state I showed up in - Taco Bell treated me as an equal, asking, "Want some?" and I would answer "Heck yeah, yo quiero." I spiced up the night with fire sauce dripping over Baja Chalupas. I remember my favorite order: *Double-cheesed fish tacos, Crunchwrap, 7-layer burrito, Cinnamon Twist happy-ending, and a large Mountain Dew.* If I did not get my fill, if I required a Steak Enchirito and an Extreme Chicken Quesadilla to eat along with a Meximelt and a regular taco, the Bell did not flinch when I came back for my *fourthmeal*.

I wanted them all, all the burgers. The thoughts tortured me that night. To think that another day would pass burgerless - not even the idea of French Toast at breakfast could assuage me. For a burger, I would have journeyed in bare feet and over broken glass. Behind my closed teeth hid a sultry tongue, pining to strike a salty sandwich.

Chapter 11. Sunday

I survived the week, lasting until Sunday. After I refueled at breakfast that morning, I checked on my spider, who still lurked in the ear-plug case. That Black Widow, she was still full of hostility. That was good, too, because she was about to take a one-way vacation. On a folded sheet of paper, I wrote, "*A souvenir for you from Basic Training, Staff Sergeant Bauer.*" I placed the note and dumped the spider into the envelope, letting her out of her jail. The feisty Black Widow was on her way to a Milwaukee Army recruiting station, to visit the man that promised me Ranger school. However, the whole plan backfired when I sealed the envelope and in doing so, a wet blotch formed on the paper. I had squeezed the envelope in the wrong spot. Opening the envelope to inspect, I found eight idle legs inside.

Sundays in the barracks were sad for some guys, but not for Shipman, who beat his chest and commanded people to clean.

"We are going to clean every tile," he proclaimed.

Shipman dragged me into his cleaning power-trip. The only perk was that we were allowed to go into the female barracks to oversee their progress.

"Male on the floor!" Shipman shouted as we entered the female barracks.

Inside, twenty females scrubbed the tiles, wearing their camouflage pants and brown T-shirts. The radio blared. Whenever the song changed, singing and dancing started anew. Some females wept in their bunks. This happened in our barracks as well, and for either sex, Shipman tended to every teardrop like a new puppy.

When she saw us in the doorway, West reacted. "Hi Shipman!"

I heard a girl from first-platoon say, "Our favorite boy is back."

I pointed at my chest and told her, "If you want it, just jump on it."

"Who said anything about you?"

Next to Shipman, like equals, we paraded through the barracks. Shipman whipped out his notebook and started jotting down complaints and supply deficiencies.

A song came on the radio that activated the women into a higher state of energy. An MTV-obsessed group of girls acted out the entire video. They sang and teased Shipman. Some of them gyrated and grinded on each other. Three of them bumped against Shipman, who kept scribbling in his notebook, pretending to ignore the attention. The scrubbing on the floor continued to the beat. "Mmm, that feels good," one of the females purred. They sang into their brushes and spray bottles. Hips everywhere swayed, the barracks was like a nightclub but with Sunday morning shining through the windows. Shipman took his notes while I took in the

crazed party. Their hair, all week wrapped tight under helmets and caps, touched their shoulders and seemed longer than the Army Regulation 670-1 allowed. In their plain brown T-shirts, they scrubbed, rubbed tiles, sang into each other's mouths, and gushed with music. Two females held an old shirt between them and they spun around until it tore apart and then they tossed the rags down to the girls who worked on the floor, scrubbing at the tiles to the beat. Other females performed amazing feats, moving bunks and massive lockers around, all while never breaking out of song. When I thought I could handle no more, Private West emerged from the latrine area carrying a large pitcher of some cocktail that the females passed around to each other.

"What is that?" Shipman asked.

"We pooled our lemonade packets from the MREs," said West, referring to the Meals-Ready-to-Eat that we received on the rifle range.

"May I?" asked Shipman.

West said, "Be my guest."

"Where did you put your lips?"

She took a drink and made a kissing sound when she pulled the pitcher away from her mouth. "Right there."

"Give it to me." Shipman drank and lingered with his mouth on the pitcher, filling it with his backwash.

Pint ruined their precious moment. The barracks was stifled. The music died. The man lived his whole life like a stink in an elevator.

Pint made his usual Sunday announcements:

"Baptist service is leaving right now. Gospel leaves in thirty minutes. Catholics at ten o'clock,

Lutherans at ten fifteen. Jewish service leaves at nine forty-five. Wiccan also leaves right now. Pentecostal departs at nine thirty and Buddhists, so do you. Scientology, you should have already left. Muslims, Mormons, you go at ten twenty. Did I miss anybody? Ok then, Baptists and Wiccans, make two formations outside. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer is waiting out there for you. Any questions? Good. The rest of you, get back to work."

During the first weeks of Basic Training, when these announcements were made I didn't react and therefore missed out on a good deal of candy. Thanks to Private Major's reconnaissance, I was converted to the Wiccan religion.

"Shipman," I said, "I'm need to go to the Wiccan service. Did you hear that the Mormons are meeting later on?"

"That's wonderful for them."

"Is it true that you guys kill a goat or a ram every Sunday?"

"I'm not Mormon and I'm not going to the Mormon service, and no, they don't kill rams on Sundays." He sighed. "Unfortunately, I'm not going to any service. I need to make sure the barracks is clean so I don't get blamed for dirt all week."

Down the barracks steps I trampled, stopping to look for my Kit-Kat stash underneath the staircase, but the Gut Truck driver continued to betray his verbal contract. No Kit-Kats - not a single one.

A group of Baptists gathered in front of Drill Sergeant Pfeffer and a small group of Wiccans made

another formation. There were only seven of us practicing Wiccans.

Pfeffer came over and said, "Y'all better be Wiccans, whatever the hell it is. Ain't no experimenting here. You came to the Army with a religion, you stick with it. This isn't some retreat to find your inner freak."

Private Waters stood in the center of the Wiccan formation and I knew he wasn't a Wiccan, but I couldn't out him, because neither was I. However, Sunday was an important day to keep my mouth shut, because if I timed everything right, I could attend the Wiccan service, get back in time for the Buddhist service, and then catch either the Jewish service or the Muslim one. Whichever one I attended didn't matter, just as long as I escaped the barracks for the maximum amount of time.

I learned a good deal about the Wiccan tradition. First, we all marched to the Shoppette convenience store and bought supplies for the service. I chose beef jerky and chocolate milk, mini-donuts and pork-rinds. One Wiccan, Private Ganger, argued about this ritual, saying that we needed to get out to the parade field and draw the pentagram. "There ain't no such thing as a Wiccan ceremony," Private Major assured her, "unless you got gum."

Ganger's opposition to the shopping never lasted long, because she was hungry as her fellow Wiccans - we had a hungry faith. When we did reach the parade field, she asked us to join hands and repeat some words after her.

"Handfasting?" Private Major said in disbelief. "No, me and my girl are off the woods for another

kind of handfasting, but it's more like fasthanding. We'll see you all in a bit."

That left only five of us Wiccans to enjoy the service. One of the Wiccans didn't seem to understand the religion. He started quizzing Private Ganger on what it meant to be Wiccan. The name on his uniform said 'Baker'.

"So you haven't accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?" he asked Ganger.

"Well," Private Ganger said, "Of course not, I'm a Wiccan."

Baker continued in this line of questioning. "Do you know that this star is a symbol of the devil?"

"No it's not," said Ganger.

"You should not be allowed on a military installation."

But Baker was interrupted by Private Waters.

"This is not a Christian ceremony," Waters said, visibly upset. "If you've come to convert people, then leave. But Private Ganger doesn't need to spend her only hour of the week getting bullied by you."

"Who's byulling? I'm just asking."

Private Vang, also not a Wiccan, seconded Waters. Private Ganger smiled. I yanked and pulled at a stubborn piece of beef jerky.

"Wow," I said to Private Waters, chewing on the end of the jerky. "For a guy with three Bibles, I'm surprised you are Wiccan."

"Sprungli, can you seriously be that dense?" asked Waters.

For a while we all stared at Baker, who eventually stood and left the circle, abandoning Wiccanism. Finally, Ganger began her ceremony. While I

watched, I tapped on the bottom of the pork-rind bag to shake out the crumbs and crunched them in my mouth.

"Please chew with your mouth closed," Ganger said to me. She then leaned back and faced the sky with open mouth. Two rows of teeth lined both the top and bottom of her mouth. In some areas, she seemed to have three rows of teeth. How so many teeth fit inside a mouth, I had no idea, but I watched carefully every time that she opened her mouth and exposed the double-tiered pearlies. In some ways, her mouth reminded me of deep-core drill bits used on *Armageddon* and *Total Recall*.

At the end of every Wiccan service, someone had to go find Private Major and his sweetheart in the woods. I had grown tired of watching Private Vang and Private Waters tickle each other and giggle, so I volunteered to locate the stray members of our flock. Private Ganger walked with me.

"Richard?" I called out in the woods, "Oh King Richard, where are you?"

Ganger followed close to me, so near that we bumped each other several times. Her perfume smelled wonderful, like peach cobbler. Before long, we stopped looking for Private Major and sat on a log next to each other. I offered her beef jerky and she accepted. Using an old magic trick, I produced a mini-donut from her ear. One thing led to another. Before long we fell off the log together, onto the forest floor with a thud, and there we kissed. She was all over me, and definitely an amateur.

"How do you like that?" I said, exciting her. "Right there, you like that?"

"That's my hip."

A first-timer. We performed a barrel roll on the grass and leaves. We did not roll far, perhaps only once around, because we had tumbled into a patch of brambles and vines. Before I could react, my arms were pinned together. The position allowed me to see my beef jerky, but I could not reach it with my mouth. Ganger wiggled on top of me and tried to escape.

"What are you trying to do?" I asked.

"I'm trying to get off of you," she said.

"Ouch! Careful where you move your knees, Ganger. Can you reach my jerky?"

The situation worsened when she managed to rise to her knees and lean forward onto the log. I wiggled back and forth on the grass until I was able to turn over, but I should have stayed put, because when I rolled, the vines locked me in place, and my face landed right in the center of her ample rear. She slapped at me with her hand, but I could not escape that ripe spot. The forest had swallowed us. I leaned back, but could not maintain the position, and without any other choice, I fell forward into her rump once again.

I heard footsteps behind me, a rustling in the leaves.

"God-dog, is that Sprungli and Ganger?" The voice of Private Major. He was already laughing. "That's Sprungli, all right. And he's snorting crack! Sprungli, are you trying to get out on a perversion charge? Damn, you are the master, Sprungli."

I spoke into Ganger's buttock. "Piss off, Major. I'm trying to get untangled."

Major's girlfriend said, "Damn, you are nasty, Sprungli."

"You said it, baby," Major agreed. "Like two whales pushed up on a beach. Two sea lions stuck on a pier."

"Help us," Private Ganger whelped. "I'm so sorry. Please give me a hand."

"Sorry for what?" Major asked. "Hell, if I was you, I'd rip one right on the bridge of his nose."

Chapter 12. Article 15

Pint quoted Field Manual "twenty-two-dash-five" while we stood on a huge slab of pavement covered with streaks of melting tar. We marched past iron giants, hulks from old wars, old taxes, rusting at Fort Leonard Wood. Pint took charge of the platoon, sending Shipman into the fourth squad, where he belonged.

"Troops who march in an irregular and disorderly manner," Pint warned, "are always in great danger of being defeated." He started to sound a lot like my Grandpa. "General Harold Alexander once said that a ceremonial parade, impeccably performed, can never fail to be a source of inspiration to those who watch it or take part in it. It is the noblest and proudest form of drill. It provides an occasion for men to express pride in their performance, pride in the Regiment or Corps and pride in the profession of Arms. Sprungli! You are supposed to be at the position of attention."

"It's so hot, Drill Sergeant."

"You do not speak at the position of attention." He looked over at the First Sergeant who tapped on his trusty wet-bulb. "Ok," Pint said, "everybody drink water. We're monitoring the temperature. We will only march for fifteen minutes at a time, and then

we'll take a water break. Last thing I need is people passing out."

My canteens were empty. Well, that's not exactly true. One of them was empty. The other canteen contained a glob of tobacco sludge, which I knew would smell awful in the heat if opened.

"Why aren't you drinking water, Sprungli?"

"Not thirsty, Drill Sergeant."

"You're sweating like a pig." He looked up and down at me. "At ease, Sprungli. Turn around."

I turned.

"Are those sweat stains? You're entire top is white with salt. Laundry, Sprungli. Tonight, you are doing laundry. You need to shower, too. If you are sweating that bad, Sprungli, you need to drink a lot of water." Then he addressed the entire platoon. "In 1967, the Egyptian Army fought the Israelis and suffered twenty thousand heat casualties, all because they didn't drink enough water. When the other Drill Sergeants and I say 'Drink Water,' we're not trying to encourage latrine breaks. We're trying to avoid heat stroke." Then to me alone he said, "So when I say, 'Drink Water,' you friggin' drink water." He unsnapped my canteen holder, pulled out the spit-canteen, unscrewed the top, and shook it around. The slopping sound inside almost sickened me.

"Sprungli, you're almost out of water. What if I was your battle buddy and I needed a drink?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

"No? I can't have a drink of your water? Really?"

"Don't. No, Drill Sergeant Pint, don't even..."

A gasp came from the people around me when I addressed a Drill Sergeant using his surname. Using

the last name of a Drill Sergeant was ultimate taboo. The canteen stopped sloshing and one bulging eye of Pint flared like the sun. I expected to be dropped, but instead of punishing me, he did something much worse.

"What'd you call me, Sprungli?" he said.

"Please don't drink my water, Drill Sergeant."

"I hand out the *don'ts* around here. Shut your trap."

And he took a drink from the canteen.

I waited to see what would happen.

He started to spit. He sputtered and gagged on the tobacco toxic waste, wiping his chin with his sleeve. Next to me, Private West offered a freshwater canteen to poor Pint, who doubled over and retched his breakfast. I blew bubbles and hoped for the best. Knowing that I faced a thorough punishment, I tried to think of something nice, like root beer popsicles.

But Pint did not take me back to the barracks for a drubbing. Rather, he marched everyone around for several hours, until his voice became hoarse. He shouted commands at us so fast that we turned the wrong way, ran into each other, and argued constantly. *Platoon, Attention! Port, Arms. Order, Arms. Sling, Arms. At Close Intervals, Dress Right, Dress! Right, Face! Forward, March! Column Left, March! Right Flank, March! Left Flank, March!* At one point I felt convinced that he was saying whatever popped into his head. *Counter-Column, March! Backward, March! Right-step, March! Step-heel-step-heel-step-heel-step!*

The First Sergeant kept tapping the wet-bulb and occasionally he raised his hand to Pint, notifying him to give us a water break. Pint did not give us a break, but only put as at *Mark Time* and said, "You have five seconds to drink water."

When this heat-torture ended, he guided us back to the barracks, where the entire Echo Company cadre, every sergeant that could be mustered, awaited our platoon. The other platoons had returned long before and they smiled like Richards when we passed by them. They stopped smiling when a shakedown was announced. Private West said to me, "I hope you get recycled."

"But would you still love me, West?"

She pinched my arm so hard that I yelped. The sound drew Pint's attention, and he yelled my name like he was calling me out for a fight to the death.

"Sprungli!" His manic face dripped with sweat and he had that crazy shih-tzu look again. In his hand he carried a little stool. I snapped to attention and stared straight forward. Lucky for me, he was angry at the whole platoon. He dismissed us for inspection and followed us inside, shoving and yelling, "These bunks look like shit!" Mattresses flew wherever the Tasmanian Pint went. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer, the lunatic from fourth platoon, started launching everything in sight: garbage cans, chairs, brooms, loose paper, boots, gas-masks, hats, a desk, dress shoes, shorts, t-shirts, buttons, sewing kits, even his own hat. Actually, it was kind of cool - for a while. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer had his own way of speaking, of acting calm when he wasn't. Only a week earlier, he had forced sixty girls into a small janitor's

closet so that they would remember where it was. In like fashion, to clean the latrine of all dust-bunnies, he made our platoon low-crawl under and around the toilets for forty-five minutes.

