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## The Chaff

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## *The Chaff*

*After incidents described by Brian Castner and Adrian Bonenberger*

**W**e called them Psycho Tuesdays. That was the day we were issued mefloquine hydrochloride to ward off malaria. By Friday, the pills' effects would diminish enough for life to return more or less to normal—for a combat zone—but early in the week it was a shit show. About a third of us, including Lieutenant Axelspoke, our platoon leader, claimed to experience no side effects at all, but the rest of the guys exhibited a variety of symptoms. For Private Crump, it was sleepwalking; Aguirre the medic talked too fast; Specialist Maupin complained of his ears ringing loudly and incessantly; and Krupa forgot vital details like tactical radio frequencies or his twin daughters' birthday. Though, truthfully, it was hard to say if Krupa's memory loss was due to the mefloquine or a fondness for huffing Dust-Off.

As for me, the malaria pills transformed my dreams into the most intense I've ever had. I looked forward to them, because as much as they were vivid and long-lasting, they were seldom upsetting. Lucid and sort of banal, they tended to take the form of my going back and replaying the previous day's tasks with a memory of how things had turned out in waking life. If one day, for instance, I had pulled a shift as sergeant of the guard and caught a private napping on duty, at night in my dream I would pull the same shift and check the sleepy Joe's guard post more frequently so he would not have the chance to nod off again.

In this way, mefloquine made me feel like I had a second chance at life; I could improve on what I had done, piecemeal, day by day. What gave the uncanny sensation its concreteness was my ability to recall the dreams in great detail the next morning—another odd effect of the drug. I remembered my dreams so well, in fact, that it was sometimes difficult to extricate what I had lived from what I had imagined. Private Crump coined an expression—"Mosquito got your ear, Sarge"—which he would use to discreetly warn me whenever I had referred to dream events as if they were real.

I bring up mefloquine to explain how I embarrassed myself one day during the summer of 2003. It was a weird time, after the invasion ended but before the insurgency really began. No one quite knew whether

the war would last a few more months or forever. At least one thing, however, was certain: once per week, every week, Comanche Company (my company) held a mandatory senior leader meeting to discuss supply issues, staffing, morale, the mission—whatever we wanted to bring up with the commander.

The mix-up happened during one such meeting. I was making a point about a disillusioned sense of complacency that I believed was eating away at our combat effectiveness. To illustrate, I mentioned an Iraqi Army tank, a T-72 that my platoon had found abandoned in a wheat field near Route Predators, which was our code name for the major highway running through our sector.

“That tank is exactly what I’m talking about,” I said, addressing my comment to Captain Rogers, our company commander and resident Team Army triathlete. “It was right under our noses this whole time, but we just now found it. Which goes to show, sir, with respect, we don’t know nearly as much about our sector as we like to think. We need to get out there and really patrol; engage the populace. We need more human intel sources. We need more interpreters—”

“What tank in what field?” Captain Rogers frowned and looked out over the command post at his other platoon sergeants and lieutenants, who refused to meet his gaze and instead stared down at their little green leaders’ notebooks where they jotted his most recent notions about how to improve Mosul’s police force. “How am I just now hearing about a tank? Someone want to fill me in?” Rogers’s eyes landed bemusedly on me. “Wanna tell me what in hell you’re talking about, Sergeant Fitzpatrick?”

Before I could dig myself a deeper hole, Lieutenant Axelspoke saved me. He cleared his throat with a brief, sharp *ugh-zzzzzzahh*. The sound was mistakable for a bizarre sigh, but of course he was recalling Crump’s proverbial mosquito. That’s when I knew I had dreamed the Iraqi T-72 and had just made a fool of myself in front of everyone who mattered in the company.

I decided against the truth and did not blame mefloquine. No need to cultivate a reputation for susceptibility. *Might as well look like a head case*, I thought, because that was happening regardless. “Sorry, sir,” I said. “Haven’t been sleeping enough—just realized I must’ve been thinking of a report I read of a tank in another battalion’s A-O.”

