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Collateral Damage: Exploring the Metaphors and Realities of War in Three Fictional Narratives

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE: EXPLORING THE METAPHORS AND
REALITIES OF WAR IN THREE FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Masters of Arts in Humanities

by

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San Rafael, California
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ABSTRACT

Since earliest recorded history, human beings have been going to war with each other. It seems that this is an integral and inescapable part of our existence.

As humanity has advanced and expanded over time, our wars have advanced and expanded in stride, to the point that we are capable of destroying all life on the planet “at the push of a button.” This awesome power, coupled with an impulse so primal that we struggle to understand it, is a dangerous and terrifying prospect. It is vitally important that, in this age of drone strikes and nuclear proliferation, we do not lose sight of the individual human element. For this project, I have written three fictional stories set against a backdrop of human conflict. I use this backdrop to explore the themes of: belonging, home, love, acceptance, place, and identity. Whether we believe in the fight or whether we are even in the fight, it is clear that war permanently changes us. This project questions what effect war has on the individual person, and ultimately asks: is it necessary?

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To my mother and father, who never stopped encouraging me.

To Greg, who sometimes knows my characters better than I do.

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Introduction

What draws me, and has always drawn me, to literature is a love of the story. Storytelling is important, not only because it is one of the most foundational methods of human communication, but also because life is, in a very literal sense, made of stories. Myths, fables, hopes, fears, daydreams, and delusions, are all stories we tell each other and ourselves, in an attempt to interpret the world around us and within us. We tell stories about our experience as human beings, about people like us, or not like us, near or far, good or bad. We tell stories to try and make sense of it all, to give it meaning, or to change it, and make it better.

For this project I tell three stories about people touched by war, but I tell them, not to focus on the wars, but to focus on the people. I use war as a grounding metaphor for all three stories because its instinctual Us versus Them attitude holds within it a wealth of rich dichotomies: known versus unknown, safe versus hostile, and at its most black and white: good versus evil. These dichotomies create space for everything in-between, for everything that is neither black nor white. It is this in-between space where my stories live.

The purpose of fiction is, in part, to explore the uncomfortable or taboo elements of the human existence in a safe environment, and thereby learn from them. In my own writing, I try to focus on the personal stories that are contained and revealed within a broader context. As Robert Olen Butler says in his book *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* “Artists are intensely aware of the chaos implied by the moment-to-moment sensual experience of human beings on this planet. But they also, paradoxically, have an intuition that behind the chaos there is meaning; behind the flux of

moment-to-moment experience there is a deep and abiding order.” Finding order in the chaos is part of what draws me to the subject matter of war. Getting to know the individual person in the greater conflict is vital if we are to counteract misconception and dehumanization.

Globalization means the world is a smaller place now than it has ever been. You can go from LA to Hong Kong in less than a day, but does that mean that you can know what it’s like to be from Hong Kong? Or Mumbai, or Baghdad? Communication may be easier, but understanding is harder. Joseph Stalin is famously quoted as saying “one death is a tragedy, one million is a statistic.” Whether or not that saying actually originated with the infamous dictator, the words have stuck with us because it reveals a truth. We are not made to conceptualize one million human beings, let alone 7.2 billion, and still think of them as people like us, but we are built to tell and understand stories. The right story at the right time can bring out a face in the crowd, and make you care about someone on the other side of the globe. The right story at the right time can change your life, or it can change the world.

The Pain Inside

“Minor dread!” shouted the corporal sitting next to me. At least that’s what I think he said. The decibel level in the jeep was about as high as a heavy metal concert.

“What?” I shouted back, then a second later the Jeep hit a pothole the size of Rhode Island and I flew up out of my seat, my skull slamming against the ceiling.

“I said, mind your head,” said the corporal, grinning and making a tip of the hat gesture on his sturdy helmet.

“How can I get me one of those?” I said rubbing my head.

I spent the rest of the ride clutching the underside of my seat and watching the desert go by.

It was a hazy day, but already about ninety degrees. On either side of the road the land stretched out to the horizon, broken only by short patches of plant life. There were mountains ahead of us, but it seemed the more we drove, the farther away they got.

The Jeep turned off the dirt road onto an even smaller dirt road and soon the camp came into view like a sickly mirage. We pulled up to the gate and after inspecting my press badge the guard let us through.

We stopped in front of a large Quonset hut, half of a giant’s tin can laid on its side. I was glad to be getting out of the Jeep. My head hurt, my ears rang, and my fingers ached from gripping the bottom of my seat. From where I stood, I could see nothing beyond the Quonset hut, and no one but my escorts were in sight. Then a man in a crumpled and dusty thawb appeared around the side of the building and stopped. He then

started again and hurried towards us. I looked back at the soldiers behind me. They stood around, hands on rifle butts, feet spread apart, bored and insolent.

The man came to a stop a full five feet away from me and said in English “Hello, my name is Kateb, I have,” he paused as if trying to conjure the phrase, “bad news.”

“Oh no,” I said instinctively and then mentally kicked myself. I sounded like he had just announced that the roast was too burned to eat.

The corporal with the sturdy helmet stepped up next to me.

“What’s this all about,” he said, “where’s Aziz?”

“Aziz is, ah, ill. Yes he is very ill, he cannot leave his bed.”

“Well, shit,” said the corporal, “Aziz was your interpreter.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Look, we can radio back to command now and requisition another one ASAP, but, damn, that’s gonna take, what?” He looked around at his fellow soldiers.

“At least 48,” someone else said.

“Hours?” I said.

“Look, it’s the best we can do.”

I only had five days here. I couldn’t waste two on just describing the scenery. I sighed, and tried in vain to wipe the sweat off my face.

I looked at the man again, he was standing with his hands clasped in front of him looking like he was just waiting for someone to tell him he could go.

“What about you?” I said to him.

“Ma’am?”

“You sound like you speak English pretty well. Would you like to be my interpreter for the next five days?”

“Uh, Ma’am,” he said looking fleetingly at the soldiers behind me, “I’m not an interpreter, Ma’am I am just a refugee here, like everyone else.”

“That’s even better,” I said, “you’re hired.”

The soldiers left, with a promise to pick me up again in five days on that same spot. I watched them go. The jeep kicked up clouds of dust until I couldn’t even see it any more, just the dust, like a magicians disappearing act.

“Well,” I said, turning to the man, “Kateb, was it? My name’s Sarah.”

We shook hands.

“I guess it’s just you and me, now,” I said.

He half smiled and shrugged. “I will take you to see the doctor now.”

“The doctor?” I said, unconsciously touching the bump on my head. “Oh yes, Dr. Standish!” I had arranged my stay at the camp with him weeks before, but what with the traveling, and the blow to the head, and the business with the interpreter, I had completely forgotten. Now it seemed odd that he had not been there to meet me.

“The doctor,” said Kateb as if in response to my silent wondering, “is a very,” he considered, “*busy* man.”

We walked past the Quonset hut to a large olive green structure shaped like a circus tent.

“This is the hospital,” said Kateb pulling back a canvas panel.

I ducked into the tent.

It was so dark compared to the brightness of the desert outside, that for a moment I was blind. As I waited for my eyes to acclimate I could hear weeping.

