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Charybdis

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CHARYBDIS

We'd spent eight months walking up and down berms and around shit-filled yards in Iraq swinging AN/PSS-12 mine detectors—known as “twelves” or “piss-twelves”—on top of eighty to a hundred pounds of gear, including M-4s, M-16s, even M-249 SAWS, and the requisite magazines or belts of 5.56mm ammunition. I was an inch shorter, my spinal cartilage having compressed under the weight.

Even so, I missed swinging the piss-twelve around people's yards, hitting the likely spots with a cool efficiency, as if searching for bombs were an Easter egg hunt. I missed digging or telling the grunts to dig when I heard the annoying, squealing tone. I missed finding something heavy wrapped in plastic only a foot or two down, saying, “We got you now, motherfucker” or “I found pay dirt,” and watching the offending haji get zip-cuffed. I think we all missed it—I know Conrad did. He used to whistle “Taps” when he was sure he'd found something. At least I think it was “Taps.” It was hard to tell because I'm slightly tone-deaf from shooting shoulder-fired rockets, and Conrad's whistling sounded like wind coming through an old screen door. If it wasn't “Taps,” it was a dirge for the damned. Either way, we all loved those moments of discovery. Those little instants of validation made Iraq an okay place for us, so much that there were only two consistent downsides: no women and no booze.

Of course there were plenty of both when we came home that August. The handful who still had girlfriends or wives met them at our Navy/Marine Corps Reserve Drill Center, where the CO released us to the mob of waiting families and friends. It was well past midnight when we arrived and filed off the bus, each of us in our most presentable pair of desert cammies. It was late summer in Virginia, so it was warm when we formed up in the familiar parking lot—probably the same temperature as Iraq at night.

Still, it felt off—wrong. We were standing in formation in desert camouflage between red-brick buildings surrounded by green trees and grass. I felt exposed, vulnerable, the way you feel after a sniper's first shot, before you can pinpoint his location.

We could see the lights in the gym through the tall windows that ran along its side. In each, figures crammed against the glass, fighting for a glimpse

of us, the way barking dogs jump against screen doors. It tripped my Spidey sense, and I felt like the illusion of safety was poised to pop. But I didn't say anything. No one did. We just stood there, loosely huddled in the parking lot as if preparing for an imminent attack. I remember looking at Conrad, locking eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, and thinking, *This nice peaceful moment is about to get overrun*. He nodded.

Mack, Conrad, and I were three of the last to climb the long ramp into the gym. We lingered at the bottom, looking up at the opening under the industrial roll-up door. All we could see was the bright light and the throngs of elated people swarming and swirling inside.

Mack turned and broke our silence. "It's like we're rock stars in some weird paradigm where it's cool to be swooned over by our lame-ass families." He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. "All right, let's go meet those groupies." We grudgingly trudged up the ramp and into the gym, Mack leading and Conrad trailing. I lost track of them when my family descended on and surrounded me, giddily assaulting my tense shoulders with hugs and proclamations of joy.

We were quickly whisked away by our loved ones, taken back to hotel rooms, apartments, and homes, where we slept in the following morning. The awkward phone calls started that next afternoon.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, you?"

"Nothing."

Silence.

"So..."

The calls weren't awkward for us, but they were for our families. We didn't know what to do, and our families didn't know what to do with us. At first, we filled the hours as we had in Iraq. We went to the gym. We checked our e-mail. Some read. Some contemplated suicide—not if, not why. Just how. We watched movies.

We killed time.

We woke up each morning and, for a few terrifying moments, searched frantically for rifles we no longer carried, feeling awkward, uneven, and incomplete without them. We pretended like we were searching for something else—anything else—and tried to adapt to carrying cell phones instead.

Within a week, we reverted to completely ditching wives, fiancées, and girlfriends to play violent video games, fourteen hours on end, in blacked-

out rooms with handles of whiskey and vodka and gin. We stopped shaving and then started again when no one scolded us. Very few ever really stopped drinking.

