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Savages

**A senior thesis submitted to
The Department of English
College of Arts & Sciences**

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English
by

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Abstract

Savages is a memoir chronicling my near-immediate expulsion from the Army upon arriving to Basic Training. The story begins with my discharge, made on the grounds that I was “psychologically unstable” and therefore couldn’t be trusted as a soldier. The diagnosis was based primarily on a sexual assault I went through several months before shipping. When I was given my in-processing packet on the first day, one of the questions asked “Have you ever been raped or sexually assaulted?” By opting for honesty and marking yes, I sealed my fate and lost my job in a single pen stroke. For the next two months I was stranded at Ft. Sill, forcibly kept in the Army’s “Holdover Program” until my paperwork could be completed.

In the Army, a “holdover” is a soldier who’s somehow been stopped from going to training. This could be due to a number of reasons: illness, injury, family emergency, and mental illness are some of the most common. A “refusal to serve” discharge, AKA quitting, is also among the most common. It would seem that the military would jump at the opportunity to get useless or unmotivated soldiers off the payroll, but they often don’t. Instead, paperwork is constantly lost, ship dates are missed, and deadlines are pushed back with shocking frequency. Less surprising, they seem to use the holdover program as a cheap way to complete daily tasks such as chipping ice or trimming grass.

The memoir deals heavily with themes of mental illness and the stigma surrounding it. Time and time again my characters denies being crazy or mentally ill, but as I proceed through therapy and begin to unwrap my past, a past filled with depression, self-mutilation, anxiety, and attempted suicide is revealed, proving the narrator isn’t as stable as she initially claims.

The overall theme of the memoir surrounds identity and how identity is formed. In the beginning, the narrator’s identity is built almost exclusively upon the Army. She believes it’s the only thing that will give her what she wants in life. When that identity is pulled out from under her, she’s forced to reevaluate what it means to be human, to be fallible, and to be broken in a world that demands perfection.

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Acknowledgments

I'd like to give a special thanks to my husband, Walter, who has proven himself my best friend, my greatest muse, and my biggest cheerleader throughout this process. You've worked so hard to support me as a writer, and it's only because of you that *Savages* has finally been realized. I love you and look forward to all the adventures and endeavor that lie ahead.

I'd like to thank my parents, all four of them. You have all made me the person I am today and none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you, all of you, for loving me the way that you have and giving me the support to be my own person.

I'd also like to thank the savages, the backbone of my project, even the ones who didn't make it into the memoir. By name, I'd like to thank the men who kept me sane during the whole ordeal: Skylar Wilcox, Devin Edwards, and Cody Allen—You guys are and will always be my battle buddies.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the holdovers who are no longer with us today. Shaffer and Erwin, you are missed. You are grieved. You are not failures or quitters. Holdovers from all over the country mourn for you, and I thank you for being part of my story.

Introduction

Savages was born a product of mental illness. Originally titled *This is Not a War Story*, I began writing as a means to escape. My experiences at Ft. Sill left me severely depressed for almost a year. During that time, I lost over forty pounds. I slept only one or two hours a night. I had to skip class some days simply because I couldn't stop crying.

At first I didn't do anything about the depression, I just let it consume me. But that same year I ended up taking a writing class that featured books like *The Bell Jar*, *Girl, Interrupted*, and *Madness: A Bipolar Life*. In those books I discovered a tragic sense of familiarity, a comradeship with my savage sisters and their brutally honest accounts of living with mental illness. Inspired by their honesty, I first began drafting that same year.

Mental illness, due to its purely internal nature, is very difficult to capture with words alone. In the beginning I struggled to find the right words for the emotions I wanted to convey. Women like Marya Hornbacher, Sylvia Plath, and Susanna Kaysen acted as guides for me, providing a tradition of insane women and insane stories on which to judge my own tale. Although I make no attempt to capture these author's styles, they provided me examples of surrealism and tension, specifically on the topic of mental illness, that I feel many of my scenes manage to capture.

Another source of inspiration came to me through the alcohol-fueled authors of the 20th century, whose distinctly masculine styles provided much of the inspiration for my own. Authors like Charles Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson, and Ernest Hemingway, with their gruff, aggressive, and sometimes vulgar styles, helped me form the slightly rude, wholly obscene, and very conversational style I utilize throughout *Savages*.

But as valuable as all of these sources were throughout my writing process, I believe that the most important resource is the author themselves. Writing begets writing, is what I've discovered. No matter the books I read, the exercises I do, or the classes I take, the greatest way to inspire writing is to simply begin writing. It's as if writing has a tumbling effect to it. You

begin slow and tedious, cursing yourself for ever thinking to do this in the first place, but eventually the momentum begins to carry you. You go faster and better and harder until eventually you're rolling, head over heels down a cliff face, drafting 30 pages in a day and unable to type fast enough for your brain.

What began as scattered journal entries, manic scribbles, and nearly illegible notes ultimately began to take shape. Over the past three years, I've written somewhere between 400 and 500 pages on the subject of Ft. Sill, and I'm sure I have much more inside me just waiting to come out. I hope to continue this project over the next several years and ultimately publish it as a novel in the future.

Prologue

You can call me Sequeira.

Or call me Soldier. Call me holdover, or quitter, or Shakira. Call me a waste of space.

Call me Private Pyle. You can even call me crazy—I don't mind.

These names aren't my birthright. That is to say, I wasn't born with them. Some names don't make it onto birth certificates or diplomas. They're too honest for paperwork, too honest for newborns—who are still too sweet and sinless for these hard truths. Names of this particular breed can't be given in the same way our birth names were given. They're much too real for that. Names of this breed must be collected throughout one's lifetime, like scars. In a single moment they're created, usually accompanied by a story, sometimes catalyzed by hard drink. Like scars, some of these names will be permanent, but many will fade. They will warp. They'll change with time.

Before this all began, I used to think that names were important, that they held a certain power, a power of history, or heritage, or self—something like that. I thought names captured an intangible aspect of a person's life, like the briefest summary of a person there is—shorthand for a soul.

Which is why I'll never forget holding my first Army nametape in the palm of my hand. How could I? Seeing my name, bold and black on that digicam background meant that I actually belonged somewhere. I ran my fingers over the smooth embroidery, admiring it, savoring the curve of the 's', the ring of the 'q', the sharp, linear, 'i'. Eighteen years old, fresh from my first year of college, that nametape was the peak of my achievement thus far. And the first time I ever noticed my name change.

Suddenly, it was as if my first name, my birth name, transformed into something pathetically insufficient. It wasn't adequate shorthand for who I was anymore. The moment I fastened that nametape over my right breast, I became "Sequeira", a soldier, a warrior even, if you believe the commercials. And, of course, I did.

The weather in Oklahoma fucking bites.

I'm from the Central Valley, I know heat. Summer days run over 100 degrees back home, easy—but the heat in Oklahoma is thicker. It's like soup. California air is cool and light, even when the sun is blazing. You have to look out for sunburns but a couple of minutes under the shade of a sweetgum tree can relieve the suffering of even the hottest day. Oklahoma isn't like that. Oklahoma heat choked me when I stepped off the plane. The air hung heavy in my lungs. It made me breathless and ravenous for nicotine. Oklahoma weather is a burden.

It's chaotic too. One minute you're sweating in 106 degree heat, the next minute you're drenched and it's 70 but it feels like 50 because no one is ever prepared for it when it comes. The rain always gets you. Try as you might, there's never enough time to fumble with your camelback and pull out your poncho before the storm has soaked through your jacket, through your shirt, down to your underwear and is running down your ass crack in torrents. By then you realize that there's no point in the poncho anymore. Putting it on will just make you feel like a human sauna.

Of course, we humans are flexible creatures. We learn to enjoy things. We romanticize them. You'll stand out in the pouring rain, taking the sheets of water with perfect resolve and suddenly you'll start to enjoy it. You'll feel like a badass, watching others cover their head and run indoors as you're forced to endure the downpour. The sky flashes tremendously over and over, casting powerful shadows each time. It becomes exciting.

And once you've gotten used to the chilling rain and awful wind, it changes again. The moment you start to enjoy the booms of thunder and the way the lightning tingles on your skin, once the thrill of a storm hits you--it's gone. You're left looking soaked and stupid in three inches of mud and not a cloud in sight. Once the sun bursts through and the steam starts rising everything is twice as bad as before. The world becomes a sizzling, steaming hellscape, and you're just left to sweat.

CH 1

It was on my second day of reception, during the so-called “Week Zero” of Basic Training, that a Drill Sergeant came into my bay and told me I wasn’t going to be in-processing that day.

“Lucky you, Sequeira,” Drill Sergeant Smith sneered, his lips curling back to reveal dying teeth, “You’re going to CBHS today. No in-processing.”

Confused, I asked him what that meant, and where I was going, but he just grumbled something about a checkup and a psych eval. “Make sure you get two battle buddies, Sequeira. You’re on suicide watch.”

Suicide Watch? “I don’t understand, Drill Sergeant.”

“You don’t have to. Just grab your battles and get down to CQ. There’s a problem with your packet.”

My packet? Which goddamn packet? The Army was full of nothing but packets, endless piles of them. Did he mean my recruitment packet? My enlistment packet? My in-processing packet? Or maybe my medical packet? Thumbing through piles of mental indexes, I tried to recall what could have possibly put me on suicide watch. *And Jesus Christ, suicide watch?* Did I temporarily lose my mind when I wasn’t paying attention? Had I walked around in a fugue state, writing macabre poetry in my Army Manual? Did I tie a noose in my sleep? I’d only been there two days, how the hell could they put me on suicide watch?

Unfortunately for me and my many questions, the Drill Sergeant who delivered the news was Drill Sergeant Smith, an ugly, impatient man who didn’t like to explain himself. A naturally slight man, Smith was smaller than me, maybe 3 inches shorter and 30 lbs lighter, but he carried himself with a Napoleonesque illusion of height. His teeth were yellow. His head was shaped like a cone. His breath always smelled like milk. All in all, he was one of the most unpleasant people on base. And, of course, as luck would have it, he was *my* Drill Sergeant.

I stood awkwardly beside my bunk for a few moments, stuck at parade rest, brain spinning. I hoped that Smith would pull at least one other girl out of the bay as a suicide risk. Maybe I wasn't the only one. That would make it easier, more explainable. But no, he didn't talk to anyone else. He just told me to go to CQ, and walked out of the bay without another word.

Son of a bitch... I couldn't understand why I was the only one who had to take a special psych evaluation. I looked around the bay at all the other females who were dressing for formation. Instinctively, nervously, I rubbed my left arm through my jacket sleeve, wondering why me and no one else.

Although it took some convincing to get people to agree, I eventually managed to gather two girls from my bay as my battle buddies. The first was a girl named O'Reily, my bunk-mate and the first person I had met when I arrived. Slight in build, mousy, with big eyes and high cheekbones, O'Reily had that classical "girl-next-door" look. Like most friendships, ours was one of serendipity. On the bus ride to base, we sat in the same seats together. When we arrived we got assigned to the same bay. We had the same job, both of us Intelligence Analysts. Turns out, we even received the same orders to train at Ft. Huachuca after Basic Training.

"Shit! O'Reily! Look! Look! We can be battle buddies the whole time!" I yelled when I found out, scrambling up the frame at the foot of her bed and throwing myself onto her wool blanket, careful not to mess up her hospital corners. "My orders are for the same date at yours!"

O'Reily threw her arms up in the air triumphantly. "From the bus to the battlefield BITCHES!" she roared.

The other girl was Johansson, an indisputable skyscraper of a woman whose six-foot frame towered over most of our soldiers. She was a ROTC Cadet, on her way to being an Officer, and made sure everyone knew about it. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't out of some misplaced sense of superiority. Johansson was genuinely amazed that she had made it this far into the Army to begin with. The whole bay once had a push-up contest and, the poor thing, she couldn't do any more than five before her twiggy little arms gave out from under her and she collapsed onto the

floor exhausted. (“I can run for miles though,” she explained, dangling her grasshopper legs off her bunk and wiggling her toes).