"Don't take offense," Pfeffer said, "don't take it personal. Just take it, Privates." His accent changed when he was truly irate. He walked up and down between the bunks, waiting for someone to make eye contact, or bump into him, or speak, or not speak. The mere idea of a Private *living* provided more than enough reason to enrage him.

Privates scrambled like fools, tearing apart bunks, only so they could make them all over again. Others grabbed brooms and swept, doing check-downs like quarterbacks, looking over their shoulder every few seconds to see if the wrath of Pfeffer and Pint headed in their direction.

Meanwhile, Pint carried the small stool in his hand and raged through the barracks. His actions reminded me of the drug-fueled Berserkers in *Doom* and *EverQuest*.

Pfeffer strolled to Private Major's bunk. Major hadn't moved an inch.

Said Pfeffer: "Private Major got time to kill."

Major said nothing.

Pfeffer continued. "Private Major sound like a rank, don't it? One that might even be higher than mine." A few snickers came from the other soldiers. "Maybe Private Major someday become a Full-Bird Private." That brought down the barracks. A bunch of people laughed, including me.

Private Major still did not move.

Pint rushed over to assist. "Major," he screamed until he wheezed, "you wanna die out on the rocks today?"

Private Major stood at Parade Rest, with his hand still scabbed from the previous day on the rocks.

"Drill Sarn't," he said, "I believe my bed is in perfect shape, Drill Sarn't." He elongated his *Sarn't* and everyone, in utter amazement, observed this small act of insubordination.

A short laugh escaped both Drill Sergeants. Pint said, "Oh, you think it's made?" Without setting the stool down, Pint violently ejected the mattress onto the floor, sheets and all.

Pfeffer jumped in. "That bunk right there?" In a tone of disbelief, seemingly calm, but with rage burning in his eyes, and with his hand extended like a paddle, Pfeffer said, "Your bunk is a dag-gum mess, Private." He elongated the word, *Prah-vit*, in response to Private Major's subtle mockery.

"It is now, yes, Drill Saarn't."

The stool hit the floor, and Pint climbed upon it, using it as a booster chair so that he could look into Private Major's eyes.

"Make that bed or make your grave!" he screamed. "Move it! Sprungli, you help him."

"Me?"

Giggles from the shadows abruptly died when a new tirade followed and everyone was heeled like dogs by a spontaneous workout directed by the Ranger, Drill Sergeant Pfeffer.

The deluge of words, the punishment, lasted as long as it took Private Major to redo his bed. I assisted with tightening his hospital corners. Pint

and Pfeffer yelled so loud that Major and I were able to talk quietly while we snuggled up the wool blanket.

With my head facing down, I mumbled, "You make nice corners. Very tight."

"Thanks Sprungli. It's 'cause I learned it in juvie," Major said.

"Are you serious?"

"Oh yes."

"Holy hell!" Pint screamed, "what is this, dag-gum happy hour?"

Perched on his stool, Pint dropped as many dag-gums into the speech as would fit. He stood on his toes so that the rest of the platoon could see him in his fervor. When the bed was made, Pint said, "Sprungli and Major: grab your field jacket, rucksack, helmet, and take your deadbeat asses outside."

Major replied, "Yes, Drill Sarnn't."

Outside on the white gravel, under the July Missouri sun, we donned all of our gear. The light reflected off the gravel into our eyes. The brightness felt like darts lancing my retinas. I couldn't look away because the barracks were painted white, too. No shade, no cool air, just heat and piercing white light.

A Humvee was parked in front of the barracks. Pfeffer got inside the vehicle. He started the engine and inspected the gages.

"Hey, Drill Sergeant Pint, we got half a tank of diesel here."

Pint said, "Front! Get down, or I'll kick you down. Both of you." We dropped to the pushup position.

Pfeffer stepped out of the Humvee onto the gravel, gently setting down one Kiwi Parade Glossed black boot at a time. Private Major and I were in a prone position.

Pint continued: "Back! Go! Front! Go! Front! Back! Front! Go! Go faster!"

Pfeffer added, "Fry, you sallies."

We tossed on the gravel like sandworms, rolling under the weight of the gear, getting up to our feet and falling back down. My mouth was too dry for bubbles.

"Go! Go! Go!" Pfeffer yelled. "We're going to do this until that Hummer runs out of fuel."

"Drill Sarn't," Major said, "it's not a good thing for a diesel engine, Drill Sarn't, to run out of fuel."

Pint rushed over, but Pfeffer stopped him with his arm. "Let me, Drill Sergeant," said Pfeffer, and then he grabbed the stool out of Pint's hand.

Pfeffer said, "I am going to bust your skull before the month is out. One thing you didn't realize about the Army, is that smartasses don't change the Army, the Army changes them. And I'll teach you that if I have to get demoted to E-1 to accomplish it. You don't know how nuts I am, Major."

Major said, "I joined the kindler, gentler Army, Drill Sarn't." Running in place, Private Major let his jaw fully slacken. "Can I get a stress card, Drill Sarnnn't?"

The stool swung heavily in the air. Private Major slumped to the ground.

Pfeffer shouted, "Front!" He laughed and put his boot on Major's rucksack.

Pint said, "Hey, battle, I think that's enough for him."

Pfeffer turned to Pint.

Pint said again, "I think that's enough for now."

Pfeffer spit on Major's back, still face down on the gravel unconscious, then he turned his eyes at me. Like a fish, I flopped onto my stomach and pushed against the earth, doing whatever pushups I had left in my arms.

I received my first Article 15 that afternoon. Major received his third.

"The first is the worst."

That's what Private Major told me when we finally got into our bunks that evening at 22:00, after five hours of continuous exercise. Through dinner and onward to the stars we did pushups and overhead-arm-claps, ran laps, and bore an onslaught of insults from various men and women.

Later that night, Major told me that my first Article 15 would be the hardest, "because that's when they go to work on you."

Chapter 13. Phone Calls

My body ached. The following morning I could not roll over, not even by rocking my body, but Shipman helped me dismount my bunk when the lights turned on. Everything sore and inflamed, including my throat. Continuous illness circulated through the barracks and my voice rasped from the swelling. This time I truly needed Sick-Call, but had cried wolf far too many times.

For the next five days, yelling followed Major and I everywhere. By day two I began to jump at my own shadow. It never ceased. Even in my sleep I heard the voice of Pfeffer, who spent more time with me than with his own platoon. At night, he made rounds to wake me for an outfit change. In a given night, I started in shorts and a t-shirt and woke up in full battle-rattle, even wearing my rucksack in bed. My Kevlar helmet was required at all times. Drill Sergeant Pint and Pfeffer made sure that I wore it to the dining facility, to briefings, to sleep. Every Drill Sergeant, from Alpha Company to Zebra, they all called me "*Freak*" and chased me from point A to point B. The helmet attracted them.

People started hounding me about getting my act together. I started to cling to Shipman, since he had my back - and him alone. Major could not help me.

He had his own battles with cadre happening on the other end of the barracks.

We were waiting to get haircuts one day, when Drill Sergeant Pfeffer walked by and something tipped over inside me. I started crying in front of everyone.

"Oh my God. Check this out." Pfeffer folded his arms and laughed. I noticed his Ranger patch, blurry, through my tears. "As many times as I've seen this happen," he said, "I still love watching a good nervous breakdown."

I was hyperventilating.

"You should be happy," Pfeffer said. "Today we get to make phone calls to home."

The words picked my head up and calmed my breathing.

"Really?" I said.

Pfeffer laughed. "Everyone but you. Now how about you go take a roll in the grass for not addressing me as Drill Sergeant. You'll need a battle buddy."

"That's me, Drill Sergeant," Shipman said. There he was, right beside me. Quite a few times Shipman could have let someone else get smoked, but he stayed beside me.

Pfeffer marched the two of us behind some bushes. During the smoking, I cracked and cried the whole time, choking on dirt and wincing at pain, but Shipman kept saying, "C'mon Paul. Just do one more."

"Shipman," Pfeffer scolded, "no one asked for a goddamn cheerleader."

He ignored Pfeffer and kept saying, "C'mon buddy."

When we got back to the line of Privates waiting for haircuts, I could barely stand straight. All day long, Pint roamed the lines, back and forth, like a *Space Invader*, and anyone who moved a muscle was yanked out of line and sent to the bushes, where Pfeffer kept the all-day exercises going full blast.

"Just stare straight ahead," Shipman said, "and don't screw around. We'll get through the line, just maintain your discipline."

"But I'm not..."

"Shh...just be quiet," he muttered. "They'll back off soon. Just get through today. They can't keep us here past dinner. Just stare straight ahead. Don't lock your knees. Keep the blood flowing."

So that's what I did. I stared into the bricks of the squat little convenience store where the barber plied her shears.

Green, black, and brown Army camouflage patterns passed through my line of sight. The whistle blew and the dust in the air muddied the sweat on my skin. Staring straight ahead, my sight was a laser to a single pebble in a red brick. I dared not move. That pebble in the wall was all I could think about. A lot of sounds tried to distract me from it, but I started to find a zone. Pfeffer's whistle rung in my ears, but at least for once the shrill sound wasn't forcing me to move. The volume of the yelling quieted as I let my mind wander into the pebble. Somehow the pebble became fascinating.

Another group of green, black, and brown camouflage passed through my vision. I heard the voices but refused to look. Several girls were crying.

"Roll, roll. Get up. Get down, GET DOWN!! GET DOWN! I SAID DOWN! UP! DOWN! MOVE!"

I started to think of home, of Grandpa and Mom.

After a two minute haircut, I stood again on the pavement, where sweat beads rolled off my shaved head, down my nose, and fell to my dusty boots. The hot sun lapped up the sweat drops, pulling them to the sky. Stinging sweat pinched the corners of my eyes. I needed to wipe the sweat out of my eyes, to shift my feet, move them off the hot rock underfoot, but I could not, had better not, no, I would not move or look away from the red brick. Filthy and dripping, but still at attention, I stared straight ahead. More green, black, and brown patterns passed in front of me. Another group of poor bastards. It was getting brutal. The ball in the whistle never stopped bouncing until nightfall.

When my turn to make a phone call finally arrived, I rushed to the phone. "You got four minutes," said a female Drill Sergeant. I nodded, I didn't argue. With excitement I waited to hear Grandpa's voice, to hear him pick up the phone.

But no one picked up the phone at home. Only then I remembered, I was supposed to have sent a letter about when we were allowed to make phone calls. I had forgot about the letter and never mailed it. Hanging up the receiver, I choked back tears. My four minutes passed on to the next caller, and it crushed me to set the receiver on the hook.

That night, with everyone defeated from punishment, tempers flared at the slightest aggravation. Private Major got in a fight with a long-armed skinhead from Washington named Private Shockley. Shipman stepped in, spun Shockley around, pushed him down, and stuffed his head against a mirror.

"Do it, hero," Shockley said, asking for it. "Just do it, hit me!"

"Do it, Shipman," I said, wanting to see some action. "Do it!"

"I'm not getting recycled," Shipman said to us both, backing away. He let go of Shockley. "I've got more important things to worry about."

Chapter 14. Road March

Two cat-eyes bounced in the darkness, rising and falling with every step of Private Vang, who walked in front of me. On a rocky road, I focused on the glow-in-the-dark decals on the back of her helmet. At a fifteen meter interval, we marched in a long, dispersed line in the pre-dawn hour.

The aches in my body and throat worsened each day, since the Drills followed my every step, making me shout all responses and drop at the first hint of demotivation. Plus, my soft-shoe profile expired. Sticking to his word, Drill Sergeant Pint shadowed me to the Doctor's office to investigate if I truly suffered from gout. But the tests showed nothing of the sort. Pint examined X-Rays with the doctor, rubbing his chin like an M.D. and diagnosing me as fit to march.

The crunch of the boots on the road reminded me eating *Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch*, that unsinkable cereal that never sogged. With our empty rifles aimed outward, we hiked along the ditches and roads of Fort Leonard Wood for three entire kilometers.

A sound in the bushes startled me. I crouched down and tried to peek under a plant, but while bending, my rucksack became tangled in the bushes. For a moment the plant had me trapped. The beast

emerged from the bush. I raised my empty rifle to fire, but the bush still held my head. The muzzle of the rifle struck my own cheek. I tumbled to the ground, turning at the same time to witness the enemy. Was this a bear? An Iraqi? Was it Nihilanth, the fetus-shaped monster on *Half-Life*?

It was a Missouri squirrel.

Private Vang turned around. "Are you ok?"

"Carry on," I said.

At 1.5 kilometers we reached the halfway point of this road march. To fight off fatigue, I stepped aside, through the bushes, and climbed upon a large rock where I could intake food and water at my leisure. I watched Vang trudging onward down the road, now with a thirty meter gap between her and the next person behind. The rock I sat on was six feet over everyone's head. I could see far from there. The first morning light skimmed the horizon, looking like an over-easy egg at griddle's-eye-view. On each side of the road, two lines of Privates moved slowly toward the turn-around point where they made a wide loop past each other. They crunched along the rocks while I enjoyed the Pop-Tarts from my cargo pocket. I also had a package of Rice Krispy Squares from Shipman, who continued to pay his tax on time. He called it blackmail. I called it keeping his secret safe. From my watchtower, I discovered another tryst, thus another taxpayer. The road march proved quite profitable in terms of calories.

The couple was Private Waters and Private Vang. After they shared a bump of the helmets and a kiss, Waters marched onward with a smile on his face. With this knowledge, I reveled in knowing that his

next serving of Jell-O was mine. I threw a pebble at him. Words were exchanged about where the pebble came from. The Company Commander, the Captain, quieted the argument by simply approaching Waters. The Captain's rank scared the trousers off every Private in the company. Even worse, if anyone happened across the Lieutenant Colonel, he or she experienced convulsive spasms induced by his high rank.

On my existing account with West and Shipman I received insurance that morning. Private Shipman met up with Private West at the turn-around, where he took her hand into his own. A flash of white passed between them - a tiny notebook exchanged hands. They did not stop to kiss or touch, but it was enough. His desserts would be siphoned. West, too.

Before long, the trail of Privates stopped coming and a pack of Drill Sergeants staggered along at the end of the line. To fall in, I made a bold move. I shimmied down the side of the rock and plunged through the bushes. The sling of my rifle caught on a branch, making my reentry less smooth than I expected.

When I turned to march, my feet froze up. A silver oak leaf shined down at me like an interrogation lamp. There he was, God Himself, the Lieutenant Colonel. He stood in front of me like road-march royalty. In the blinding light, I read his name-tag, and felt my knees buckling. I managed to raise my hand in a salute.

"Good afternoon, I mean, morning, Drill Sergeant, er, sir, I mean, Sir."

The Lieutenant Colonel said nothing and did not return the salute. The silver oak leaf said it all. I saluted three more times as he moved away, which drew the attention of Drill Sergeant Pfeffer.

"That was the best left-handed salute I've seen all morning," said Pfeffer. "Is that the same hand you use to wank?"

"Left-handed?" I asked.

"You saluted him with your left hand. And for your information, Sprungli, we don't salute on a road march."

The idea that I saluted with my left hand rattled me. Pfeffer, ignoring the rule of silence on the road march, shouted back to his cohorts, "We got a left-handed saluter right here. Private Sprungli."

A response came from Pint. "What's he doing back at the end of the company? Why is he with fourth platoon?"

Then Pfeffer whispered to me, "Why are you with fourth platoon?"

I stammered, "I had to use the latrine."

"For Christ's sake, this is a three klick walk. It's not even a road march, it's a mosey, and you can't pinch your bladder for that long?"