As my sight returned, I saw a very disheveled looking man in a dingy lab coat huffing and puffing his way over to me.

“Who are you?” He said in a thick Scottish brogue.

“I’m Sarah Kane,” I said, “and you must be Dr. Standish?” I held out my hand.

Dr. Standish wiped his large fleshy one on his lab coat and we shook.

“Oh yes, the reporter. To tell the truth,” said the doctor, “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Oh?” I said, “why not?”

“Well, with no interpreter, I didn’t expect you to stay.” He wiped his brow with a paisley handkerchief.

“But I have an interpreter,” I said smiling and gesturing to Kateb. “Kateb has offered to help me.”

“Hrmph. Very well then, let me show you where you’ll sleep.”

The doctor took me out the other side of the hospital and showed me a white dome-shaped tent with the letters UNHCR on the side. It was like a small imitation of the Quonset hut. Inside, a blue tarpaulin was stretched out on the dirt floor, and at the far end there was a cot. That was it.

“I know it’s not much to look at,” said the doctor, “but it’s the best we can offer.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

He told me where the toilets were and where I would take meals, and then he said, “now if you don’t mind, I’ve got a lot of patients.”

“Of, course,” I said, “thank you, doctor.”

The sun was beginning to set, and I still had not got a decent look at the camp, so I put my bag inside my tent and walked further around the hospital tent. It turned out that the hospital and admin building were on a slight rise compared to the rest of the camp, so when I rounded the side of the big tent, I could see the entire camp stretched out in front of me. Row, on row of white tents, all identical, broken only by the occasional cargo container or concrete bunker; an uncountable number sprawling across the desert floor like giant insect larvae.

The next day I met Kateb outside the hospital tent. His thawb was gone and he was wearing track pants and a Star Wars t-shirt.

“This might be a stupid question,” I said, “but do you not normally wear the thawb?”

He laughed. “No,” he said, “I was trying to dress up for the American reporter.”

I laughed. “I like your t-shirt.”

“Thank you,” he said, “It is my favorite movie.”

For the next two days I walked the camp with Kateb. I learned that Kateb’s father had been a linguist, and besides Arabic and English he also spoke French and German.

Over those days together we spoke to dozens of people across the camp.

Kateb translated their stories for me.

This man used to be a professor of biology until his University was caught in an air raid.

This woman and her family were just about to sit down to dinner when they got word of an invasion. They left the food on the table.

This boy was about to take the test to get into medical school. He says he misses his books the most.

This girl lost her mother and now the rest of her family has to watch her constantly so she does not end her own life.

Each person had a different story, but in one way they were all the same. It was the story of what might have been.

“Yes, there are many types here,” Kateb was fond of saying as we walked up one row of dirty white tents and down another, “but now we are all the same.”

At the end of the second day I was getting my meal at the administration building. I ate with the camp staff and aid workers. One small section of the hangar-sized structure was set up like a school cafeteria, with picnic-style tables arranged in rows. The rest of the building was all storage for supplies and food, mostly huge bags of rice and lentils, and drums of cooking oil. There were no refugees eating here. Food was distributed every two weeks on a rotating basis throughout the camp. If the people in the camp wanted anything other than their allotment, they had to pay for it one way or another. The tables were filled with well-intentioned men and women from all over the world, who came here thinking they could make a difference.

I sat down at one of the long tables next to a young woman in a World Vision International t-shirt. She couldn't have been more than twenty, with an open, round face,

and wavy blond hair, the epitome of the all-American do-gooder. I learned that she had been at the camp for three weeks, so far. She told me that she still couldn't get over how bad the conditions were.

"It's hard to stay objective," she said "I feel like we can't possibly do enough."

Which of course is true.

"Did you hear the story about that UNICEF worker?" She said after we had been talking for a while.

"No," I said, "what happened?"

"Well, I didn't know him personally, this was before I got here. But according to what I've heard he got really close with a refugee. Like, really really close."

"What exactly does that mean?" I asked.

"They say—" she put her fork down and glanced around her, before saying to me in a whisper, "they say he got her pregnant."

"Ah," I said.

"Of course, I don't know for sure, but I also heard that he tried to take her back home with him. I guess he made a big deal out of it with the UNHCR, but of course they found out what had happened, and they sent him home."

She fingered a small cross around her neck. "I guess stuff like that happens, right? It's just..." she looked down at her tray of food.

"What is it?" I prompted.

"It's just," she sighed, "sad."

At the end of the third day I was sitting with Kateb at a makeshift café inside of a cargo container. We had been walking the camp all day, it was very hot, and we were both exhausted. The last person we talked to was a man whose office building had been bombed by US troops. He had been through three rounds of facial reconstructive surgery just to be able to breathe normally. His left eye socket had been sewn shut. The last thing he said before we left him was that he wanted me to know that he didn't hate Americans. He just thought their government was very misguided. I couldn't disagree.

As Kateb and I sat on packing crates in that metal box and drank weak tea out of tin cups, I couldn't stop seeing that man's disfigured face.

"Kateb," I said. "I've heard a lot of stories over the last few days. Do you mind if I hear yours?"

He looked at me and then down at the cup of tea in his hands, then he finally reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph. In the photo, he stands in front of a house next to a beautiful dark skinned woman wearing a floral dress and a bright pink headscarf. A young boy who looks to be about six years old stands between them grinning with a bright gap-toothed smile. They stand in front of a blue house, next to a flowering citrus tree. The Kateb in the photo looks out at the camera proudly, one hand resting on the boys shoulder.

"Is this your family?" I asked.

"Yes," said Kateb, "My wife, Abia and my son, Nuri."

"Are they here with you, in the camp?"

"No, they died."

"I'm sorry."

“Thank you.”

He looked silently at the photo for a long while. A breeze blew through the container providing momentary relief from the oppressive heat.

“They had gone to the market,” Kateb said finally. “There was a girl, she had a bomb.” He stopped, held his face in his hands.

“We can stop,” I said, but he looked up at me and shook his head.

“Shortly after, there was an invasion, my brother was killed trying to protect his home and his family. I wanted to stay and fight. I had nothing left. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“But my brother’s wife was left alone with her daughter. I had to live, for their sake. I had to do this for my brother. So we came here. We all know it could be worse, but it is still very bad. We are not prisoners, but where can we go? The worst of it is the boredom. Nothing to do but think, remember, grieve.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Five years.”

The next day Kateb took me to a different part of the camp. To me it looked the same as any other part, but here people greeted Kateb by name and stopped to chat with him in the street.

“Kateb,” I said, “is this your neighborhood?”

We stopped outside a tent and Kateb said, “this is where I live.” He pulled back the tent flap and invited me in.

A woman and a young girl were crouching in the center of the tent laying out a strange assortment of clothing on the floor: a sequined mini skirt, several men's ties, one sock, and a bikini bathing suit top. The woman said something to Kateb and he replied and gestured to me.

"This is Halimah," he said to me, "my sister in law, and my niece Zafirah."

"It's a pleasure," I said, as Kateb translated.

"Can I ask a question?" I said.

Kateb spoke, and Halimah nodded.