After a couple of weeks, though, most started to stumble back into their regular civilian lives. I started working at the cable TV call center and was instantly lost in abject boredom. Mack excitedly went back to school only to decide within a week that he despised college kids. Some, like Conrad, were left searching for jobs. Lowe's didn't think he was qualified to guard a parking lot. Outback Steakhouse said his college degree overqualified him to serve food. Bed Bath & Beyond really needed an inventory manager, but he wasn't what they had in mind. So, he spent half of his time either drunk or searching for a job and the other half walking long distances—miles upon miles—grinding along as we had when we'd carried all that weight. He said it started one day when he walked seven miles on the trail out to Cascade Point, past the football stadium and the bridge over Irish Creek. When he got there, he looked around for a moment, turned, and walked seven miles back—simple as that. It started as something to ease the boredom, but it began to consume more and more of his time.

24

He told us about it over drinks at Murphy's Pub, where Conrad, Mack, and I met on Mondays, played darts, and drank until the bartender switched on the lights and killed the music. Others sometimes joined us, but nothing regular.

Mack complained about immature college kids, calling them “spoiled, adolescent fuck-sticks living in a no-consequence, paid-for-by-Daddy world.” I tried desperately to drown my disgust after ten-hour days of empathizing with irate cable subscribers who treated missing an episode of *Glee* as the end of the world. Conrad, still wearing his combat boots every day, told us about his walks matter-of-factly.

“Killing time,” Mack called over his shoulder between darts. “Doing what’s natural.”

But Conrad said it felt weird and unnatural without the weight. So he loaded a backpack with two dumbbells, twenty-five pounds each, and started carrying it on walks. He felt a little better, especially since he'd gotten a part-time gig restocking a bookstore two days a week after the weekly shipment. He lugged books all day and walked for hours after, long into the nights. On his days off, when not looking for another job, he walked all day—ten, twelve, fourteen hours at a time—just like over there.

At some point, he added weight by lining the backpack with a trash bag and filling it with sand, shaking it so he could fit a little more. Then he attached a collapsible shovel to the side of the pack one Friday and didn't return until Tuesday. He said he'd just kept walking and eating what little garbage he'd been able to fit in his pockets. At night, he dug shallow holes and slept off the trail so he could observe traffic without being seen. Conrad hadn't showered in days, but I could tell he'd been bathing with baby wipes and shaving at night to avoid razor burn, the way we had during the Pipeline Sensus Sweep, unofficially, yet appropriately, dubbed "Operation Mad Max."

We asked him what he was doing, and he said he'd been patrolling and manning observation posts. He told us he'd be going out again soon because there were some suspicious-looking places that needed to be checked.

Mack chuckled, clinked Conrad's beer glass against his own, and said, "Keepin' us safe, point man. Keep keepin' us safe."

Conrad did just that. He went to Walmart and bought a cheap metal detector called "The Scavenger." It was pitifully subpar to our military-grade piss-twelves, but after learning the tricks, he could efficiently interrogate a metal signature and locate its center. He started using The Scavenger on his patrols, and thus his patrols became sweeps. He walked up and down the public trail with big and small backyards on either side of him and looked for visual indicators—clues like loose or freshly dug dirt, stakes, ribbons, mounds, plastic, wires, ant trails, or initiating systems. When he saw something, he climbed over the fence or stepped through the gate to perform a hasty sweep. Occasionally someone came out, yelled at him, and asked what the hell he was doing. He claimed to respond with a firm, "*Is-koot! Is-koot!*" or an "*Im-che!*" Mostly the yards were clear, but every now and then he'd find an old jar of cash or an abandoned water pipe.

The first time he found a gun, it was night, and he called in for support. The police responded to the strange, anonymous tip, promptly surprising the homeowner in bed with his wife. As it turned out, the gun was unregistered, had blood on the barrel, and the man got hauled off for questioning. Afterward, Conrad came out of the tree line and presented the man's angry wife with a small bag of rice, just like we had done in Iraq. He asked, "*Wain ali baba?*" Confused and angry, she shouted and waved her arms frantically. Conrad talked slower, over-pronouncing each syllable in his pidgin Arabic, but she didn't understand. Instead, she continued shouting and making

angry, threatening gestures. He commanded “*Irfa-eedake*,” but she stormed off into her home.