Together, and only after bribing them each with a couple of stamps, a pen each, and my (useless) bottle of “minimum-hold” hairspray, the three of us made our way down to Central Quarters (CQ). Outside, the other sleepy-eyed soldiers were already lined up in a groggy, shuffling, formation. Once at CQ, Drill Sergeant sat us down in a room with a big television and rows of grey padded chairs. A couple of other soldiers were already camped out, waiting for further instruction with bored, tired, expressions. Some wore PT uniforms and sneakers instead of uniforms and boots, like brand-new soldiers who hadn’t received uniforms, “Day-Ones”. One had his knee wrapped up in a bandage, and crutches were leaned up against his chair.

I remember thinking it was weird. Even though they were dressed like Day-Ones, they didn’t look like Day-Ones. Day-Ones always looked scared and nervous, but these guys looked just as calm, jaded, and bored as the Drill Sergeants.

“Stay here.” Drill Sergeant Smith commanded, “Don’t talk.”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

I sat down in one of the chairs and hung my cap on my knee. Sunlight was just beginning to pour through the window, giving the usually cold, military presence a rare, golden glow. As I watched the soldiers outside, I noticed a group at the front of formation acting particularly rowdy. They were pushing each other around and laughing, making no attempt to hide their lack of discipline. I rolled my eyes at them.

Idiots... I thought, then returned my attention to the tiles on the floor, the nervous hangnail that tortured my left thumb, and the anxiety that hung in the air. *What the fuck could I have possibly put in that damn packet?* I couldn’t bear the thought that this bullshit might slow me down. I wanted to get my training over and done with, move on with my career, but I’d heard of people getting stuck on Army bases because of problems with their paperwork. Hell, my

brother, Danny, almost missed a deployment because of a bad suicide-watch call. He was taking a class for his job and another soldier peeked at his notebook when Dan wasn't looking. Turns out, to pass the time, my brother likes to write down the lyrics to his favorite heavy metal albums. The soldier mistook the lyrics as suicide notes, reported my brother, and Dan's unit almost deployed without him before he could resolve the confusion.

Thinking about Danny actually made me feel a little better. *These things just happen sometimes, Randi... It's okay. You'll be fine.* Tension eased from my chest, and I took a deep breath. Even if this hiccup set me back a couple weeks, it didn't matter. I was finally there. I was in the Army. Hiccups or not, I couldn't be stopped.

It felt like had been working towards this goal for so long, ever since Dan joined. I was in the 2nd grade when he left home. He was a metal head with black fingernails and a headful of ginger-colored braids when he left, but when he came back he came back a soldier. The same thing happened to my sister, Staci, a few years later. Kids go into the Army and grownups come out. That's all I needed to know.

For years just the word inspired envy in me—"Soldier." I wanted to be a soldier. I wanted it so badly that I willingly subjected myself to "Boot Camp Bible studies", and "Soldier of God" campaigns just to see what it felt like to wear the title for a week. Some little girls grow up wanting to be moms, or athletes, or doctors, or politicians—all admirable ventures, but not for me. I just wanted to be a badass, the strongest person in the room, the one person nobody could ever fuck with.

And I was for a time. Thanks to an early and very abrupt growth spurt, I was bigger, taller, and stronger than most of the boys growing up. A natural tomboy, I spent many childhood summers playing war with my cousins, lobbing dirt clods and rocks at each other, rolling our tongues across our teeth to impersonate the *clickclickclickclick* of a machine gun's roar. In middle school, Sapphic rumors followed me everywhere, fueled by my sailor's mouth and over-the-top, tough-girl attitude. In high school I cut off all my hair and spent many afternoons in the math

classroom, neglecting my tutoring and trying to beat the guys in arm wrestling or pushup contests.

Of course, plans changed throughout my life, as they do with all children. The Army wasn't a constant. Sometimes I wanted to be a forensic scientist, or a mortician. I wanted to be a vet for several years, and a biologist, briefly. But eventually I realize that all of these careers involve math, an Achilles heel of mine I've never overcome.

I ended up joining the Army with my boyfriend, Walt, in 2013, three weeks before we graduated high school. That's just the kind of person I am. I don't like to waste time, so I didn't. Still seventeen when I joined, I was already working out, changing my diet, and preemptively developing a nicotine addiction so I could fit in with military life when I got there.

As my fellow classmates scrambled around, trying to find direction in their lives, I had the luxury of a perfectly straight road, a line from me to success. Forced to wait a year before I shipped to training, I signed up for a school in Oregon, moved away from home, and found an Intel unit willing to take me on up north. The plan was to be a fulltime student and Army Reservist for four years, then to go full-time as an Officer once I had my diploma.

A year might seem like a long time to wait for BCT, but it's more common than you'd think. Ever since the Recession in '07, lots of people have been trying to join. The Army has downsized, restrictions have gotten tighter. People have gotten fatter. Damn near everyone needs a waiver these days and waivers slow everything down. Not to mention tattoos, piercings, gauges, and the waivers that go with them. Job scarcity or unavailability for training can get in the way, as was the case with me, so can strange or unclarified medical conditions, like with Walt. All these factors make the joining the Army a notoriously slow and sluggish process. Everything moves with the urgency and speed of a cold lava lamp.

There were perks to the wait though. In that span of a year I worked my ass off, literally. I had to lose weight. I was a vegetarian. I studied everything I could about Army life. With the help of a strict workout regimen and the encouragement of many, very loud, NCO's I even got

myself to post-training physical standards. Right before I left, I had my two-mile run down to 17 minutes, my push-up count up to 35 in two minutes, and my sit ups up to 80 in the same amount of time. Of course, I was still a little disappointed by my run, but I had nine weeks of training to work on that so I wasn't very concerned.

In my mind, I had life locked down. I was in good shape. I was smart. I had a promising career, a boyfriend I intended to marry. I had everything I needed and I was only 18. The horizon stretched in front of me, bright and welcoming, as I flew from the rolling, amber, hills of California to the flat plains of Oklahoma, the sun just beginning to set as I arrived. Nervous excitement fluttered in my belly as I strained to see further into the golden glow all around, certain that the horizon held sweeter secrets than even the sky before me.

Unfortunately though, as I've said before, Oklahoma skies have a way of surprising you.

CH. 2

Back in CQ, a Drill Sergeant I didn't recognize popped his head into the room and asked how many of us were going to CBHS. Johansson, O'Reily and I all raised our hands. Glancing around, I saw another trio in the back raising their hands too. I figured one of them must be on suicide watch like me. The boy sandwiched between the other two seemed nervous and twitchy. I could only assume it was him by the way he looked as if he had been sculpted by stress. His every feature was intense. Small and waifish, with the biggest blue eyes I had ever seen, the broad, white pools that framed his irises were stained red with tears. His eyelids had swollen up, pink and puffy, making the blue stand out even more in contrast. Occasionally, he'd let out a gentle snuffle, or a quiet sob, but otherwise he was silent. On his jacket was his nametape, labelled: "Wilcox."

"Six Jimmy Deans!" Drill Sergeant called out.

"What's a Jimmy Dean?" I whispered to O'Reily, and she shrugged.

A few moments later Drill Sergeant walked back in with several shrink-wrapped meals. He threw one at each of us. Inside each package was a can of tuna, three small pieces of flatbread, a carton of raisins, a granola bar, and a juice box. As I examined the contents, disillusionment gnawed at me. It looked like a prepackaged lunch for grade-school fieldtrips, and a far cry from the MRE's I had described to me before I left. Disappointed, I sighed, tucked the meal into my pack, and hoped we'd be having burgers at the DFAC that night.

"Alright crazies," Drill Sergeant said, "We're loading up for CBHS now. No sick bay." Drill Sergeant pointed towards the small cluster of soldiers near crutch-guy. "You guys are going with Drill Sergeant Liming after he drops off the Med Holds." He gestured to the gigantic, bald-headed, Drill Sergeant standing next to him.

At this point, I had yet to meet Liming. What lovely days those were. I was still young, naïve, blissful in my ignorance of 6'3" half-human, half-orangutan Army experiments. Liming was a 1st platoon Drill Sergeant, not technically one of mine, but even so I was already forming plans on how to avoid him in the future. He was one of the meanest looking men I had ever seen. Deep wrinkles etched his forehead from years of scowling. His arms were long and strong, primate-like. His eyes were squeezed almost completely shut, marked by foreign suns in foreign deserts far hotter than our own. Worst of all, he was perpetually enraged even though nothing had happened to warrant his anger.

"Come on, cripples!" Liming barked. Crutch-guy, a big fella wearing PTs, and a female with a bad limp, all stood up and followed him out the door. Nobody looked pleased with the current arrangement and, for a moment, I swear I could hear Chopin's "Funeral March" playing in the background as they hobbled away.

A few minutes later, we loaded into the CBHS van in silence. I took a lot of effort to keep my face calm and relaxed despite the sick feeling that swirled around my stomach. I didn't understand. It still didn't make any sense why they would send me to CBHS. It didn't make sense that I was on suicide watch. I had been on base for less than 48 hours. I didn't even have time to

think about being crazy, let alone act on it. As I watched the flat lands of Oklahoma whirr by my window, a bad feeling rose up from my chest. I hoped, I prayed, that what I felt was just a storm or a twister coming on and not the first thread of my future slowly unraveling. As I stared out the window, past the horizon, my eyes scanned across its edges, and I begged to see grey.

CH. 3

“Whudya here for?” A man with skin like a coin purse squinted up at us from the CBHS main desk.

“I need to see the doctor,” I replied, wondering how long it took, exactly, for one to sunburn off every pore on their body like he had so skillfully done.

“Fill this out.” He slid a packet towards me. “And don’chu lie. We’ll know,” he threatened.

As I filled in the packet, nerves chewed at my throat. I hate paperwork. I can’t help it. I always sound sketchier on paper than I am in real life. In real life, I’m pretty alright. I’m an artist, a student, possibly an eccentric but by no means a troublemaker. On paper, I’m the daughter of a crack-addicted mother. My father, who was a known and active Alcoholic Anonymous member, died when I was 14. I was raised from then on by my step mom, another active AA member, who remarried years later, to another active AA member.

On paper, I’m reduced to an average GPA, 2 years of grief counseling, a family where Alcoholics Anonymous is a rite of passage, and a genetic disposition towards alcohol and drug abuse. They don’t care that my father was sober 15 years before he died or that my mother has never hurt a fly, despite the addiction. They just have to cull the herd.

I answered fairly honestly on the form. At least, I think I did. The brain is a tricky thing when it comes to honesty. Every day, we lie without even realizing it. The brain will fill in “I-don’t-knows” or “I-don’t-wanna-knows” with reasonable sounding guesses. This was the fourth or fifth packet I had filled out since I arrived, and honesty had been my policy in large part. There

were a few things I was instructed to leave out, things that happened back in middle school, but the recruiter said it was fine. “Time changes things, soldier. We know you’ll be fine.”

The form had the standard questions, ones I had seen many times before, but the stress of the situation made them seem different, more insidious. I took longer to answer each one, fearful that I might accidentally contradict a previous statement in a previous packet, acknowledging the futility of trying to remember.

“Does anyone in your family have a history of drug abuse?”

“Yes.”

“Does anyone in your family have a history of mental illness?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a history of alcohol or drug abuse?”

“No.”

“Do you have any recorded mental illnesses?”

I lingered over the word ‘recorded’ for a moment, thinking back on my past therapists. *Maybe I should put something about...* I thought, then stopped myself. *No. Remember what the recruiter said. You didn’t take the test, Randi. You’re not formally diagnosed. It says ‘recorded’ illnesses, you mark no.*

“Have you ever been sexually assaulted or raped?” My black pen hovered over the box for several moments as my eyebrows drew closer together. *Fuck this question.* It had thrown me for a loop the day before too. I know it’s not intended as a curve-ball question, but I still didn’t know how to hit the mark with it. Why were they asking it? What did it mean if I marked yes? If I marked no? What did it mean if I lied? I rolled the pen in between my fingers, contemplating my options, and cursing the question for even existing. Finally, I turned my body away from Johansson and O’Reily.

