

War Torn

By Jamie Bogenschutz

Artist's Statement

The biggest lessons in life are usually ones that speak to you on a personal level.

Watching a close friend of mine spiral out of control is a hard thing to be witness to. And no matter what you say to them, they can't seem to see their self-destruction for themselves. You try to stand in front of them like a mirror and reflect the truth back at them. A lot of times if they chose not to see what's in the mirror, they smash it...if they can. Some mirrors are delicate glass; some mirrors are sturdy metal. They aren't easily broken, and they won't give you seven years bad luck.

Carter Anderson, although he hits rock bottom more than once in his life, refuses to look at the truth in the mirrors that are around him. Mirrors such as a close friend over dosing, perhaps an omen of what could become of him. It isn't until Alice comes along that he truly steeps through the looking-glass and to a better life on the other side.

"War Torn" is composed of several short stories that I wrote based on the life of one of my friends and related works by two other writers; Tim O'Brien and Colby Buzzell. I relied on these three sources to keep my thesis accurate.

The importance of my thesis on my artistic development is exploration and execution of blending fiction and fact to create a story based in the here and now. I consider my forte to be fiction writing, but I have always chosen to write in high fantasy or science-fiction. I've written in for that genre since sixth grade. My loathing of the real world and stories about it crippled me in a way, but—to write about something so close and important to me—I hope to break free from my misconceptions. When I was growing up, I used reading as an escape. I didn't want to read any story that was based in our present time period or in our natural world. I mean, that was

exactly what I was trying to escape from. This shunning made me miss out on a whole genre that has worth.

I read *The Things They Carried* for one of my college lit classes and it spoke to me. I was very touched by what O'Brien was able to do. He made me connect with his characters. I realized then, that I may have made a mistake earlier in my life. Now I plan to remedy it.

Some mirrors...can be made of paper.

PID

We love death. The U.S. loves life. That is the big difference between us.

--Osama Bin Laden

Iraq

It was fucking hot...really fucking hot. Not a sticky, humid kind of hot. Just fucking hot.

I tried to ignore the sweat running down my face. It stung my blood shot eyes irritated by the dry desert wind as I peered out into the stark wasteland. The sun had set long ago, so I couldn't really see anything.

Night didn't offer any relief for me. No relief from the sweltering heat. No relief from the constant sense of impending danger.

The sense of danger didn't really bother me. I had been in some pretty shitty situations back stateside that amounted to the same thing. Kill or be killed. Fire first or never fire at all. Being stalked by an enemy was a bit different though. They were out there somewhere. Out in the dark.

I felt that way for a few months into my deployment. Then the sense of danger was in the back of my mind, *way* in the back. I never actually saw the "enemy" until my very last days in Iraq. For the most part my time in Iraq was boring. We would get dropped in the desert close to some town and just stay there intercepting transmissions. It was really, really boring. Except for the one time we came under fire. Figures that I would almost die the very first and last time I would ever see combat.

I put on my NODs (night operation device). I was supposed to be looking for Iraqi Regs. They shot at anything. Civilians as well as Americans. The Regs didn't care if they died.

I don't think the army cared if I or my fellow soldiers died either.

I was military intelligence, but I sure as shit didn't really *know* anything. In fact, it was 'cus of this not-knowing-anything that I had a cyanide pill issued to me. It was so I could swiftly kill myself in case we ever got captured. The Iraqis wouldn't believe us if we said we didn't know anything, so why endure the torture? The sluggish metal machine I was sitting in was probably more important to the army than I was. We had orders to blow it if we ever were going to be captured though, so maybe not. The significant lesson to get from that is to destroy anything holding information that might be used against the U.S.

Once we lost our means of travel and all our rations and our means of communication, I suppose a cyanide pill would start looking rather tasty. I mean, wandering around the desert with little means of protecting yourself (remember how I said I was military intelligence? Yeah, no big guns for us) and knowing if you were captured torture and death would result... Yeah, cyanide was the way to go. Our unit's motto was, "Too light to fight. Too heavy to run."

Except, I really didn't want to die.

The convoy, and by that I mean just us and our little modified APC (armed personnel carrier), made its way through the sands to its next AO (Area of Operations). We'd stay wherever that was and listen into Iraqi comm. and send it all back home.

Home. America. California. The rotting hell hole that is L.A.

All I had ever wanted was to get out. Out of my parents' house. My hometown. My home state. I'd emancipated myself as soon as I could and left.

And made one big damn mess of my life.

I shook my head violently and tried to focus on the task at hand. That's when a bullet whizzed past my head. Literally inches from fucking my cheek. Ambush.

Bullets sang through the air and pinged off the side of the APC. I jumped behind our vehicle, putting it between me and the Regs. I could tell the Lt. was yelling something into the radio or maybe shouting orders at me, but my mind couldn't translate it. The chaos that I suddenly found myself in triggered that famous "fight or flight" response, and my army training took over. It was almost an out of body experience. I no longer had control of my body. It was on autopilot. My body traded gunfire with the Iraqi Regs. I felt my weapon discharge and then saw one of the Regs fall to the ground. It was possible my bullet wasn't the fatal one, but the closeness of his death to my gun firing... Yeah, I killed him.