The Ranger Tab on Pfeffer's shoulder scared me almost as much as the silver oak leaf on the Lieutenant Colonel. I had to lie. "I have a stomach flu, Drill..."

"Die, Sprungli. Just die. Right here on the ground. Die." He did not appear to be kidding.

"You want me to die, Drill Sergeant?" I asked, thinking this might be a saying like *beat your face*,

but this he meant literally. "What do you mean *die*? How?"

"Start eating dirt. Run your head into a rock. Drown in your canteen. Just die."

He started to walk away, but then came back. "I've got another idea. Catch up to second platoon, you derelict. Move, Jody!"

The chase was on. Past a long line on Privates, he harassed me from behind, calling me Jody (I think he meant to say Richard), kicking rocks at me and singing foul Ranger cadences that I hadn't heard before. Everyone laughed as I passed. When I saw Private Vang, I tried to fall into line behind her, but Pfeffer pulled my rucksack forward, forcing me to keep going, shoving me along like a broom. All the way back to the barracks he pushed me. When he and I were in the barracks lot, he yelled, "Gas! Gas! Gas!"

"It wasn't me," I said.

I thought Pfeffer was going to hit me, but he slapped my thigh with one hand and said, "Gas! Gas! Gas! Put your goddamn gas mask on like there was a nerve agent in the air. Gas! Gas! Gas!"

I ripped open the mask carrier, which was strapped to my thigh. As quickly as I could, I tightened the straps, but after the run I was breathing so hard that I could hardly stand, let alone make sense of the confusing mask. Once on, the mask suffocated me. Pulling air into my lungs felt like sucking on a straw.

"Front!" yelled Pfeffer.

He had to be joking.

"Get on your face or I will put you down just like I put Private Major down."

Through the eye holes on the mask, I looked for someone else to save me, but only he and I stood in the company area.

"Last chance, Sprungli."

I complied, let myself fall to the ground, and in the process dropped my rifle.

"Back!"

The mask steamed, blocking my sight, but I did see Pfeffer pick up my rifle and sling it over his shoulder.

"Crawl."

I heard my own voice echo inside the gas mask. "Crawl? You mean, like, really crawl?"

"Crawl."

Every rock seemed to have sharp edges. My knees grated over the gravel and I tried to breathe but I was losing focus. Sweat poured down into my face and bit like ants at the corners of my eyes. Kneeling for a moment, I tried to take off my rucksack, but Pfeffer stepped me down like an accelerator, flattening me against the rocks.

"All clear! Take your mask off. Not dead yet? Damn. Put the mask away. Follow me. Uh-oh, you lost your rifle. Bad news."

Before he finished telling me to do one thing, he told me to do another. I scrambled behind him toward the fourth platoon barracks. For a moment, he disappeared into the Drill Sergeant office, and returned carrying an old tape recorder and a mop. He threw the mop at me.

"Ninety minutes," he said, smiling. "Ninety minutes of practice for you, starting right now." He pushed play on the tape recorder and set it near my feet. The grainy voice on the tape was his own. It said, "*Welcome to side one of Drill Sergeant Pfeffer's Remedial Command Instruction.*" Pfeffer laughed and said, "I just made this tape last night. I may have to sell these, but you get to be my pilot group. Let me know if you like it, Sprungli. That mop there is your rifle. Pay attention, here it comes!"

The voice continued. "*Thank you for enrolling in this course. Side one begins now. Atten-shun! Right, Face. About, Face. Port, Arms. Present, Arms. Order, Arms. Inspection, Arms. Right, Face. Left, Face. About, Face. Side-step, March. Prah-vit, Halt. Left, Face. Right, Face, About, Face...*"

While I struggled to keep up, Pfeffer yelled, "That mop better be at Port Arms when my recording says *Port Arms!*" He looked at his watch. "I'll be back in forty-five minutes to flip the tape. Have fun. Oh, and I'll be watching out the window while I have my morning coffee."

The other two hundred Privates in the company gradually gathered around me. The laughter started to drown out the voice on the tape, but I just kept facing right, facing left, and doing random movements. Bubbles popped out of my mouth every ten seconds while tears teemed and streamed from my eyes.

The company moved out to breakfast without me. As Drill Sergeant Pint passed by, he did not smile but, for a moment, I almost suspected that Pint had concern for me.

When I neared heart failure, Pfeffer emerged from his office to flip the tape. Another forty-five minutes of facing movements, followed by Pfeffer marching me to breakfast alone, where he forced me to eat in three minutes. Next he ordered me to bear-crawl up and down a hill until I vomited. When he marched me back to the platoon, the company was just arriving back from a company run.

Pfeffer said, "Your battle-buddies all just went on a company jog, all because of you, buddy. How's that make you feel? You got a lot of explaining to do. Man, I would hate to be in your shoes."

My fellow Privates were not laughing at me any longer. Four hundred eyes passed by me and the only hint of fun that I saw danced in Private Major's eyes, who seemed to be enjoying the punishment and simultaneously encouraging me to keep up the good work. He held a fist of solidarity in the air at me. The platoons were put into a mass formation. Pfeffer spun me around to face the company.

"And now," Pfeffer announced, "because of Private Sprungli, you all get to join him in my new course, *Drill Sergeant's Pfeffer's Remedial Command Instruction.*"

He started the tape over again.

Chapter 15. Dumped

By week six of Basic Training, time stopped moving forward. Just as Drill Sergeant Pint promised, the world grew small. Every night I curled up in my bunk and wished myself away from Fort Leonard Wood. Drill Sergeant Pint and Private Shipman made sure that my boots were polished, that I did my laundry, that I ate the right things, that my cap sat two inches over my nose, that my pockets were empty and buttoned, that my rifle barrel was clean, socks folded properly, bootlaces tucked in, shoes underneath the bed, poncho hung out to dry, canteens full, ammo pouches closed, chinstrap straight, rucksack stuffed, gas-mask situated, pen in pocket, face shaved, shampoo used, soap applied, teeth brushed.

Worse yet, half of the platoon took an interest in my physical fitness. They seemed to have a fetish for watching me exercise. When the company was dismissed, Shipman requested that I do one extra set of push-ups with our rucksacks on our back. Shipman and Waters stayed behind to annoy me.

"C'mon, Sprungli. Let's do ten with our rucksacks on."

"Why?"

"So you can pass your PT test. I'm going to do it with you."

"Do it with yourself."

But he insisted. By dinner, I lacked the energy to put fork to mouth. At bedtime, I sometimes found myself fighting off sadness.

Shipman's bunk became the psychiatric ward as guys came by to drop their problems at his feet. If Shipman slept at all, it must have been only a few hours a night. A guy would receive a letter from home, a *Dear John* break-up note and Shipman would talk to him for two hours. A soon-to-be-Reservist would get a letter saying that his unit was getting deployed as soon as he was trained: a *Hello Iraq* letter. Shipman listened and then commiserated. Somebody lost their poncho again - Shipman helped them locate it or requested a new one from the Drill Sergeants. Somebody's grandmother died - Shipman offered his deepest and longest condolences. Somebody took offense at a baby joke - Shipman scolded me. Somebody felt threatened by so-and-so - Shipman weighed the options and kept notes in a log. Somebody ran out of soap - Shipman loaned his. Somebody backed up the latrine - Shipman said "breathe through your mouth." Somebody found Jesus - Shipman prayed with them. Somebody lost Jesus - Shipman asked them what was going on.

One Saturday night during week six, we had an hour to relax. The next day was called "Free-Day-Away." We were to be bussed outside of Fort Leonard Wood to a town called Lebanon where we

could have candy and soda and a home-cooked meal, followed by a church service. Everyone, including me, tittered over the chance to get away from Fort Leonard Wood. But as soon as the Drills mentioned this Free-Day, they spent the whole week threatening to cancel the event. The threat gained power over us, but by Saturday night, we believed that barring some major incident, no Drill Sergeant would dream of cancelling our Free-Day-Away.

That night, Waters, Major, and I decided to play a joke on Shipman when he sleeping. After midnight, Shipman started to snore. We decided to throw him a mock towel-party. We gathered around his bed and on the count of three, Waters and I pulled the sheets down tight over his body and trapped him. Private Major aimed two flashlights into Shipman's face and said in a guttural voice, "The devil will see you now, Shipman."

Shipman fought to sit up in his bunk but the sheets restrained him. He squirmed under the blankets until we started to laugh. Before we could explain that it was a joke, Shipman was out of bed with his dukes up, ready to take us all.

"Damn, Shipman, that hurt my hand, man," Major said. "We were just fooling around."

Slowly, Shipman lowered his fists and his fighting expression reversed into a smile. "You...assholes!" he said. "I've been expecting a beating since I became Platoon Guide."

"Well," I said, "we did plan on beating you sooner. But now, no one wants your job. You can have it."

"Damn, that scared the heck out of me. Wow." He shook off a chill, like a dog after a bath.

We stayed up that night talking, telling jokes, talking about girls and home. Earlier that day we were allowed a four minute phone call home. In the end, four minutes only whetted the appetite for more minutes. I spoke with my stepbrother, who basically said, "Meh" and hung up. At least half of the people tried to go over the time limit and another half walked away from the phone with tears in their eyes. Everyone suffered a temporary mental breakdown after the phone call. Few wore a smile when they hung up the phone, because they had either lost something or were reminded of what they missed.

Love took heavy casualties that day. If the relationships at home were yet intact, they were not stable. Drill Sergeant Pint was right when he said that the sweethearts back home found new boyfriends and girlfriends. Listening to all the others talk about getting dumped almost made me glad that I didn't have a girlfriend.

Shockley, the guy who tried to fight Shipman, stopped by and shook his head. We tried to make him feel better by calling her all variations of tramp.

"Thanks guys, I appreciate it," Shockley said. "But I should have saw the rain coming before I left home."

Major said, "If it ain't rainin'..."

"We ain't trainin'," I finished.

"Drip drop, drippity drop." Shipman muttered the start of a running cadence.

A clear sign that you've been in basic training for too long is when cadences become fun to sing. It happened every day. Cadence in the shower, cadence at lunch, cadence in your dreams.

Major picked up a pair of Shipman's boots and puts his hands inside each one. He started tapping the boots on the metal of the top bunk and it sounded like a running beat. He started to sing, "Drip drop." Shipman and the rest of us quietly hummed and sang the background for him.

"Now the roof gotta leak, and the rain justa fallin' my head..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

"Well my roof gotta leak, the rain justa fallin' my head..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

"Well, it hit me so hard, I might as well be dead..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

"Well, I'm sittin' here drinkin', thinkin' what I'm gonna do..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

"Yeah, I'm sittin' here smokin', thinkin' what I'm gonna do..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

"My baby's gone and left me, I'm feelin' mighty blue..."

Drip, drop, drippity drop, drop

When we were all tired, sick, and sore from the week, the best moments filled the cracks. Of course, the Drill Sergeants weren't around during those times, but that's when they could really catch someone with his pants down, and they often did. For a short time, four days in a row, things were going fairly well for me. Just that day, I received a compliment from Pint. He said, "Sprungli, we're

going to get you squared away yet. Squared away like a donut."

Chapter 16. Ranger

Things were going so well, like I had turned the corner and neared a level of respect with the cadre and other Privates. It did not last. That night I slipped again. While we sang cadence, I didn't hear the barracks door open and shut. I only heard someone say:

"Female on the floor!"

I said the first thing that came into my head.

"Female on the floor?" I asked. "How about female in my bunk?" Then I said to Shipman, Waters, and Major, "Know what I'm saying?"

But none of the others laughed. Instead, they moved away, tracking east, south, and west, leaving me to stand alone by the bunk. I said, "Where y'all going?"

A shadow fell upon me. The aura of a pressed uniform crackled the air around me. I didn't even need to turn to know it was a Drill. I faced the issue, and yes, a female Drill snorted at me, with her hair bunned tight as catgut. She had no make-up on, but I did detect a slight perfume, or deodorant. It was the scent of a mannish woman.

Her name was Drill Sergeant Radcliffe from third platoon, making a surprise visit to second platoon on

a Saturday night. Up close she reminded me of Orta, from *Panzer Dragoon* on Xbox.

She grabbed me by the ear, like I was toddler. "Did you really just say," she orked, "what I think you said?"

My quiet night turned into a mess, a clusterbomb spilled wherever I walked. Drill Sergeant Orta summoned her Dragoons, her fellow Drills, from the four corners of Fort Leonard Wood and, honestly, she overreacted to my comment. I'm sure my fellow Privates felt the same way, but they misdirected their anger at me instead of Orta, blaming me for having to exercise all night. The whole company was rolled out of bed on a Saturday night for physical training by moonlight. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer, who was allegedly lounging at home, drove back to Leonard Wood simply to take part in the smoking of two hundred forty Privates.

Flutter-kicks can exhaust the stoutest soldier. After ten, I was bushed, but Pfeffer thought I could push out a few more, even though I warned him that I was prone to hernias.

"Flutter!" Pfeffer screamed with a vein jutting out of his forehead like a fault-line. "Flutter!" He called me fatty and other names, like manatee, beluga, and seacow, earning lots of laughs.

While lying on our backs and performing flutter-kicks, Orta delivered an impromptu lesson on Sexual Harassment, making a fuss over my transition from "Female on the floor" to "Female in my bunk." After a while I only heard certain words being repeated, like "explicitly," "victim," "appropriate actions," and "wrongdoing." On top of this, she said that "Free-

Day-Away" was now cancelled, which drew a large gasp from the crowd and daggered eyes of Privates fell on me.

The barrage did not conclude when Orta finally called us to attention. We expected to hear, "Fall out" or "Dismissed" but Orta called, "Right, Face," and marched us off to a pit of dirt and wood chips. Pfeffer loped alongside, running backwards and laughing, with his tongue hanging out like a basset hound. He kept complimenting his friend Orta, calling her his hero.

For another hour, we rolled back and forth in the wood chips, left and right, did push-ups, flutter-kicks, and so forth. At this point, I started considering what I had said, and the more I thought about the words, the more I was convinced that Orta had definitely misquoted me. Even so, Orta had impressed my guilt so directly into the company, that later on, no one had a sense of humor.

Later, I had to plead my case in the Drill Sergeant's office, where Orta wrote up a sexual harassment counseling statement.

Pfeffer, shoveling in a late-night snack of potato salad, almost choked when I said I meant "female in my bunk" as a compliment to Orta. With his mouth full of a white and yellow half-chewed goop, he said, "Sprungli, the more your talk the worse it gets." His fork danced on the potato salad, and his head wobbled on his neck.

"I haven't quite figured you out yet, Sprungli," Orta said, watching me perform a push-up. "Either you will be drummed out of the Army, or you'll make Sergeant Major."

"Or," Pfeffer said, "I will stomp a mudhole in his chest."

Orta laughed. "Don't do him any favors."

They concocted the wording on my counseling statement while preaching advice to me. The longer I sat there, it began to make sense. Eventually Orta left the room to make rounds in the barracks. When she left, I worried that Pfeffer might destroy me. But he calmed and did not treat me like a maggot. For a bit, he seemed like a normal human. But even then I knew he was not - he was an Airborne Ranger. Whenever he spoke, I could only look at the Ranger Tab on his shoulder. God, how I wanted to tear it off and have some old woman sew it onto my uniform. When I responded to him, it was not to a man named Pfeffer, not to a Drill Sergeant, but to that small patch on his arm.

"Yes, *Ranger Tab*," I thought.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you, Sprungli, that you're an idiot?"

"Many times, Drill Sergeant"

"Too many times, that's the problem," he said. "You could do just fine here, Sprungli. Drill Sergeant Pint tells me that you have family in the military. So what's your problem then? Why can't you figure it out and fit in?"

"Slightly retarded, Drill Sergeant."