Captain Rogers harrumphed and continued on like nothing had happened. But as he discussed the necessity of *maintaining our uniform discipline during this period of decreasing op-tempo in the lead-up to our redeploy-*

ment, I was hardly even there. I had already traveled in my head to that wheat field, which I knew one hundred percent for sure was a real place.

The wheat was in its late stages, very dry and tall as my waist. I parted it with my rifle held out in front of me at port arms, and some of the ears brushed off and clung to the sleeves of my uniform before tumbling to the brittle gray earth. There in front of me was a Soviet-made tank abandoned like a massive junked-out car overgrown with weeds. I touched the sun-hot steel, patting the gun tube affectionately. The Republican Guard had max-depressed the gun, pointing it at the ground as a sign that they were not hostile before they had deserted when the bullets had started to fly that past March.

I could picture it so well it was hard to believe I had not really seen it. The leader's meeting ended, a day passed, and still the dream stuck with me. I told myself its memory was nothing more than mefloquine residue. Nevertheless, I couldn't shake it, and the more I thought about it, the more I came to believe that the wheat, not the T-72, stood out as the most vital aspect of the dream. While the tank was a figment, the wheat field was not. For starters, it was strategically important. Not only was the field located adjacent to our main supply route, but the wheat crop also fed a nearby squatter village we called Triangletown because of its layout. It sprawled five clicks down the highway from our camp, which we had made in an abandoned cigarette factory on the outskirts of Mosul. Some comedian on brigade staff had named the forlorn outpost Fort Marlboro.

I checked the roster and discovered our next patrol that would pass by the wheat was set for Thursday. A couple hours before we were scheduled to roll out, Lieutenant Axelspoke and I suited up and left our platoon's common area on the cigarette factory floor. The dusty space was littered with busted-up pallets, MRE trash, empty water bottles, and the remains of picked-over care packages yet to be tossed into the burn pit outside. Some of us had tried to maintain high standards, but, despite our efforts, cleanliness had been slipping along with morale the longer we'd spent in-country.

Thursday lunch was beef stroganoff and succotash. Sweating, wrapped in Kevlar, Axelspoke and I ate, silently at first, but then I decided to tip my hand. I told him I thought we should consider conducting a dismounted reconnaissance of the field off Route Predators during our upcoming patrol. This was the first time I had mentioned the wheat since Tuesday's incident with Captain Rogers.

Axelspoke sucked his teeth and sighed. "Please tell me this has nothing to do with your phantom tank."

“Sir, look,” I said. “The battalion’s been ambushed twice in the last month. Both times were on Predators. That field is the perfect enemy OP. We owe it to ourselves to check it out.”

Calling the wheat a *perfect* enemy observation post was an exaggeration, but my tactical reasoning was basically sound, and Axelspoke—the more analytical man—knew it. What’s more, he had learned to trust my gut. Together we had led the platoon for nearly a year, slogging through some heavy shit in Nasiriyah during the initial push-up from Kuwait, and doing it without losing any of our guys. In our most notable operation, we had pulled cordon security for the Seals who rescued Private Jessica Lynch. That mission got a lot of media attention but in reality was kind of a cakewalk. Others hadn’t been, but generally speaking, our luck had held. We’d had a few Purple Hearts in the platoon—light shrapnel wounds—but nothing requiring a medevac.

A foot patrol through the wheat would risk tarnishing that record, but I felt confident Axelspoke would tempt fate and okay my plan, if for no other reason than that he craved a real *hoo-ah* infantry mission to break the monotony of driving up and down the same stretch of highway all afternoon. Keeping our supply lines open was most of what we were doing that summer. Keep to the road. Patrol the road. Secure the road. And if it happened to blow up underneath your Brad’s track, you could deem the mission either a success or a failure, depending on how crazy you were.