As I tried to absorb the fact I had just killed someone, something hit the inside of my right thigh. What the fuck... More bullets hit the APC. I returned fire, but I also noticed my pant leg was very wet. I looked down and realized I was staring at my own blood. Shit...

"I'm hit." I yelled.

Forgetting about the Regs, the bullets, everything except for my bleeding leg, I tore off the bottom of my shirt and tied off my wound. I think I dropped my gun, not a smart move, but a panicked move. I knew a wound on that part of my thigh could be fatal. If the shrapnel had hit the major vein in my thigh, I could bleed out in seconds and die. Since I wasn't dead yet, I figured I wasn't going to be. But... we were still getting shot, so I picked up my assault rifle after I tied off my wound and started to return fire again. Best way to up my survival rate.

And then everything settled down. The good guys got to live another day.

"You did well for your first time under fire, Anderson." Lt. stood in front of me.

I didn't feel so much as heard the thunk of an assault rifle against the back of my head. It was like some people had decided to tap dance on the back of my skull and then turned off the lights when they were done. What an asshole.

OD

I don't think you'll be puttin' any more dope in that arm.

--Court Doctor in "Requiem for a Dream"

Los Angeles

We were either rolling or drunk. I can't really remember. Either way, we were really fucked up on something. A friend of ours was supposed to find us some 'shrooms. After calling him for like thirty minutes we decided to go to his place.

We were ready to give him grief about being late, but we ended up flipping out on him for a completely different reason.

"You're fucking doing powders again, you fucking dumbass." I yelled at him.

I've never been able to tell the difference between meth and crack by the smell, but he had been smoking one of those two. Obviously fucked up. Obviously really fucking high.

"We told you to quit doing this shit."

We're yelling at him and suddenly the color just drained out of his face. I mean normal human color to Casper just like that. He's eyes got this far away look to them and then the shit hit the fan. He started twitching like there was no tomorrow.

We grabbed his ass and dragged him to the car.

Foam began coming out of his mouth and ears. Profanities spewed from our mouths for the whole car ride to the hospital.

"Fuck—what the fuckin' shit..."

"Get to the fuckin' hospital..."

"Fuckin' shit, man...FUCK."

We didn't call the cops. He needed help, and he wasn't going to get that in jail. Plus he always had a large quantity of drugs in his apartment. We were pretty sure that night was no exception. Not to mention we all had a lot of drugs on our persons as well.

We stopped the car outside the emergency room doors of the hospital. We hauled him into the emergency room and dropped him on the floor just inside the doors.

"We found this kid like this in the lobby of our apartment building."

The nurses tried to ask us question, but we just walked out the door.

The Drug Years

Did you know America ranks the lowest in education but the highest in drug use? It's nice to be number one, but we can fix that. All we need to do is start the war on education. If it's anywhere near as successful as our war on drugs, in no time we'll all be hooked on phonics.

--Leighann Lord

Let's Start at the Beginning...

I was fourteen when I started to think of girls differently. It was right around the same time that puberty hit my best friend and the girl next door, Britney. From a guy's stand point puberty went well with Brit, and my brain took a trip south whenever I was around her.

Brit and her family had lived next door to me for seven years. We were pretty much the only kids on our block, so if I wanted someone to play with, I had to get over the whole "girls have cooties," which is a beyond stupid concept anyways. The other guys at school tried to start shit with me for having a girl as my best friend but, after I beat some of them up, my masculinity was no longer in question.

Brit didn't have the best family life. Her parents fought all the time, which led to her smoking at the age of thirteen.

By the age of fourteen, puberty was starting to hit most of us kids. And even though I know you can't find true love at fourteen and having a boyfriend or girlfriend at that age is ridiculous, that's pretty much the goal of most kids at that age. This leads to much angst and stupidity as one tries to grab the attention of their one and only.

My brainless act of daring to get Brit to like me and think I was cool enough to be her boyfriend was to start smoking. Inhaling was quickly followed by puking. Thankfully it wasn't in front of Brit...or maybe it would have been more thankful if I *had* smoked for the first time in

front of her. I would've puked and been so un-cool in her eyes that maybe I never would've done it again. But as it happened, I forced my body to accept the vile stuff and pulled off my puff of gallantry.

She didn't immediately become my girlfriend however...she actually never became my girlfriend. I smoked by the tennis courts at school with her every day after school for months and, she never even asked to be my girlfriend. And then one day, she started telling me and the other people we hung out with that she really liked this older teenager that shopped at the same Goth store she liked. Bitch.

I still hung out with Brit. I can't say I was hoping she'd change her mind and come crawling after me. Mostly, I liked our friend group, which was made up of kids who weren't really doing the typical thing kids did at our age. We smoked (nicotine and pot), and we drank.