Conrad didn’t have to explain letting her go, because he couldn’t enter and clear the house alone. We nodded over our beers in understanding; women simply were not arrested in this war. Per our SOP, he’d left, climbing back over the fence and continuing down the trail until he found a good spot for an OP.

After a month or so, Conrad started going out for weeks at a time, sweeping the creeks and canals and trails around town. Sometimes he slept during daylight, and more often than not he’d sleep only a couple of hours per day, for a week at a time. But he continued reporting finds and calling for support when he hit “pay dirt.” Once, he found fertilizer and gasoline in a shed and reported bomb-making materials in a garage with LARRY’S LANDSCAPING painted on the side. Larry was detained for questioning while his wife and child pleaded and cried. Conrad said he slept easier, having prevented an attack on a convoy or foot patrol. He’d left a bag of rice on their doorstep.

26

He kept sweeping, occasionally finding something in a house or a yard. Hunched over his beer, he said the hardest places to sweep were where children played, because they purposely littered the ground with all kinds of debris, rendering metal detectors useless. Instead, he visually inspected before manually probing with a knife or simply digging until satisfied all was clear.

In October, our platoon had to resume drilling with the rest of the company one weekend a month and reported for muster at 1600 on a Friday. Conrad did not report for muster. Mack and I had had beers with him two weeks prior but had been unable to get him to answer his phone since. The CO sent Mack and me to Conrad’s apartment to find him, and Mack picked the lock when no one answered.

Conrad’s apartment was exactly like our hooch in Habbaniyah: the walls decorated with crookedly taped-up pictures of girls from *Maxim* and *Playboy*, the windows sandbagged and boarded up, and the AC on full blast. The bed was even handmade from scrap two-by-fours, two-by-sixes, and plywood, complete with a tarp curtain. It was like being jerked backward five months and eight thousand miles.

“Fucker even has a jack-shack,” Mack said as he pulled the curtain aside to reveal a bare, ratty mattress. “Gonna go out on a limb here and say he hasn’t been laid lately.”

Conrad was living out of a cheap, black plastic trunk and a sea bag, both shoved under the bed. We found a box in the trunk with his wallet, iPod, and powered-down cell phone. The wallet was missing only his military ID card, and his cell phone hadn’t registered a call in over a month. Mack showed me the empty window in the wallet where the ID belonged.

“He sanitized?” I asked.

Mack nodded and responded, “Houston, we have a serious fucking problem.”

When we returned to the drill center, our CO asked if Conrad was home. Mack responded simply, “No, sir. He’s *gone*.” The CO sighed grudgingly and marked him down as Unauthorized Absent while I pretended to file a U.A. Contact Sheet.

Unbeknownst to us at the time, Conrad was still reporting finds and possible finds, and the police had started looking for him. The problem was that they didn’t know who or what to look for. They ran circles around town searching, but it was aimless and fruitless. At first the police wanted to send him to the psych ward. People were complaining about holes in their yards and occasional break-ins. Later, they needed him as a witness because he’d found a dead body in Oscar Quincey’s yard before simply leaving it upon discovering that he’d detected a watch, not a weapon. The next day, Old Man Quincey’s heart gave out from the panic and strain of reburying the body.

A week later, Conrad found a refrigerator in the Gullys’ backyard, buried so that it opened upward. It was filled with rifles and ammunition from the early 1960s and three KKK uniforms. Since the Gullys were black and in their late twenties—the wife six months pregnant with their first child—the police concluded that previous residents were probably responsible and sent a clerk over to the county courthouse to look through property records.

In early November, Conrad reported a family as bomb-makers when he found their unmarked pet cemetery. On the 911 recording, he claimed they were planning to use carcasses to hide bombs. It was on the statewide news and everything. The video showed a six-year-old girl crying at the sight of the family dog’s rotting corpse. It was lying in the middle of the yard, where it had been drug by its collar and left with maggots crawling out of the empty eye sockets. The dog’s name was Cookie.

It was mid-December when the police figured out who Conrad was. A rookie cop—an Army veteran—read the reports and recognized that the eight-digit numbers Conrad recited were military grid coordinates and that the reports were modified nine-lines for reporting wounded and IEDs. Somehow they kept the search quiet before finally piecing together that their target was military or ex-military and coming to see us. By that time, we hadn't seen Conrad for months, and we offered to help.