"What is this?" I said, indicating the clothing on the floor.

"It is the package of clothing we received from a charity organization," he said.

"Halimah says she will use it to patch the tent."

Halimah showed me a photo of her husband, Kateb's brother. He was a handsome man, wearing a business suit and clutching his lapel as though he were posing for his statue. Zafirah stood protectively beside me as I looked at the photo.

"Zafirah is only seven years old," said Kateb, "this photograph is all she knows of her father."

As we were leaving, Zafirah waved and said "bye-bye," and Halimah said something to Kateb that made him glance at me and chuckle slightly.

"What was that all about," I asked when we had left Halimah and Zafirah alone in the tent.

"She didn't know you would be a woman," said Kateb.

"Does that make her uncomfortable?"

"No."

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“No.”

“Oh. Good.”

At the end of the fourth day Kateb and I were sitting in my tent behind the hospital. I had no furniture so we sat cross-legged on the floor. The sun was going down and the temperature was dropping quickly. I was asking Kateb about his childhood.

“You ask too many questions,” he said.

“Well, what do you want,” I said, “I’m a reporter, it’s my job!”

“Yes, but perhaps I should ask you some questions.”

“You can if you want to,” I said. “You can interview me.”

He laughed.

“Here,” I said, handing him my notebook “you can even take notes.”

He took my notebook and pen and flipped to a blank page. He cleared his throat ostentatiously.

“Question number one: Where do you live?”

“Tribeca.”

“What is Tribeca?”

“It’s a neighborhood in New York City.”

He wrote in the notebook.

“You were born there?”

“No, I was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska.”

“What profession did your father have?”

“He was a mailman.”

“A male man?”

“He was a postal worker, he delivered the mail.”

“Ah. Why did you leave Lincoln Nebraska?”

I laughed, “You’ve obviously never been to Nebraska.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I wanted to be in a more interesting place. I left for college when I was eighteen and just never moved back.”

He scribbled quickly in the notebook.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

“I am writing that Nebraska is a very boring place.”

I laughed.

“Did you go to university in Tribeca?”

“No, I went to college in DC. That’s the District of Columbia.”

“That is where your government sits?”

“That’s right.”

He paused and looked at his notes.

“Do you have a husband?”

“No.”

“A lover?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s hard to maintain a relationship with the type of work that I do. I have to travel a lot.”

“To go to places like this.”

“Yes.”

“Have you been to other camps?”

“No, this is the first.”

“Will you go to others after this?”

“I might.”

“And meet other people like me.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever meet anyone else like you. You’re very unique, Kateb.”

He closed the notebook and looked at me.

“No. I’m not. I am not unique. That is just an American fantasy that everyone is unique. No one is unique, especially not here.” He threw my notebook down on the cot and walked out. I picked it up and stared at what he had written in lovely scrolling script, but it didn’t tell me anything.

At night the desert becomes a totally different place. The sky is so huge and the stars so bright, it’s as if the world were turned upside down and you’re hanging from the sky looking down on a twinkling city. When I was a child I would lie outside at night, in the summer, and stare up at the sky. I could lose myself in the sky, like I was falling into a bottomless abyss. It was a feeling both frightening and freeing. I always imagined that that’s what falling in love should feel like, that I should get that same feeling when looking into the eyes of my beloved. But maybe that was just a load of romantic bullshit,

another American fantasy. I had never felt that with any of my relationships. Maybe love like that didn't really exist.

The next day I was surprised to see Kateb waiting for me in our usual meeting spot.

"I didn't expect to see you today," I said.

He shrugged, "I want to apologize," he said. "I should not have yelled as I did yesterday."

"You don't need to apologize," I said putting my hand on his arm "I probably am a deluded American, but that's why I'm glad I've met you. I'd love it if you could put me in my place more often."

"You leave tomorrow," Kateb said.

"Yes."

"Then there is not much more time for that."

I looked out over the rows of tents to the mountains beyond. There was a thick haze over everything.

"You could come to America," I said.

He laughed, "that is another very good fantasy."

"I'm serious," I said. "I know it's difficult, but it is possible to get a visa."

"So they say. I have known many people who have tried, but no one who has succeeded."

"Surely you must know of some people who have left since you've been here."

He looked away from me, towards the horizon.

“Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi Raaji'oon,” he said.

“Do you mean they died?”

“Yes. Many have escaped this way. Many.”

“I can't just leave you here to die,” I said.

“Why not? Am I so different than any other miserable person here? Even if I did leave, I couldn't leave Halimah and Zafirah. I can't just leave my family, and what gives me the right to go when there are so many more deserving people here? You need to go. Go back where you came from. It is your place. Tell the world about us, do that, for my sake, for everyone's sake. Tell about us, but live your life. Leave me to live mine.”

“I won't stop trying to help you,” I said.

I was aware of how I sounded, the deluded American again, but it was the only way I knew how to cope with the situation. I was sick of the way people in the camp seemed to treat human conflict like some sort of natural disaster, like there was nothing to be done but wait. I had to do something.

So I went.

I stood alone. I watched a small cloud of dust become a bigger cloud of dust and finally transform itself into the army Jeep I was waiting for. I got in the Jeep. There was a corporal sitting next to me, but he was a different man, a different man in the same uniform and the same helmet. I gripped the bottom of my seat and turned to face the desert.

The Needle

“How does it feel?” said the doctor, smiling with benign professional excitement.

“I don’t know,” he bent and straightened his elbow several times and thought that it clicked and whirred very loudly.

“State of the art tech,” said the doctor. “You’re like the Bionic Man now!”

“The what?”

The doctor chuckled mildly, “I guess I’m dating myself with that one.” He looked around as if searching for someone to appreciate his self-deprecating humor, but the large open room was still and quiet.

“Will I be able to wear this in combat?”

“No need to get ahead of yourself,” the doctor said, beginning the process of disconnecting the soldier’s arm.

“You’ll have plenty of time to consider going back to active duty,” he said, casually disconnecting machinery from flesh.

“I’m sure you’re looking forward to spending some quality time with your family.”

The soldier flinched involuntarily. He watched the limb that was not his limb, but the closest thing he had to a right forearm, being dislocated from his body.

“Listen, Doc, is there anything else you can give me for the pain? These pills you gave me aren’t really cutting it.”

The doctor hummed clinically, “that’s a perfectly normal reaction and regular pain killers won’t necessarily have much of an effect, but for now I can give you something that might help you relax.”

“Yeah, thanks, Doc,” the soldier watched the needle pierce his vein.

The doctor left.

The soldier lay back, waiting. He stared up at the ceiling, a maze of partially exposed ductwork and sound baffling.

“Oy, didn’t you hear?” The man in the next bed spoke with a thick accent.

“Hear what?”

“They’re drawing up the armistice papers right now. There won’t be a war to go back to.”

“No, I didn’t hear,” said the soldier, and he tried to imagine peace, but it was too ephemeral of a thing to comprehend, so he tried instead to imagine going home, but that proved to be equally amorphous, so he lay back against his antiseptic pillow and continued to wait.

“Where were you, Mate?” The man said.

“Hubei,” said the soldier.

“I was stationed in Yunnan for five months. Until this,” and he laughed.