Brit was usually the one to supply us from her parents' liquor cabinet. I stole from my parents as well. The pot was the most accessible drug to us. It was the cheapest and easiest to get. We didn't have to steal or worry our parents would miss it, 'cus it wasn't theirs. It was ours.

Teachers and the government always try to say that pot is the gateway drug. I would say nicotine is. It's what I started using first. It's a lot more harmful than pot, too. I'm probably going to die of lung cancer. A painful way to go...I wouldn't wish nicotine addiction on my worst enemy. I can't stop. I've tried a bunch of times, but I can't. The worse I ever got from pot is my memory is shot. This country has its drug schedules screwed up. The worst drugs out there are legal; nicotine and alcohol. It's just sad.

The Middle...

A friend and I were booming (a.k.a high as fuck on 'shrooms.) We decided to go to this party at a huge house that my friend had heard about. There must have been at least five hundred people, maybe even a thousand, in and around the house when we got there. It was a three story mansion-like place. The lights blazed out into the night. We made our way through the people on the yard and into the house. Straight in from the front door was a big living room. There wasn't any furniture, which left the whole space for the people who were dancing. Bass pumped from the speakers, which I could actually see. Rippling circles left the speaker moving through the air. The floor undulated under my feet. It looked like waves from the ocean. I was Jesus-effing-Christ walking on water. I turned to my friend.

"Dude, I can see the bass."

My friend opened his mouth to respond, but I couldn't understand a single fucking thing he was saying. It all came out jumbled.

I looked up above his head and saw what he was trying to tell me in comic speech bubble. Fucking sweet. I spent the whole night reading people's words instead of hearing them.

A different house, a different party. This time I was rolling. E is by far the most fun drug to take. It takes about fifteen to thirty minutes to take effect, depending on what's in your stomach. We would always take it before going to the clubs. It would just enhance and add to the whole night. Just image...

You walk into the club filled with energy. You look around at all the people dancing. The music throbs through the air and through you. The colors from the dance lights are vivid and wild. The people dancing? They are all your friends. You smile at them as you make your way through the crowd. Even at the slightest touch from them, the mildest brush of contact, pleasure

sizzles through your nerves. There is a general sense of euphoria coursing through you. All is right in the world. There is only one niggling side affect. If you don't voluntarily clench your jaw, your jaw will clench for you. So, you pop in a piece of gum to alleviate the pressure. The gum will be liquefied by the end of the night, but it'll be the best damn night of your life.

The End...

That's how my adolescent life went. Party after party after party. It was the only relief I had from the shit that was the rest of my life.

I had a GED, 'cus I couldn't stand my dumbass high school teachers. As soon as I could, I hopped into my car and drove to the place where you could take the GED test.

"I want to take the GED." I told the lady behind the desk.

She looked up at me from her paper work. "Don't you want to take the study course first? We have some study materials you can take with you and look over and then come back and take the test when you're more prepared."

"No, I want to take it now."

She continued to look skeptically at me but eventually let me take it. I passed of course, but after dealing with stupid high school teachers, I wasn't going to torture myself with college. That meant all that was available to me was entry level positions. I couldn't stand my incompetent bosses, but I needed to pay rent. I would suffer for a few months at one job and quit or get fired for saying or doing the wrong thing.

At one point I decided I had enough with the crap jobs and decided to sell E. I made a lot of fucking money doing it...but it was dangerous work. And then, I lost my supplier. He got

caught by the police...I think. I just stopped hearing from him. It could be that he got killed by a rival drug maker. I don't really know what happened to him.

I didn't really want to give up the sweet life of being my own boss, so I decided to try to make my own E. That brilliant idea literally blew up in my face. It also blew up the shed I was using to hide my experiment. Thank God my neighbors were used to strange noises and didn't call the cops. Thank God I came to in time to put out the fire before my neighbors decided to call the cops.

Decisions, decisions. Life's all about your decisions and other people's decisions. Right or left. Stop or go. Start smoking to impress a girl or don't start smoking to impress a girl. And those decisions lead to other decisions, which all have consequences.

Anyways, I went back to crap entry level jobs...but eventually I stopped being able to find work. I think I got blacklisted as a troubled employee. My money dried up, and my roomy picked up the pieces. I started to owe him a lot of money for the rent he paid for me. I needed a solution. And I wasn't going to find it being stoned, high or drunk on the couch.

The PULHES Factors

Be all you can be.

--U.S. Army Slogan

Stateside

I got shipped back stateside when the Army was done using us as spooks; I still had a little over a year left with my enlistment. The Army was using me as a MLI (Military Language Instructor) until my Tour of Duty was up. I wasn't really teaching anyone, that was the civilian contractors' jobs. But the Army thought the civilian instructors were too easy on the privates, so I was there to keep a military tone in the classroom. By this time I was no longer Spc. Anderson but Corporal Anderson.