“Yes.” The same box I checked the day before. Bitter, I wondered why they felt the need to ask it once, let alone twice.

“Ye done?” The man peered over the edge of my clipboard from his cluttered desk.

“Almost, sir,” I said a little too-irritably, and snapped the clipboard towards my chest for privacy. Leather-man grumbled something about my wasting his time, so I decided to review my previous answers to make sure they were all correct. They were. With Mr. Pigskin’s eyes drilling holes in the top of my head, I filled out the rest of the questionnaire slowly and diligently. When I was done, I laid it down on his desk along with the clipboard and pen.

“May I use the latrine, Sir?” I asked.

In a typical Army fashion, the man groaned and leaned back in his chair dramatically, staring up at the ceiling as if God might strike him down and save him the effort of pointing me to a pisser. I shot a look past him at O’Reily and Johansson, who were both quietly cackling just out of earshot. “A’right...” He sighed when no lightning bolts rained down from the sky. “Get your battle buddy, and come on.”

I gestured towards O’Reily and Johansson for them to follow. Silently, the two of them marched over and fell in on either side of me. When he saw them, the man squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, sighed, then squinted them open again and glared at me. “You’re on suicide watch, aren’t ya?” He asked.

“Yes sir.”

He stood up and walked around the desk. “Follow me,” he said and led us down the hall to unlock the latrine. As he pushed open the door, he turned to us and explained that suicide watch had specific rules about these kinds of situations. Namely, the two of them needed to go into the stall and supervise me while I took a piss.

A long, tense silence followed that statement. Mortified, nobody could think of what to say. We just stared at the man with stunned expressions as the weight of those words sunk in.

“Uh... Sir?” I finally asked, blinking rapidly as if staring into bright lights. “Did... You just say they have to *watch* me pee?”

“They need to go in with you! Inside the stall! One has to go in the stall, one has to stay right outside,” he explained. “You can’t be by yourself, cause you might hurt yourself.”

O’Reily, Johansson and I just continued staring uncomfortably at him, waiting for the punch-line that wouldn’t come. Leatherface shifted nervously on his feet, avoiding eye contact with us. “Well?” he asked, gesturing for us to do *anything* but stare.

I could feel my brain short-circuiting. Embarrassment bloomed hot across my face and settled in my ears. “You said, ‘*in the stall*’, sir?” I asked, bewildered. It still didn’t make any sense why they had me on suicide watch. What the hell was on my packet?

Mr. Raisin-in-the-Sun shook his head. “Just go,” he sighed, gestured us in, and walked away.

As the door closed behind him, I whirled around to face the others. “No,” I spat, before they could say anything.. “Just... no. You are not following me. Sickos.” Both girls erupted into nervous giggles and I felt a wave of relief spreading throughout the room.

O’Reily snorted, “I totally thought you were gonna do it. We wouldn’t have let you live it down.” She poked Johansson in the ribs and they both broke out into girlish titters.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck you guys.” I stepped into the stall, thankful they weren’t making a big deal about it. Almost instinctually, I ran my hand along the bottom of the toilet paper dispenser, gingerly feeling for anything out of place. People who cut themselves will sometimes store their “sharps”—things like razors, thumbtacks, needles, etc., beneath sinks and paper dispensers, usually taped up against the bottom with a piece of scotch-tape. I learned that from one of my sisters, Hailey. Hailey was forced to stay in a psychiatric hospital for several months in high school after admitting to a doctor that she experienced suicidal thoughts and an urge to self-mutilate. She left depressed and came back, not cured, but with a new set of secretive skills, trained in the art of hiding her sins with scotch-tape and drain screens. Proud of her cleverness, she taught me all about it when she came home.

“They must really think you’re a nut-job to put you through all this, Sequeira.” O’Reily called to me through the stall.

“Yeah. It seems like they take this stuff really seriously,” Johansson leaned up against the stall door and spoke towards the ceiling. “What’d you do that was so....” she paused, looking for a polite word, “Well... crazy, I guess.”

“Shut up, ya assholes. I’m not crazy. I’m just.... I don’t know. I look bad on paper. I’m sure I can just talk my way outta whatever this is.”

They asked whether I thought I’d be able to complete my training, or if I thought they were going to send me home.

“I’m going to training, man.” I tucked my shirt back into my pants and stepped out of the stall. “I may be bad on paper, but I’m perfect for the Shit. I love the Army. Everything will be fine. Besides,” I continued, “there are crazies all over this Army. I’m gonna be just fine.”

CH. 4

These days, the word “Crazy” fits me like an old pair of jeans. It isn’t my most flattering title, but I’ve noticed the way it’s grown soft and comfortable against my skin. So comfortable in fact, that I often forget it’s there until someone points it out again.

“Crazy” wasn’t always so comfortable though. “Crazy” used to wrap itself around my belly and squeeze me until I puked. “Crazy” was too tight, too hard, too ugly to wear with confidence. It was a uniform, a scarlet letter worn with indignation. Time and time again, I tried to peel it off, but no matter how hard I pulled it only seemed to cling tighter. I couldn’t amputate the name from the way people saw me—and the fact that I went to a private Christian school wasn’t doing me any favors.

The money, the prestige, the suffocating moralism, a kid like me had no chance in a place like that. Other students thought I was weird. Teachers thought I needed help. The house phone would ring at night and the school’s principle, armed with a cornucopia of complaints,

would warn my parents about some of my more “offensive” interests and behaviors. Sometimes she complained about my inappropriate reading material, claiming True Crime anthologies and nude art books were “too mature” for children. Other times, we got calls about my intolerable toilet language, my inability to shut up in class, my difficulties getting along with others. That crazy old woman even accused me of trying to start my own satanic cult, an allegation I wear with pride to this very day.

As insufferable as the adults were, the kids were even worse. They liked to invent strange stories and sick narratives to fill in the holes of what they knew about me. By the 8th grade, I was followed by rumors involving schizophrenia, homicide, suicide, Satanism, animal sacrifice—even cannibalism. One kid heard a rumor that I intentionally broke my leg to get out of gym class. Another admitted to starting a rumor that I believed I could speak to squirrels. The rumors were fantastic, but the reality was much more embarrassing. My leg was injured because I tripped over my own feet during a math lecture, and I talked to squirrels because I was in the habit of feeding them the potato chips I neglected to eat at lunch each day.

“Crazy” was a name I earned even within the family. My step-mom teased that I “was acting like a serial killer” when I did an art project that involved blacking out the faces of magazine models and pasting them on ink-splattered paper. I considered it homage to horror movies, but she just thought it was creepy.

Teachers, therapists, grandparents, cousins, it seemed like everyone had something to say when it came to me and my interests—everyone except mom, that is. My biological mom, Deidre, never called me anything like “creepy” or “crazy.” But to be fair, that’s only because *she’s* so creepy and crazy, extending it to others would be a tremendous exercise in hypocrisy. Mom’s room, like mine, is stuffed delightfully full of countless piles of macabre artwork. Bloody babies, demonic dolls, insane clowns, most of her projects had to do with taking the innocent and making it dark, making it crazy, for the sake of juxtaposition and art.

Part of me has always wondered if maybe it's genetic. Hailey inherited mom's Bipolar Disorder, and we both got her eyes, so maybe I could inherit her creepiness. I still don't have an answer for that.

I used to get scared when people called me crazy. I was afraid that maybe they saw something I couldn't see. Everyone always said that if you're crazy then you won't know it. But if I knew that, did that mean I wasn't crazy? And if I knew *that*, did it mean I was? The paradox was baffling. Even worse, if you tried to break out of the cycle, maybe research some symptoms online, you realize you have them all. The ones you don't have will surely afflict you at any moment.

I would make myself crazy, dissecting my personality, trying to find which parts were sick and which were just strange, which were development and which were disorder. Was I lazy or catatonic? Stressed or Anxious? Sad or Depressed?

It seems insanity, even for the sufferer, is not an easy thing to gauge.

CH. 5

Six, long, grueling hours of questions later, I was being interviewed by the fourth doctor of the day. I was pretty sure I was at the end of the line, though. Dr. Kozik was the only one that wore a white coat and had a big office. His office was bigger than my childhood bedroom, with a smooth, wooden desk and bulletin boards covered in tacked-up patches of famous Army units. Behind his desk was a topographical map of Oklahoma.

As for Dr. Kozik himself, I could tell he spent too many years in the sun and heat. His face looked like it was melting, like a human popsicle left on a hot porch, lopsided and pooling on one side. A drop of sweat ran down his nose and dripped onto my enlistment packet. He shook the drop off the page and sighed: "Daggone, it's hot today..." he looked at me for a response, but I just kept staring at him in silence. A quiet rage was building inside me. His misshapen, sagging eyes darted back down to his paper. He cleared his throat, loosened his tie, and I watched as his

flabby neck skin waggled. “Very hot....” he repeated. The skin of his face hung like stretched taffy around deep eye sockets, and one side of his mouth drooped lower than the other, threatening to slide off his face and plop down onto his desk at any moment. As I thought about the man’s clearly declining structural integrity, he finally spoke:

“We’re gonna send you home, soldier.”

All the blood in my body rushed violently into my cheeks and ears. “What?” Beneath the smooth, wooden desk my fingers gripped deep into my left arm, struggling to hold me still.

“What do you mean, ‘sending me home’?”

Dr. Kozik folded his hands on his desk. Once properly poised, he rambled on about how “these days the U.S. Army is more serious about certain things.... We’re more careful about psychological evaluations and making sure we don’t accept anyone who isn’t a top-tier individual,” but as he talked his voice trailed off into Peanuts-style “wah-wahs”, worthless to my ears.

All the wasted time. All I could think of was the wasted time. Over 365 days of preparation. Over 365 days of studying. Over 365 days of dieting and watching my weight. Countless trips to recruiting stations, hours of online classes, exhausting monthly Battle Assemblies—all of it was for nothing.

An 18th of my life, wasted.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Soldier?” Dr. Kozik tapped this pen loudly against his clipboard to bring me back.

I opened my mouth soundlessly for a moment taking on the appearance of an asphyxiated fish drowning on dry land. No words came out as Dr. Kozik raised his eyebrows and I struggled for something to say, something to think, something to understand.

What is 1/18th as a percentage? Goddamnit, I’m so freaking bad at math...

“Soldier?” The doctor’s face was hardening as his patience began to wane.

“I.... just.... don’t understand...”

“What don’t you understand, soldier?”

“...I don’t understand because I passed MEPS, sir. They said I was fine... I swore in. I’m a soldier. I talked to them about everything.”

“Well, MEPS doesn’t catch everything, soldier. That’s why we have to do tests here too. Not to mention, you didn’t report that assault from last January. That’s new in your packet. We didn’t even know about that until yesterday, when you filled in your processing packet.”

Oh. My lungs seized up like a failing engine inside my chest. Oh, of course it was fucking paperwork. Of course it was. Green, Army-drab waves of panic and grief rolled through my body, settling heavy in my limbs. Why is it that the more official something tries to be, the more artificial its outcomes are? I knew I was already fucked. Futility hung in the air and layers of confidence sloughed away like dead skin as I began to realize that there was no chance to talk my way out of this. I was at the mercy of formalities and administration—the most detached of institutions. These people speak the language of paperwork, in finalities. Paperwork asks questions but gives no room for explanations—and I’m a woman in need of explanations.

“I think you’ve just had too much trauma in your life, okay? Between the long history of drug abuse in your family, all the death you had to deal with, and the assault... It’s all too recent. You won’t be able to adjust properly while under all this stress.”

“But I’m fine!” The words erupted hoarsely from my lungs. “I’m fine, I’m fine. I can handle this. I really can. Please, Please, just let me show you I can.” Dr. Kozik looked at me with a very serious expression for a few moments, as if considering something. A flicker of hope shot through me, but tears burned the corners of my eyes. Induced by panic, they betrayed my words.