IED sweeps. Dangerous, but in those days the IEDs weren’t nearly as sophisticated or as catastrophic as the later builds—they weren’t really a threat to our Bradley Fighting Vehicles—and the truth was, you didn’t need to suffer from an adrenaline addiction to get bored enough to reach the point of *wanting* the road to erupt, *wanting* something terrible to happen just to break the tedium of it all.

Axelspoke considered my request as he kicked at a piece of mummified Salisbury steak seared to the concrete floor by heat and dust. He was only twenty-two years old and already an incurable pessimist, which made him my favorite lieutenant I had served under thus far. He drew in a breath and spent at least five seconds expelling it from lips pursed like he was playing the trumpet. Then he loosened up, raised another plastic spoonful of succotash to his mouth, and stared at me with dismal intentionality. “Sure, Sergeant. All right. We’ll do it your way and clear the wheat field on foot. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Three hours later, we arrayed the men in an inverse wedge on the side of Route Predators. We took precautions, leaving a small guard force

with the Brads to keep an eye on the vehicles. Those of us who would go on the patrol assumed a good distance between each man, so as not to present an easy target for mortars or rockets. Locked and loaded, we waded into the wheat, searching, scanning, rifles held at the low-ready. I had taken a position on the right flank with Crump at my side. Axelspoke anchored the wedge at its center, his radioman to his left, and Aguirre the medic to his right.

We found the anti-aircraft gun almost immediately. Maybe ten minutes into the patrol. Krupa, of all people, was the one to find it.

“Hey, Sarn’t Fitz-P! Check this out!”

“Fucking noise discipline, Krupa,” I hissed. “They teach you kids anything in basic these days?”

Krupa was not the sharpest. During a recent health and welfare inspection, I had searched the platoon’s wall lockers—we were fortunate enough to have inherited the cigarette factory’s furnishings—and had found, crammed in the bottom of Krupa’s locker, his collection of piss bottles: plastic one-liter water bottles filled with urine. The guy was too lazy to walk a hundred yards to use the latrine under the beating sun. He would rather piss where he lived and store the piss next to his stash of menthol cigarettes and cans of potato chips mailed to him by his wife.

Looking embarrassed by my rebuke, he stumbled through the wheat toward the anti-aircraft gun and now gestured to it stoically, like the rest of us couldn’t see for ourselves. The platoon circled our find. It was towable but obviously had not moved in a long time, not since before the last war, not with its dry-rotted tires and rusted steel frame sunk partially into the stony earth. Specialist Vilperson, who was a military history buff and sort of a gun nut, identified its make and caliber.

“Thirty-seven millimeter,” he said. “Model 1939. Rusksies churned out a buttload of ’em in World War Two.”

“I dreamed this thing would be here,” I mumbled to no one in particular, wanting to share my wonder at what had happened but at the same time careful not to sound too excited because all I could think was, *Holy shit, I did dream this. Maybe I screwed up the details and dreamed a tank in place of an anti-aircraft gun...but holy shit.*

I doubt I had a sudden onset of psychic powers; I’m sure my foreknowledge had a more mundane source. I must have seen the gun’s tandem barrels from a distance, driving Route Predators past the field. The barrels were barely visible from the highway, and then only if you knew what you were looking for. Because they were rigged in tandem, they didn’t look so much like barrels attached to a weapon system as

they did like appendages of some piece of decrepit farm machinery, the likes of which were strewn all over the Iraqi landscape. Patrolling the highway, I must've noticed the hint of the broken-down gun in passing and not realized it—though my mind, dreaming, had honed in on the detail and resolved it for what it was. More or less.

“That’s wild, Sarge,” Crump said, sounding unconvinced.

“Get off there,” Lieutenant Axelspoke snapped at Vilperson, who, to get a better look, had climbed onto an earth mound set off to the gun’s side. “How much you wanna bet the ammo for it is buried right there?”

Vilperson stepped off the mound. Axelspoke drew his bayonet from its sheath clipped to his tactical vest. He knelt by the mound, which looked disturbingly like a shallow grave, and used the bayonet’s tip to probe under the surface.