I was thinking of reenlisting after this enlistment was up. It was nice not to have to worry when my next paycheck would be or whether or not I'd even have one. Nice not having to worry about having enough money for food. Also it was nice bossing Pfc's around. Being a MLI was cake. The con to all the pros was Iraq. I could always end up going back.

Maybe I could find better work now that I was a veteran. People hired vets all the time for the tax break. I didn't really want that to be the reason I was hired though, and fuck any boss who looked at my vet status and think they could boss me around. When it came to civilians, I still had a problem with authority. My Army bosses deserved respect and had earned it. Civilians would have to do the same, and most fell short...way short.

As it would turn out, however, my mind would be made up for me. I broke my leg during a routine training exercise. Stepped wrong. Fluke thing.

"I'm being discharged?" I stared at the company commander confused. "But I still have, like, a year left."

"It's a medical discharge, Corporal. Your leg will take, what? Three, four months to heal? And then there is rehab. All that time you're sitting on your butt, getting fat and out of shape and being completely useless to the Army. To put it simply, Corporal, it's cheaper to discharge you."

"Yes...sir," was all I could think to say.

The Capt. left me all alone in my hospital bed. I wasn't sure how I should feel about my discharge. I was starting to get used to the idea of staying in the Army. And now they didn't want me? All the time and money they put in to training me and one broken leg I was out the door? I had figured I'd be in the Army for awhile longer. I had heard some rumors that guys were getting their enlistments extended. The Army was calling it "stopped loss." Too many guys were leaving and not enough were enlisting or reenlisting to stop the loss of soldiers. So, the Army was extending enlistments. It sounded like Draft talk to me. That wouldn't be a surprise. A Draft. It was all this war needed. A lot of people were saying that OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) was our Nam. I could see the parallels. They were both pointless wars.

Yeah, I could reenlist after I did my rehab and got myself back into shape. But would I have to do Basic again?

Fuck that. Fuck them.

Rock Bottom

And when you're high you never

Ever want to come down...

--Guns'N'Roses

A Bar

The clinking of glasses as the waitresses bussed the rickety tables used to be an old comfort of mine. Jimmy always let me stay as long as I wanted. We went way back. All the way back to the third grade when I gave Jimmy a black eye. We became fast friends after that. Honest to God. I don't think there is really anything better to bring two guys together other than a fist fight...whether you are personally doing the wailing or you're just watching.

He also never gave me any gruff about Brit being my best friend. I would've hung out with Jimmy more growing up, but he came from a divorced home. Summers were his dad's time, so we only hung out at school.

Of all my friends, Jimmy was the best adjusted...and the most successful. He cut with all the drug crap about the same time I shipped out. Now he owned his own bar. A favorite of place mine whenever I was on leave. Jimmy and our friends visited this bar a lot before I shipped out, too. Jimmy bought it when the owner had died. I was surprised that he had the money. Apparently, Jimmy inherited quite a lot of dough from his old man without telling any of us. I was pleased he hadn't wasted it all on drugs, even though I had gone back to using as soon as I was out of the Army.

I didn't help Jimmy with the cleaning. It wasn't that I was lazy; Jimmy just never asked. I was less inclined to help now. Being out of the Army didn't give me as much pleasure as a lot of people thought it should. I was right back to where I was before I joined. Unhappy with my lot in

life...unhappy with my job...unhappy with my boss...unhappy with the crappy apartment I was renting...

...Only happy when I was high.

But I definitely didn't want to go back to the Army. Ever. Again.

Things changed a little bit for me once I was out of uniform. I felt sort-of claustrophobic in the city. After all that sand and nothing to see for miles, the skyscrapers closed in on me. I had nightmares, too. Mostly about the Iraqi I killed. The fact that I killed him didn't really bother me. It was me or him...It was just...The image of the bullet going through his head. The blood spatter. The perfectly round hole. Well, maybe it did bother me I killed someone. Why else would I keep seeing him in my dreams? There were times I couldn't shut my eyes without seeing him. Why wouldn't the ugly Hajji leave me alone?

The jukebox changed from county to a screaming vocalist. I flinched at the sound. Not music. That was not music, and it brought on more memories.

I stood up and walked to the bathrooms. Looking in the cracked mirror, I could see the dark smudges under my eyes. I didn't sleep much anymore. Reaching out with an unsteady hand, I turned on the cold water to splash some on my face. But I couldn't wipe the haunting image away. Goddamn Hajji. I feared he'd be burned to my retinas forever.

"Hey, Carter?" Jimmy called from the bar. "You fall in the toilet, dude?"

I pushed the bathroom open, re-entering the bar area. Jimmy was sweeping the floor.

"You almost done, man? I'd like to get in some poker before work." I asked.

"Yeah, just give me a few more minutes. Although going to play cards at four in the morning, six hours before you work, doesn't sound like the greatest idea in the world."