Finally, he just said no. I was a suicide/homicide risk for the base. As far as he was concerned that’s all I was. That, and paperwork. According to him, I was getting a “General Discharge”, a type of discharge that was neutral in value. It was neither a good thing, nor a bad thing. “You won’t even have to tell employers,” he said, “It’ll just be as if you never joined.”

“As if you never joined” Disgust guided the corners of my mouth into a pitiful scowl.

Too-softly, I asked him if I could ever come back while trying to bite back tears. One slipped down my cheek and I quickly wiped it on my shoulder, hoping the Doc hadn't noticed.

Dr. Kozik nodded and handed me a tissue, which I wadded up in my fist and refused to use. "In two years you can rejoin. But in the meantime, I think you need to get some help."

My skin prickled at the word *'help'*. I knew what he meant. He meant therapy. I hated therapy. Talk therapy came and went throughout my life, but joining the Army was supposed to be the end of that cycle. I was pissed. Not only was the Doc putting me into some mandatory three-week therapy program, but it was some kind of bullshit therapy I'd never heard of before. He handed me a slip of paper that said "Three Sessions—Biofeedback Therapy" in chicken-scratch handwriting. "You seem stressed out," he added.

Deep inside my chest, I could hear the fast-paced clicking, like a pilot light, of something about to ignite. I sucked air through my teeth, filling my lungs with oxygen, feeding the flame. A whoosh, like gas igniting, puffed up my chest as I prepared to shriek at him: "Of course I'm fucking stressed out! I'm at Army Basic Training and I just got kicked out for being molested at a party by someone I trusted and having a dead dad! Of course I'm stressed out! Fuck you!"

But the explosion never made it to my mouth. It stayed trapped in my chest, lighting up the top of my spine like a wax candle. I paused, holding my breath until, "pssssshhhhhh," the force of the blast escaped through the cracks in my teeth like steam through pipes. Dr. Kozik stared at me through the smoke, waited patiently for me to respond. But there were no words.

"It'll be okay," he half-smiled. "You'll be okay."

Disgust crawled along the nape of my neck. I hate it when people say that.

Finally, he released me. I guess it wasn't just me. There were no more words left for anyone. So I stood, snapped to attention, did an about face, and marched out of the office without saying goodbye. As I walked down the hall I felt compelled to turn back and see the doctor one last time. I couldn't help it. I needed to take a second to hate him before I never saw him again.

As I stared, I found myself hoping that he would look up so that he could see me hating him. I thought maybe if he saw me hating him as fiercely as I was then he'd finally see that I'm a badass who can't be fucked with. He'd call me back into his office and congratulate me on my hardened disposition. Oh yeah, he'd be amazed. He'd say it was all just a test, to check my resolve. He'd shake my hand and put me on the waiting list for Airborne school, say I was going right after AIT. I'd ace Airborne training then be on my way to become the first female Ranger to pass the school with no handicaps.

But he didn't look up. He was already too involved in his next daily task, whatever it might be. I could only assume it had something to do with ruining someone else's life. I watched him for a moment and allowed myself to bask in bitterness.

A few hours later, as Drill Sergeant Daniels drove us back to the bays in that shitty white van, I noticed that the horizon was blue and crystal clear. There wasn't a cloud in sight. My twister had never arrived, and the sun was already beginning to set. I knew that as the day slowly faded, the past was being forced farther and farther away. Soon, the setting sun would light the sky, and the past, on fire. Once the flames died away all that would be left is ash, thick and black as the night sky. The day was nearly gone, and with it went my straight and narrow path.

For the next few days, it felt as if life floated between my ears and rolled off my grey matter in tight little beads. None of it stuck. The memories are hazy, a little stressful, but mostly just drab and without texture, without color. I remember very little detail. For those days, I was like a speeding vehicle on autopilot, navigating a road I thought was straight but actually did flip-flops and barrel rolls. I ate very little, slept very little. I had to go through in-processing with my unit, knowing full-well that it was a waste—I wasn't going with them to the other side. I wasn't going to graduate.

All around me, the world increased in weight. The camelback hanging from my shoulders felt like lead, it forced my spine to bow to the ground. My boots cracked through the pavement with every step. My skull fused with my spine from the pressure of my cap.

Around day four, I realized there must be more to weight than just gravity.

CH. 6

When I first joined the Army, I had to go to MEPS twice because of my weight. I wasn't fat, I was just... big. "Barn-like" is a phrase I've heard before, "sturdy" is another. I was 5'8, 175 lbs., a healthy weight by most civilian standards, but ten pounds over according to the Army. It was a hell of a battle losing the weight, but I managed to shed the extra pounds with a week and a half of clean eating, exercise, and, of course, borderline anorexic fasting habits.

The first time I went to MEPS, I went in a van filled with recruits, all of us headed to get our physicals done at the same time. Walt was with me, along with five other naive recruits all nervously chattering as we approached the station. As awkward as it was trying to make conversation when all we could think about was failing but it eased some of the nervousness going through it with others.

On my second trip to MEPS, I went alone with two recruiters. I had to have two recruiters because I'm female. We need a chaperone—they say it's a liability thing, meant to keep recruiters from blackmailing females into fucking them as they went through their enlistment. Usually, I'd think the rule silly, but on that day I was just relieved the Sergeants had each other for conversation instead of relying on me. I knew that if I talked I would probably just say something to make me look stupid. Staring out the window, I half-listened to the Sergeant's chatting, and worried about my chances to enlist. For most of the ride they talked about the usual things, their wives and children, their most recent workouts, just innocuous small talk. But suddenly, one of them said something that caught my attention.

"Have you heard we have SHARP training again this week?"

“Again? I’m so sick of watching that fucking documentary,” he held up his hand and curled two fingers like quotation marks “*The Invisible War*,” he mocked.

My eyes flickered to the front seat, curious. *The Invisible War* is a documentary that came out in 2012 exploring the topic of rape and sexual assault in the military. A truly shocking piece of journalism, it was so ground-breaking and well-received that the US military added it to their sexual harassment program, “SHARP”. Most, if not all, Army units were required to view the film as part of their training and my Sergeants, it seemed, were not fans of the film.

“It’s all just liberal bullshit, man. Everything’s “suicide this” and “rape that” these days,” Sergeant Tucker shook his head, “These females want to be in combat positions, but they expect the whole Army to change so it can happen. We’re an Army, not a goddamn college club.”

Uncomfortable, I shifted about in my seat. Walt and I had just watched *The Invisible War* on Netflix only a few weeks earlier. All the rape cover-ups were so wretched and disturbing, the testimonies so moving, that I noticed Walt’s eyes well up as he watched. 20-25% of active duty female soldiers are raped during their service. Neither of us had known that before the documentary, and it was heartbreaking to learn the facts. At least for us, that is.

“I say things were better before all these politics got involved. I mean—“ Sergeant Anderson suddenly stopped mid-sentence. His eyes met mine in the mirror, as if he had forgotten that I was in the car for a moment. Guilt flashed across his face, and he began backpedaling. “It’s not that we don’t care,” he explained sheepishly, “It’s just that we’re an Army, ya know?” I shrugged silently and nodded my head.

The two of them rambled on for a couple of minutes about how horrible rape is. They said that every soldier who’s caught raping another should be shot, or hanged even. “Sting them up, I say! They’re the lowest slime of the earth.”

But, they were sure to clarify, we can’t just tell people not to rape. That’s too simple. Documentaries and sexual harassment seminars wouldn’t do the Army a lick of good at this point—it was all about getting rid of the problem at its source. “We need primary prevention!”

Anderson hollered back over his shoulder to me, “We gotta get rid of the problem before it even becomes one.”

Lounging in my bunk, my discharge papers blushed red from the shine of my flashlight. All around me, the bay was dark and still with exhaustion. I could hear the soldiers on fireguard whispering quietly from the front desk. It was late, but I couldn't stop reading the same line of paperwork over and over again, running it through the filter of that memory. On the section titled “DISCHARGE CONDITIONS”, the Doctor had written underneath, “Pre-Existing Mental Condition—Sexual Assault.”

I read it again, tracing each word with the tip of my pen. Greif and insight flooded my eyes, blurring the words on the page. I didn't need to read it anymore, I'd been reading it for hours and the words were long since memorized, but I couldn't stop. It was like prodded an open sore on the roof of my mouth. Each time I read it I understood just a little bit more the shape and the depth of the cut. So I read it again. And again. And again. And each time I did, I understood just a little more what SGT Anderson meant that day by “Primary Prevention.”

My mind started to return a few days later. Sleep was slowly becoming easier as I eased myself out of autopilot. That night, I had finally fallen into a deep enough sleep to have dreams licking at the dark sides of my eyelids. I don't remember them, though. Maybe I didn't have them after all.

In the Army, dreams are chased away each morning with fluorescent flamethrowers. When the lights come on they burn through a soldier's eyelids and reduce all their dreams to rubble. What's left behind is a cerebral warscape, disorienting and ablaze. The last one on fireguard is the designated Dream Killer, the one to administer the very first dose of discomfort in a soldier's day—they're the ones who get to turn the lights on.

It's a little sadistic, but honestly I came to love being last on fireguard. There's an undeniable sense of power, no matter how miniscule, when you flick the lights on and watch everyone groan out of their bunks, rubbing their eyes, still dressed in their PT uniform. You can silently lord power over them while they squabble over the sinks like peasants.

Unfortunately, on that particular day I had a 1am shift for fireguard, meaning I woke up like everyone else: a commoner, a plebe, and a damn cold one at that. I wrapped the itchy green blanket tighter around my face and clenched my teeth to stop them chattering. My toes and fingers were stiff and achy, though I was starting to get used to waking up this way.

The morning cold was inevitable in my bay. It never failed. Sometime between lights out and the crack of dawn, the bone-crushing Southern heat of the day would turn frigid and icy at night. Three industrial-sized fans continued to whirl and clank from the corner, pouring cold air into the bay despite the chill. The letter I had tucked between the springs of my mattress flapped against the gale. All across the bay groans of gelid discomfort echoed off the walls. Irritated, I wondered why nobody ever thought to turn them off at some point in the night.

A small beep caused me to reach down to the wire frame beneath my mattress and check my watch: 0430.

Alright... I thought to myself, smashing my knuckles deep into my eye sockets as I audibly groaned, *That means I have about 16 hours until I get to go back to bed. That's like.... 8 movies.... or 16 TV shows.... or 4 concerts...or a single trip from Vacaville to Canada...or....* I sighed. Trying to motivate myself was just making it worse.

Mornings are always oppressive, but they're especially so when you're not properly motivated. I've come to learn that 4am isn't a time of day, it's an abstract concept—like a feeling but harder to pin down. I think we can all relate to the feeling of 4am. It's a certain sickly pathetic fatigue, where even the most hardened men wordlessly groan against its tyranny. When you wake up at 4am, you wake up before the sun and the birds and the world, and your brain begins to protest: "Why the fuck are we here?" When you respond back "Because there is shit to do" (and

this is the only acceptable reason for experiencing 4am) the brain inevitably protests. It convinces you that you don't really want breakfast, it turns your stomach, it tightens your spine, it drags your eyelids down to your bellybutton... The brain is a formidable opponent before dawn.

I had long since adjusted myself to the 4am feeling. The new oppression was the fact that I no longer had shit to do. How could I control the brain without motivation? I had nothing to wake up for. The eye exam was pointless. The hearing test was pointless. Receiving my CAC card was pointless. Without the promise of graduation, I had little to look forward too. As I lingered in my bunk trying to work up the enthusiasm to leave, I felt an anchor slip from my ears and secure my head to the pillow.

“Morning, Sequeira.”

I turned over to look at O'Reily who was still lying in the bunk beside me. “Morning,” I whispered back.

“It's cold,” O'Reily moaned, gripping her blanket tighter. Her eyes were still squeezed shut.

“Yeah, it is.” I rolled out of my bunk, letting myself freefall for a moment before landing gracelessly and lazily on the floor below. My hands smacked loudly against the tile as I caught myself.

“So, what are you doing today, Sequeira?”