“Yep,” he said, withdrawing the blade. “Buried metal, right fuckin’ there.”

The radio crackled with static, and one of the soldiers we had left behind to guard the Bradleys transmitted, “Blue One, this be Blue One Delta.”

Axelspoke accepted the handset from his radio operator and replied, “Blue One.”

“Roger. You’ve got a mam headed to your pos. Looks like he came from Triangletown. It’s just the one mam. Over.”

“He armed?” Axelspoke asked.

“Negative.”

“Roger. One out.”

*Mam* was a military-aged male; *pos* stood for position; and Axelspoke, thinking out loud, figured the mam heading to our pos was a farmer who had seen us messing around in his field. Axelspoke sent a fire team to intercept him and bring him in. While we waited, he knelt again by the mound and used the bayonet’s blade to scrape away soil with the care of an archeologist excavating a precious find. Before long, he had uncovered a half-dozen 37mm rounds with casings the diameter of toilet paper tubes. He spit on one of the brass casings and wiped it off, revealing blue, green, and white shades of oxidation.

“Dollars to donuts there are hundreds more of ’em down there,” he said, sighing. “With my luck, they’ll all have high-explosive tips. You could wire in a fuse and *bam* these turn into makeshift grenades. We’re gonna have to do something about this.”

“We’ll be out here for hours playing fuck-fuck games over it,” I said. “Why not just leave it be? Looks like haji has been plowing around that spot for years. And the barrels on this thing are shot. It’s all just junk.”

“Well, you can explain that to Higher, since this was your bright idea. Came to you in a dream, huh?”

“Sort of.”

“Horseshit,” Axelspoke said, but not unkindly.

“Yo man, pass me one them cigs, would ya?” Krupa asked Crump.

Crump thumbed a cigarette from his pack, nodded at Axelspoke, and said, “Hey, L-T. Haji comin’ up on your six.”

The mam—indeed a farmer, whose name was Salah—indicated by way of mummerly and what few words of English he spoke that the antiaircraft gun had not been fired in ages, which we already knew. Salah waved at the gun like he could make it disappear, shook his head emphatically, and said, “Saddam—very bad,” which we knew. Lieutenant Axelspoke directed Salah to come and take a look at the shells buried in the mound, and Salah nodded in immediate recognition and mimed a person shoveling dirt, then pointed proudly to himself, which we had not already known.

Axelspoke sighed and patted Salah on the shoulder. He placed his other hand over his heart to signify our genuine thanks for the intel before motioning to his radio operator, who passed him the battalion handset.

“Crusader Main, this is Comanche Blue One.”

Axelspoke was calling headquarters. They answered immediately: “Crusader Main.”

“Roger. I’m in the wheat east of Predators—grid to follow. We have located one Russian-made, three seven mike-mike A-A gun and approximately several hundred rounds three seven mike-mike. Gun is inoperative. The rounds are buried and highly corroded. Request guidance, over.”

“I copy, you found a three seven mike-mike gun, in-op, with buried rounds. Wait one, over.”

Crump lit another cigarette, and Axelspoke and I shared a dip with Salah, who handled the lieutenant’s can of Copenhagen as if it were a delicacy. We waited for headquarters to transmit instructions. Axelspoke used his tongue to pack the dip into his cheek and a moment later spit a stream of chaw juice. “Twenty bucks says they’re gonna tell us we have to blow it,” he said.

“If we do that, you know we’ll set this field on fire.” I licked my finger and held it up to judge the strength and direction of the breeze. It was coming from the southwest. Fast enough.

“Probably so,” Axelspoke said.

I ventured an alternate plan. “What if we transported the rounds back to Marlboro and demolished them there?”

The lieutenant grimaced and shook his head. “We would still have to blow the gun in place. That thing’s not going anywhere. And no way would I haul those rounds in my Brad. The state they’re in, those evil bastards could go off anytime.”

“Yeah. Hell.”

In the distance, maybe half a klick away, we heard a rifle crack. In itself, this was unremarkable. The Iraqis were notorious for shooting in the air after weddings, funerals, winning or losing soccer matches, you name it.