“Miss Mother Hen, I asked you if you wanted to go and you said yes. I plan on going whether you feel it is a good idea or not. Now are you going with me or are you going to prove you are in fact an old man already and go home to your snuggie?”

Jimmy sighed. “Yeah, I still want to go. Stop PMS-ing.”

I shoved Jimmy on the shoulder as I passed him on the way to the door. “I’m going to go have a smoke then while you take your sweet ass time, grandpa.”

I walked outside and lit a cigarette. As I blew the toxic smoke out of my mouth, I looked up at the sky. Ugly clouds were rolling in, mixing with the smog that was the LA sky. A great omen for a perfect day. I shook my head and flicked the ash off the end of my cigarette. Life was so pointless.

“Carter?”

I turned my head in the direction of the uncertain voice. A bright smile greeted me.

“Carter!” Came the jubilant cry before I was engulfed in an overly excited hug.

“Brittney.” I said with little enthusiasm. I was well over my boyhood crush. She still looked amazing though.

“When did you get back?”

I took another drag from my cigarette. “Back? Back from Iraq or from the Army in general?”

“Does it matter?” She clearly didn’t have a clue what had happened to me. Jimmy either hadn’t kept her in the loop or she hadn’t cared to be kept in the loop.

Jimmy actually visited me in the hospital when I called and told him I was getting discharged early. He told me he didn’t know whether I was lucky or unlucky. Lucky to get out, but unlucky to get hurt the way I did. I survived shrapnel in my leg and stayed with my unit until

the bitter end...only to break my leg in a routine training exercise. Jimmy came to the conclusion I was just stupid.

Brittney pulled back. She barely came to my shoulder. I tried not to stare at her, but she was looking rather well. She was still fond of short skirts and tight shirts...and from this angle...I had a good view of a certain pair of her assets.

"How are you?" She clutched her purse to herself, making me think she was feeling self-conscious and awkward. The Army taught me to read body language.

I grimaced at her question though. Why was everyone asking me that? "Fine." I gave my short and clipped response. It was like everyone was waiting for me to explode into a full blown case of PTSD.

"Well...it was nice to see you again." Her tone of voice suggested that it was in fact not nice to see me again. I didn't respond. Brit's fake smile faltered and finally went away. She hastily waved good bye to me and ran over to one of the cars in the parking lot.

I watched her go, admiring her other asset, wondering if I should try to hook up...just for old time's sake. I was still contemplating it when Jimmy finally came out the bar door and locked up.

Beer Tears

Last dance with Mary Jane, one more time to kill the pain.

--Tom Petty

A Bar

I was sitting at the bar talking to Jimmy like usual when she came in. She was dressed in sweat pants and a sweatshirt. I don't know if it was loneliness or what, but I thought she looked pretty sexy in sweats. Her auburn hair was done up in a simple ponytail. As she got closer to me, I could see her eyes were a dark green. An attention-grabbing color I had never seen before.

"Sorry I'm late, James." The woman hurried passed the bar and went into the backroom. Jimmy just nodded his head in her direction.

"New waitress?" I asked, indicating towards the direction the woman had gone.

Jimmy wagged his hand in a so-so motion. "She's usually not late. Good worker."

"When did you hire her? I haven't noticed her before."

The woman in question reentered the bar; this time wearing jeans and a black polo shirt with Jimmy's logo on it. She hastily tied a red apron around her waist.

"Alice," Jimmy called her over to him. I watched as her eyebrows crinkled in worry—clearly reluctant to talk to Jimmy.

"Yeah, boss?" She blew at her bangs and then brushed at them, in annoyance, with a hand.

"Any particular reason you're late?"

Alice shifted on her feet nervously. "None in particular. Won't happen again."

Jimmy looked like he wanted to ask more, but he just dipped his head. Sensing she was dismissed, Alice went out to the bar floor picking up some menus as she went. I watched as she walked away. Jimmy flicked a finger against the back of my head.

“Ow,” I said, drawing it out. Turning back towards Jimmy, I eyed him irritated. “What was that for?”

“She’s off limits.” There was definite finality in his voice. He didn’t look at me as he readied some drinks.

“Explain...”

Jimmy let out a long sigh. “She’s not getting along with her boyfriend.”

“Perfect,” I said with a smile. Jimmy didn’t appear pleased.

“I’m serious. Just leave her alone, man. She doesn’t need your shit.” He turned away to place an order in front of a customer. I could tell he was embarrassed and didn’t really want to get in an argument with me. We had been fighting about my drinking...and my drug use lately. I had tried to get him to go to a party with me just the other day, and he had been furious I would even ask. We had both said some things we had wanted to say but probably shouldn’t have said.

Jimmy went about the rest of the night not talking to me other than to keep my drinks coming. I diligently avoided acknowledging the awkwardness that had suddenly sprung up between us. Instead, I spent the time studying the new waitress. She didn’t act like a woman who was in a rocky relationship. She was laughing and joking with the customers as she took their orders. Being the dutiful waitress.