“I don't know, actually.” As we talked we began pulling out our uniforms and getting dressed. I told her what had been told to me so far. Drill Sergeant said I had to “in-process before I could out-process” and that meant going through all of the tedious medical and financial steps of joining, even if I wasn't going to stay. “It should only take me a couple days to finish it up though.”

She asked if I needed to get shots. I told her no. “Drill Sergeant Grunlo made sure I knew that.” I ripped the letter from between the springs of my bunk and shoved it deep in my pocket along with my Blue Book, my bug spray, my hand sanitizer, a handful of tampons, and a Bible.

“Holdovers don’t get shots. Grunlo says it’s a waste of money and there ain’t any reason to get me sick and make my ass hurt if I’m not gonna stay.”

“Lucky,” O’Reily hissed. “We’re getting ours today or tomorrow, I think.”

“Enjoy your peanut butter ass.”

“Enjoy your...” she paused, groping for an insult, “...shitty personality.” She flashed her teeth at me and spun around, chuckling at her brilliant wit as she sauntered off to claim a mirror.

The morning progressed as it always did from there. After a little over a week of the routine, we had this shit down. Sleep, wake up, put on your uniform, fix your hair, line up for formation, do your chores, get yelled at, spend the day with doctors, get in formation, get yelled at, eat, get yelled at, go to sleep. Lather, rinse, repeat.

For me, the hard part was over. Waking up was always the worst part of the day, followed closely by morning formation when the air is cold and the Drill Sergeants are especially cranky. The brain is a formidable opponent even for the Drill Sergeants.

That morning when we lined up for formation it was still dark. Miles of smooth, glassy, horizon were just beginning to turn navy at the edges but the deepest pit of sky still retained its nightly darkness. The cold air hung around my face as I tried to ignore the quiet whispers of my bay mates around me. It wasn’t very hard. My mind was somewhere else. Specifically, it was deep within my right cargo pocket, folded tightly into a fat little square and protected by a Ziploc bag in case it rained. My mind was with the letter in my pocket, debating whether or not to give it to the mail carrier.

My past couple days had been consumed by letters and stamps as I tried to write my stepmom, Shelley, to explain my situation. The green notebook I kept stuffed in my waistband, beneath my jacket and my camelback, was already down to 10 pages. Even worse, I had sealed, stamped, and thrown away at least three letters. With mailing supplies in as high of demand as they are in the Army, it’s dumb to waste envelopes and stamps. Those two items can be traded for almost anything else on base. Stamps are especially valuable. I managed to trade for shampoo,

conditioner, deodorant, hair spray, and even books and notebooks using stamps as currency. The fact that I was wasting them was infuriating, but I just couldn't stop.

I started to walk up to the mail carrier, but my feet didn't move. I opened my mouth to call him over as he wandered around, looking for letters, but as he approached my row I instinctually snapped it shut again.

He walked by me, shouting through cupped hands, "LETTERS! I'm doing mail today! Who has letters? MAIL! I'M DOING MAIL!"

I rubbed the edge of the letter nervously. I needed to tell my mom what was going on. I needed her to sign me up for college classes. I needed her to get my life back in order for when I got back. But no matter how many times I tried, what words I used, or how much I tried to soft-hand it, there's no easy way to explain to your mother that: "Hey! So I got drunk about a couple months ago, passed out at a party, and woke up being sexually assaulted by a 'friend'. Also, I was stupid enough to admit it in my enlistment packet! Now they're kicking me out because they think I'm crazy. Oh, and I don't know if I'll be able to keep going to college AND I don't know when I'll be home. Bye!"

Goddamn it, I fucked up. I felt sick with guilt and shame at the thought of her reading the letter and learning everything at once. I wouldn't be there to answer her questions, to calm her fears. The mail carrier walked by me again, shouting his call. I opened my mouth just to slam it shut again. Embarrassed by my fear, I played it off as a yawn. *Maybe tomorrow...* I finally conceded, and shoved the letter deeper into my pocket.

"HEY!" Suddenly a booming voice grabbed my attention. I looked up and saw D.S. Smith stomping in my direction, one hand raised tensely and all five fingers pointing towards me, as if he intended to judo-chop me in the throat. In the Army, we like to call that the "knife hand" and every Drill Sergeant does it. "YOU!" Smith bellowed when I made eye contact. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

What now? My body reeled sharply as I turned to face him. I snapped to parade rest, “I’m standing in formation, Drill Sergeant.” I said, without a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

At that, Drill Sergeant Smith forced himself in between me and the soldier in front of me, ensuring that he was as close as possible without actually touching me. Once he felt he was adequately within my personal space, he very loudly and angrily asked me to repeat myself.

“I said ‘I’m standing in formation, Drill Sergeant.’”

“SHUT UP!” Spit flung from his lips and onto my Eye Pro. “YOU. ARE. A. HOLDOVER! HOLDOVERS,” he continued. “DO. NOT. LINE UP. WITH. THE. SHIPPERS!” He waved his arms wildly around, gesturing to the soldiers around us. He asked me if I could see them. When I nodded he refocused his knife hand back between my eyes. “Well they’re all going to training because they didn’t quit!” Smith rambled on about how holdovers are just a bunch of whiners and that, if I stayed around his soldiers too long, I’d risk giving them ideas about “going crazy” and going home. He used air quotes around the words “going crazy”, and I thought about the fact that he was the man who sent me to CBHS in the first place. Unamused, I made a mental note to roll my eyes at the man’s clearly flawed logic once I got a moment alone. Once he was finished with his tirade, I scanned the formation, trying to figure out where the holdovers lined up as Smith stared expectantly at me.

“So, where am I...?” I began to ask.

Drill Sergeant replied with an unintelligible roar. I managed to make out “front” and took off running, calling “Yes, Drill Sergeant!” over my shoulder as I went.

Now, on my first day of reception I was given a number. That number coincided with a place in formation where I would always march. Due to a handful of generally... X-rate incidents occurring in formation, males and females are no longer allowed to march together in Basic Training.

To put it bluntly, people were jerking each other off in line, and the Army had to find a way to stop it. Their brilliant plan? Put females in the back. That’ll do it.

I, like all female soldiers, was given a number in the 600's. I was 621. This is unfortunate for us females because the bigger your number, the farther back in formation you are, and the less time you have to eat. Females, by being assigned the highest numbers, had the least time to eat. As a female whose last name began with "S", I was one of the very last rows in formation.

I hadn't even seen the front of the formation since I arrived. As I jogged past the rows of females, then the males, then the Spanish-speaking Alpha-Threes, I wondered what was at the front, if it was any different than the back. I wondered if they kept anything interesting at the front that I didn't know of. Like a flag or a banner or something.

Turns out they did keep something interesting up there, but not flags. That's where 2nd Platoon kept their savages.

Savages (*Noun*): "a member of a people regarded as primitive or uncivilized."

Potential synonyms include: barbarian, wild man, primitive, unsophisticated, uncivilized, or simply "holdover."

I want to clarify, I don't mean "noble savages." I don't mean the "historical savage", the Old-World use of the word that dehumanized Non-Western people for so long. I mean "Savages" in the way it's used when you get on a city bus and see a woman taking a very public and completely shameless shit in the back row. I mean "Savages" in the way it's used when a group of college boys get so drunk that one of them flings himself off a balcony, misses the above ground pool, and knocks out his teeth by kissing the ground. When I say "savage", I'm talking about some truly uncivilized bullshit—and that's what holdovers are best at.

I fell in at the back of what they called the "holdover formation", a surprisingly distinct formation tasked with leading the main one. No shipper was allowed to share a row with a holdover and this separation was enforced even more rigidly than the separation of genders. Placed intentionally between the shippers and the holdovers were the ESL soldiers, the Alpha-Threes, who were waiting to ship to an English language school in Texas. They didn't speak any

English, and it was clear that they were being used to provide a language barrier—another attempt to further the quarantine of failure and savagery.

I paused for a moment to take a deep breath as I tugged on my cover, trying to avoid eye contact. They were the rowdiest group of soldiers I'd ever seen, even for reception soldiers who hadn't been properly "broken." One pale, skinny guy kept smacking the soldier in front of him on the shoulder while pretending to position himself in formation. The only other female was standing scandalously close to three male soldiers. Her hands were jammed deep inside her pockets. Nobody was in proper position.

I leaned over a little to look at who was leading formation. A stocky, muscular soldier with a deeply tanned face was spitting loogies in the air as Drill Sergeants had their backs turned. He laughed and snorted with others as he got away with it. His cap said "Fournet". The others were "Ignatowski", "Jenerette" and "Pollock".

The female, McKenzie, had olive skin and fierce, dark eyes. She scolded them for their stupid games, repeating that they were gonna get everyone in trouble if they got caught. Fournett just grinned and hawked another loogie into the air. "Morons," she growled.

"Hey," she said, turning her attention to me. Raising an eyebrow curiously, McKenzie said I looked familiar, and asked if I was in her bay.

I nodded without hesitation. To be perfectly honest, I had no idea whether or not we shared a bay. I didn't even know who she was. But, hell, who was I to argue when loogie-free companionship seemed in such short supply?

"I'm McKenzie, this is Jenerette, Fournet, and Iggy." The four of them made up the first row. "You a new holdover?"

I nodded.

"What's your discharge for?"

"Psych Discharge."

"Ah, so a crazy."

“No, the doctor is just stupid.”

They asked when I had gotten there. I admitted that I had been there for only a week and already, the prospect of spending another two or three without anything to work for made me cringe.

“Ah, that’s not so long,” Fournett said.

McKenzie rolled her eyes and sighed, “I’ve been here a month so far since my discharge.”

“Three weeks,” Iggy groaned

“Yeah, about three weeks,” Jennerette agreed, “Iggy and I came around the same time.”

“I’ve been here the longest,” Fournet grinned dryly, radiating that familiar cockiness of someone who knows they’ve had it worse than anyone else in the room. His smile said he earned his right to whine. Him and no one else. “Six months,” he bragged.

Gravity jerked my jaw to my chest. “Six fucking months? What the fuck? How does that even happen?”

“Yeah...” He scratched his face on his shoulder, keeping his hands looped loosely behind his back. Apparently, Fournet had made it to training twice, and broken his right leg both times. First time he broke it on the repelling tower, which is one of the very first exercises soldiers do once they arrive. The second time was during the ruck march, which is one of the last. “I’ve spent months as a holdover waiting for this thing to heal,” he said, lightly smacking his leg with his palm.

I cringed at the thought. “Well thank god it won’t take me that long. The doctor said it would only take about two or three weeks until I get to go back home. Maybe I’ll even rejoin.”

Fournet laughed, “Oh no, There’s no way you’re going to get out of here in two weeks.”

“What?” I asked, but Drill Sergeant Smith called us to attention before he could answer. Fournet turned forward and I was forced to shut up and go. As usual, we were expected to call cadence as we marched, but I just mouthed along. My mind was too preoccupied to summon

sounds to my lips. I stared at the buildings as we marched, taking in the setting of the base as Fournet's words echoed in my skull. For the first time since I arrived the monotonous setting of tan and red buildings, all perfectly alike, felt neither comforting nor intimidating; they felt disorienting. Like a maze I had to find my way out of. And like a puzzle within a puzzle, each building contained its own labyrinth of paperwork and bullshit I'd have to claw through to get out.

“There's no way you're going to get out of here in two weeks.” He said.

Well, then how long am I gonna fucking be here?

CH. 7

That was always the question, the question that all us holdovers had to live with: “How long?” Two weeks? Four weeks? Six months? None of us ever knew. The ambiguity was enough to drive anyone crazy. It was like living to wait in line for something you didn't even want in the first place. You'd give anything, anything, just to ship home or ship to training. All you want is to move forward a little bit.

You get tired of the repetitive letters. You get tired of writing time and time again to your loved ones that nothing has changed. You get tired of waiting. Eventually, the stillness starts to get under your skin. It makes you itch. It makes you twitchy.