The soldier turned to look at the man. He was propped on one elbow, unruly blond hair, several days growth of beard, crooked smile, and a visible absence where his blanket lay flat against the bed.

“Are you from Australia?” asked the soldier.

He was beginning to feel the effects of the injection.

The man laughed, “I’m not *from* Australia. You’re *from* the U.S. of A.”

“What?”

“That must have been some powerful shit the doc gave you, Mate. We’re *in* Australia!”

In those first days, hours, minutes, when he was slowly working his way back to awareness, he took the small hesitant steps of someone very old, someone who having come back into wakefulness in a sterile, unwelcoming hospital, wonders if it is really worth the effort to come back at all. When all he knew was pain, when all he remembered was a deafening blast of light, it hardly seemed likely that the world was worth returning to, but eventually he was able to move beyond that, to progress to the point of conceptualizing beyond his hospital bed. The doctors and the nurses became real people. They wanted him to remember that there was something worth going back to.

They brought him to see a psychiatrist. She wanted him to talk about his life back home.

So he talked.

But what the psychiatrist didn’t know, was that every time he thought about going back home to his wife and daughter, he would feel that strange hit of tingly adrenaline like someone punching him in the face, and when well meaning people like the doctors and the psychiatrists encouraged him to talk about his home and family, he felt a tightening sensation in his chest, like a hand closing around his trachea, and it became difficult to speak.

But he spoke.

About the late summer sun making dappled shadows across the asphalt as he drove down an open mountain road, his wife beside him, smiling and singing along to the radio, her hair blowing uncontrollably across her face.

About the fresh snow, immaculate and glowing in the last rays of weak winter light. The Christmas lights glittering, and haphazardly draped across the porch, spilling down onto the bushes in the front yard.

About the day his daughter was born. Holding her tiny body, so warm, so fragile. How he couldn't stop the tears pouring down his face, hot and salty.

He told all this to the psychiatrist and when he inevitably began to choke, she assumed he was overcome with emotion, and considered it a good sign, but it was anything but emotion. What it really felt like to the soldier was a lack of emotion, an absence, just like he now had an absence where his forearm used to be. He felt like someone had amputated his ability to feel along with his arm. Sometimes he wondered if, in that explosion, something had been blown loose in his brain as well as his body, but unlike his arm, which still ached constantly, there was no phantom emotional ache. There was nothing, which was even more frightening.

He knew of course that the psychiatrist was screening him for PTSD, but he didn't think that's what his problem was. He had seen other soldiers with it, and they would seem completely normal and then, like the flip of a switch, they would explode in a fit of rage. Or they would wake up screaming from nightmares and not know where they were. He didn't have any nightmares. He didn't even have any dreams. He had nothing.

“Things are really coming along great,” said the doctor, studying the readout on his tablet.

The soldier had been spending the last hour touching, gripping, picking things up and putting them down, while the doctor eagerly watched the data.

“It looks like your body is a fast learner. Pretty soon, you won’t even know the difference.”

The soldier lay back in his bed and tried to remember where things had gone wrong. He knew that at one point he had felt like a normal person, he knew this intellectually, but he found it almost impossible to remember what it felt like. He knew this was probably due to the medication, but there was nothing he could do about that. If he didn’t take the meds, it was like his arm was being blown up all over again, like a thousand stab wounds all at once.

It wasn’t like this after his first tour of duty. When he went home the last time he felt almost rabid about spending time with his family, as though he needed to make up for all the time he missed when his daughter was a baby. He would spend hours just watching her play in the garden, or on the living room floor. He needed to indelibly imprint her image on his mind, to make her part of him, so that she would be always with him, always safe. He would stay awake all night long, just so he could watch her sleep, documenting each breath, the way each lock of hair fell on her pillow.

But at some point, he realized there was only one way to make sure his daughter was really safe, and that was to see the war to the end.

When he told his wife he was going back for another tour, she didn't even cry.

The bottle rattled as he struggled to open it with his new arm.

"How many pills do you take a day," said the psychiatrist from behind her desk.

"I don't know, I take them when I need them. I'm in a lot of pain."

The psychiatrist looked over her glasses at the soldier.

"I know you think you're in pain and so I can only assure you that it is primarily a psycho-physiological response. The phantom pain *will* lessen in time."

"I don't have time. I'm going back to service as soon as I learn how to use this damn arm." He tested the mechanical hand, repeatedly opening and making a fist, it whined, seemingly in protest. The psychiatrist sat back in her chair and observed the soldier.

"You know I haven't signed off on you yet, and I have not yet completed my assessment, but as it stands right now, I would strongly recommend some extended R&R at the very least."

The soldier continued to open and close the fist.

"If it comes to that, I don't want to have to make it an order, I would prefer if you made the decision yourself."

The soldier let his arm drop to his side. It made a hollow sound against the chair.

"I'll think about it."

“Cheer up, mate, the war’s over!” said the man in the next bed.

The soldier was sitting on the edge of his bed. He exercised his new arm by working a weight methodically up and down, up and down.

“Aren’t you excited to go back to Kansas?” Said the man.

“I’m from Colorado.”

“Eh, I was close, though, right?”

“Sure.”

The man watched as the soldier continued his exercises.

“They’re pulling all personnel out of Asia, that was part of the agreement, but you Yanks are setting up shop here, you know, somewhere a little closer, to keep an eye on things, just in case.” The man grinned good-naturedly.

The soldier said, without looking up, “I got an e-mail from my wife.”

“That’s great!” Said the man.

The soldier reached beneath his pillow and handed a tablet across to the man.

“No, not great?”

The soldier went back to his exercises while the man read.

“Well, this doesn’t sound so bad, what are you worried about, mate?”

“She’s found someone else.”

“How do you know?” The man looked again at the tablet, scrolling up and down a couple of times.

“I can tell.”

“I don’t know, mate, I’d take it easy if I were you. Maybe you should just ask her.”

“I can’t.”

At night the soldier lay in his bed listening to the sounds of the hospital: the quiet beeping, the man in the next bed snoring lightly, the steady hum of an air conditioner, and the occasional shuffle of footsteps. The entire room was dimmed at night, but it was never quite dark. In the hospital it was never really day and never really night, noon and midnight were separated by only a few lumens. Sometimes the soldier felt like the entire hospital and everyone in it existed in a state of liminality.

When he closed his eyes, he could see moonlight; sharp, blinding, vivid moonlight reflected in a wavering column off the Yangtze River. It seemed so real, far more real than anything in the hospital. He could almost smell the strong watery scent, the night blooming jasmine, the earthy mud of the riverbank. It felt like if he concentrated hard enough, he could will himself back there, back to reality.

“I think you got another e-mail,” said the man in the next bed, “I heard a noise while you were at PT.”

The soldier sat down on the bed, picked up the tablet, and began to read.

“Is it bad?” said the other man.

“You have a choice to make,” said the psychiatrist. “I’m clearing you for active duty, but the army is offering you an honorable discharge with full pension. I highly recommend you take it.”

“I had a dream last night,” said the soldier, “you said to tell you if I had any dreams, so I’m telling you.”

“Yes, that’s good.”