As the night went on, however, I saw her glance more and more at the Coors’ clock. Her smile was starting to fade as well. Jimmy noticed all my ogling of course and spent most of his night frowning at me. When the last of the customers left, Alice took a seat at the bar.

“Bad night?” I asked to start up conversation.

Alice had her head in her hands. With the barest movement, she glanced at me. At first I thought she was going to ignore me and go to the backroom, but she sighed and slumped back in the bar stool.

“You could say that I guess.” Her attempt at a smile failed. All she managed was a little twitch of her lips.

“Shouldn’t you be getting home, Carter?” Jimmy glared at me.

I lifted my half empty beer glass. “Almost done.”

Jimmy shook his head and started to clean up. Alice got up out of her chair to pick up a rag and help.

“So...when did you start working here? I haven’t seen you before.” Keeping it casual.

“I’ve seen you.” Alice wiped up some spilled drink.

“Oh?” I asked, actually puzzled.

“Yep, you’re in here almost every night. I’ve been working here for almost a month now, so I’ve seen you a lot. I’m thinking after all your drinking you probably have a hard time seeing anything, so I’ll forgive your oversight.” There was a real smile on her face now. I took that as a good sign. Her words suggested that she didn’t think much of me, but the tone suggested she was making fun of me...like a friend would.

“My bad, I guess.”

I slowly sipped at my beer as Alice continued to clean the bar top around me.

“Can I ask you a somewhat personal question?” The question burst from Alice’s mouth, and her face immediately got red.

“Shoot,” I thought she looked cute all red-faced.

She stopped cleaning to give me her full attention. "I know you're an old friend of James, but why are you in here all night, every night?"

"I like the atmosphere?"

"Okay," she said slowly. "But why soak up the atmosphere here all the time? Why not go somewhere else once in awhile?"

"I don't like the atmosphere anywhere else."

She narrowed her eyes. "Okay, maybe I deserved that. It was a personal question, but I was expecting a semi-serious answer."

Her tone of voice caught me off guard. "What the hell? I can't like the atmosphere in my friend's bar? What answer did you expect?"

Her face got all red again as she dropped her gaze. She started to clean again. "I'm sorry. I...never mind. I'm sorry."

Frustrated, I tried to think of something to say. This conversation had turned somewhat bizarre. "Can you please tell me what you thought I was going to say? I'm very confused right now."

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"Do you want me to leave?" I asked genuinely surprised. This wasn't her bar to demand customers to leave.

"No," she replied quickly. "I didn't mean it that way. Don't you have some place you'd rather be than at a bar all the time? The great atmosphere notwithstanding."

"I'm not here all the time. I have a day job. And, yeah, I'd rather be a million places than be here, but it isn't going to happen. Why are you so curious?"

She shrugged her petite shoulders. "You don't seem very happy when you're here. I wonder why you keep coming back. You don't talk to James much, so I didn't think it was to see him. Unless you just wanted someone to bitch to."

I found this woman to be utterly...stunning. She was so completely frank—with a complete stranger no less. She cut straight through the bullshit to what she wanted to know. No, hey, how are you; what's your name? Nope...just...you don't seem very happy. Why are you here? Talk about an extrovert. It was simply amazing. I found her absolutely fascinating.

"You are a very interesting woman." I told her. "By the way, I'm Carter. Carter Anderson."

"I know. James told me."

"Well," I paused. I didn't really know what to say. "I will see you tomorrow. Maybe. If I haven't drunk so much beer that I can't see straight."

I downed the last of my beer. With a last nod of my head to both Alice and Jimmy, I got up and left. I didn't know whether Alice was just a bitch or the most refreshing person I had ever met in my life.

I was almost across the parking lot and to my car when I heard someone behind me. Without thinking, I lashed out. There was a small squeal as I grabbed my attacker's arm.

"Let go," Alice ordered.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?!" I demanded. "Do you think this army jacket is a costume?"

Alice followed my pointing finger to the jacket I wore. She frowned at me.

"I was going to apologize to you, but you know what? You don't deserve one. Were you really going to drive in your condition?"

“What condition?” I returned just as angry as her.

Alice snatched my keys from me. This time my army instincts failed me. “You’re not driving when I saw you drink at least fifteen glasses of beer while I was on shift. Who knows how much you actually drank.”

“I believe Jimmy would. He holds my tab.”

“I’m not joking around.”

“I’m not either. Give me m keys back before I hurt you.”

“Just try it.”

We were almost face to face by this point. I contemplated knocking her on her fucking ass but fought against the urge. No doubt the uppity bitch would call the cops on me. As a struggled with this moral dilemma, Jimmy poked his nosey fucking nose out the door.

“What’s going on out here?”

Without looking back at Jimmy, Alice replied, “I was just offering to drive Mr. Anderson home or call a cab for him.”

Jimmy took a step outside. “You don’t have to do that. I can drive Carter home.”

Glaring at Jimmy and seeing only one way to get any personal satisfaction out of this whole mess, “I actually already said yes to her offer to take me home. See? She has my keys.”