"That's not uncommon here, but you can still fall in line. Don't need to be a genius to show up on time and shine boots. Those things anyone can do. I didn't exactly excel in school, but I can soldier."

"Have you been to Iraq, Drill Sergeant?" I asked, worrying that I had crossed a line in asking him anything personal.

"Been there?" The toothpick fell out of his mouth but he caught it softly in his hand. "I'm trying to get back over there. Every day of the week I call the Regiment and ask my chain of command to find me a seat in the next unit rolling out, as long as it ain't with some Reserve rag. But this ain't a conversation, Sprungli. We're not girlfriends here. Don't get confused about how things work. Don't ask me any questions."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"I want you to think about one thing Spungli. Look at my boots, Private. Just look at these boots."

The boots reflected the lights in the room. I could have used his toes as a mirror to comb my hair, if I had any hair. No polish smears whatsoever - gleaming in the light - waxed to perfection. I idolized those boots.

"Take pride in little things, like boots. Take one thing at a time and do it right." He adjusted his crotch with his non-toothpick hand.

"I'm not trying to screw up, I'm just..."

"Don't explain. Your explanations don't mean squat around here. Excuses are like assholes, everybody got one. I don't care if you know people that could buy and sell me, it don't matter here. If you need an extra maxi-pad to get you through the night, I can get you one. What you need to do, Sprungli, is plain as day if you open your eyes."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'm sayin' that you need to wake up. Once you learn to love being a soldier, you got no problems. When I was your age, I got in a lot of trouble myself, but sooner or later, I figured it out. I love being a soldier. Not some toy-soldier in Class A uniform, but a grunt. Every morning when we march outside for PT, I can't wait to lie down in the cold, wet grass. I love it because I should hate it, because I know it makes me stronger, because I know weaker soldiers don't love it. I like snapping the starch in the elbows when I get dressed in the morning and going to bed crumpled and tired from a day well worn. Everything is simple in the Army, Sprungli. Life here has no unnecessary parts. All I need in this world is two liters of water and a mission.

"I'm not one for worrying about staining my deck and mowing the lawn, I'll tell you that. Give me a barracks, where you can eat off the floor, where every minute of the clock gets used and everyone shows up ten minutes early to formation, hungover and heartbroke. It's a big support group for you, Sprungli, if you get in line and close your mouth. There is no better group of people than those in the United States military. Ain't no such thing as race or creed here. If world peace happened, I would still be a soldier. No other job suits me. I don't even need to have an enemy. I just need to be a soldier."

My throat was dry from listening to him.

"And that's the frame of mind you need to find, Sprungli." Pfeffer broke his toothpick. "Get rid of your old thinking. You grew up thinking you were something special, unique, thinking happiness is normal, something you deserved. But it's not real, it's

a fantasy that's not coming." The bent toothpick sailed through the air and landed perfectly in the center of the trash can. "As far as I can tell you, the only thing that's worth thinking about is bringing honor to your unit and the United States Army."

I said, "Yes, Drill Sergeant."

Chapter 17. Free-Day-Away

The Drill Sergeants, the Privates, and the summer were all hot that morning. Twice I was shoved, once to the ground. Three times I felt a boot in my rear, twice by the kick of Private West. Several Privates made a game out of unsnapping my canteen pouches every few minutes.

Now we had to *earn* our Free-Day-Away. An emergency inspection occurred that morning. The First Sergeant, usually hovering around his wet-bulb, suddenly found his voice and he started to shout at the Drill Sergeants. After a month or more of silence, suddenly he erupted in a rage.

A Drill Sergeant announced, "The First Sergeant doesn't think you've earned a Free-Day-Away. You're going to have to prove it to him. Right now, unless things improve, I don't think he's going to grant you leave for the day. In addition, there's the sexual harassment issue, which did not help your chances."

This went on for four hours. Everyone grew angry with each other. That morning, the First Sergeant finally stepped forward and revealed the cause of his fury.

"The dust covers on the bunks," he declared, "are a disgrace. Since when is the sixth spring an acceptable place to align the dust cover?!"

On our bunks, we had a blanket act a dust cover that laid over our pillows. Until today, no one ever mentioned aligning the dust cover with a particular spring underneath the bed. Even Shipman, the stickler for detail, admitted ignorance of this rule and he publicly questioned the First Sergeant for a clarification, which resulted in him getting smoked for quite some time, right in front of the company, with me by his side.

"The dust cover is placed over the pillow," the First Sergeant screamed, tapping himself on the forehead to mock us. "It's folded in half lengthwise, with the smooth edge toward the center of the bunk. The smooth edge should be aligned with the fifth spring of the bunk where it connects to the metal frame."

The morning was consumed with dust cover alignment. The First Sergeant examined dust covers and threw mattresses to the floor. Those who did not meet this new sixth-spring standard received an immediate counseling statement. An outcry went up from those people who had never received a counseling statement. For once, I did not receive a counseling statement. I was very proud and couldn't help but chuckle at those who didn't know how to properly fit a dust cover.

But other than that small victory, my morning was miserable, with everyone calling me names and moving my stuff around. The unsnapping of my canteen pouches drove me crazy. Everyone but Shipman and Waters joined in Sprungli-bashing. Private Major, who was supposed to be my friend,

turned enemy, repeating "female in my bunk" while humping my bedpost with furious gyrations.

My mood sunk deeper when the First Sergeant blew a gasket and declared Free-Day-Away officially rescinded. But actually, he had already taken it away before that. I guess he took it away again. Wherever the First Sergeant was not, the Drill Sergeants popped up like Jack-in-the-Boxes to reiterate the loss of Free-Day-Away. At least twenty people started to cry at the loss of this chance to go to Free-Day-Away. The Drill Sergeants became docile as the morning wore on, expressing their doubts that we would get to enjoy Free-Day-Away. I became confused, since the Free-Day-Away was revoked, yet the Drill Sergeants continued to act like we might still get to go. With every mention of Free-Day-Away, the crying started and stopped, started and stopped. By lunch, the topic became so engrossing I nearly forgot to collect the Pop Tart tax from Shipman, West, and Waters.

Every hour, we met outside in a large formation to wait and find out if the First Sergeant had relented, and every hour a Drill Sergeant told us, almost apologetically, "That the bunks are still unsatisfactory, and Free-Day-Away is no more." Those who weren't fully in despair resumed making the bunks and cleaning the barracks. The weather was humid and the mood angry. The onslaught against me continued. The final straw came when a female threw the contents of a dust pan into my face, blaming me for all things unholy. I felt my chest beginning to shake, tears welling, and palpitations in my lower intestine, but before I could weep, we were ordered back outside into formation. We stood

outside for some time before a Drill Sergeant emerged from the doorway and stood on the wooden staircase of second platoon. It was Drill Sergeant Pint.

"It was not easy, Privates," Pint said, holding his hat in his hand, "but you can thank me later. The First Sergeant is not happy, but he has decided, with great reservation, to grant you Free-Day-Away."

A roar went up from the crowd of Privates, as if Pint had just threw a touchdown pass or ordered pizza for everyone.

"At ease!" he yelled. "Don't get stupid now. We can still take away your Free-Day."

We settled down when the threat reared its head again. But a minute later, school buses began entering the company area. Sighs of elation reached the heavens. Many Privates nearly fainted. Tears fell from my eyes. I was so thankful for this Free-Day-Away.

Pint kept preaching from his staircase pulpit. "You better be ready to work when you get back Privates. You had better be motivated. Are you motivated?"

A hearty cheer came forth. "Yes, Drill Sergeant!"

"How motivated," he said, prompting a memorized response from the company.

Motivated, motivated, downright motivated

Ooh, ah

I wanna hurt somebody

Ooh, ah

I wanna kill somebody

"Excellent!" said Pint. "Enjoy your day, and show respect to the good people of Lebanon."

On the bus, everyone chattered about what Drill Sergeant Pint had done to convince the First Sergeant, but Waters thought it was all a game.

"You fools," Waters said, "that was all a big show, don't you get it?"

No one believed Waters. No one understood his thought process.

"I'm fairly certain," Water argued, "that the First Sergeant didn't wake up today with the fifth or sixth bedspring on his mind. I mean," he laughed, "haven't you noticed how they grant us something, then take it away, then give it back? How many times have they sent us *back to red phase* as punishment and threatened to extend basic training?"

We started to talk about something else, without Waters' input. He continued talking to himself.

"Do you really think the Army plans to spend additional money by keeping us here another week while a billion-dollar-a-day war is going on?"

By the end of the day, I was certain that Waters' brain had sprung a leak.

The buses carried us forty miles outside of Fort Leonard Wood, to a town of twelve thousand people and home-made pie. The sun that was so hot in the morning cooled in the afternoon, just as we escaped the Drill Sergeants.

Still, the general excitement on the bus for Free-Day-Away became subdued. Even for myself, I felt dull after so much activity that morning, so many

highs and lows of the week. We were now six weeks into basic training and judging by the heads leaning against the windows and seats, emotionally wasted, like a pack of strung-out addicts desperate for a new life.

When the town came into view, I pressed my nose up to the window to take in the town of Lebanon. The streets were quiet, but a few elderly people strolled along the sidewalk, pushing walkers and limping along. The old folks reminded me of home and I had to smile about my Grandpa. The buses unloaded in front of a place called the Tabernacle Baptist Church, where more old folks were waiting. They smiled and pointed in various directions, guiding us toward different kinds of food. A woman said, "You can get a home-cooked meal inside, or you can go to the convenience store and the Bowl-a-Rena for candy..."

Before she could finish, I ran in the direction of the Bowl-a-Rena, to beat all the other Privates who wanted to order a pizza. Private Ganger, the hungry beast, tried to get her foot into the Bowl-a-Rena before me, but I pulled her backwards by the pony-tail and rushed inside.

The man at the counter took my order, but he hesitated.

"You want how many Peanut Butter Cups?"

"Six."

"A hungry fellow," he said. "You must have a strong stomach. And for you, young lady?"

I cleared my throat. "Sir?" I moved to block his view of Private Ganger. "I wasn't finished. I would also like a forty ounce soda: half Sprite, half Coke." A

picture of a pizza hung on the wall behind the man. "I'll have that exact pizza, right there. What sizes does it come in?"

The man looked at the picture. "Small, medium, and large."

"None bigger?" I asked.

"Don't they feed you?"

"...and two hot dogs, with extra mustard and relish. Please."

He whistled and rang up the charges on the cash register. As he was about to announce the price, I noticed a slushy machine and the rack of potato chips behind him. I held up my hand to quiet him.

"I'm not finished, sir."

Around me in the Bowl-a-Rena, Privates gathered in circles. Secret couples held hands openly. Private Major did not attend any of the sanctioned Free-Day-Away activities. I found out later that he had swiped a pack of Old Gold cigarettes from the convenience store and then wandered the alleys of Lebanon with his girlfriend, until they found a wood-pallet to get splinters upon.

Near the doorway of the Bowl-a-Rena, Private Shipman held a popsicle in one hand while he played a pinball game with Private West. I never saw him smile so much, nor did I ever see hands slide around a waist so often, or at such a slow pace. I watched them share the last few bites of the popsicle. Turning away, I found no better scenery, since Private Waters and Private Vang came into my view, performing some arm-locking French fry deposit into each others' mouths, like regurgitating birds. They came

dangerously close to kissing several times - so close that I felt compelled to fling an ice cube at Waters.

I stuffed myself until I could eat no more. But when I finished I started to look around the room and felt alone. Most of the others had friends and girlfriends, but I only had napkins and several empty paper plates. I had scarfed everything. I noticed Private Ganger eating by herself at another table, shoveling chicken strips by the claw-full. I decided to join her. To break the ice, I stole several fries from her plate.

"Take all you want," she said, "I can share."

"Whatever, Ganger."

The way she salted every fry individually gave us something to talk about. The longer we sat together, the more we learned from each other. As we grew more intimate, I decided to ask a question that I'd long been holding inside.

"Can I ask something that's kind of personal?"

She stirred her soda. "That depends."

"It's not bad, I promise."

"Ok, go ahead."

I leaned forward, over the table, toward her pursed lips. When I was near her mouth, I finally asked Private Ganger the important question I had been keeping a secret for so long. She looked up at me and smiled.

I asked, "How did you get so many teeth?"

"What?"

"Can I see them?"

"What?" she said.

"Will you say 'ah' for me? I want to see them."

"You jerk. You jerk, Sprungli. It's not my fault my Dad never took me to the dentist. I hate you for asking."

In a flash, Ganger was gone, running to the bathroom, leaving her various fried foods unattended. Who knew she was so touchy? I don't know why she left, but I sampled her food and waited for her, but she ignored me when she came out of the bathroom and left the building.

Being in that heavily coupled Bowl-a-Rena only reminded me of my obvious aloneness, so I walked outside (buying an extra Twix for the walk) and I lumbered back toward the Tabernacle Baptist Church. In the distance I could see the steeple, with the dark sky behind it, and the thunder and lightning had started, meaning Free-Day-Away would soon be watered-down. Soldiers walked to and from the church, along a designated pathway. The laughing pairs of Privates increased my sadness, their happiness stealing from my own.

When I arrived at the church, I went into the hall where elderly people forked out large plates of meat, along with mashed potatoes, vegetables, all of which looked delicious. If only I hadn't feasted at the Bowl-a-Rena, I might have had more than one plate. At a table, I watched a group of Privates playing basketball. Most of the Privates sat on bleachers, talking and laughing about so many wonderful things, but what were those things to me? It dawned on me that a few others were experiencing the same rejection as me. Not everyone on the bleachers was joking and laughing. In reality, maybe only half were talking and laughing. The silent ones, heads on

knees, either slept or cried - there was always crying. Some even read a book, of all things. If Waters didn't have the attention of Vang, he would have been poring over his *Divine Comedy*, like he did every night in his bunk when he wasn't writing poems to Private Vang.

Chasing wandering peas on my plate, I yearned for someone to join me at the table. When people passed by, I smiled at them, but three people in a row flashed a sneer or a middle finger at me. Everyone still blamed me for the latest punishment. Their looks made me feel small, made the high-ceilings of the recreation room even higher.

I needed something. Food had filled me, but I felt empty. The loneliness came on too fast. Home seemed forever away. Everyone had made friends, but I only had enemies. The Drill Sergeants singled me out as a scapegoat. I had no place now, no track to follow. At least at home I had my spot, even if it was Xbox marathons and smoking keef in the basement. I didn't know where to turn and how to proceed, but I knew for the first time that I needed some change, a path, a map for the coming aloneness. I didn't want to feel this alone. To find a simple road with a happy ending, that's all I wanted.

The music stopped playing and the old people of the Tabernacle Baptist Church started to circle the room, informing us that the time had come for the short service. Everyone started filing into the church. I didn't move until an old woman touched my shoulder and said, "Would you like to join us?"

She smiled and reminded me of home. The look on her face, the pleated skirt, and her gentle manner put the weight of Wisconsin on me.

"Here, I'll take your plate," she said. "Shall we?"

With her walking beside me, we moved into the safe and quiet church.

The pews were filled with excited Privates in camouflage. Some continued to gab and stand in the aisles, as the elderly men and women ushered them into seats toward the front of the church. Because I arrived a moment after all the others, I had to sit in the back, but the old woman stayed with me. She pointed to a seat in one of the rear rows.

The comfort of the Baptist church calmed me as much as the old woman's questions did. She asked about my day, the Army, Milwaukee, Mom and Grandpa, if I missed my friends...

"Oh, I'm sure you miss them, Paul," she said, shaking her head and creasing her brow. "I'm sure that you miss them dearly."

The church had the same feel as the one in Milwaukee, which I had stopped attending over two years ago. An organ played a slow song, one that I had heard before but had never listened to. I felt it tugging on my heart. Those slow chords stoked feelings in me. The mumble of the Privates began to quiet, lifting the music more. I sat quietly in my seat, looking at the old woman, whose smile never faded and I fought off the urge to hug her. The Privates hushed each other as the pastor, wearing a huge smile, made his way to the altar, and even though I was in the back, I swore he looked right at me several times.