The radio chirped with an imminent transmission, but this time it was the team guarding our Brads and not battalion headquarters calling. “One, this be Blue One Delta again. Somebody just took a motherfuckin’ shot at us.”

“You got visual contact?” Axelspoke said.

“Naw, sir. Whoever they was, they bounced, but it came close. Johnson heard it fly right by his motherfuckin’ ear.”

“Maintain your discipline on the net, One Delta. Tell the guys to take cover in the Brads. Start scanning.”

At that inopportune moment, the other radio crackled and headquarters got back to us with orders to demolish the antiaircraft gun and any related munitions. Lieutenant Axelspoke told One Delta (his driver) to stand by and return fire if fired upon. He then switched handsets to answer headquarters’ call.

“Crusader Main,” he said. “Be advised, my team set by Predators just received one round small-arms fire from an unknown location, most likely Triangletown. Negative casualties. Enemy broke contact. Recommend we regain contact with the sniper and leave this A-A gun for another day. Additionally, know that if I set charges here, there’s an extremely good chance I will burn this entire wheat crop to the ground. I say again, I don’t think we have an active ammo cache on our hands here. It’s just junk. War trash. Over.”

“Roger,” headquarters said curtly. “Someone’s gone to get Crusader Six. Wait one.”

By then, everyone but Salah had taken a knee in the wheat to make himself a harder target. I pulled Salah to his knees, too, even though he didn’t appear to think the threat merited the indignity of crouching. We had heard no more rifle fire, and I guessed some teenager had taken a pot shot on a dare. Nothing about the situation felt like an ambush. But I knew it wouldn’t seem that way to Crusader Six, the colonel who

was running things from the safety of the command center back at Fort Marlboro. Despite Axelspoke's wary reporting, the colonel would naturally connect the sniper fire with our finding the gun and buried rounds. The colonel was miles away, receiving snippets of information, and you had to be on the scene to discern the truth: the one event was causally unrelated to the other. The single bullet whizzing by Private Johnson's ear was a lethal red herring, a consequence of our simply being. Our guys back at the Brads had gotten shot at for no other reason than that they'd been sitting by the side of the highway too long. Stay in one place long enough in Iraq and you would eventually get shot at.

"Those jokers are gonna make us blow that fuckin' gun," Axelspoke said again, not so matter-of-factly this time. Salah noticed the shift in his tone and looked around nervously, which the lieutenant must have picked up on, because he offered another pinch of dip and started making chitchat. "How many babies you got, bro? You know, like this. Babies. This many? Or this many?"

Salah smirked and held up seven of nine fingers.

"Good man."

We waited a short while longer before the colonel's voice came back over the radio: "Comanche Blue One, this is Crusader Six. Split your platoon. Have two squads pursue the sniper, and two charlie mike and blow that gun in place. How copy? Over."

"I got you loud and clear, sir. Destroy the gun and wheat and get the bad guy. Wilco. *Out.*"

Ending the transmission abruptly, Axelspoke slapped the handset in disgust. The men looked at him with respect for how he had just "outed" the colonel, riding the razor's edge between compliance and insubordination. Most of us had long ago gotten fed up with headquarters and their meddling, impossible directives. Our high-powered radios meant the brass did not have to be anywhere near the action in order to micromanage it. We could all plainly see that the colonel's order was ill-advised, and Axelspoke had argued against it the best he could. Now there was nothing more to do but carry it out.

"Shit is fucked up as a football bat," Krupa said.

"Behold the glorious self-licking ice cream cone that is the U.S. Army," Crump said.

"That's some real fine poetry, Crump," I said. "Break's over. You two, double-time it back to my Brad and get the C4."

We got around to running fuses. It was then that Salah realized that the black, plasticine-looking blocks duct-taped to the anti-aircraft gun

and stacked beside it were high explosives. He soon came to the same conclusion we had.