One day of sitting around in battery is fine. Sure, it's boring, but it's not too hard. A week is doable. Two weeks is when it starts to get to you. But by the time a month has rolled by and you're still sitting, still folding towels, still chipping ice, still a fucking holdover—that's when it starts to feel like you're losing your mind. The Army leaks into your dreams, into your thoughts. You get hysterical and you start to laugh at everything. You start doing stupid things to pass the time like spitting loogies, ripping off uniform patches, and smuggling peanut butter from the DFAC. All of this just to keep yourself entertained.

Of course, it would take me weeks to realize that. In my ignorance, I just assumed the holdovers were all crazy, or maybe just stupid. Either way, as we marched to chow I made a mental note to avoid embarrassing myself with that kind of behavior in the future. Even if I was a holdover, I could still have some self-control, for God's sake.

But by the time we got to chow, despite my claims of self-control, I couldn't bring myself to eat. The food tasted bland, like chewing on a towel. Even though I've never been a picky eater, every bite made me gag. The gagging made my eyes leak. I sighed. My taste buds seemed to unpredictably give out ever since my discharge. That morning, they violently refused each section of my plate as quickly as I could present them. I tore off a piece of biscuit, popped it in my mouth, and retched quietly around the flavor, confounded by my lack of appetite.

A few seats down, Jenerette and Iggy were knife-handing each other back and forth across the table, making fun of the Drill Sergeants. Each time they raised their hand at the other they'd fiercely whisper "Guy!" and giggle. Fournet was quietly examining their game, smiling with amusement as they gradually grew louder. McKenzie stared furiously down at her cereal, ignoring them all with pointed displeasure.

All the noise and chaos coming from my new table was making me nervous. I resisted the urge to glance at every Drill Sergeant I saw, silently hoping they wouldn't hear my new and unusual "unit" fucking around. If they got caught I knew all of us would be punished.

Iggy tossed a straw wrapper at McKenzie and I cringed, tucking down my head to avoid the waves of berating, belittling, screams—but they never came. I guess nobody noticed.

Once McKenzie finished her meal, giving me battle buddy to leave with, I gestured to the door and we grabbed our trays to bus them. My tray was still packed with uneaten food, so I threw a napkin on top to make sure nobody noticed.

I'll eat during lunch chow, I thought.

The two of us began the formation, taking our spots up at the front. An awkward silence stretched a few moments too long. I kicked a beetle around on the ground, trying to think of something to say. “Soo...” I finally asked, “What do you guys do all day?”

McKenzie sighed. “Well,” she said, “We wake up with the rest of the soldiers, and go to chow with the rest of the soldiers, but most of the time we’re separate. While they do in-processing, we spend most of the day waiting around. Sometimes we do details.”

Gently, I used the toe of my boot to flip the bug inescapably onto his back. “What kinda details?” I asked. The beetle writhed helplessly beside my boot.

“The holdovers do laundry, all the laundry on base once or twice a week. We wash the linens. We clean some of the buildings. We do some gardening, lawn mowing, weed trimming, path sweeping... general landscaping stuff. We clean bird shit off the stairs. Plus, we do a lot of stuff for supply.”

I nodded, watching the beetle kick furiously trying to right himself. Each time he came close, I would gently guide him onto his back again, trapping him.

When McKenzie suddenly fell silent, I took my eyes off the struggling beetle long enough to look at her. Frustration was etched deeply into every line on her face. Her dark eyes looked fiercely past me, glaring into the distance. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I stayed quiet.

“We chip ice, too,” she said after a long time. “and we help the shippers while they get ready to leave.”

“What do you do when you’re not doing details?”

McKenzie sighed. Her face twisted even tighter. She looked down for a moment at the struggling bug on the ground. Its frenzied legs still kicked in vain as it tried to flip itself right side up. Every so often, he’d try to use his wings as leverage, but the weight of his body was too much. McKenzie, furiously silent, kicked my beetle off the sidewalk and back into the grass before she answered.

“Nothing, Sequeira,” she said, frowning at the bug as he escaped through the grass. “We do absolutely nothing all... fucking... day...”

According to the holdovers I had met, there was a hell of a process to getting out. First, I had to meet with the Commander so she could sign me off and get my out-processing started. Then I had to meet with the Liaison, who would clear me for leaving. After that, I had to wait for Charlie 95th to have a slot open up so I could complete out-processing. I'd spend two weeks at Charlie and then, and only then, would I finally be sent home.

It seemed simple, but from the other holdover's testimonies, it was clear that it would take a while. Everyone agreed that there was absolutely no way of telling how long a holdover would remain a holdover. We were simply at the mercy of our paperwork.

“Just wait,” Iggy grinned and squeezed my shoulder, “you'll be one of us before you know it.” He pointed to the tan that halved his head in two, distinctively dark at the bottom and light at the top, a product of too much sun and always wearing the same hat. “Just like us,” he repeated, “weirdly tanned, and out of fucks to give.”

Looking around, I could see there were quite a few holdovers on base. In addition to the holdovers I met in formation, there were a few “non-marchers”, some of which were the “cripples” I had seen at CQ the day of my discharge. Scattered about were several holdovers attached to different platoons than my own.

One of the 1st Platoon guys was Parker. Parker, in polite terms, was an ‘intense’ individual, but if I'm being honest the phrase ‘absolutely bat-shit crazy’ seemed to capture him better. He rarely spoke, mostly he just liked to stare at people with wide eyes until they looked away with discomfort, then he'd find a new person to stare at. When I tried to strike up a casual conversation with him, ask him why he was going home, he turned to me and said very calmly,

“My mama can pick her nose with her tongue.” Then stuck out his tongue and tried to do the same.

After that, I moved back to my original seat. I figured I didn’t really need any new friends after all.

Another holdover was Pollock, a chubby kid who was being discharged for a bad shoulder. From what I could figure, he was a lightning rod of sorts for the group. His job was to absorb all of the negative energy everyone else was building up inside. It was a symbiosis. Pollock would say something stupid and everyone would take the opportunity to verbally abuse him. Once the abuse started coming he’d shut right up but only to try and think of his next outlandish lie.

“I was in the National Guard for 15 years before this,” he said, though he was clearly no older than me.

“I used to be a professional MMA fighter before this, but I killed too many people so they retired me,” he said, though he was clearly an overweight and ruddy-face man-child.

“I hurt my shoulder stopping a car that was going to run over my girlfriend,” he said, disregarding the laws of physics for the momentary high of being the center of attention.

The kid was like a fresh mountain spring from which the purest lies trickled. He had devalued his word so dramatically that even benign statements like “I lived in Florida for a while,” or “I like juice more than pop,” seemed like potential falsities.

As the room flooded with a fresh wave of insults, I rested my head against the wall behind me and closed my eyes, miserable. These people were weird. They were unpleasant. If they weren’t off in some way, like Parker or Pollock, they were irritable and cranky like McKenzie, waiting for an opportunity to lash out. I missed my old unit, the ones that were leaving me for my dream. I wondered what O’Reily was doing. She was somewhere on base, probably getting her finances in order, maybe writing her will. I wondered if I would be able to see her again once she shipped. My odds seemed slim.

I looked around at all the other holdovers, their melancholic moans and complaints. If there was any conversation, it was on the topic of misery, the only thing we seemed to have in common. I studied them for a few moments, thinking of all the wasted weeks and months, maybe even years, they made up between them. The beep of my watch made me shudder.

Unable to stand it, I forced myself to look at anything other than them. I had to try and find something good. Directly across from me, a tiny window let in the only bit of natural light in the room. I couldn't see very far, just a few tree branches pressed against the glass. Almost everything else was blocked by leaves. Sunlight beamed through the foliage like stained glass, giving the tree a cathedral-like appearance.

For a moment, there was a strong enough breeze to push the branches aside, providing me a glimpse of outside. Beyond the edges of my arbor church, the world dissolved into miles of monochrome. Where the building stopped a Kingdom of Tedium began. The tops of buildings, peeking through the leaves, side by side, like tan and red tombstones, bled hazily into one another. All around me, there wasn't a thing to catch your eye. Everything was too flat, too colorless—and extraordinarily small. I realized that my entire world had been reduced to dry shades of green and brown. The world's citizens had been reduced to buzz-cut copies and feverish failures. The world's leader's dressed like Smokey the Bear.

Anxiety clutched my throat as the walls of my world squeezed me even tighter. A tremble ran through my body and settled in my fingertips. I could feel my heart thrashing against my chest. Trying to shake away the claustrophobia, I fumbled in my pockets for a pen, and yanked my notebook from my pants. Pressing pen to paper, I felt a wave of relief run through my body, propelled from my veins by ink and rage. I took a deep breath grateful that for me, quiet comes packaged in tiny black tubes and loaded in the barrel of a pen. Even there, in the Kingdom of Tedium, almost 2,000 miles away from home, surrounded by strangers and enemies of the mind, I could find peace in my pen. The words of the holdovers faded away, the spring of lies stopped seeping, the crazy tongues returned to their mouths. All that mattered was my pen.

I drew a tree. It was the only thing to draw.

CH. 8

When we lined up for dinner chow that day, I remembered to file in at my new position in the front. Drill Sergeant Wiley was already standing to the side of the holdovers, chatting with the front row.

“...I just don’t get it,” Drill Sergeant said, “Even in the Army, a place where you get paid to exercise; this place is still full of fatties.” He looked down the formation and pointed to a pudgy soldier standing a few rows back, “See?” The kid looked up. “Fatty. And there, another one! Fatty. Fat asses abound, even here.”

“Betcha wish you could PT us, don’t ya Drill Sergeant?” Fournett watched the Drill Sergeant’s rant with irreverent amusement, his hands crammed deep inside his pockets.

“You’re goddamn right I do!” Wiley barked, “Back when I went through Basic Training they could still hit you. Now THAT’S a goddamn Army, THAT’S how ya make killers.” He looked back at us and smirked, “These days it’s a ‘kinder’, ‘gentler’ Army with kinder, *fatter*, soldiers. Hell, we can’t even call you guys ‘retarded’ anymore...” He shook his head somberly at the loss.

“Yeah,” Jennerette teased, looking pointedly at McKenzie, “We even let *women* in the Army these days. Won’t be long before we’re all speaking Russian.” McKenzie rolled her eyes at him.

“Hey!” Wiley snapped, “You watch yourself or I’m gonna bring over one of my female battle buddies and have her show you just how ‘soft’ this Army is.” The whole group cackled and “ooooo’d” as Wiley turned back to McKenzie and narrowed his eyes. “But you know what? He’s right. You are kinda gettin’ fat.” The front row roared with laughter.

McKenzie’s eyes went wide with shock and amusement. “Shut up!” she protested as everyone jeered and teased. I kept quiet, unsure of how to act. The holdovers were, paradoxically

so, both friendlier and more at-odds with the Drill Sergeants than the average soldier. The fact that they were teasing the Drill Sergeants, and that the Drill Sergeants were teasing them, felt strange and foreign. I wondered how long it took to win over a Drill Sergeant, and hoped I wasn't there long enough to find out.

"If ya'll privates weren't so damn dumb we'd be able to let you work out here in reception," Wiley continued, "But nooooo..." he threw his hands up in the air helplessly, "you dumbasses need to do things like break your hips or sprain your ankles doing some stupid, made-up, exercise in the bays."

"Has that ever actually happened, Drill Sergeant?" Jennerette asked.

"You'd be damn surprised soldiers," Wiley said, looking down to his clipboard, "just how stupid you all really are. Alright," he sighed and adjusted his glasses, "Let's get this shit started. Where's Shaffer?"

"DEAD, DRILL SERGEANT!" The holdover's shouted back in perfect unison.

What the fuck? I whipped my head around, confused.

"Thomas?" Wiley asked.

"DEAD, DRILL SERGEANT!" Everyone seemed disturbingly calm, considering.

"Ramierz?"

"AWOL, DRILL SERGEANT!"

Not a single person, including the Drill Sergeant, seemed concerned with the two dead soldiers or the AWOL. As far as I could tell, I was only one missing out on the meaning of this strange ritual. As I scanned the holdover formation for answers, roll call continued on as if nothing had happened—as if we weren't missing three soldiers.

Unable to help myself, I leaned in a little bit and whispered in McKenzie's ear. "Hey, what's the deal with those two soldiers?"