I could see the indecision on Jimmy’s face. For some reason he had decided to get a stick up his ass about this woman and me. Considering our current falling out, I was going to use Alice to push the stick up a bit farther.

“Well, at least let me follow so I can bring you back here to your car, Alice.”

“That would be good, boss. Just let me go get my things.”

Alice went back inside; my keys still in her hand. Jimmy and I faced off in his parking lot.

“She got your keys from you?” He asked. I sensed some humor coloring his words.

“I gave them to her.” I lied. Jimmy smiled at me. Obviously I didn’t lie convincingly enough. “Where the hell did you find her?”

Jimmy laughed. “All she did was answer a help wanted ad.”

“She’s...” I thought about the whole night and how new it was to me. “Something else.”

“Yeah, I like her.”

“Like her, like her?” I inquired. It would explain a lot.

“No, what are you? In grade school again? Like her, like her? Jesus,” Jimmy smiled at me. I shook my head. And just like that, our feud was over. Like two chicks we just needed to yell and sulk a bit and all was good again.

Alice interrupted our ceasefire by returning outside. She was back in her sweats and had a bag over her shoulder. My keys were in her hand. She looked back and forth between Jimmy and me. It seemed like she knew something had passed between us, but she didn’t comment.

“Which car is yours?” She asked me.

I gave one last look at Jimmy before leading her to my beat-up Buick. There were rust spots everywhere, and the passenger door made a God-awful squeal as I struggled with it to open. She also didn’t comment on my choice of vehicle as she placed herself behind the wheel.

“So...where am I going?” She started the car up. It coughed a bit, but eventually the engine rumbled to life.

“Summer Villa Apartments. Take US-101 S.” I instructed. “It’s going to be twenty-eight minutes to a little over an hour if we hit traffic.”

She pulled out of the parking lot and made her way to the highway. We didn't talk much at first. Either she had used up all her brazenness in the bar or was disinclined to talk to me anymore. I decided to sit back and relax in my comfortable beer haze. But finally she did say something to me.

"Isn't there a rule about being drunk in uniform?"

That caused me to chuckle. "I'm not in uniform right now. I'm just wearing my coat. Nam vets do a lot worse in their jackets."

She snorted a bit at that.

"Why do you care about my drinking so much?" I asked.

"I don't like it."

"Well...at least you're honest, but it's not really any of your damn business."

"No, it's not." She agreed and didn't even sound mad that I had snapped at her. "I just hate to see the people in the bar that are clearly alcoholics ruin their lives by being in the bottom of a beer glass day in and day out. There is so much more out there."

"Is there really? I've never seen it."

She sent a glare my way for that flippant response. "Why are you so bitter? The war?"

"Everyone always thinks that. But, no, I'm not the stereotypical wacked-out vet."

"Funny, you're doing a good job acting like one."

"Look, lady. My problems started way before the war, okay?" I forced my mouth shut. I hadn't really wanted to tell her that.

"James really worries about you, you know? I see it in the way he looks at you when you're in the bar."

"Dear God, don't make us sound like a gay couple." I tried to brush off the concern in her voice. Attempts to make me feel guilty don't really work on me.

"Typical male," she sighed.

"Jimmy is a worrywart. He thinks he needs to take care of everyone around him. He's worried about you, too. He said you and your boyfriends are fighting. Don't you think your boyfriend will get angry you took a drunk home?"

Alice pursed her lips. "No, I don't think he'll care so much. He dumped me. That's why I was late...I...didn't take it so well."

"His loss," I replied automatically.

Alice started laughing. Half-heartedly, but laughing nonetheless. "I would think you'd say my boyfriend dodged a bullet by dumping me. We haven't really gotten alone since I started talking to you."

"Ahem, I believe I was the one who started the conversation. But, I have to say, you are the most interesting person I have ever met." I smiled at her. "A bit like Jimmy."

"I like James. He's a good boss."

We sat in silence for a while; neither one of us really knowing what to say to each other. I stared out the window trying to figure out how close we were to my apartment. Almost there.

"Do you always try to save the drunks in the bar, Alice?"

"No,"

"Then way me?"

"As I said, I like James."

"So your attempt a redeeming me is a favor to James?"

"I'm not attempting to redeem you, Carter. I didn't tell you to stop drinking. I'm just trying to understand why you drink."

"I like it," I shrugged. "There isn't much more to it than that."

"So, you don't think you're self-medicating depression?"

"No, I don't," I tried not to get angry with her again, but her poking into my life was unwelcome. Especially when she had it wrong. "Turn right at the next exit."

I guided her to my apartment. We pulled into the parking lot. Jimmy parked his Honda next to us.

"See you around I guess," I said as Alice handed over my keys.

"Yeah, I suppose I will."

I chose to ignore the disapproval in her voice. We got out of my car, and Alice got into Jimmy's. Jimmy waved at me and backed up.