“Very bad. No *boom* here. No no, Mistah. *Whoosh*. Very bad.”

With a regretful look, I placed my hand over my heart and said, “*Donna asuff*,” meaning, *I’m sorry*. I knew a few other Arabic phrases. *Peace be with you. Stop or I’ll shoot. Thanks very much. Where is the bomb?* Few others.

Salah looked at me like I was nuts and turned to appeal to the lieutenant, seizing Axelspoke by his tactical vest.

“Crump!” Axelspoke barked. “Corral this yokel. Take it easy on him, but make sure he stays back.”

“Yessir.” Crump grabbed hold of Salah and walked him away from our work with the gun, the C4, and the fuses.

“Maybe we’ll be able to put it out after it starts,” I said. “Maybe we can trample the wheat around here to stop it from catching in the first place.”

“I doubt it, Sarn’t,” Specialist Maupin said. Maupin had been a firefighter in New Jersey before 9/11. Volunteered at Ground Zero—that’s why he joined up. “Once a brush fire gets about yea high”—Maupin held his hand at his hip—“you ain’t puttin’ nothin’ out unless you got high-pressure hoses and shit. All this dry fuel around, blast this big, the spall it’s about to throw, nuh-uh, fat chance.”

I thought he was right, and as a group we lacked confidence in my plan, but Axelspoke said we should try it anyway. Better than doing nothing, he said. That’s the kind of guys we were, always preferring action to inaction, all of us volunteers, and so each an idealist in his own peculiar way. Even the colonel, whose paradoxical circumspection had guaranteed the most work for us and also the maximum amount of mayhem for the Iraqis. Crump’s axiomatic “self-licking ice cream cone” was dead-on accurate. We were detonating a large quantity of plastic explosive under semi-controlled conditions *for safety’s sake*. It wasn’t quite destroying the village to save the village, but we were definitely trampling the wheat to save the wheat.

The squad hunting the “sniper” came back empty-handed. No sign of any armed force in the area. Everyone agreed the near-miss gunshot did not forebode worse things. Everyone agreed it must have been some kid from Triangletown showing off for his buddies with daddy’s Kalashnikov.

We continued the work of demolition. Axelspoke repositioned one of our Brads on the far side of the field to ensure that no curious Iraqis

could wander into the area while we were blasting. We took Salah with us as we ran a fuse along the highway back to the other Brad. We dropped the troop ramp and climbed in the armored vehicle's rear compartment. It smelled like feet, ass, and nuts, but it was preferable to standing out in the open when the C4 blew. Axelspoke got on the radio and told battalion to stand by. The warning was a courtesy, so other units would know it was a controlled blast and not the end of the world. They would hear this one echoing in downtown Mosul.

He declared that the time had come, called "Fire in the hole!" armed the triggering device, and handed it to Salah, motioning for him to press the button. I'm still not sure why Axelspoke did that. Maybe he thought Salah would want to destroy his own crop, since it had to be done, like you might want to be the one to put down your favorite dog if it came to it. Maybe Axelspoke was just being polite, or maybe he hoped, in some uncharacteristically small and stupid way, that the thrill of blowing shit up would begin to compensate Salah for the loss of his livelihood.

It was a thrill to blow shit up. Anyone who says different is probably lying. But Salah refused, and so Axelspoke had to push the button himself.

The movies get it wrong. The Hollywood version of war rumbles from subwoofers, but in real life, up close, an RPG or an IED or a pile of exploding C4 sounds sharper, like a gunshot, the volume proportionate to the size of the charge. This one was big enough to send an anti-aircraft gun barrel at least as heavy as a man more than a hundred meters in the air and embed it in the earth across the highway like an oversized javelin. The blast wave was a punch to the gut.