"Which soldiers?"

"The dead ones."

“Oh. Shaffer and Thomas?”

“Yeah those ones.”

“Oh man, I don’t know,” she said. “Those guys died way before I got here.”

That first day of being a holdover was, without a doubt, one of the longest I’ve ever experienced, like living several lifetimes in 24 hours. When I got back to the bay, exhausted from doing nothing all day, I checked the first box of my hand drawn calendar, marking my first full day as a holdover—my first full day of being nothing.

Stripping out of my uniform, I lined up my boots beside my bunk, and put on a pair of PTs to sleep in. Across the bay, the soldiers of my unit were getting excited to ship. They were doing inventory checks of their gear and chattering nervously about the training that lie ahead. An anxious energy hung in the air, giving it a charge, an acidity, that felt unusually tense. Everyone in the room wanted the same thing: to graduate, to move on to more prestigious and comfortable phases of their lives where all of the grime and homesickness of this place would be worth it—but I just wanted a shower. Slowly, I made my way to the latrine. The sounds of flip flops and girlish conversation echoed off the tile. Some of them sang garbled cadences back and forth from the sinks, their mouths full of toothpaste:

“Here we go again!

Same old stuff again!

Walking down the avenue!

Nine more weeks and we’ll be through!

It’s good for me and good for you...”

I stuck my head under the hot stream of water, letting it plug my ears. Warm suds turned brown as they ran off my body and curled down the drain. I hadn’t even noticed that I was dirty. As I floated through my routine that night, nobody said a word to me. I was invisible, soundless,

ethereal in my ambiguous state. I figured it was a consequence of being nothing, not a soldier, not a civilian, and tried not to take it personally. But even O'Reily could hardly see me anymore. She was preparing to ship with a handful of other soldiers, shooting the shit and making bets without me. Too tired to care, I crawled into my bunk expecting the relief of unconsciousness, but the noise wedged its way into my head and forced me to listen:

“Oh my god! I can't believe we're gonna ship so soon!”

“I'm nervous for the repelling tower.”

“Hey Johnson! I'm gonna beat your ass with the pugil sticks! Make sure we face off!”

One voice rang out louder than all the rest, shrill and anxious among the enthusiasm.

“Hey!” she cried, “Has anyone learned the Soldier's Creed yet? I need help studying! Please? Does anyone know the Creed? Come on, guys!”

I knew it, but I wasn't gonna say anything. I had memorized the Creed nearly a year ago, while flying back from Costa Rica the summer before. It had been my graduation trip, a 14-day adventure in Costa Rica. I turned 18 and bought my first pack of cigarettes in the streets of San Jose.

“If they quiz me and I don't know, I'm going to get smoked, come on guys!”

I buried myself deeper into my sheets and thought back to that trip. It one of my favorite memories. The city was thrillingly crowded and busy. The jungles were beautiful, and equally noisy, filled with the sounds of its own wild citizens. I would come out of the *la cabina* after everyone went to bed, and listen to the night while I smoked. The packs had pictures of blackened lungs printed on the front and even though I sputtered awkwardly around the smoke, I felt so grown up. I was 18. My high school days were gone, my diploma was finally mine. I had just sworn into the Army a few weeks prior and, despite the fact it would be another year until I shipped to training, I was in a constant state of frenzied excitement. I spent the whole flight home learning what I could about being a soldier out of my tiny little Army guidebook. My Creed, my General Orders, the rank structure, I learned whatever I could think to learn. The Creed was my

favorite. Modern people don't get a lot of creeds. It made me feel important to have one of my own. I felt like a knight pledging allegiance to her Queen.

“Come on guys, PLEASE! Someone needs to help me out.”

I ignored her. I didn't have the energy to tutor someone that was too lazy to learn it themselves. Instead, I whispered it into my pillow, so quietly only I could hear it.

“I am an American soldier.”

The Creed took form naturally at my lips. I knew it so well that it took no thought to say.

The words tumbled out organically, and I continued:

“I am a warrior and a member of a team.

“I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

“I will always place the mission first.

“I will never accept defeat.

“I will never... quit...” A lump formed in my throat. “I'll never quit.”

“I will never leave a fallen comrade.

“I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.”

My eyes closed and clasped my hands together beneath my blanket, curling my fingers tight before continuing.

“...I am an expert and I am a professional. I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

“I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.”

I brought my folded hands to my forehead and whispered the last line not as an affirmation, as it had been so many times before, but as a wish, a far-off dream, or a prayer:

“...I am an American Soldier...”

I fell asleep quickly that night, and I didn't dream.

CH. 9

When my platoon finally left the next morning I pretended to be asleep. I stayed curled in my bed, wrapped in that awful wool blanket, listening to my bay mates as they packed their bags to ship. I only looked up long enough to say a shitty goodbye to O'Reily.

"I'm sorry you're not coming with us, Sequeira." She sat on the edge of my bunk, one hand draped comfortingly over my leg.

"I'll be fine," I smiled, then gave her a hug and sent her away, bag in hand, across the tracks. As much as I'd miss her, I hoped she'd stay as far away from me as possible. So far that her accomplishments couldn't hang over my head like a drizzly cloud, symbolic of my own failure more so than her success. Guilt chewed at the back of my eyelids, beckoning them to open as I ignored everyone else in the bay. The morning seemed to stretch on endlessly. Hands patted me through my blanket, quiet platitudes were whispered in my ears.

"We love you, Sequeira."

"We wish you were coming with us."

"You'll make it someday, girl."

I applied bitterness to each statement with a brush, allowing their sweetness to be overwhelmed by the flavors of my own life. It toughened their statements, made them hard to swallow, but I slopped it on thicker with each passing comment. Sure, it's a little self-destructive, but who doesn't like a good marinade?

It was nearly 0400 when they left. I heard them grabbing their belongings, lining up, and filing out the door; disciplined, hushed, and excited. When they left, an unholy silence filled the bay, and suddenly I was wrought with loneliness. The empty space around me felt heavy, becoming the same unfamiliar void it was on my first night, massive and hollow. Only three other girls were still there. Two were "ESL" soldiers who spoke only Spanish, and the other was McKenzie, who was guaranteed to be pissy and silent once we got moving.

Even though they were gone, I didn't get out of bed right away. I stayed lying in my bunk, picking acrid pieces of the morning's conversations from my teeth. But come 0430, I had to drag myself out of bed to put on my gear. Nobody talked as we got ready, and I was grateful. I felt terrible and I knew I looked like shit. I had only arrived 10 days ago, but already my face was halved horizontally. My neck and jaw were beginning to turn a dusty tan color but the top of my face, where my cover shaded me from the sun, was still a cool pale. I looked like a pint of light beer, amber colored with a big white head. I thought of what Iggy said when I first arrived about the woes of the "Army tan", and I sighed.

My hair was becoming increasingly unkempt and unmanageable as well, despite my short, boyish cut. I wished I would have thought to trim it before I left. I hadn't thought about my bangs and they were becoming a problem. They'd plaster themselves to my forehead every time I took off my cap. I tried pushing them back before putting it on, but then they'd stuck straight up for the rest of the day.

I sighed, flipping my bangs this way and that across my forehead, trying to make them look decent. I pushed them to the right and my cowlick acted up, sending the strands straight out from my forehead, making me look like a quail. I pushed them to the left and they fell into my eyes, blinding me. I pushed them back and they whipped forward again like taut river reeds. Anger flickered in my belly as I lusted for a decent pair of hair clippers.

Honestly, I couldn't give two shits how I looked when my PC was off. The Army did though. In the Army you have to look presentable, even when you've been sweating, or working, or marching, or hanging out in the rain for an hour and a half. I tried to manage it with barrettes and bobby pins but quickly realized that after three or four years of having such a short, low-maintenance haircut, I had no idea how to style hair anymore.

As I tinkered for another 15 minutes with bobby pins and gel I thought of my male battles with envy, wishing the Army would just let me shave my head like them but female soldiers are expected to retain some of their femininity. Army regulations aren't specific about the issue, it

just says that female haircuts cannot be “eccentric”, “masculine”, or “faddish” and, according to people with higher ranks and too much time on their hands for making stupid fucking rules, a shaved head falls somewhere in that category.

It’s almost funny, our hair and penchant for hygiene has been an argument for keeping women out of combat for years and yet, according to the higher-ups, the key to ending the war on terror lies somewhere in the elusive skill of wearing a patrol cap without fucking up your bun.

My reflection scowled back at me as I checked my uniform for everything that I needed. Uniform, nametape, flag patch, water bladder, Blue Book, hand sanitizer, ink stick, notebook, and my Bible. Not that I was religious, the Army just has a rule about reading material. The only things you can read are Army-issued manuals and religious text. I figured at the very least I could entertain myself with stories of whores, salt pillars, fires, floods, plagues, and insidious serpents, people going through worse shit than me. Sometimes, hard times call for a cosmic perspective.

The morning continued like it always did, only less crowded and dreadfully quiet. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, poured some Goldbond powder into my boots and tried to carefully pull them over my feet. The pain beat me on the first try and I had to take a break to pad the blisters better.

Over the past few days since I received my uniform, my feet had become vaguely reminiscent of something from the 1982 film “The Thing”, pale and white with big, throbbing blisters scattered across the whole foot. I was in horrible pain. Bitterly, as I scotch-taped another cotton ball to my heel, I thought of the unpleasant woman who fitted my boots and didn’t bother to size me properly. When I tried them on I had immediately felt the problem, but the woman refused to work with me. Within hours I had blisters on every toe and both heels. After several days of treating the sores with clear paper tape and cotton balls, I was starting to feel like amputation could be a more low-maintenance option.

Examining them that morning, my stomach churned. It was getting significantly worse. My toes had begun to turn green, so had my heels. The pinkie toe on both my feet had become

hugely swollen and discolored. I knew the blisters were getting infected, but a trip to the hospital would surely slow down my stay.

They, the doctors, those fucking doctors, could force me to stay until I finish treatment, like they did with my psych therapy, like they did with Pollock and his shoulder or Fournett and his leg. Even the Drill Sergeants warned us against going to sick bay, saying it would bog us up with paperwork, leaving us stranded. As a result, holdovers are naturally suspicious of doctors. We avoid hospitals and medical professionals like the plague, fearing the monotony of a longer stay more than the discomfort of illness.

This psychological phenomenon has a name. We call it “Holdover’s Paranoia” and I’m petitioning to add it into the next DSM manual:

“Holdover’s paranoia: (n) a psychotic symptom of the Army’s bullshit. Soldiers held on base too long will begin to suspect any action they perform has the potential to interfere with the speed of completing their paperwork. Even benign actions such as requesting a sick day or losing a piece of one’s uniform becomes a potential roadblock to freedom. Possible symptoms include: delusions, paranoia, diarrhea, irritability, dehydration, and, apparently, blisters.”

It took me a while but eventually I had enough layers of cotton balls, scotch tape, and moleskin that I could bare the weight of my boots on my feet again. I laced them as tightly as I could, hoping the extra support would curb the rubbing. Wiggling my toes, I made sure they still had room to move; then I pulled my patrol cap down over my hair and limped out into the morning air, dreading the pain of the short march ahead.

As I walked, I looked over towards CQ and saw a line of new soldiers out front, Day 1’s. You could tell they were Day 1’s because they were dressed in PT’s and personal shoes, instead of a uniform and boots. Day 1’s don’t get their running shoes until the afternoon, and they don’t get their ACU’s until the second day. On Day 2, they’d wear boots and PT’s. On Day 3 they’d finally get to put on the full uniform. It was a nifty little system to keep everyone separate when everyone looks exactly the same. In line, the Day 1’s looked nervous and fidgety, unable to stand

still. Like I was on Day 1, some of them looked really stupid in their PT/personal shoes combo. One male wore huge, worn-out, cowboy boots with his PT shorts and I snorted, amused by the way his twiggy legs disappeared at either end. As I watched them, undisciplined but eager, I couldn't help but wonder how many would end up with us at the front of the formation. Any of them could. Even cowboy boots might end up a holdover, the poor guy. He looks stupid *and* he might not graduate. That's a tough break.