"How y'all doin?" he said. "Are you feelin' *Hooah*?"

"Hooah!" Everyone shouted it out, with enthusiasm. The room was full of energy after the couple of hours spent relaxing. The Drill Sergeants disallowed us from saying "Hooah," claiming we hadn't earned the right to say it yet, but the pastor didn't seem to mind. After a series of questions, with each response of "Hooah" growing louder, he started talking about the word "Hooah," making me laugh.

"You can use Hooah for just about everything. You use it to say good, great, roger that, and thank you. You even use it when someone says, 'How was breakfast?' '*Hooah*.' Or you use it when you're not sure how to answer something, or when you're in trouble." He had a lot of these jokes, but he ended it with something that made a lot of sense. "We have a word for that here in the church, too. We don't say, '*Hooah*.' We say 'Amen.'"

The pastor then transitioned into a song. I didn't plan on singing, but the old woman opened the songbook to the proper page and placed it softly in my hands. As best as I could, I followed the song and sang the words, but not always in the right place, but she sang loud enough that I picked up the tune. At the end of the song, she said, "You have a wonderful voice, Paul." She touched my shoulder.

When the song ended, the pastor started speaking again, directly to me. Everything he said made sense. I wish I had recorded the words, because I could never repeat what he said quite as well. He said that we have two choices: to believe in God or to choose hell. The choice was quite simple, he explained,

because if God does exist and you believe in Him, then you will gain everything. If you believe in God and He does not exist, then you lose nothing. But if you don't believe in Him and He does exist (and the pastor assured us that He does), then you have lost everything. With these two options, he argued, only an insensible person would choose not to believe. Believers win either way, but non-believers have the potential to suffer eternally in a burning abyss.

The pastor quoted books of the Bible, one after another, making his points even more effective. He said, "For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God."

Right with God. That was it. Not even halfway through his sermon, I knew what I needed: to get right with God.

"Anyone who believes in Him," the pastor added, "will not be disappointed. Anyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved."

With the introduction already laying the Truth on the line, the pastor made some humorous statements about those who chose to go to hell. "If you want to go to hell," he chuckled, "then you can manage it rather easily. Do nothing. You will find it. Satan has you signed up - and you thought that your recruiter could tell lies! Privates, the Prince of Darkness is evil's recruiter. Yes, the scary Truth is that there are only two places you can spend eternity. You pick heaven or you get hell. If you think hell isn't real, then just wait. Wishful thinking won't make it go

away. It's very simple. There are no other alternatives. There is a place of smoke and fire, burning with the flesh of those inside, and their torment continues forever, but no one hears them."

The church became rather quiet. The pastor turned off the jokes for about five minutes and assured us that no delayed-entry program existed for heaven. By the time he asked us to accept Jesus Christ, I was on the edge of my pew.

"All you have to say is, *Jesus*," he said, looking up at the ceiling. *"I know that I'm a sinner. Please grant me Your forgiveness. Please forgive my sins and make a new person of me. You died for my sins, You shattered hell, and rose to give me life. Let me live my life for You."*

His head came down slowly while his arms lifted out toward the camouflage audience. "Now I invite you," he said with a trembling voice, "to come to the front of the church if you want to accept Jesus into your heart. Can I get at least three people to choose salvation?"

The muscles in my legs stiffened. I leaped to my feet.

"I choose it!" I shouted.

The next thing I knew, I felt my feet carrying me to the altar, toward the change. An overwhelming surge of love made my legs feel rubbery and I almost stumbled, but I was lifted back to my feet by some wonderful force. I wanted to laugh and cry.

As I approached, the pastor did not stop praying and asking for more Privates to accept Jesus, and after awhile, a steady stream of Privates moved toward the altar.

At the front, I saw the face of the pastor up close and around him I witnessed the Spirit. I drank it in and held onto his hand as long as I could. Many of the other Privates exchanged smiles with me, many were crying from the overload of Spirit.

The force hit me hard, like a flash of lightning, terribly hard, as getting right with God requires. My mouth formed strange words, holy words, and my body started to writhe until I slumped to the Tabernacle Baptist Carpet and uncontrollably wormed on the floor, inch-wormed in the aisle, slithered as the demons inside me were conquered by the Spirit. Twisting violently I tried to grab onto someone's boot in the first row. I looked up and saw Private West looking down, making an ugly face at me and speaking English. I could only respond in my new voice.

"Nuq DaQ Yuj Da'pol!" I said in a foreign tongue.

She shook her boot as I climbed her leg. When I could see over the pew, I noticed Shipman standing next to West, and he spoke English. A hand stabilized me. My fingers clutched at Private West. Shipman tore me free of West's pantleg.

Everything became blurry for several seconds, but then I saw the shape of a face in front of mine. English came back to my mouth. I cried out, "What is happening?"

A harsh whisper that smelled of bleu cheese harkened down upon me.

"It's me, and I've saved your soul." The blurry lines evaporated and the pastor's face came into view. "Now rise, and stand on thy feet!" His powerful hands seized my collar. "What is your name, son?"

"Paul Sprungli."

"Bless you, Lord," the pastor howled upward. Then he jerked my collar and looked hard into my nose. "And bless you, young man, for the Lord has called upon you today."

Bubbles formed on my tongue and wafted to the heavens.

"You have been given a gift!" the pastor said, shaking me, with his silver eyes dazzling like spinning rims with chrome wheel covers. The old woman who followed me to the front of the church peeked over the pastor's shoulder. She gaped and he gritted. "With this gift of the Spirit," the pastor said, dragging me to my feet, "you must open other's eyes to the Good News. Son, you are on the right path. Turn them away from Satan, so that they may receive the forgiveness of sins. Turn them from darkness...to light!"

Chapter 18. Bus Ride

The buses rolled back toward the base, with a storm blowing overhead and leaking through cracks in the windows. Lightning lit up the Missouri fields.

My experience in the church left me feeling heavy in my stomach and back. The pain in my torso doubled me over, making me aware of abdomen muscles I had never used. Between shaking and sweating, I stifled nausea by puffing my cheeks and biting down on my fist. Profuse buckets of sweat streamed from my bald head. Breathing became difficult. I felt scared, restless, feverish. Holding my throat and stomach, I bounced my forehead against the seat ahead, limiting the discomfort by jarring my brain.

The Privates around me stood and argued, turned in their seats, called each other names, bashed and praised the Lord. The words of the pastor still rattled inside my head.

I heard someone ask, "Sprungli, are you all right?" It was Private Vang. "Why do you keep hitting my seat?"

Leaning back I saw her frowning at me. I said to her, "I gotta get right with God."

"Stop being ridiculous, Sprungli," said Vang, rolling her eyes at me, under her head of spiked hair,

similar to the style of *Sonic the Hedgehog*. "What a scene you made in there. Aren't you ever embarrassed?"

Vang sat next to Private Waters. Actually, he was kneeling on his seat, facing forward and arguing with people in the rows ahead. After having the Lord driven into me, Waters took up the opposite cause, against the Lord, and tried to drive the Spirit out of the bus.

"This should not be called Free-Day-Away," he shouted. "It should be called Christian Recruiting Day and the Department of the Army should end it. End it altogether!"

A voice came back from a third platoon Private, defending Free-Day-Away. "Nobody said you had to listen, Waters."

"Actually, yes they did," Waters shouted. "Before leaving for Lebanon today I asked the Drill Sergeants if the service was mandatory, and guess what they said: 'You have to attend the service.'"

The voice behind me responded again. I recognized him as Private Baker. "That's good. You obviously need to attend more often."

"Says who?" Waters said, slapping the top of the seat with his palms. "That was a revival meeting, for homesick soldiers. Can you think of a better time to brainwash someone? The only thing missing from that church was snake-handlers and David Koresh."

"If you can't accept the Word, then I pity you," Baker said, but he was rudely interrupted by Waters again.

"Don't you see? All the food, the games leading up to the party, was grease for the conversion." Waters

shook his hands like tamborines. "We even had someone speaking in tongues. Sprungli," he said, turning angry eyes on me, "I hope that episode was for laughs. What a show you put on. Honestly, I don't know whether to laugh with you or at you."

This talk had been tolerated for too long. The pain would possess me unless I could deliver that bus from evil. No one could out-shout this Waters, scourge of all things holy, so I leaned back my head and yelled as if giving birth to a cinder block:

"Waters is a devil worshipper!"

Every head in the bus turned. My announcement startled them all. Stares bore down on Private Waters, who turned to look at me with his evil smirk.

"I'm Agnostic, Sprungli. For once, get it right."

"Get right with God!" I yelled. Then I remembered the day I met him and how he waffled on selecting a religion. "His dog-tags," I said. "His dog-tags tell it all."

Baker called for Waters to show his tags. Several people then asked Waters to show his tags, but he refused, forcing Baker to take action. His squad members seized Waters' hands, and Vang lashed out, forcing one of Baker's boys to grab her neck and pin her head against the window. After a short struggle, Baker ripped the tags from Waters' throat and held them up to his eyes to inspect them.

"What's it say?" asked Baker.

Baker snatched the tags into his fist and shook them violently. "It says he's going to hell. He's an atheist."

The dog-tags were passed up and down the aisle. I began to feel better. Waters and Vang became the center of attention - for once, it was not me.

With the tags dangling in his hand, Shipman forced his way from the back of the bus into the center where Waters sat.

"At ease!" yelled Shipman. "AT EASE! Stop the madness!" He shouted so loud that the bus driver even slowed down. "What the hell is wrong with all of you?" He gave Waters his dog-tags. "Waters is right about one thing. Keep your religion to yourself. But then, Waters, you haven't been doing that real well yourself, have you?"

After that, the feuding parties calmed.

All the way to base, my health depleted. A sharp pain continued in my stomach and back, jabbing at my innards with every bump on the road.

Chapter 19. Sick Call

On Monday morning, I woke up to Shipman's voice. The thrill of my spiritual awakening disappeared with the night.

"Sprungli, you look dead," Shipman said. "You need to go to Sick-Call." He stood on the bunk to peer at my face. "My God, you look thin."

"Really?" I said, feeling slightly better. I'd been called many things, but not this.

Unable to dismount from the top bunk under my own strength, Shipman assisted me to the floor and handed me my gear, one item at a time. We were late to formation, bringing Pint into a morning blaze. He jumped around and tossed wicked one-liners at me because I was leaning on Shipman. When Pint finally stopped barking, he shined his flashlight in my face, and with one glance said, "Take that bag of bones to Sick-Call. What's his deal now?"

Shipman said, "I think he had a seizure yesterday in the church."

"A seizure? Now he's into seizures. What's next, Sprungli? Mad Cow disease?" Pint shook his head.

Private Major nodded at me and smiled, beaming pride at what he heard, assuming I'd faked the religious experience to get out of the Army. On the

other side, Pint accused me of faking it to escape exercise.

Funny thing was, now I didn't want to escape exercise. I didn't want to go to Sick-Call. I wanted to soldier like Pfeffer and believe in the Army, and now, to be thin for once in my life. Yet without the power to stand, I had to go to Sick-Call.

Shipman said, "I'll take Sprungli to Sick-Call, Drill Sergeant."

"On second thought," Pint said, taking inventory of those going to Sick-Call, "I'll take him myself."

What was this? Even with the shard of pain bouncing in my abdomen like a yo-yo, I still managed to catch a secret glance directed from Pint to West. She stood in line to go to Sick-Call. If I was not mistaken, Pint also suffered love for West. At that moment, I realized that it was not a coincidence that Private West had been managing the phones every time I was disciplined in the Drill Sergeants' office. Her assignment to the phones happened for a reason. Flirting between a noncommissioned officer and a subordinate - this was fraternization. If my suspicion was true at all, then Pint, the reciter and repeater of rules, owned all of those accusations he placed on me.

The Sick-Call line moved out to the sing-song cadence of a happy Pint.

"Quit holding your junk, Sprungli," he said. "Whatever fungus you picked up, playing with it ain't gonna put it in remission."

He marched alongside the Sick-Call squad, standing right in the middle, next to Private West,

and she didn't bother to call out the song, while the rest of us were scolded for not singing from the belly.

At the clinic, Pint ushered me to the front of the line to see the doctor first.

"Take off your pants," the doctor said in a Russian accent.

"What?" I replied.

"It's a pretty simple thing, Sprungli." Pint stood in the room with his arms folded and acted rudely on behalf of the doctor. "You undo the belt, then the buttons, then put your thumbs down your pants and PUSH!"

"Please, Drill Sergeant," the doctor said, "take it easy. This is not the barracks."

The doctor circled his finger in the air. "Please drop your briefs too, Mr. Sprungli. I didn't ask you to take off your pants just to see what color underwear you are wearing. It's necessary, I assure you."

I did as requested.

"It's a bite of some kind."

"A bite?" said Pint.

"Yes. A spider possibly."

"A spider bit the Private," Pint said, laughing.

"Hold the jokes please, Drill Sergeant."

"I'll step out," Pint said. "I don't need to see this."

"Actually, you shouldn't be in here at all," said the doctor.

"I'm here to make sure this Private graduates."

"You have no business here in the examination room, and you should remember that for next time."

"Yes, sir," said Pint, exiting the room.

With that, the doctor did a thirty-point inspection of my parts, observing me so long that I thought he might pull out an easel and paint a nude portrait of me. I found it disturbing, the length of time he inspected.

"Ok, please put your pants back on."

"Should I leave some money on the table, Doctor?"

"Money?"

I said, "I just thought usually people had to pay for that sort of thing. Gee whiz, Doc."

He washed his hands and ignored my comment. He turned to me and said, "That looks very much like a spider bite on your penis." The way he said penis made it unfunny - not even a smirk on a face. The word never sounded so plain before. "Any idea how it got there?" he asked.

"No. No idea."

"Well, it should have been treated earlier. Unfortunately, you've suffered through the worst of it already. I can give you a prescription, but what's done is done, the toxins are nearly out of your body at this point. Surely you must have noticed the bite earlier?"

"No sir."

"I believe that it caused the episode the Drill Sergeant mentioned, at the church."

"Episode?"

"However," he said, ignoring me, "you will need to take it easy for now, as far as exercise goes."

The doctor wrote on his clipboard.

Finally, after a full minute, the doctor said. "Get dressed. We will have to perform more tests, but I'm afraid you will have to recover while continuing with

your training. The bite should have been dealt with earlier. Had you come in earlier, you might have been assisted. Now the scar tissue and remaining infection, well, it will have to heal the old fashioned way. Good luck to you." He handed me a piece of paper. This new profile excused me from all exercise, from pushups to jumping jacks to finger exercises.

Outside, Drill Sergeant Pint stood in the waiting room, scolding a group of Privates for chatting, while Private West sat filing her nails and humming. Behind him, I did a soft-shoe shuffle to a seat in the waiting room. Keen-eyed Pint nabbed me before I could sit down. He listened to my explanation of the spider and he made gibes, without apologizing for doubting me earlier. Nor would he withdraw my counseling statement for the night he shined his flashlight on me in my locker.

One too many jokes, he made one too many cracks at me.

He said, "Don't tell me he gave you a new profile."

I nodded.

Later that day, we sat through a long series of briefings on emergency medical training. The sergeant in-charge came from the past, from the Vietnam era, glasses and all, but he had a story for everything, and in all of his stories, someone died because his battle buddy didn't do this or that: X lost his legs because his battle buddy didn't know how to dress a wound. Y died of hypothermia because no one recognized the symptoms. Z choked to death on a hunk of SPAM because no one knew how to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Apparently, he had

tended to every soldier who had ever died in defense of America.

During one lengthy tirade, the sergeant discussed - "in short" - how we were supposed to triage injured people if we were the first responders to a Mass Casualty Incident. Private Waters sat next to me. Waters listened with a sarcastic smile on his face. On his lap lay a smuggled book that he brought back from Free-Day-Away.