“I dreamt that the whole peace treaty was a hoax, a sham.”

The soldier looked down at his two hands, spread open on his knees, one flesh and bone, one copper and silicone.

“What happened in the dream?”

“I was in a bunker, talking over the radio to a soldier in the US. I was trying to warn him about the treaty, I was trying to tell him, but the connection was bad, and then it was too late. It went silent. I could hear only static, then nothing. I ran outside, and I could see. I knew it was impossible, but I could see it.”

“See what?”

“The mushroom cloud.”

The psychiatrist was silent for a long time.

“You’re not taking the honorable discharge, are you?”

“I can’t go back there.”

“I know.”

Below him, the dry valley stretched out endlessly, a great river coiling through it, ancient and implacable. The clouds, nearly at eye level, cast their shadows on the valley floor. He pulled his coat tighter against the relentless wind. Everything around him was rocky and bare, save for a short scrub of plant life and a bent and weather-beaten tree

tenaciously clinging to the cliff's edge. It had been so long since he had seen forests and green fields he hardly remembered what they were like.

Thoughts of his daughter and her mother came, unwelcomed, into his mind, he heard their voices calling him. If only he hadn't come back, if only he had stayed. But these sorts of thoughts were useless. That was his past. There is no going back.

He circled the rock face until he found a small cave, just enough room to squeeze his body inside. Out of the wind he could hear the whir of his prosthesis. His missing arm still ached. He pulled a small pouch from inside his coat. He took his lighter. The flame licked eagerly. He pushed the needle into his skin and began to dream.

Entanglement

The explosion knocks me to the ground. Dust billows around me, I can't see. My eardrums are ruptured, I can't hear.

Hernandez is standing over me. I think he is yelling "get up, Olivia!" I scramble to my feet, straining to see through the dust. As it clears the grey city comes back into view, and out from behind the cracked ruins I can see something huge and black moving towards us.

"Incoming!" I scream into the com, "fall back!"

I turn but another explosion sends me to the ground. Through the powdery whorls I can just make out the jagged bloody stump where my left arm used to be and I slowly slip into unconsciousness.

The coffee flows in my mouth and down my throat. It's hot and strong and tastes like the best coffee I've ever had, since in a way it is. In a way, it's the only coffee I've ever had. I hold the cup intently since my nervous system is still a bit dodgy.

Eliza sits across from me, elbows on the table, chin resting on her fists. The breeze plays in her hair. She watches me, squinting a little in the bright sunlight. I am squinting too, even behind my dark glasses. All this sunlight is too much for my new eyes. I am wearing one of Eliza's summer dresses. The material is soft and fluttery against my knees, it feels strange on my skin, uncomfortable, alien.

Done with the café, we stroll and Eliza window shops.

Back at her flat the afternoon sunlight bursts through her shutterless windows, raking across the bamboo flooring. Two cats scuffle on the rug. Leaping and tumbling over one another— one black, one white— like a pair of Chinese Acrobats.

“Liza, have you always had cats?”

She looks at me sideways and says, “you’ve been gone too long this time. How about a beer?”

She hands me a pint of good English bitter, cupping my hands in hers and saying “careful now,” as if to a small child. She pulls herself on to the kitchen counter and watches me; her own pint glass nestled between her thighs.

I swallow the beer, it bubbles over my tongue. The hops hit me in the back of the throat sending a shiver down my spine. I sneeze, splashing beer on my feet.

Eliza laughs. She loves to watch me while I try everything over again: food, booze, sex. She says it turns her on to see me overcome by sensation. I can’t help it, when my body is so new. Everything feels different, slightly off, like I’m wearing someone else’s shoes.

One of the cats, the white one, jumps up on the counter next to me. I run my hand over its agile feline shape. I can feel its eager tension, ready to spring. It yawns, exposing glistening, carnivorous teeth.

“Soft, isn’t he?” Says Eliza.

“He’s a killing machine,” I say “like me.”

Eliza takes me downstairs for dinner at the Jumping Electron. I stare stupidly at the sign out front.

“Has this pub always been named that?”

Eliza just rolls her eyes and pulls me inside.

“I feel like I would have remembered that.”

Over bangers and beer, Eliza says “tell me about it.”

“I’d rather not,” I say around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“Is it terrible?” she persists.

“Yes.”

“What’s the worst thing about it?”

“Have I ever told you how stubborn you are?”

“Oui,” she smiles, “many times. Now, tell me.”

“The worst thing about it?” I shrug, “I don’t know, I guess it’s that it’s so goddamn close to home. It is home. Or it could be. Twenty four hours ago, I blasted a hole in the side of St. Michael’s.”

“Oh,” she blinks, “But aren’t you happy to be home, now?”

“Yeah,” I say “of course.”

After dinner we float back up to the loft. I am far drunker than I feel I should be after three beers. I remember being able to handle my liquor.

I hold Eliza around the waist while she whispers unmentionable things in my ear. Everything seems slightly off here, just a little out of phase. I’ve spent so much time over there that now home seems like the wrong place. I feel like maybe that should bother me.

But right now I have more pressing concerns, as Eliza takes me to her bed and watches eagerly as I am yet again overcome by sensation.

I lie in bed with my eyes closed. The first inklings of morning come seeping through the open window, and I am in that place between sleeping and waking where visions come unbidden, like pictures on a screen. Eliza's warm body sleeps next to me and I can feel myself falling back into slumber when suddenly I see a face, it's Hernandez, he's mouthing something. *Get up! We have to move! Get up, Olivia, get up!*

"Hernandez!" I start, fully awake.

"Who's Hernandez?" Eliza mumbles sleepily.

"I have to find him," I say, jumping from bed, tripping myself in the loose bed sheet and falling hard to the floor.

Eliza is sitting up now, looking alarmed.

"I have to find Hernandez," I say, disentangling myself from the bed.

"Right now?" Eliza makes an effort to smooth down her mussed hair, "don't you want some breakfast?"

"No. I just—no. I have to find him. He has something to tell me."

I stumble down the stairs and out into the blinding morning light. The street is congested with people, dogs, bicycles and all manner of other hostiles. I forgot my sunglasses and the sun feels like an icepick in my brain. I try to shield my eyes with my arm.

I turn left down the street and weave my way through the throngs of Sunday shoppers. The pedestrians gabble and chatter around me. I turn a corner around the sharp edge of an old building and I'm back there. I'm back again. The street is silent. I look behind me, there are no carefree shoppers, there is no one, nothing but the monochromatic city, rubble and dust.

I look down at myself, I'm still wearing Eliza's floral sundress, the only stain of color in an otherwise greyscale universe. This is it, I think; I'm finally losing my mind. I stand very still, hoping it will all go away, and behind everything there is a sound, a ragged sibilance, like wind through leaves, but there are no leaves, not here, not ever. I press the heels of my hands roughly into my eyes until my vision dances with color and when I open my eyes everything is back to normal, the people, the trees, the pigeons. The street once again hums with life. And yet, behind it all, I can't be sure, I can feel it more than hear it: the sound.

I find my way back to Eliza's apartment. She is cooking breakfast, wearing nothing but a long t-shirt, her thin brown legs prance easily from stove to refrigerator. As I slip quietly through the door the smell of bacon frying hits me and makes my stomach growl.