It started as a ploy to lure him out. We play-acted like it was Iraq, since Conrad was acting like it was Iraq. The company CO called up our platoon and ordered us simply to find him. We spent a week aimlessly walking around town in our cammies, flaks, and Kevlars, lugging our weapons and piss-twelves. We lazily mock-patrolled a few hours a day in disorganized tactical columns on trails and through open fields.

28

For a week, we awkwardly stumbled around remote parts of town with orange blank-firing adaptors affixed to the barrels of unloaded rifles. We answered texts and checked football scores on smartphones during halts and made a minimal effort not to be too obvious about it. Simmons listened to his iPod in one ear, singing and humming along under his breath.

The entire week, all we found was an old ranger grave he'd dug and slept in.

After that, we got serious. We stopped half-assing and made the ruse real. The rest of the company was activated. They brought tactical vehicles, crew-served weapons, and radios filled with crypto. The works. We started using proper radio etiquette and call signs. We even code-named major roads alphabetically after universities with prominent football teams and started enforcing light and noise discipline after sunset.

All non-military electronics disappeared. Incoming calls from girlfriends and wives suddenly went straight to voice mail. The CO even gave the order to ditch the BFAs on the muzzles of our rifles, originally intended to impart comfort to the citizens. We were then ordered to insert magazines in our rifles.

"We're not in Kansas anymore," Mack offered as the metallic clicks of 126 M-16 and M-4 assault rifles accepting thirty-round magazines rustled through the assembly area. "Look out Oz—there ain't no cowardly lions on this yellow brick road."

I bought cigarettes and a lighter. Several cut the fingers off their gloves and rolled their sleeves up to the middle of their forearms. Most un-bloused their boots, and a few attached watches to their flaks. We all started carrying extra, unmarked liter bottles of water in dump pouches.

We're back, I thought as we settled into everything simple and familiar.

After two days of planning and rehearsing and a full morning of mission briefing, we mounted up in Humvees with turret gunners and began a coordinated sweep through town. First Platoon started in the northwest corner and swept southeast towards the park. Second and Third Platoons spread out along the northern edge of town and swept directly south to the park. Headquarters set up an ambush site at the park and waited. We pushed nearly twenty hours at a time, resting for a few hours every night in two-hour shifts.

We chewed and dipped instant coffee grounds to stay awake and alert.

Where the town had casually regarded us as a strange breed of tourist during the first week, it treated us with the mixed curiosity and fear reserved for dangerous wildlife after we stepped off that morning.

The sweep through the university was the worst, slowing progress to a literal crawl. It took all of Second Platoon and half of First two full days. We performed cordon-knocks on every building on campus while the college kids stood nearby in awe, snapping pictures with smartphones. We tried to scatter them, but they swarmed like gnats and mosquitoes, continually circling back around. I'd never felt so on edge in my entire life. With tall buildings and countless windows in every direction, the place was a sniper's wet dream. Even with the masses of people swirling around, we were still totally exposed out in the open.

Before we entered the campus, we had gone firm in the parking garage, refusing to proceed until we could scrounge up enough radios for almost everyone in the platoon to have one visible on their flak jacket. Only the squad leaders and above actually had batteries, but communication wasn't the point. It was a shell game we'd played in Saqlawhiya to hide the chain of command when there'd been a high sniper threat. It had worked then, so we decided to play the game again.

The radios eased our tension a little, but we sweated our time in those college courtyards more than we had in the two-level shantytown of Saqlawhiya. When we finally passed the stadium just after sunset on the second day, we all breathed a sigh of relief. The thousands of watchful eyes

had borne down like so many pounds and worn us thin, in ways no civilian could see or understand.

Later, a lone bag of trash left out too late for the sanitation crew prompted a hasty search of an affluent home. The entire rear of the house was wrapped in floor-to-ceiling glass, and when Mack walked up and reported the house as cleared, I was looking out over the perfectly manicured backyard sloping up a hill to a thick tree line that wrapped 180 degrees around the back of the house. Standing in filthy boots on a polished hardwood floor with a thirty-year-old housewife's irate protests echoing from the entryway, I flatly commented, "We shouldn't be here. It's a tactical nightmare."