The sergeant teaching the class read evacuation techniques from a canned Army presentation. *Basics of Triage and Transport*. "When prioritizing casualties, Privates, there are four basic categories. Their names are Urgent, Priority, Routine, and Convenience." He spoke in a clipped manner, losing the last letter of every spoken word. The sergeant, perhaps sensed Waters amusement. Without raising his voice, the sergeant asked Waters a question.

"Is this funny to you?"

"I just think some of the word choices are interesting," said Waters. "Convenience is hardly convenient for an injured person"

"We have an intellectual in our class today," the sergeant said, walking away from Waters. "Yes, words can get in the way. They sure can. Here's a question for you Private, a puzzle for you to ponder. You like puzzles?"

"I do," said Waters.

"I thought so. Let's say you're in a building that's wired to explode. An old man and a child are with you. It's just the three of you. You have a chance to save yourself and only one of them." The sergeant

turned around and stared at Waters. "Who would you save?"

"Well," Waters said, smiled, and leaned back in his chair. "It's an ethical question, one that can't be answered quickly. I mean, entire lives are spent studying this exact thing..."

"Bang!" screamed the sergeant, slamming his fist on the table, right in front of Waters. "Too many words. Instead of two alive, all three of you are dead." Then he composed himself. "You take the child, understand?"

Waters sat startled, no longer amused.

"Still thinking, aren't you?"

The platoon started to laugh at Waters.

"Ok, now listen up, and you others, quit smiling or I'll dust you," said the sergeant. "Moving on, let's look at the next slide. Oh here we go: *How to approach a helicopter on sloping ground*. This will save your life one day. You think I'm joking? No joke. You don't just run at a helicopter like they do in the movies. There's a process and if you don't follow it, you'll lose an arm or your head. Think it's a joke? Here's a joke. I was in Somalia when a Sergeant First Class went charging in as the chopper set down, and guess what? He ran downhill, put an arm up while slinging his rifle, and his hand went right into the chopper blade. Good-bye arm, hello hospital. Never was re-attached because the zone was hot so we had to get out. Some jackal probably fed her pups with that Sergeant's missing wing. All because he didn't *listen* in basic, because on the day he learned this crap he sat there with a smirk on his face and a book on his lap."

Chapter 20. Drill and Ceremony

Maybe the heat drove everyone to madness. Maybe love springs infernal. Whatever the cause, everyone seemed to be smitten. Every day a breakup, every day a new beginning, a drama and a happy-ending. Luckily, I was above all of it, since Ganger quit speaking to me after I asked to see her teeth.

The four platoons in the company were gathered on the parade area, a giant slab of blacktop, so hot that the tar turned to gelatin. Drill Sergeant Pint parked our platoon on the blacktop, letting us cook like bacon strips.

The couples slid beside each other. At this point the norm had become open defiance to fraternization rules. At every wiggle I received a counseling statement, while the hollowness of justice ignored the quartet of West, Shipman, Waters, and Vang, who titillated each other without as much as a chiding.

Through the cracks in the blacktop, weeds grew out in various places. A fistful of snapdragons and daisies were growing in the center of our platoon. Normal, sane people ignore such growth as only a nuisance on an otherwise fine parade field. Waters, however, not only noticed it, but gathered them up as a bouquet for Vang.

One of the snapdragon's attracted a honey bee that had flown into the scene. Dazed by the heat, Waters, Vang and West watched this bee. Vang said, "Look, honey, a bee!"

Waters laughed. Worse than that - he guffawed. Shipman and West, sitting quietly beside each other, turned around and faced Waters and Vang. I sat next to West.

"Isn't it something," Waters said, as he typically began any statement, full of musing, "that flowers can grow out of concrete? It just shows you that made-made things are not as strong as nature."

I covered my ears to watch First Platoon implode on the parade field. I seemed the only soldier concerned about winning the Drill & Ceremony competition. The lovers watched the bee for another minute, until Drill Sergeant Pint walked through the ranks and interrupted them by accident. After ordering Vang to drop the bouquet, Pint crushed the flowers with his boot.

Drill Sergeant Pint watched First Platoon carefully and narrated their errors like he was Bob Costas at the Olympics.

"The judges are tough, Privates," he said, standing amid the nature lovers. The bee hovered safely around Pint's shiny boots, waiting for him to move his feet off the flower.

"Drink water," he commanded.

That morning, I had shined my boots, taking Pfeffer's words to heart, but because I spent a half hour spitting on my boots, I forgot to fill my canteens with water before we moved out.

"When you go to 'Open Ranks,'" said Pint, "move with purpose. The Command Sergeant Major will have a few questions for you. Answer with confidence and don't fudge your answers."

"Drill Sergeant?"

"Yes, Shipman."

"What if someone doesn't know the answer?"

"Haven't you been reading your Smart Book?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant," Shipman said. "But I'm asking for everyone, Drill Sergeant."

"God have mercy on those who don't know."

I said, "Shipman knows everything."

"Is that right, Sprungli?" Pint looked down at me. "Ok genius, if you're such a smartass, what's the maximum effective range of the M-16-A2 rifle?"

The rifle was sitting next to me. I answered, "Twelve parsecs."

"The answer is five hundred fifty meters. In fact, Sprungli, if the Sergeant Major asks you anything, this is what you say to him: 'I don't know, Sergeant Major, but I'll find out and tell you the next time I see you.' Got it?"

"Sure, Drill Sergeant."

"Sure. Sure is a deodorant. Do push-ups. Oh wait, you have a profile. How could I forget. Never mind, Sprungli," said Pint, cowed at his own reminder.

"No, I'll do pushups," I said, getting down.

"You will?" said Pint. "Good, Sprungli. Good dog!" He patted my head. "Make a killer out of you yet."

I banged out some pushups to show everyone the new Sprungli. Others observed me, I could feel it,

and they knew I had the option to sit, but here pushed Sprungli. Absorbing their admiration, I pushed - I did pushups until muscle failure, then put my knees down and continued to the second tier of muscle failure.

"Privates," Pint continued while I bounced off the pavement, "if men are to give their best in war they must be united." Pint quoted his favorite Field Marshall, Harold Alexander. "Discipline, through drill, seeks to instill into all ranks this sense of unity, by requiring them to obey orders as one man. A ceremonial parade, moreover, provides an occasion for men to express pride in their performance, pride in the Company and pride in the profession of arms."

During this speech, West became preoccupied with something dangling from Drill Sergeant's Pint backside. From my push-up position, at first I thought it was another spider, but the closer I looked, I realized that it was a string dangling from Pint's pants.

West's fascination with the dangling string became an interest to those around her, including me. The string dangled like any string, but then, this was no string. It was the loose string of vindication. This string, after seven weeks of hearing the Drill Sergeants' complaints, was the equivalent of a flaw in a Crown Jewel. This string was like a Westminster dogshow winner lifting its leg on the podium, or a centerfold minus the airbrush, or Mario crashing his Kart when the checkered flag flew, or a seed in a well-packed pipe.

The string was an imperfection.

Confronted with this dangling thread, West decided to take one end of the string between her fingers and pull at it. She pulled on the string as if she wanted to remove it, giving it a short tug, but only the fabric around Pint's rear lifted and then settled again, fluffing his pants. She tugged again, slightly harder. The fabric rose and fell, airing Pint once again. On her third try, West seemed more determined. She wrapped the string around her finger, once, twice, three loops, and she pulled with force, which produced a ripping zipper sound that moved downward, unthreading the back of Pint's pants.

In disbelief, West looked at the long string in her fingers. A spool's worth. Then she gazed up at Pint, who suddenly felt a draft. In confusion, he spun around twice, giving everyone a view of his underwear. Pint, the American hero, wore boxer shorts - yet another violation of regulations. As soon as he realized what had occurred, he covered himself with the back of both hands, and then high-tailed it, backwards, away from the platoon, and he ordered West to follow him to explain the incident. She apologized repeatedly, holding the string in her hands like an injured child.

The laughing in our platoon drew Drill Sergeant Orta and Drill Sergeant Pfeffer over to our platoon. "Laugh now, knuckleheads. You're up next," Pfeffer said, and then moved back to his own platoon.

At last, it was our turn to show off our marching discipline. The heat battered my shoulders. All the pushups made me light-headed. Even after Pint had

left the slab, I continued doing pushups every few minutes. The admiration of my squad became intoxicating, so I kept banging out pushups whenever my arms regained some strength.

During the competition, I had difficulty standing still while we were at the position of "Dress-Right, Dress." West grunted at me, "Stop moving." The position required me to hold my arm straight out to the side, but my arm could not stop wavering, moving up and down like a tachometer on a gear shift in *Pole Position* or *Burnout*. Somehow I fended off the dizziness and completed the competition, but I'm not sure I remembered any of it. The Sergeant Major visited me and I suddenly felt possessed. I stood at Inspection Arms.

"Soldier, what's the Second General Order?"

I said, "I will obey my special orders and perform all of my duties in a military manner."

"That's correct, Private," said the Sergeant Major.

A gasp came from my whole platoon.

The Sergeant Major leaned closer and sniffed me. He muttered, "Good answer. But...are you drunk, soldier? You're slurring your speech."

"Drunk?" I asked, feeling a laugh coming on. "Not yet," I said.

The Sergeant Major squinted at me for a few seconds and then his chiseled face softened into a smile. "I like you, Sprungli," said the Sergeant Major. "You got the right answers and a hell of a fight in you. Good job. I'm going to let your Drill Sergeants know they got a soldier in their platoon."

Once finished, we sat on the blacktop again and several Privates slapped me on the back for answering the question. Others scolded me for my second answer about being drunk. I couldn't stop laughing. In fact, I couldn't stop laughing at anything that happened. A bird flew over the parade field and I rolled over on my side until tears came out of my eyes. I stopped sweating. Sunlight began to change colors. To soothe myself, I attempted to blow bubbles, but my mouth was parched. The world turned into a stereo kaleidoscope.

"Are you ok, Sprungli?" Shipman said, holding my head in his hands. "Where's your canteen? Oh my God, you need water."

"Huh?" I said, unaware of my surroundings.

"I think you are overheated, Sprungli."

A pair of Privates escorted me to a shade tree, and they doused me with their open canteens, and I giggled as if being tickled for twenty minutes.

Chapter 21. Notes

In my bunk, recovering from the punishing sun, the barracks hummed around me. In the aftermath of heatstroke, my head felt punch-drunk. I could only listen to Shipman and Waters discuss their love lives and their philosophies of the world. To block out the sound, I stuck my head inside my pillowcase.

Shipman stayed up late that night scribbling letters. After he fell asleep, I climbed down from my bunk to use the latrine and I noticed a note jutting out from underneath Shipman's pillowcase. I snatched it, quick as lightning.

"Who's there?" Shipman said, waking up. "What are you doing, Sprungli?"

Keeping the note behind my back, I said, "Sorry, battle buddy. I bumped into your bunk. I'm on my way to the latrine for some late-duty."

In the bathroom, Private Major stood in front of the mirror, nude as usual, trimming his nose hairs.

"Sprungli! That was some show you put on," he said. "You're an escape artist, brother. One day you're floggin' the dolphin, the next you're faking convulsions, and now this new thing. What do you call it? Sun stroke?"

"Soldiering?"

"Genius," Major said, plucking and wincing. "Genius. But I don't think it will get you out of the Army. Sorry, Sprungli."

"I don't want to get out of the Army."

"Oh, right." He winked at me. "You are a rock, Sprungli. Keep up the good work. I should tell you, shining your boots isn't going to get you out. If anything, they'll see that you are motivated. You don't want that."

"Major, I'm not trying to get out."

"You are an inspiration to me."

Inside a bathroom stall, I started to read the note. West's words struck me. For a moment I wished she had written them for me instead of Shipman. I could hardly believe that she wrote such wonderful things to Shipman. She wrote:

We don't have long to wait now. Six days and a wakeup and then we are free. I keep my watch set ahead just to imagine the end is closer. Even if it's only for a day, before I go to my next phase of training, at least after Basic I can see you the way I want to. Even if only for one hour. Nine weeks of this, being so close, seeing you every day, and still it's like a long distance relationship. This is torture, not being able to talk to you. I feel like I'm in a straightjacket, making me all the more crazy! I hope that when this is over, at the end of Basic, that we still feel the same. I hope that you do, too, and that we both can stay this way for a very long time. I respect you and I love you, D.S. If you think you can stand bending the rules a bit (I know how seriously you take them - I still think it's cute) I

propose that we meet during the night fire. It will be dark. We can meet around the side of the windscreen. A minute, one minute, is all I ask. No need to say anything. I'll just be there, and if you would meet me to kiss me, in the quiet, in the dark, just for a minute, no words, no army stuff, nothing but us for one minute. I'll make sure that I get in the first firing order, so that I can shoot and be done. Please meet me at 22:00!

*Yours truly,
me*

If the letter had been addressed to me, I would have started replying immediately: Yes. I'll be there, behind the windscreen, I'll be there.

But I had to read it through Shipman's eyes, those dreamy, woodpecker eyes. I wondered if he would in fact meet her. The "night fire" would be our final visit to the firing range. Three times already it had been post-poned due to rain, but we had one last chance. I prayed for good weather.

Suddenly Drill Sergeant Pint's voice entered the latrine. He made the rounds that night. First I heard him scolding Major for being naked, but then he asked, "Where's Sprungli? He's not in his bunk."

"On the toilet, Drill Sarn't."

"Sprungli, that your feet under there?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"If I catch you without water in those canteens one more time, I'm going to recycle you back to Day Zero, do you understand?"

"What!" I said.

"I've told you how many times to fill those canteens. How many times? And don't think I'm bluffing you about a recycle. I've done it before, and I'll do it again. And that remark you made to the Sergeant Major. Unbelievable that he didn't recycle the whole company. You're lucky he has a sense of humor, because I sure don't."

In the stall I fumed at the idea of starting training all over again. The entire chain of command from Platoon Guide to Drill Sergeant played dirty. I could play dirty too.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant," I said, quietly and with respect, while observing the initials on the outside of West's note to Shipman.

"No more screw-ups, Sprungli, or you're gone. I am done playing around with you." Pint paused and added. "And put some clothes on, Major."

"Yes, Drill Sarn't, right away Drill Sarn't."

Very carefully, I folded the letter into the standard shape of teenage love notes: a little triangle. On the outside, West had written the initials "D.S." for Darius Shipman. By only adding one letter to those initials, I could change the recipient. If I added a "P", the note would be addressed to "D.S.P.", for Drill Sergeant Pint.

A shadow fell on me. I hid the note between my knees and looked up expecting to see Pint.

"What are you doing in there?" Major asked, peering over the latrine door.

"Get out of here."

"Why, so you can play with yourself?" He made a squishing noise with his mouth.

"Why," I asked, "want to watch or what?"

"Do I want to watch?" Major jumped down and looked at me through the crack in the door. "That's the guaranteed escape route."

"What is?"

"They will throw you out of the Army without questions. The only problem is that you have to actually get caught in the act with another dude."

"What?"

"Hey, baby, it's cool with me," he said, and disappeared from the crack in the door. He resumed his nose-trimming. "I just ain't down with it myself. Sorry baby. Back on the block, I knew a guy like you."

"Really? You knew a ninja?" I threw open the door and stopped talking when I saw Major. He was still naked, now shaving, with his skinny thighs pressed against the sink. He pointed into the mirror, and his reflection pointed at me. "Woah Sprungli," he said, "back up. I see you got your hand in your shorts. This is a latrine, not a bathhouse. Don't get any ideas."

"What ideas?" As usual, while he trimmed his nose hairs, he kept his johnson sitting on the sink, like it too needed to see the mirror.

"Any idea at all," Major said, "like hitting on me. Not interested."