Reason

Woman with the sweet lovin' better than a white line,

Bring a good feeling ain't had in such a long time,

Save my life...

--Head East

It's weird having someone you don't really know worried about you. I continued to see Alice at the bar. Now that I knew she was there, it seemed like she was always there. Almost as regular as me. I learned from Jimmy that she was taking some college courses online, trying to finish a degree, and that her job at Jimmy's was to pay the bills. I had figured someone who apparently hated seeing people use alcohol to drown their sorrows as much as she did wouldn't really want to work in a bar her whole life. She was actually trying to become a social worker. Oddly, that seemed to fit. Well, maybe not oddly. Odd that I felt that that was right for her. I mean, honestly, I didn't really know her at all. It felt like I did. Probably that had something to do with how candid she was.

I started to stay later and later at the bar...later than usual for me, so I could talk to Alice when she stayed to help Jimmy clean up. I learned a lot about her; she didn't learn nearly as much about me. That didn't seem to bother her though.

One night she suggested that I help with the clean up too, since I had helped make the mess. I smiled and joined in.

Jimmy kept an eye on me the whole time. I got the feeling he thought of Alice like a sister. It made the situation more interesting. And more fun. Talking with Alice was fun. She drove me home a few more times. Sometimes we even went to a twenty-four hour diner to get something to eat before she dropped me off. I just left my car at Jimmy's. There was nothing in it

to steal, the car itself wasn't worth much either, and I could always find another way to work and back to Jimmy's.

Alice and I started dating. I don't know whether it was me or Jimmy who was more surprised when she agreed to go to a movie with me. After that there was some bowling. And then she came to a couple poker games at my place. I was pleasantly pleased to see she was very good at the game. I don't know whether this was her plan or not, but as our relationship got more serious I stopped using drugs and cut back on my alcohol consumption.

A bar

"Hey, Jim." I sat down at the bar in front of him.

Jimmy looked up at me. "The usual?"

I shook my head no. "I'm just here to pick up Alice."

"So, things are going well with you guys?" Jimmy gave me a glass filled with coke. "You haven't been in here for awhile now."

I slowly sipped, thinking about what I wanted to say. "Jim...I think I love her."

"Ah..." Jimmy hesitated. "Dude, it's only been...what? A couple of weeks?"

"Yeah, I know," I couldn't be annoyed by his skepticism.

"I think it's your dick talking not your heart."

I nodded in agreement even though that wasn't how I really felt. I was sure I loved Alice. I didn't want to keep discussing it with Jimmy however. Someone in the bar might overhear and tell Alice.

Jimmy cleared his throat loudly to get my attention. I glanced up to see him staring at the door. I turned about to see what the fuss was about and inwardly groaned.

"It's Peter-ass and Shrooms," Jimmy told me unnecessarily.

Peter and Scott were both friends of mine and Jimmy's from our drug days. Jimmy had said good-bye to the two of them and the drugs a long time before me. My exodus from that life was recent. About a couple of weeks recent. Alice hated drugs as much, if not more, than alcohol, and I wasn't going to do anything to screw up this relationship. Alice was refreshing and fun. It felt like I was starting a whole new chapter. She even talked me into taking some online courses, so I could get a job where I was happier. I hadn't done it yet, but I was seriously looking into it.

Anyways, Peter and Scott wouldn't help me in my goal to not screw up my relationship with Alice. Peter was called Peter-ass because he liked dating younger women...a lot younger. Last I heard, he was "dating" a sixteen year old. Scott's nickname was Shrooms because that was his drug of choice. None of this bothered me, but I had a feeling it would bother Alice.

"Corporal," Scott said and saluted me. A salute that would've never been tolerated in the Army.

Peter smacked my back in greeting. I nodded to the two of them.

"Haven't seen you around, Corp," Scott continued. "A few of us are hanging out at Gram's tonight if you want to come. The party will be booming." Meaning there would be 'shrooms there. Big shocker. Gram always had drugs at his place. I think he spent 24/7 being high on something. I would put money that either Peter or Scott probably had some stuff on their person's as well.

"You could come too, Jim," Peter invited.

Jimmy smiled, but I could tell there was no real feeling in it. "I think I'm going to have to pass. Got a business to run."

Peter shrugged and turned back to me.

"I'm going to have to take a rain check as well. I've got plans already with Alice."

"Dude, you're already whipped, aren't cha?" Scott laughed at me.

It was my turn to shrug.

"Are you going to be doing a disappearing act on us like good old James here?" Peter demanded.

"Nah," I said. "We can still have poker nights and watch football games. Just no more junk for me."

"Alright, if that's what you want. You always know where you can get some stuff if you decide you're tired of being whipped." And with that, Peter and Scott took their beers and sat at a table across the room.

Usually a guy is considered a pussy for saying something like, "I saw her and I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her." Or, even better, "She's my reason for being alive, man. I live because of her." But when it comes to me and my girlfriend, Alice, that's the God's honest truth.

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