"On second thought, maybe I will have that breakfast," I say.

Eliza turns in surprise, spatula in hand.

"Olivia!" she runs to embrace me, "what's wrong with you? Where did you go this morning?"

I extract myself from Eliza's grip and sit wearily at the kitchen table looking up at her.

"I think I need some new clothes," I say.

Eliza eyes me with a combination of suspicion and worry and wraps her arms around my head pressing my face into her chest.

"Your bacon is burning," I manage to say.

"Mon dieu!" she gasps and hurries back to the stove.

"Well?" Eliza says, emerging from the shower, a towel wrapped around her head, the spitting image of a Sultan's harem girl. "Did you find him?"

"What?" I say, trying to find a pair of Eliza's jeans that actually fit me.

"Herrera, or whatever his name is."

I struggle into another pair. "No," I say "not exactly."

"What's going on, Olivia? What was all that this morning?"

"Nothing," I say, "I just had a bad dream."

Eliza walks past me to the closet, grabs a pair of trousers and hands them to me, I put them on, they fit perfectly.

"Some dream," she says.

"Are these my pants?" I say.

We walk along the river, hand in hand. Children run past us, shrieking with glee. The smell of food wafts by occasionally.

“How long are you here for?” Eliza says leaning her head on my shoulder. “How long do I have you for this time?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “it will take a while to fix my,” I pause, “uniform.”

Eliza shudders.

We sit on a bench in the park eating shaved ice and watching people play fetch with their dogs. The ice is painful to my teeth, but the flavor is sweet. Eliza has been quiet for a long time. I nudge her gently.

“I don’t like to think about you,” she says.

I raise an eyebrow.

“I mean when you’re not here. I don’t want to know what is happening to you.”

“Then why in God’s name do you ask so many questions?” I throw my hands out in exasperation, flicking little crystals of pink ice across the grass.

“Because you’re here now,” she says, “you’re here with me, I can see you and I can feel you, but when you’re away... *alors*, you might as well— ”

“Be dead?” I say.

She looks away.

“When I was seven years old, my uncle— he worked on the project, you know.”

I nod.

“Well he told me, when I was only seven, that when I grew up I wouldn’t have a single cell in my body that was the same as when I was seven. It scared me! I thought it would be like dying. My poor uncle, he wanted to amaze me, but all he did was make me afraid to grow up!” She laughed, but I could picture her as that scared little girl.

“But of course,” she continued, “it did not happen suddenly, and as I grew older, I stopped worrying. But I never forgot.”

“For me,” I say slowly, “it is.”

She looks at me, teeth pressed into the soft pink flesh of her lower lip.

“Sudden, I mean. And when I come home... Liza, I’m not even sure I *am* the same person.”

She takes my hand and presses it to her smooth face.

“How I wish you could stay,” she says.

“Do you ever think about your father?” Hernandez asked.

We were on guard duty together. The night was freezing, as nights get over there.

“What about him,” I said tensing up and walking away. He followed me and put his hand on my arm to stop me. I turned to face him, one hand on the butt of my weapon.

“He was a Believer.”

“Yeah, and?”

“He wouldn’t have liked you fighting over here, would he?”

A staccato laugh escaped my lips, “no.”

Wind whistled through a blown out window somewhere. A door gaped open, dangling off it’s hinges and swallowed my torch beam whole.

“What are you getting at,” I said.

He looked at me, with those big brown eyes of his.

“It’s just, don’t you ever wonder if maybe they’re right? I mean about us being here. I can’t really believe there is a God out there with a capital G, not after what we’ve

seen, but sometimes, I just think that maybe we shouldn't be here. Even if the people here already fucked it up, do we really have the right to be fighting our wars in their space?"

"But isn't it better than fighting at home?" I said, playing devil's advocate.

Hernandez looked out into the inky night.

"So they say. They say we're learning from them and not making the same mistakes they did, but we're not, are we? If we were really learning, we wouldn't even be at war in the first place. Even if I don't believe in God, I feel like it's still kind of sacrilegious, like it's disrespectful, like we're dancing on someone's grave."

"We shouldn't be talking about this."

"Who's going to hear us?" He said, stepping closer. I could feel his breath on my face. "No one's out here but us, Liv, just you and me. Who's going to see us?"

Jacob meets me downtown in the early morning. Everything is hushed, still half asleep under a cold blanket of fog.

"I need to see Hernandez," I tell him pointedly as we stand outside in the drizzle, huddled against the side of a building.

"You can see him," he murmurs, sullenly "but there's something you have to understand first."

"What," I say. I have little patience for Jacob's cloak and dagger routine.

He looks at me skeptically from under his dark eyebrows, "there was an issue during censoring." He looks down at his boots, "he doesn't remember."

“What do you mean?” A commuter hurries by on her way to work, head bowed against the mist, I lower my voice, “how much?”

“Everything. Since he was last deployed.”

“That was over a year ago! You’re telling me he just lost over a year of his life to, what, some clerical error? How does that even happen?”

“Calm down Liv,” Jacob rubs his hands together, “it’s not quite that simple.” He takes his hat off and puts it back on, “they’re worried he may be having side effects, from crossing over.”

“Just let me see him.”

Jacob leads me down a long sterile corridor. Men and women wearing lab coats and serious expressions pass by carrying tablets and conversing in hushed tones.

“Well, here we are,” says Jacob, holding open a door.

I see Hernandez in full armor, a crimson cavity in the center of his chest.

The breath catches in my throat.

Hernandez is sitting up in a hospital bed. He is wearing clean white pajamas, a book propped against his raised knee. He looks up at me, and smiles.

“Liv, I didn’t know you were home too!” He stands with an unsteadiness I recognize all too well, and embraces me.

I glance back at Jacob who’s leaning against the doorjamb trying to blend into the woodwork.

“I hear you’re having a bit of a memory problem.”

“That’s what they tell me,” says Hernandez, chuckling. “Hard to believe. You don’t look any older.”

I see his helmeted head bending over me, nothing but grey sky above.

My palms are cold and clammy. I rub them ineffectually on my pant legs.

I try to smile cavalierly, “I’ve been getting plenty of beauty sleep.” I look down at the aseptic linoleum floor. “Hernandez, are you all right?”

Hernandez grins and looks up at Jacob who I assume is still lurking in the doorway.

“Don’t you worry about me, Liv, you know me, I’m a survivor. What about you?”

I look him in the eyes, searching for—something.

“I’m good, Hernandez, fine.”

“And how’s your father?”

I can feel Jacob’s penetrating gaze on the back of my head and it makes my flesh prickle.

“My father?”

Hernandez smiles and nods.

“Well, to tell the truth, he’s not doing so great.” I sit back in my chair and cross my legs.

“That’s too bad,” says Hernandez, “is it his heart?”

“Well that, and, uh, you know, his mind,” I sit forward and knock my own head with an index finger.

“Ah,” says Hernandez. “I understand. You know they have support groups for that sort of thing.”

“Is that so,” I say, “I’ll have to look into that.”

“All right, kids,” says Jacob from behind me. “Playtime’s over, time to go home, Olivia.”