After all the debris had fallen, we descended the troop ramp into the open. A mushroom cloud of dust had risen above the field, followed by black smoke. Just like Specialist Maupin had predicted, my plan to mitigate damage to the wheat by trampling a crop circle around the gun had failed. The shifting breeze stoked the fire and pushed it through the field. Watching it burn, the work of a season destroyed, Salah wept without shame, though we felt it on his behalf, and after listening to him carry on for a while, Krupa said he couldn't deal with it anymore and yelled at Salah to *shut his faggot haji cockholster*. When I heard that, I got up in Krupa's face, put him at parade rest, and dressed him down drill-sergeant style.

Axelspoke let me do my thing for a minute before he tired of the clown show and told us all to shut up. He went back into the Brad, sat on the troop bench, and wrote something in his green leader's notebook. He ripped out the page and gave it to Salah, explaining that Salah

could bring the letter to Fort Marlboro to prove his eligibility for a war damage reparation payment.

Salah couldn't read the letter, but Axelspoke pointed to it and opened his wallet and took out a few twenties, as if to exchange the money for the page. It looked like Salah got the idea. In those days, the army was paying \$5,000 to Iraqi families who had lost a loved one as a result of errant bombs or bullets. Axelspoke said he had no clue what the army was paying for scorched earth. Maybe something. Maybe nothing. He didn't want to get Salah's hopes up. It was hard to convey all that with pidgin Arabic and body language.

In time, the fire moved to a different part of the field. We parted ways with Salah and went to see if the 37mm rounds had been destroyed. *Affirmative, Crusader Main*. The breeze picked up, and the fire spread more rapidly. The whole thing was over by the time the sun cleared the horizon and twilight masked the crisp glossy black of the charred stalks we crunched under our boot heels on the march out.

I recently retired from the army and took a job as Deputy to the Director of Physical Security for a publicly traded corporation. You might call that selling out, and you would be absolutely right. You could also call it nepotism: the CFO is a cousin of mine. I'm one of those weirdos who enlisted when he didn't have to. With the life I have now, it's hard to believe I was previously in the suck for twenty years and harder still to think that the incident with the wheat happened more than a decade ago.

In the meantime, I returned twice to Iraq and also did one tour of Afghanistan. In more than a thousand days of war, what happened near Mosul in Salah's field fits somewhere in the upper-middle of the range—maybe day 243, ranked in terms of gut-wrenchingness. The best days, you're riding a whirlybird to some godforsaken airstrip on your way home. The worst, they're obvious.

A thousand days of the beheaded, the disembodied, the tortured to death with power tools. Dead, gut-shot insurgents, mostly teenagers and young men clutching their rifles like they might still get the chance to use them one last time. Women with gray bloodless skin and limbs tangled in black *abayas*, and small gray kids—collateral damage, they were the worst. But strangely enough, as much as they're with me, I don't dream about those grisly horrible things—hardly ever, not nearly as often as I do the wheat.

It recurs inexplicably. From dream to reality and back to dream again. Ten years older and wiser, now I know the field was just an empty place

and I brought whatever was important with me, inside me. It troubles a body, but life goes on until. This new wheat dream, it's always the same, and I get it a few times a month. Not like the old one—it's not hyper-realistic, there is no Iraqi Army tank, and I have no mefloquine pickling my brain with the illusion of lucid foresight.

The new dream is simple and stranger. Lieutenant Axelspoke and I walk through the field. My old friend Axelspoke looks just like he did back in the day, but I have aged. I am out of uniform, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. We are alone. The wheat is taller than real wheat, tall as elephant grass, and we can only see a few steps ahead. We move cautiously because there is no wind and every sound carries. We walk a ways until the field ends abruptly in an ocean. No beach, just farmland meeting saltwater, the waves breaking and sloshing against the shelf of wheat. Axelspoke stares out over the water and then smiles at me in his ironic, too-old-for-a-kid way, like he knows a dirty secret. Without a word he pitches his rifle into the breakers, and I start to protest but he ignores me as he drops his helmet, his battle rattle, strips naked, and fords ahead. It gets too deep to walk and he swims out to sea, ignoring my calls for him to come back. He swims until he is a speck. He swims until he is nothing. When I dive in to follow, I find the water ice cold.