The unsanitary nature of his sink usage, along with his comments piggybacking on Pint's threat, it all irritated me. So I made a fist and bonked his snake right where it sat on the sink. I pounded on his johnson twice.

"Ow!" he screamed, and "Ow!" again, respective of the bonks. He doubled over. "Sprungli, I'm gonna kill you."

I skipped back to my bunk. After stuffing the note into my pillow, I pretended to sleep. Major walked by my bunk and pinched my fat so hard that I screamed and everyone woke in the barracks for a few minutes.

In the morning I had a bruise from the pinch-wound. I took the note out of my pillowcase and walked outside. On the barracks stoop, I stopped Private Baker and asked him to be my battle buddy for a moment. Together we accosted Drill Sergeant Pint, who seemed exceptionally calm that morning.

"What is it, Sprungli?"

"Drill Sergeant," I said softly, "Private West asked me to deliver this to you."

"What the heck is it? Another list?"

"I have no idea, Drill Sergeant." I held the note by one of the triangular corners. "She didn't ask me to open it, just to deliver it." The initials D.S.P. caused his eyes to grow wide.

In a flash, the triangle of paper disappeared, as if a gunfighter had shot it out of my hand. Pint unfolded the note and read the first line and stopped.

"Scram, Baker," Pint said.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant!" Baker shouted at the top of his lungs and then doubled-timed off into the morning mist.

I watched Pint's face as he read the note. Subtle changes in his eyes and forehead gave away his excitement, and I knew that the words had him

immediately. By his facial ticks, I could almost tell what line he was reading. When he read the "22:00 behind the windscreen" part, every muscle in his face relaxed while his chest filled with air.

He sighed, reddened by emotion. Straightening himself he said, "Come with me, Sprungli."

Off we marched, to the Drill Sergeant's headquarters, into Pint's own personal space. The shack was empty of all other Drills, so we spoke freely.

"What is this note about?" he asked. "Did someone put you up to this?"

"Up to what? To deliver the note?"

While he stared at me, I wore the dumbest face I owned, one perfected in school with substitute teachers.

A minute passed, silence, and then the answer came. "Tell her..." He paused. "Tell her only this - I will be there at 22:00."

"22:00?" I said. "Where? 22:00 on what day?"

"Just tell her what I said."

"Ok. Is that all?"

"Yes," he said, but as I got up he stopped me. "Wait. Have you mentioned this to anyone, this note?"

"Not a soul."

"Good. You can also tell West that if she wants to write, to only deliver messages through you, understood? Only through you."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Ok, get out of here."

Chapter 22. Courier

The first letter to Pint worked like a charm. The night fire was still two days away, so the flame needed to be stoked. During the following nights I waited patiently in my bunk for Shipman to take a shower. When he departed his locker, I searched his belongings for the latest note from West. Shipman, like Pint, had accepted the offer to meet West behind the windscreen.

Over the next two days, Pint became increasingly eager as I brought the letters to him, lost in the fantasy. Having him under my thumb made me realize that, in gamer terms, I had just leveled-up. The fourth note to Pint must have tipped over a glass of tears inside the man. His loose-string incident was a blemish, but this - this was a full autopsy. The exterior of the Drill Sergeant hid a dire state within.

He sat down slowly into his chair and covered his face with his brown round until he collected himself. If only I had a camera, I could have sent the picture to National Geographic. Seeing a Drill Sergeant cry as rare as the Loch Ness Monster or the Yellow-tailed Woolly Monkey.

I asked, "What's wrong, Drill Sergeant?"

From behind the brown round, a hand came out, motioning for me to go away, but I stayed.

"Gosh," I said, "anything I can do?"

"No, no. I owe you already."

"I don't understand."

He lowered his face into his hat. "Sprungli, I can hardly explain it to you."

"I'm not good at much, but I'm a good listener," I said.

For a minute he said nothing, but stuffed his face into his hat, and when he finally cleared his mechanism and wiped his eyes, he looked up at me and spoke.

"I have been in the United States Army infantry for twelve years now," said Drill Sergeant Pint. "My first marriage fell apart while I was in the field at Fort Drum. Don't ask me to explain what I came home to find that weekend. Lost custody of my kids, because my lawyer did nothing, and I could do nothing while I was parked back in the mountain on another training exercise. Two years ago, I had a new fiancée. Iraq took care of that. The first time I went into the red zone, she nearly died from the stress. She knew then that she didn't want to be a soldier's wife. Then I got my orders to become a Drill Sergeant. It was either this or recruiting duty and there was no way in hell I wanted to visit high schools and cold-call parents." He tried to drink his coffee but couldn't, and he wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I go home to an empty house each night. I'm thirty-one years old. In eight more years, I'll have twenty years in. I can separate from the Army, start a second career, but...never mind. You don't understand what these notes mean, Sprungli. Why am I telling you this? This doesn't leave the office."

On his desk, the cup of coffee steamed away. He lowered his hat to the desk and then swirled the coffee around, looking down at the liquid like it was his Magic 8-ball, as if an answer would float up to the top.

"You better keep your mouth quiet."

"I will, Drill Sergeant."

"Or I'll recycle you."

"I know, Drill Sergeant. I'm trying to do better."

"I know you are."

A compliment. This caught me off guard.

"You're doing good, Sprungli. Much better. I mean, your boots shine, you're doing the exercises, even after the spider thing. I didn't want to tell you, but you did good during Drill and Ceremony, except for that spasm in your arm. But I don't want you to fall backward now and rest on your laurels, all because I told you that."

"No, Drill Sergeant. I'll keep trying." This complicated things terribly. Now that I had set him up, ballooning his hope, I needed to pop him. But how, unless West wrote a note cancelling the meeting?

"A guy like me," he said, lifting his red eyes to meet mine, "opportunity doesn't knock often. A guy like me only gets a few chances to find someone like West. And if she's in love with me, then that's all I need in this world."

My mouth started to form an apology, but his happiness and my fear of being recycled stopped me.

Chapter 23. Night Fire

At noon, the cattle cars hauled four platoons of Echo Company Privates to the firing range. All afternoon, we lined up in the foxholes to pop off rounds, and I mean very few rounds. For the first time, we used our M-16s as machine guns. The Drills allowed us to fire three-round bursts, but with a twenty round magazine, that meant seven squeezes of the trigger and back to the windscreen for a good long sit.

I asked Orta, "When do we get to fire the M4 and the grenade launcher?"

"When you get to Baghdad," she said.

All day long I spied on Shipman, West, and Pint. They floated on high-hopes, floating on their secrets. Sitting with my rifle between my knees on the bleachers, I considered telling them to call it off. Hardly ten minutes could pass without Pint stopping by to say hello to Private West. Wherever she went, the lamb was sure to follow. He nodded knowingly at her - a wink, an eyebrow raise. She pursed her lips and offered curt smiles, causing Pint to blush and peer around to see if anyone had noticed. Ever vigilant, Shipman maintained his distance from West, but from afar he gazed, like Mario at the Princess. Longing looks traveling great distances,

yearnings cast over rows of Kevlar helmets, love's Hail Marys, back and forth all day over the rifle range. All three of these actors did quiet reconnaissance of the windscreen, checking the rendezvous point, peeking around the sides of the tin windscreen at the spot where the silent kiss was scheduled to occur.

During the long hours of waiting, Pint came up to me on three separate occasions to ask about updates, checking for new messages in his inbox. Again, I was unable to spill the beans, thinking only of my next turn on the firing line and graduation.

"I haven't heard anything from her, Drill Sergeant."

"If you do, you know, just let me know. I'll be nearby."

"Sure thing, Drill Sergeant."

The sun dove into the earth. The hour neared. Pint nearly levitated on his third visit to question me, even offering me a favor for my services rendered. At nine o'clock he asked, "Would you like to fire twice this evening? We have some extra rounds."

As he spoke, a flare shot into the sky, drawing oohs and aahs from the Privates. The flare marked the beginning of the night fire exercise. I asked Pint, "Can I shoot one of those things?"

"It's called a parachute flare."

"Yeah, can I shoot one?"

This request he didn't expect, but after scrunching his nose, he granted my request.

"Yes, I suppose you can," he said. "I'll tell Drill Sergeant Pfeffer that you will be allowed to fire one

flare. After you fire on the line, go to the tower. I'll give him a heads up."

Firing at night tripped me out. Every fourth shot fired was a tracer round, which zipped through the night like a laser. At last, here was ammunition that looked like a video game. Finally, after almost two months, I experienced a real *Call of Duty* moment. The sergeant in charge of the range ordered us to "pull the trigger as fast as you can," and I did. My tracers, at first, were diving into the dirt, and I realized that I was aiming too low, so I pointed my rifle at a forty-five degree angle, which lifted my tracer rounds into the atmosphere, high above everyone else's, over the range and into the woods.

Drill Sergeant Pfeffer galloped down the firing line and yelled at me for aiming so high.

"This ain't anti-aircraft training, Sprungli. Aim lower."

When I was done, he scolded me again, ripping the rifle from my hands. Breaking the rifle down to its components, Pfeffer said, "This is what I'd like to do to you. Break you down into parts and recycle you." Then he added with a shake of the head, "I hear Pint's letting you fire a flare yet tonight."

"That's right, Drill Sergeant."

"What'd you do to deserve it? You don't deserve a perk. The only guy in your whole platoon that's worthy of reward is Shipman."

"That's right. Me, Drill Sergeant."

"Your boots look better." Still, he sighed in disgust. "Ok," he said. "In a half hour, meet me at the tower to fire your flare."

Back on the bleachers I watched the clock and observed West and Shipman, who kept a distance from each other. Pint paced back and forth in front of the windscreen, acting the chaperone to those waiting to fire. Whenever a flare erupted in the sky, I became excited at my chance to fire one. A smudge on my boots caught my eye and I used a cleaning rag to touch them up. The comment from Pfeffer, the Ranger, filled me with pride. Between the flares and my boots glistening in the night, I began to forget about West and her suitors as the half-hour expired.

To the tower I marched, walking swiftly. Pfeffer greeted me at the stairs with a sneer. I climbed the steps and from inside the control tower I enjoyed an amazing view of tracer rounds whizzing downrange. The red piercing lights in the darkness, the crack of the rifles, and the smell of brass casings on the ground below all together gave me pause for a moment. I had a moment in the control tower. For some reason the tracers reminded me of *Star Wars* beam weapons and blasters, turbolasers, quad laser cannons, swivel mounted laser guns, concussion missiles, and tractor beam projectors.

Pfeffer held the flare gun in his hand. He said to me, "In five minutes, I'll let you fire the flare."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Why? You gotta date?"

"Just wondering."

"It's a minute before twenty-two hundred, Sprungli."

"What? Twenty-two hundred?" I said. "But that's ten o'clock!"

"No kidding?" Pfeffer said.

Watching the tracers, I had lost track of time. Now through a side window of the tower, I peered out into the darkness toward the windscreen. I was poised to miss the kiss, and suddenly I didn't want my fellow soldiers to get caught fraternizing, nor did I want to cause Pint pain. A well of military *esprit de corps* previously unknown filled me, and simultaneously flooded me with guilt. I pressed my face to the window to look at the windscreen, which was too far away in the darkness.

Down the firing line, I noticed the shape of a short man walking, holding a flashlight. The flashlight swung up and down and the gait was Pint's. He was moving swiftly toward the windscreen, having waited until the last minute, sticking strictly to the plan. And I had to stop him, to stop Shipman and West from meeting, to break up the entire event before it happened, but from the control tower I could not reach them in time. The flashlight bobbed with every step, marking Pint's position, and I asked again, "What time is it now, Drill Sergeant?"

"Twenty-two hundred," he said. "Don't ask me again."

"Can I fire the flare now, please?"

"You know what?" Pfeffer paused and bit his lip. "Yes, you can. Because after that, you can leave and I won't have to listen to you anymore."

We stepped outside onto the tower's platform. He gave me instructions, but given the time, I ignored with details. There was a trigger and a business end. What else did I need to know about flares?

Pfeffer positioned me, even put my arms at a certain level, and then he backed away three steps, like a golf caddy.

"Fire when ready."

In the corner of my eye, I saw Pint's flashlight extinguish near the corner of the windscreen. Pint was in his final approach. I raised the flare gun and spun toward the windscreen.

Pfeffer shouted, "Don't!"

I pulled the trigger.

A pop sounded and out jumped the flare. The canister sailed through the air, toward the company, who saw the incoming flare and scattered out of the bleachers to avoid what appeared to be an errant lob from the tower. The hundreds of boots moving at once on steel made the sound of a crashing wave,

As the flare erupted over the windscreen, Pfeffer grabbed me by the back of the neck and stripped the flare gun from my hands. Before, he had mentioned how he wanted to break me down like a rifle. He now acted on that impulse, putting me into a pretzel shape, boxing my ears, and finally battering both of my kidneys. Lying prone on the platform I was able to witness the quake of light split the darkness wide open and I prayed that the illumination separated Shipman and West before Pint arrived, before anyone touched lips.

A chorus of voices in Echo Company cried, "Ooh!" and I could see many Kevlar heads tipped backward to intake the bright light. The Privates rushed forward and spilled around the edges of the windscreen, into the zone of the secret tryst.

Suddenly, as fast as sound travels, a roar of laughter reached my ear, loud enough that Pfeffer stopped wrangling me. The laughter continued as the flare wafted down from the stars to the earth. A little parachute carried the bright lamp overhead, slowly and dramatically, until the lamp burned its last bit of fuel and snuffed.

The sound of the laughter struck me, and I wondered what had happened. Had West embraced Shipman? Was Pint raging at the two of them for fraternizing?

I didn't have to wait long. The news spread like flames down the firing lines, as a Private in the first lane turned to a Private in the second lane, and so on like a game of telephone. Privates popped up and shouted from one side to the other, sharing the news and then laughing themselves. In a matter of seconds, the gossip reached all the way to the tower where Pfeffer and I heard the tale.

The words came up to us from an inarticulate Private who had just contracted laughing sickness.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Pfeffer, shouting down from the control tower.

"Drill Sergeant Pint, he..." The private started to hiccup. He paused to take off his glasses and hold his stomach.

"Get yourself together, fool!" Pfeffer said.

"Drill Sergeant Pint, he..." The Private gasped and choked and aspirated and swallowed.

Pfeffer was not in the mood. "Ok, we got the first part. Now don't repeat it again. Go on to the next part."

The Private held his breath until he could squeeze out one word at a time.

"Drill...Sergeant...Pint...was..."

"Get to it!" Pfeffer ordered.

"kissing..."

"Kissing?" said Pfeffer.

"Drill Sergeant Pint kissed Private Shipman!"

Pfeffer grabbed the railing on the platform and descended the tower staircase in a lurch, taking four steps at a time. He forgot about me. The kidney pain no longer ached, because I went into shock for several minutes at the revelation from the laughing Private.

Chapter 24. Military Justice

That night, in the barracks, madness reigned. With a Drill Sergeant caught fraternizing, all norms were cast aside. Pfeffer's typical tirade started, Shipman suffered a long series of smokings. West disappeared to the female barracks for interrogation. I listened to the melee, trying to muster a confession that never took form enough to speak amid the yelling and confusion.

Rumor had it that after the brief embrace, the confusion set both Pint and Shipman aflame with rage, but only Pint lashed out, giving Shipman two raccoon eyes. The story claimed that Shipman raised his fist in return, but refrained from hitting his superior.

At one point, Pfeffer relented with the physical punishment of Shipman and left the building. He told Shipman to get in his bunk and wait. The door slammed as Pfeffer walked out. A sweaty mess, Shipman leaned against my bunk and pondered his fate.

"I don't understand what Pint was doing there. I was supposed to meet West. Unless she set me up." He looked frail and defeated. "She wouldn't have done that. I know West wouldn't lie." He put his face into his hands. "What have I done?"