"That, kemosabe, is the nature of being the bait," Mack responded.

As we exited, the housewife, a petite blonde, grabbed my sleeve with one hand, pointed up at my face with the other, and started yelling at me. Smirking, I pulled my sleeve from her grasp and continued out the front door. She fell instantly silent, and Mack, one step behind, cheerily proclaimed, "Don't worry, lady, we're here for *you*," chuckling as he passed.

30 After bounding to the curb, I turned back and kneeled to cover Mack's movement. The lady was standing in the doorway across her pristine front lawn, watching our withdrawal, mouth open and eyes wide, blinking rapidly. When Mack trotted past, he remarked, "Same shit, prettier women."

Ultimately, it took us nine days to inch through every neighborhood, but we never found Conrad. Either we missed him or he sensed the trap, dug in somewhere, and laid low.

With the sweep complete, we started patrolling. We knew he was around, but we couldn't pin him down to bring back. Early on after the initial sweep, Mack had the idea to start a rumor that battalion was sending a platoon of volunteers to Afghanistan. "Be really vocal about it—make sure he hears. I'll bet you he'll walk right up to join."

So we did. We even picked a random grunt battalion to support and made it part of the rumor. As expected, it spread through the company at a speed Mack called "Mach Jesus." Within three hours, we had seventy-six volunteers for thirty-three slots, but still no sign of Conrad. A list actually started. Someone had written, "No-Shit Deployment Volunteer List" at the top of the page. I couldn't figure out if "No-Shit" meant "for real" because battalion really wanted a platoon, or if it was just some lance corporal being a smart-ass. On the off chance it was real, I put my name on the top line, which had

been left blank intentionally, and passed it on. The company staff took the ruse so far as to organize the volunteers into a platoon on paper, assigning team leaders and squad leaders and such. I was given third squad.

We continued sweeping and searching for another two weeks until the battalion CO came down from DC and, after one sneering look around, called it off. But before leaving, he overheard a couple of PFCs talking about how excited they were about the deployment and angrily called division to find out why Marines from one of his companies were getting deployed without his knowledge. I don't know how that conversation went, but what matters is that division found out they had a platoon of volunteers and a week later issued orders for Afghanistan in support of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment.

We were so happy that we threw a party in Conrad's honor. We even dressed a mannequin in some of his old cammies and spent the night toasting and taking drunken pictures of each other with it. None of our girlfriends, fiancées, or wives seemed to understand and were generally outraged by our joy and our volunteering. There was a mass dumping, which left ninety-five percent of us single before reporting. On the plane, we all laughed until it hurt when Mack summed up our collective feelings: "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke."

31

Five months later, we were in Helmand Province, sweeping for IEDs and weapons caches. We'd been out for at least three weeks—so long that even the young, naive, "moto-tard" officers had stopped caring if we shaved. Doug and Russell had both been blown to pieces but had somehow survived. Roger had been shot through the shoulder. Still, no one had a damn clue where Conrad was.

When he came up in conversation one night, Mack swallowed the last bite of his beef ravioli MRE and said flatly, "He's a fucking magician. Disappeared himself, then disappeared us when we went looking."

We got lucky a lot in the heavily mined fields of Helmand, where the Taliban planted IEDs with such low metallic content that our piss-twelves were useless. Often, when the piss-twelve didn't register anything, there would be some visual clue marking the spot—a rock stacked strangely on a stump, a ribbon, loose dirt. We'd see it, check it out, and find a 155mm artillery round wired to a pressure plate one of us had narrowly missed stepping on or were kneeling right next to. Mack said it was Conrad keeping us safe, our point

man sweeping ahead of us. I don't think he truly believed it, and I don't know if I did. But it doesn't matter—that was never the point.

Even today, years later, I still check the police blotters for evidence of Conrad. Every now and then, I see something odd or unexplained I think must be him. Sometimes I even go to look for evidence, but I never find much. We had the same problem during the sweep: it always felt like he was nearby, but of course he wasn't. You have to understand: he's one of the best. He didn't want to be brought back, even by us. And I can't say I blame him.