“Liv,” Hernandez says as Jacob is escorting me out the door, “you should go visit him,” and he just holds me with those big brown eyes of his.

“Yeah, Hernandez, I’ll do that.”

Eliza welcomes me back like I’ve been gone for days. She’s just had the kettle on, and we sit at the table with mugs of tea in front of us.

“How was it?” Eliza asks looking concerned. The black cat jumps up on her lap.

“It was... strange. They say there was a problem with the censoring.”

“But he remembers you.” It’s not really a question

“Only since the last tour,” I say taking a drink of tea and burning my mouth.

“Oh. What did he say?” She strokes the cat absently. I look at her and shake my head.

“He asked me about my father.”

She looks puzzled.

“But you said it was just over a year. Your father died...”

“Three years ago.”

That night Eliza has some friends over. I’ve never met any of them. I think she wants to show me off, to prove I actually exist. She asks me if I want to invite anyone else, anyone we used to know, but I say I’d rather not. She hasn’t seen any of them in a

long time. She says she stopped going to the same places after I left because it made her miss me too much.

“Is that so bad?” I say peevishly, but she just kisses me and shakes her head, like I couldn’t possibly understand. Maybe I can’t. I can’t stop thinking about Hernandez, and what he said in that hospital. Being guest of honor at a posh cocktail party is the last thing I want to do. But I do it for Eliza.

“Voila!” She says as she shoves a black cocktail dress and a tube of lipstick at me.

“Ah, lipstick for the pig?” I say.

“Oh shush,” she scolds me, “you’re gorgeous,” but she makes me put the lipstick on all the same.

It’s a small crowd, but it still feels oppressive to me. The dress is too short on me and I am paranoid about smearing my lipstick. Eliza’s friends are all chic and impeccable, just like she is, I feel gauche in comparison. I spend most of the night watching them and trying to figure out what Eliza’s life is like while I am gone. She ushers me around like a visiting dignitary, while her friends coo and swoon and ask me inane questions about the war.

“What’s it *like*? I’m sure I couldn’t *possibly* imagine?”

“*Darling*, don’t tell me you have a favorite way to die!”

“*The war*? Who are we fighting again? I simply *can’t* keep track, but I do hope we’re winning! Ha ha!”

Just when I think I can’t possibly stand another idiotic question Eliza steers me towards a tall, immaculately dressed man talking to the refrigerator.

“Olivia, this is Marcel.” The refrigerator says something in reply and produces a cold glass of champagne.

“Marcel works on the Project, too. Do you know each other?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had the pleasure,” says Marcel in a smooth baritone.

“I’m afraid Eliza thinks too much of me,” I say, shooting her a look. “I don’t work *on* the Project, I work *for* the Project.”

“Well, you never know,” says Eliza, “Marcel is working on something very top secret. He won’t tell us anything about it,” she says coyly, touching his arm.

“Yes. Well. I’m sure he has almost no contact with grunts like me.” Eliza shoots me a reproving look.

“That’s actually not true,” says Marcel, “I often work quite closely with— soldier— such as yourself.”

Eliza spots someone else across the room and darts away, leaving me alone with Marcel.

“Tell me, Olivia,” He orders up another flute of champagne and hands it to me, “how are you acclimating back to civilian life?”

“Oh,” I take a sip of champagne, “you know how it is, still a little rough around the edges.”

“Actually I don’t. I’ve never crossed over, myself,” he looks intently at me through clear grey eyes. Is he envious of me? Maybe some desk jockey or lab coat that wishes he were out on the front lines.

“Well, there’s really not much to it,” I say, “from my point of view, at least.”

“I see, and you’ve never had any problems with neuroshock, or experienced any other side affects?” Must be a lab coat.

I shrug and try to smile, “just lucky, I guess.”

I lie in bed, trying to process the evening’s events. Lulled by the late night city sounds floating through the window, sleep slowly creeps in from the corners of the room, and I’m there again.

“Olivia,” he says, “where the fuck have you been?”

“I’ve been...” I falter, looking down at my body. *Where’s my armor?*

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Hernandez grabs me by the shoulders and wraps me in a strong bear hug. Digging my unprotected flesh into his hard exoskeleton, my head knocking against his helmet.

“What’s going on, Hernandez,” I struggle to say.

“Right,” he says, releasing me and falling back into a crouch behind a pile of rubble. “We’ve got the majority of the enemy line pushed back to about three clicks southwest of here, and we’ve got B Team ready for a strike in Gama quadrant as soon you give the order.” He shows me on his com-pad “We’ve also got a bogie coming in from the east, it’s been moving slowly, so we’ve just been keeping an eye on it, but it looks big, whatever it is,” he stops, puts his com-pad away. “And then of course, there’s the sound.”

“What sound,” I say, instinctively bringing my hands to my ears, but I can already hear it: the shivering murmur.

“You know,” says Hernandez, cocking his head at me. Now he’s reclining back on the pile of rubble like it’s a sand dune at the beach, elbow propped jauntily on his knee. “I know you’ve heard it.”

They figured out how to cross over the year I was born. Nine years later they actually did it. My father thought it meant the end, a rupture, a rift, a breaking open, or a collision, a cataclysm, something.

So I waited with him huddled in a dark and fetid living room, while he prayed under his breath, a steady bitter chant.

He and others like him had stockpiled for months, years, thinking they could survive. I have never understood how they could believe what they believed and still think they could survive. But that, I suppose, is faith.

It takes me a long time to find the grave. The sky is grey and the air still and hazy. The cemetery feels as ascetic as the veterans hospital. Autonomous gardeners mindlessly mow and prune. It has been several years since I was last here, but still, I feel like it’s different from what I remember. I have a clear memory of standing on the crest of a gentle hill on a cold, clear November day. Eliza huddled beside me against the biting wind, the Believers chanting psalms in whispered voices.

But when I finally find the grave, it’s in a small valley, a hollow, really. I shake my head against the memory. In the distance I can see an Islamic funeral party saying Janazah. My father’s grave is simple and austere, the way he wanted it. A clean marble

slab with the precise laser etched lettering of his name and the inscription: *O Lord, how diverse are Your mechanisms. In wisdom You have created them all: the multiverse is full of Your treasures.*

There are no pictures of weeping angels. No “loving husband and father.” No “he will be missed.” At least it’s honest.

I stand for a long time. Surveying the scene. The tranquil autonomous behaviors, the Muslims finishing up their ceremony, my father’s grave at my feet. I know there’s something strange going on. I have this feeling that the answer will come to me if I let it. Like it’s right in front of me, but I can’t see it. Like it’s right on the tip of my tongue. I’m just about to give up and leave, when I see it.

This is the spot.

This is where the bogie was spotted in my dream. Was that a dream? Is this a cemetery over there? I can’t remember. Too many things tumble through my mind all at once.

And then I can hear it. In the background again, like a subtle vibration in the back of my skull. Not a sound, exactly, but I know what it is.

I meet up with Jacob again, this time at a pub downtown called Bohr’s Folly. He’s waiting for me at the end of the bar, a fancy martini in front of him.