"Yeah, about that," I said. "That wasn't entirely a coincidence, I think. Maybe."

Shipman raised his head. "Why else would be be there unless she told him to be there?"

I scratched my scalp. "Right, right. I hear what you are saying. It's possible that Pint thought those notes were for him. It's possible."

"How? How did he know about them?" Suddenly he leaned back and said, "Oh God, you're right. I lost a couple of her notes. I wonder if he confiscated them and read them. But how," he struggled to connect his thoughts, "how could he have misconstrued it and thought she wanted to meet him?"

"Well, they were just sticking out of your pillow a few nights ago."

"They were?" he said, surprised. "Damn, they were. They were! But..." Then he stopped. "How did you know that?"

"I saw them when I walked by."

"You saw them? You saw our notes? Did you read them?"

I took too long to respond.

"You did, didn't you, Sprungli."

My face grew warm. "Yeah. But I didn't mean for any of this to happen..."

"You set me up, Sprungli? You did?" His expression turned bitter. "You dirty, low-life, scumbag." Balls of fists clenched under his chin, he turned toward me but then squatted down and pushed his fists against his eyes. "I wish I knew why, Sprungli. I'm pretty sure I didn't deserve it. I may get kicked out of the Army for it. Drill Sergeant Pint,

too. He will either be demoted or worse, all because of *your* practical joke."

I stammered, "I screwed it up. I just...I was sick of being the screwup and now I'm the screwup again."

"It was you then," Shipman said, leaning forward onto his elbows so that he appeared to be scrubbing the floor.

That's when the MPs arrived, coming into the door with Pfeffer and two other Drill Sergeants. I saw a lot of angry faces coming toward our bunk beds.

Pfeffer grabbed Shipman and Waters by the collars. "Waters, we know about you, too," Pfeffer said. "The secrets are coming out tonight. I already got your girlfriend, Waters. You're coming along to join her."

Dragged away like sacks, Shipman and Waters moved toward the door. Pfeffer yelled in Waters' ear the whole way. I heard Waters ask what he had done, and if the result would be a general discharge from the Army.

"Yeah, buddy?" yelled Pfeffer. "How's it going pal? Why don't you just call me by my first name. Call me asshole. Do it! Do it, Private! I beg you, do it! Am I not a Drill Sergeant?"

"You are, Drill Sergeant."

"You ain't getting discharged, Waters. Maybe the others, but not you. That's what you want, so you're not getting that. I have something better for you especially, Waters. Nothing opens up the pores like a good eighteen months of war. The heat in the desert will clear up your face. That's where you're going, Waters. I'm going to see to that. Iraq is gonna be your home. Lots of units need spare parts. You're

not going to Water Treatment school. I'm going to reassign you to eleven bravo, infantry. And I hope one day soon you'll be driving down a Fallujah highway, looking at every little piece of litter on the shoulder wondering if it's an IED, and *bam!*" The room echoed. "You'll be a pile of red sand. You'll find out, Waters. I'm going to make sure you get your combat patch before you get your college money. You'll find out..."

The barracks door slammed shut. The remaining fifty-eight Privates stood in silence. Our Platoon Guide of nine weeks was gone, and suddenly without Shipman, no one knew what to say or do.

That night, using Shipman's flashlight, I read his notebook until the battery died, and became ashamed by his words. Now it was me crying in the night, sobbing on the pillow, because Shipman had written in his book that "...I know Sprungli could be a good soldier, but I'm afraid he doesn't want to be."

Chapter 25. Rights of Passage

Shipman and Pint were called onto the carpet. The brass fell hard upon them, and as promised, they were both punished with legal terms that I knew were bad because I didn't understand any of the charges.

In rows on the barracks floor, a platoon meeting took place, with the purpose of addressing the event that had occurred. Even the company commander and First Sergeant attended. The gravity in the open space increased when Pint made a confession and apology, and announced that he would not be with us for graduation, that his transfer notice to another platoon took effect immediately, and that he wanted us all to defeat the other platoons in the final week during the Field Training exercise.

Sitting next to Major, Shipman, and West, I felt a shared taint between us all, now that each of us carried an Article 15 on our record. The four of us, in ten weeks, had been corrupted and changed and melted and hardened. Even Private Major's jokes diminished with each week.

The kissing incident made Echo Company the laughing-stock of Fort Leonard Wood for the remainder of Basic Training. The Lieutenant Colonel, who I had once saluted with my left hand,

ordered a new Drill Sergeant to our platoon, a young woman, fresh out of Drill Sergeant school, who treated us like it was Day Zero all over again.

I had only a few days to right things with Shipman. West, too - I could not bear to meet her eyes, since she knew that I had organized the kiss.

Shipman ignored me when he returned to his locker after the meeting. He had become the new whipping boy for the company Drill Sergeants, mocked mercilessly wherever he set foot.

The only thing I could do to redeem Shipman and our platoon was to dominate the other platoons in the Field Training Exercise. The time had come for the true Sprungli to emerge, and the true Sprungli was Leon Kennedy of *Resident Evil*. Praise God and pass the ammunition: I laced up my boots and set fire to my soft-shoe profile.

Our final tasks included a two night camping trip in the woods. I dug a hole in the ground, then I dug Shipman's hole, since he lacked motivation after being chased around for days. I woke up to pull all night guard duty under the stars, taking on Shipman's shift after my own. If I found one of the enemy sleeping on guard duty, I took his rifle away and, if he laid still, I handcuffed the sleeping beauty with plastic zip-ties.

At night I laid in my hasty fighting position gazing out from my cover in the trees. The stars overhead twinkled on my boots and on the steel barrel of my rifle. I began to doze off until the prairie grass in a clearing moved and the outline of a Kevlar appeared,

then another, and another. A stalking enemy approached our line. I fired my blanks at them and when I ran out of blanks, I resorted to insults.

The next day, I led the road march, the final road march, carrying all the things in my rucksack that I was supposed to carry. At the end of the march, I entered the grand finale of Basic Training, where I crawled underneath a barbed wire obstacle while bullets buzzed overhead. Actually, the bullets could not have hit me if I stood up and leaped in the air, but still, this nearness to bullets came closest to reminding me of playing *HALO*. At the end of a long sand-pit, I crawled next to Shipman and said, "We did it, battle buddy. It's all over."

"We did," he said. "But I still hate you."

And the floodlights came on. Basic Training had ended.

From there the Drill Sergeants funneled us into a formation, congratulated us, and marched everyone to an awards ceremony, one that was clearly modeled on the TV show *Survivor*. The officers lit candles and sang the Army Song in a *Rights of Passage* ceremony.

The battalion commander and the company commander faced our aging First Sergeant. The three of them marched around each other in a circle and pinned medals on each other. The company commander was awarded a medal by the other two men, then they rotated, with lots of square turns and salutes, to arrive at a new position. Now the colonel received a medal and a plaque, followed by another series of square circles and salutes and another

pinning, this time on the First Sergeant. As it turned out, the company commander was also getting promoted, so they had to march in a circle again, salute, and pin additional medals onto each other. During all of this, some of the Privates started to wobble and pass out, because they were tired from the long road march and from crawling in the sand-pit. I couldn't help but pity Private Ganger, who fell onto her face and was dragged out of the formation by Drill Sergeant Pfeffer.

"Don't lock your knees, Privates. Drink water!"

If I learned one thing in Basic, it was that drinking water cured everything.

Chapter 26. Go, No-Go

On graduation day, Grandpa attended the ceremony. Visiting family members gathered into an auditorium where we sang the cadences proudly, loudly, giving loved ones the impression that we always sang that way. I was full of pride and made sharp turns, crisp turns, praying that Grandpa could see me. He smiled at me. I didn't smile back, maintaining discipline.

The ceremony took about an hour. During the ceremony, a medley of patriotic country music songs reminded us of the important war effort, reminded us of justice yet to be delivered in the form of daisy cutter bombs. The music played over a series of PowerPoint slide shows, showing tanks in the sun, the World Trade Center, sandy Iraq, helicopters at sunset, a soldier helping a wounded Iraqi lad, an eagle soaring, a child holding a U.S. flag, ground zero in New York, Iraqi tank in flames, the Pentagon, soldier in sandy dune, our president and vice president, Humvee in Iraq, sunlight through the remaining beams of the World Trade Center, a jet, a ship, and lastly a heavily armed U.S. soldier reaching down to pet an Iraqi cat. A country singer crooned "*Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Flies.*"

Then the moment came when I would walk on stage in front of Grandpa and receive my certificate of successful completion of Basic Training. Drill Sergeant Pfeffer greeted me on the hardwood, smiling at me, almost laughing out loud as he handed me an envelope.

"Congratulations, Sprungli," he said. "See you downrange. See you real soon."

"You think so, Drill Sergeant?" I said.

He chuckled and pulled me past him with his ultra-grip Ranger handshake.

Marching to the end of the stage, I waved at Grandpa, who stood up and raised a shaky fist into the air.

The Drill Sergeants dismissed us to greet our families. At the call of "Fall Out," Grandpa hobbled toward me, putting his cane out and then following it, putting it out again, and then following it.

"It's good to see you, Paul!" he said, hugging me. "My goodness, you look terrific. You *are* a changed man. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I don't know what to say."

I was so proud of myself for graduating that I could hardly hide my joy. That is, until I noticed Shipman watching me.

Afterward, the Drills released us for an afternoon of family time. Grandpa and I went to eat at a restaurant outside of the Fort.

Before the waiter even asked, I said, "A plate of buffalo chicken wings, please." Then I fished my GameBoy out of my backpack and started up a new

game. Finally, I could play it without looking over my shoulder.

"Paul," said Grandpa, "after losing all that weight, are you really going to start eating junk again? And playing video games?"

"Oh right," I said. "Waiter? I'll take a Diet Coke, too. And yes, Grandpa, I intend to play games now that I'm out of Basic Training."

Grandpa sighed and said, "Well, at least you didn't get kicked out. I was worried, you know." Before long, he started into his usual talk, rambling on about Milwaukee and the local news, the latest kidnappings and traffic problems.

"Paul, did you hear me?" he said. "I can never tell when you're listening."

"Yeah, Grandpa, I heard you."

The buffalo chicken wings arrived in no time. I have to admit, they were delicious, and messy. As fast I could eat them, I gnawed like a dog on rawhide.

"Awful manners," Grandpa said. "Awful, even for a soldier. But you still look good. At least there's that."

Suddenly I stopped was I was doing, mid-wing, because I smelled a familiar scent, that of a flowery field. A hand fell onto my shoulder, and when I turned, there was West, and behind her, Shipman, both wearing civilian clothes.

"Congratulations, Sprungli," said Shipman. "You made it to the end."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, aware of the wing sauce on my face. Wings always made me feel like I needed a shower.

Shipman said, "I'm out, Sprungli."

"Out?"

"I guess the Army doesn't want me after all." He laughed. "They gave me a general discharge, calling it 'Failure to Soldierize.' When the Colonel ruled on my file, with all of those counseling statements in there, the ones that you earned for me, they discarded me. Even Pfeffer couldn't keep me in once the Colonel read my file. I mean, you must have had ten counseling statements, and Pint promised to put a statement in my folder for every one you received, remember?"

West and Shipman laughed.

Grandpa said, "You don't really look like the type of person that fails to soldierize."

"Apparently I am."

I asked West. "You're not getting out of the Army, too, are you?"

"Not yet, but very soon, I will be. I confessed to the charges of seducing Pint and Shipman, and after they kicked out Darius, they decided to make an example of both of us. The paperwork is processing. Pfeffer let us walk through graduation today, but after this, we are homeward bound."

"We'll be a cautionary tale for others," said Shipman. "I think that's the idea. But none of it would have been possible without you, Paul."

West hugged close to Shipman's arm and he smiled at her.

"We couldn't have arranged it better ourselves," said Shipman. "I'll be going back to Champaign to work at the bank. But I'm glad I ran into you today, Paul, because I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" I said, picking up another wing.

"Yes, for setting up the whole fiasco. And Emily is going to move to Champaign, right?"

"I'm going to give it a try."

Shipman kissed her on the cheek and she closed her eyes.

Before they left, West stopped to ask me, "Is that the envelope you received at the ceremony today, Sprungli?"

"Yes," I said, growing angry and envious of their happy ending, now that my plan to expose their relationship backfired but somehow worked, yet ultimately made their perfect lives more perfect. "Why do you ask?"

"That's funny," she said, with a curious brow. "The Privates who graduated got a certificate, not an envelope. Darius and I have the same envelope that you received."

"You mean," I said, "I'm getting discharged, too?"

Grandpa sat up closer to the table, frowning at the idea.

"I don't know what it means," said West. "I just noticed it. Have you opened it yet?"

The envelope became red with barbecue sauce as I slid my finger down the fold. The thought that I could return to gaming full-time in Grandpa's basement made me forget about my valorous final week at Basic Training. But to escape the Army now, the mere idea of it lifted my spirits, the possibility of going back to my favorite TV and Taco Bell...

I stopped fantasizing and dived straight into denial. Out of the envelope fell a picture of Drill

Sergeant Pfeffer, right onto my hot wings. A smiling photo of Pfeffer, all teeth and gums.

"What the heck is this?" I said.

I picked up his picture and turned it over in my hand. Pfeffer had written something on the back of his face. I read aloud:

"I heard you like to play jokes. Me too. Await orders from me. You have been recycled to Delta Company. See you next week for Red Phase. Basic Training. Zero Day. You are not slipping through the cracks of my Army. You are a NO-GO. Love, Pfeffer."

I was speechless.

Shipman and West stared at me for a moment. West covered her mouth. She said, "I'm sorry, I have to go now." A giggle escaped from her before she turned to leave. She yanked on Shipman's arm. He said, "Best of luck, Paul."

Together, hands locked, they walked out, staring at each other like two sunflowers, and I heard them burst into laughter as they exited the restaurant.

"Well," Grandpa said, watching Shipman leave. "I don't believe that a guy like that failed to soldierize..."

"He failed to soldierize!" I yelled, hitting my plate and scattering bones. "Didn't you hear him say it himself?" I took a bite of a stray chicken wing, trying to digest Pfeffer's words. "I've been through a lot and I worked hard and I deserve to feel like a hero for a day."

"A hero?" Grandpa said. "I'm not sure getting through Basic Training makes you a hero..."

The idea of Red Phase, all over again, of the rifle ranges and latrine crawling and dew on the grass and POSH training and Free-Day-Away and cattle cars and sick calls and gas chambers and night fire and bayonet training and three minute meals - and worst of all, the psychotic Pfeffer as lead Drill Sergeant of Delta Company. I felt ill. But not knowing what else to do, with nowhere to run, I stuffed wings into my mouth.

"No," Grandpa said, "That doesn't work for me, kid. The same goes for anything else. What you see is not what you get. Finishing training doesn't make you a soldier. Carrying the Good Book doesn't make you decent. Growing a beard won't make you a scholar, cooking doesn't make you a gourmet, and wearing a uniform doesn't make you a *hero*. An accomplishment, yes, it is an accomplishment. But hero? I beg to differ on the definition, you might say."

I chewed wildly and started to retort, but when I opened my mouth I inhaled, and the buffalo chicken wing was vacuumed into my mouth and down my esophagus, bone and all. By impulse, I tried to cough it up, but in doing so I inhaled the wing further, tucking the gristle deeper into my throat.

I started to rock in my chair, and grabbed my throat, but Grandpa said, "I'm trying to say something. Do me the courtesy of listening."

Slapping at the table with one hand, smacking my knee with the other, I tried to blow a bubble, and failing that I put my hands to my throat and stood.

I fell onto the floor and gagged on the buffalo chicken wing. Flopping like a fish, I began to fade, I

could feel myself disappearing like Mega Man on his last life with no cheat code for the villain, in this case a chicken wing. Before I passed out I felt Grandpa grab my waist and I heard him say:

"Dear God, we've created a monster."

###

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