“Isn’t it a little early for that?” I say, sitting down and ordering a beer. He glances at the drink.

“It’s been a rough day,” he says.

“How so?”

“Oh, you know, very hectic, lots of new deployments.”

“Poor bastards.”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, they’ve had the array running all day, the damn thing sure does make a racket.”

“What did you say?”

“The array, it makes a god awful noise when it’s running, shakes you down to your boots,” Jacob rubs his temples.

“A noise?” My head reels, I struggle to keep my thoughts together. Jacob must have interpreted the stupid expression on my face as incomprehension because he says “but then I guess you wouldn’t know that,” he chuckles slightly.

“What’s going on here, Jacob?” I say. The panic is rising in my chest.

“Listen, Liv,” he pauses for a while, thinking, then says “thanks for meeting me,” again, “I don’t want to have to be the one to tell you this. You know how I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” he rubs a hand across his five o’clock shadow.

“Sure,” I say numbly, “what is it?”

“Well, it’s just that Hernandez has taken a turn for the worse,” he takes a deliberate swig of his martini.

“What does that mean?” My throat feels constricted.

“They’d like *you* to come in for some tests,” he doesn’t look at me.

“Jacob, tell me the truth,” my voice sounds strange in my ears.

“Now look, Liv, don’t get freaked out, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. They just want to check and make sure that you’re all right, you know, that whatever happened during his censoring process didn’t happen to you too.”

“I’m fine,” I say “I can remember everything.”

“Just to be sure, Liv,” says Jacob, “for me?”

“I need to go back.” I stand up.

“To the hospital?” He looks hopeful.

“No, back there.”

“Now?” says Jacob, looking like he would much rather take me back to the hospital.

“Yes, now,” I say, standing up, “something fucked up is going on and I need to find out what it is.”

“Now look, Liv, take it easy. Why don’t you just come back to the base with me and we can figure this all out.”

“Fuck you, Jacob,” I say, turning away and walking from the bar.

“Liv, wait!” He grabs me by the sleeve and I whirl around. My fist meets him square in the face. Jacob crumples. I turn to leave the bar and I feel a jolt. I’m on the floor. My whole body is numb, but I know the pain is not far away. I feebly try to stand, but I am hit again. Before I pass out, I see Jacob’s dark eyes hovering over me, he is clucking like a mother hen, while blood drips meagerly from his face.

“You shouldn’t have done that Olivia.”

Hernandez and I sit side by side at the top of the hill. There is no grass, just bare dirt and ash, not many of the gravestones are still standing. The sun is rising. Hernandez is speaking.

“She planted a pear tree in the front yard,” he says.

Sunrise and sunset are the only times you ever see color over there.

“That’s nice,” I say, “I bet the kids love it.”

It’s like it’s trying to make up for it by cramming all the other colors you’ve been missing the rest of the time into one insanely beautiful light show.

“You bet they do,” he says, “Millie can’t stop climbing on it, she’s such a little monkey.”

The sun makes its steady and inevitable progress into the sky.

“Eliza got cats,” I say.

“Cats?” Hernandez laughs.

“Yeah, a black one and a white one, when they sleep together it looks like a yin yang sign.”

Hernandez laughs, “next thing you know, it’s you two who’ll be having kids.”

I look at him. The sun is now a full circle, perched on the horizon.

“Do you ever feel weird when you’re back at home?” I say.

“Sure, don’t you?”

“I don’t mean just the usual weird. I mean, sometimes I feel like my soul hasn’t had a chance to catch up yet. Like my body crossed over, but my ghost stayed here.”

He pulls in a long breath, holds it, lets it out.

“Maybe that’s what’s happening.”

I look out over the barren cemetery, now more dead than any cemetery back home has ever been. The corpses below those stones are gone forever, with no one left to remember, but they were the lucky ones. They died before the apocalypse, before we came.

“He used to say we already had one foot in Hell by being over here.”

“You’re not your father, Liv.”

My whole body hurts. I take stock before opening my eyes. I wiggle my fingers, my toes, even the soles of my feet hurt. I open my eyes. I’m lying on top of a hospital bed with all my clothes on.

Jacob comes into the room, and I smile weakly at his black eye.

“You should have just come in when I asked you. You’re making this a lot harder on yourself than it has to be.”

I sit up slowly and drop my feet over the side of the bed.

“Did they do the tests?” I ask.

“Some,” Jacob walks to the window, “they want to do more.”

“What if they’re positive?”

Jacob shrugs, runs his hand through his hair, sighs.

“Jacob, what if they’re positive?”

“Deep censoring probably. It’s just standard operating procedure.”

“How much would I lose?”

He looks down at his shoes, “at least a year, maybe more, but...” he trails off.

“Or I could lose myself?”

“It’s unlikely.”

I look out the window. It’s raining. We are on an upper story and I can look down on the tops of trees, umbrellas, the roofs of other buildings.

“There’s another choice,” I say.

“Don’t be stupid, Liv. You’d never be able to come back.”

“Where is Hernandez?”

Jacob shakes his head, “you really need to focus on your self right now, Liv.”

“I want to see him?”

“Look, Liv, I don’t know what happened over there between you two, but you need to let it go. For your own good, you need to forget it. He has.”

“So he’s made his choice.”

Jacob leaves and Eliza comes into the room, her makeup is smeared, and her hair is tangled, like she’s been sleeping in a chair. I hold her to me and breathe in her scent.

“Have you talked to the doctors?” I ask her.

“Yes. They want to do some tests.”

“More.”

“What?”

“More tests.”

“Ok. They want to do more tests. What will they find?”

“Nothing. I don’t know. Me, maybe.”

“You’re not making any sense,” she starts to cry again.

“It’s ok,” I say, “I love you.”

I lie in bed afterwards staring blankly at the ceiling. I feel empty. I know what they’ll find, they’ll find that there are some things you can’t take away. Some things you can’t erase.

The door opens, I raise my head and laugh. It's Marcel, the well-dressed man from Eliza's party. He's carrying a tablet and wearing a lab coat.

"It's good to see you again, Olivia, I'm sorry it's under these circumstances. Do you want me to call Eliza in?"

I shake my head, "she doesn't need to be here for this."

He pulls something up on his tablet, and assumes a professional air.

"Deep censoring is really a very safe procedure," he says, "you won't *feel* as though you have lost memory. There will be some disorientation at first, but classically that only lasts for an hour or two."

"Marcel, stop. I can't do this."

"I understand how difficult this is, but—"

"No. I've made up my mind. I'm not doing this. Send me back. Tell them to send me back."

"I really think you should take some more time to think about it," he glances towards the door, "are you sure you don't want me to get Eliza?"

I shake my head slowly, "I don't have any more time."

He looks at me intently, appraisingly, then bows his head.

"Marcel?"

"Yes?"

"Make sure she's alright."

Jacob holds me by the arm. The sedative has already begun to take effect, I can feel the world drooping and bleeding out at the edges, but my body feels light, so light. Jacob guides me gently, tenderly, a hand behind my neck, an arm under my legs. He is helping me lay down. I see him say *goodbye, Olivia*. My body feels warm, translucent. I begin to float. Then, somewhere in the distance, I think I can hear it.

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