“Morning, Sequeira.” A soft voice brought a smile to my face.

“Hey, Wilcox.” I spun around and grinned. Wilcox: my fellow crazy, the other Private Pyle. Wilcox was a psych discharge like me, the only one I had met so far. We'd finally struck up conversation in Battery the day before, after noticing that we had both been floating around CBHS with our suicide-watch battle buddies. At nineteen years old Wilcox was already a husband and a father—a damn good one from what I could tell.

“I worked at a hospital before this. I was in charge of the kitchen,” he explained. “I thought I wanted this but... I don't even know why I joined anymore. I have a great job back home. I have a son and a wife. I just need to get back to them. This just isn't me.”

I had to agree. Wilcox had no place in the Army. He was gentle, loving, talented, and in no need of the benefits. He hated the work and couldn't stand the distance from his family. He rolled his eyes at vulgarity and the machismo, avoided the various hazing rituals, and to top it all off, he was Mormon. He couldn't drink. He couldn't smoke. He couldn't curse or drink caffeine. By no fault of his own, Wilcox had very little in common with most of the other soldiers, and I suspect it's why he cracked so quickly. The Army is a hard place without any friends.

“My bay was pretty empty this morning,” Wilcox whispered, looking around warily for prowling Drill Sergeants, “It's weird with all the shippers gone.” He asked me what I was doing that day and I rolled my eyes, hesitant to tell him the embarrassing truth: Therapy. It was finally time for me to go to my first Biofeedback Appointment.

“Maybe it'll be a good experience.”

“A good experience, my ass. I’m not excited to eat another one of those shitty Jimmy Deans for lunch,” I scowled, “but at least I get breakfast.” I picked up one of my feet and rolled my ankle, trying to get some blood flowing to my toes. In my effort to ease the pain of my blisters, I had laced them far too tight and couldn’t feel the ground through my soles anymore.

“Are your feet still bothering you, Sequeira?”

“A little,” I lied.

“Have you talked to a Drill Sergeant about exchanging them?”

“Of course I have. Smith is such a dick. He won’t even let me go to booty-change.”

“Booty-change” was the holdover word for “Boot Exchange.”

“Well what about sick bay?”

“I don’t want to slow down my process.”

“I don’t think it will, Sequeira.”

“But you never know.”

We marched to the chow hall and lined up outside in silence, hands clasped behind our backs, stomachs growling, as usual. We waited for the doors to open and the civilian cooks to begrudgingly beckon us in for wheat waffles and chicken sausage, as usual. That SIMPLE FUCKING ACTION took about 45 minutes to happen, AS USUAL. Once the doors opened we began counting off. I jogged in and went for the handwashing sinks. As I washed my hands, one or two holdovers slipped by me in line and got their food first.

Irritated, I grabbed my tray, sat down, and had to ask, “Why don’t any of you wash your hands? Ya’ll are just walking biological warfare, you savages.”

Jennerette smiled. “Just use your hand sanitizer,” he whispered. “We don’t waste time at the sinks, the Drill Sergeants don’t care when we do.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I refocused on my food, acknowledging that I had been right on about the menu. Wheat waffles and chicken sausage. I also got a biscuit.

Lifting my attention from the food just long enough to hear Pollock say something absurd from the other side of the table, I wondered if the waffle was hard enough to beat him with. I weighed it on the end of my fork to be sure. As I considered the various potential of my breakfast, Drill Sergeant Smith stepped up beside me, cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed to the room: “If you were before number 30 in formation you should be DONE!”

I looked around, lots of PT shorts and running shoes. Looks like the new people were pushing the maximum capacity for the chow hall. They needed more seats. I started shoveling food in as fast as possible.

“SEQUEIRA!” I looked up to see Drill Sergeant standing right next to me. “Didn’t I just say you should be done?”

Tragically, my mouth was full of cement-waffles. I couldn’t respond.

“GET OUT!” he bellowed, then turned to the rest of the holdovers. “All of you!”

As we scurried out, dumping our still-full plates at the dishes station as we went by, I asked McKenzie: “Are they allowed to kick us out of Chow like that without eating?”

She shrugged. “They can do whatever they want.”

My stomach growled. I’d never felt so let down by missing out on rock-hard waffles and greasy chicken patties. “Here.” She said, discreetly passing me a packet of peanut butter from a stash in one of her pockets.

I thanked her as I tore the package open with my teeth, sucking down the earthy, greasy contents with gusto. Iggy slapped my back and told me not to worry—lunch chow was only five hours away.

“That’s just around the corner,” he said, “Hey! And if we’re lucky, they may even feed us.”

I smiled weakly at him, charmed by his efforts to cheer me up. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was wrong. Lunch chow wasn’t just around the corner, not for me. Around the

corner was a Jimmy Dean packed with stale granola, shit bread that somehow tastes moldy even though it isn't, and putrid cans of chicken salad.

Drill Sergeant drove me and a battle buddy to CBHS shortly after non-breakfast. The man with the leathery skin, also known as "Sequeira's best friend" by the sarcastic soldiers who accompanied me to CBHS, explained I would be going through a type of therapy used for soldiers with high anxiety. They called it "Biofeedback Therapy." Apparently, it could teach me how to handle stress better by using breathing exercises to forcibly slow my heartrate and lower my blood pressure.

"That's it, sir?" I asked, "Just breathing?"

"Yes, breathing!" he snapped. "What'd you expect? One of those long-ass couches, and your own personal therapist?" I heard my battle buddy snicker behind me.

He explained the whole process in great detail. First, they'd sit me down at a computer screen, give me noise-cancelling headphones, and attach a little sensor to my finger. The sensor, a small clip-like device that glowed red, tracked my heartrate and breathing then fed that data into the computer. Then, that data effects the little game on the computer to make my character go slower or faster.

For example, the game I played the most was a balloon racing game. My "character" was a happy little hot air balloon, floating peacefully through a sunset sky. The goal was to get from one end of this scenic mountain range to the other as quickly as possible. If my heartrate is slow and peaceful, the balloon goes faster and I win the game with a better time, but if my heartrate is fast and stressful, the balloon slows down and the game takes longer to complete.

In my humble, and admittedly undereducated opinion, this is a garbage form therapy.

I know, I know, "Sequeira, what do you know? You're just a crazy girl with no degree and obviously erratic emotions. How would you know better than trained psychiatrists?"

I want to make it perfectly clear that I don't claim to know much about psychology. Psychologists went to school and spent a lot of money for a reason, they learned a lot during their schooling and surely we would be sorry not to have them.

That said, if you're looking for a great way to completely infuriate an anxious person by taking what an uncontrollable bodily response and integrating it into a game so excessively relaxing in design that it's borderline offensive: biofeedback therapy is the way to go.

I spent the whole time so furious that I couldn't get my heartrate down. I just sputtered and fumed like a dying car over my keyboard, pressing the arrow key down harder and harder, knowing full-well it wouldn't do any good. "Fucking balloon..." I muttered, watching it grind across the screen. Dozens of other hot air balloons whizzed by my balloon, reminding me just how slow I really was.

A doctor came up behind me to see my progress. "Good." He said, unenthusiastically. "Now, why don't you try to make it go faster?"

"I am." My words came out as a strained grunt.

"Try the breathing exercises we taught you."

"I am."

"Well close your eyes and try it. The games sometimes stress people out."

My point exactly. I closed my eyes and tried to be as still as possible, just like they said. Barely parting my lips, I slowly inhaled to the count of seven: *1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7...* Then out to the count of 11: *1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8... 9... 10... 11...* Rinse. Repeat. In for seven. Out for eleven. *In. Out. In. Out. In...* My heart started to slow, just barely at first, then more. I felt my jaw unclench, my shoulders droop. I stared at the back of my eyelids, melting into the quiet and darkness....

Out....

The lobby fell away. I wasn't in a cubicle surrounded by other wackos and psych discharges. I was alone. Away from bullshit. Away from hot air balloons.

In...

My chest expanded further, stretching to pull in more air. The tightness in my lungs that choked me 24/7 since I arrived started to fade away. Breathing felt easier.

Out...

“How’s it working for ya?”

I opened my eyes and suddenly I was back at CBHS. The doctor was looking at me expectantly.

“Uh... it’s fine, sir,” I said, a little embarrassed I lost myself like that.

“You got your balloon to go faster.”

I looked back at the screen. It *was* a little faster than before.

“Good job,” he said, monotone, and I cringed. I felt like a little kid being praised for a scribbled-up crayon drawing. “You’re doing so good you deserve a break,” he added.

Oh! Oh well then, yes. I’m doing great. I’m the master balloon breathing racer. I definitely deserve a break. Patronizing compliments or not, a true flash of happiness went through me when he said that. “Thank you sir,” I smiled.

“Go ahead and sit in the waiting room so you can eat lunch.”

“Yes sir!”

“You brought a Jimmy Dean, right?”

The flash of happiness fizzled when I remembered. “Yes sir, I have a Jimmy Dean.”

“Alright, good!” He spun around to go help another soldier. “Enjoy your lunch, private.”

I looked back at the balloon on the screen. It was barely moving again. My small triumph was over. My stomach rumbled, a long, drawn-out sigh escaped from my mouth, and I think I saw the balloon get even slower.

I had been to therapy before reception, but it wasn’t garbage therapy like Biofeedback. It was real therapy, talk therapy. My first therapist was given to me when I was 14, after my dad

died. She didn't really work out. She was a children's psychologist—that was the problem. She tried to make me play games, write poems, or “draw my feelings” as a form of therapy. I was an artistic kid, but I struggled through every exercise. I didn't know how to draw my feelings. I could write poems with her in the room with me. I didn't like using art in a therapy setting. It just felt twisted. So I asked my mom if I could stop seeing her and that was that.

On my way out, the therapist grabbed my hand and squeezed, gently suggesting I stay with her for the sake of continued help. She suspected I had mild PTSD brought on by having both my biological parents taken from me in one way or another. If I wasn't careful, she warned it could develop into full-blown Manic Depression by the time I was an adult, and she wanted to get me tested. But she wasn't my therapist anymore so I just left.

Things got better with my second therapist. She treated me my own age and listened, which was enough for me. I went to her for over a year. We talked about my family, and my love life, and my awful boyfriend at the time. We talked about the classmate that sent me death threats in the form of love poems, and how nobody, not even the teachers, seemed to care. I told her I was tired, that I had trouble sleeping. I told her I had nightmares, and that I struggled staying focused in class. After a year or so of picking my brain raw, she claimed I had ADHD. When she asked me to be tested, I refused. The day after she suggested it I quit seeing her.

During my freshman year of college, I saw another therapist for problems with eating and sleeping. The problems came back worse than ever right after “that whole big thing.” That thing my friends and I don't talk about. The reason I got discharged.

For months, my appetite and sleeping schedule waxed and waned dramatically. Some days I was ravenous and sleepy. Other days I was without appetite and exhausted. My body was breaking under the weight of the chaos, I just wanted some consistency. After a few weeks of seeing him the therapist suggested I might have an anxiety disorder. And I quit him too.

CH. 10

Throughout history, women have always been associated with insanity. They used to say it had something to do with menstruation and the moon, *la Luna*; the base word for lunacy, lunatic, and looney. Anything a woman did was grounds for a diagnosis. From getting too drunk, to masturbation, to cutting her hair too short, all of it was considered symptomatic of insanity.

A woman got drunk because she was insane, not because she was exhausted from a day of working and needed to obliterate her fine-motor skills before anyone could ask her to do anything else. A woman masturbated because she was insane, not because her fat, uninteresting husband couldn't get the lawn wet with a firehose, let alone her. A woman cut her hair because she was insane, not because she liked the ease of her routine and the breeze on her neck.

“Nymphomania”, “Penis Envy”, “laziness”, “political excitement”, “lesbianism”, “masturbation”... All were viable reasons to declare a woman insane at one point. Completely stable women were branded this way then thrust into abusive looney bins. Some historians see a trend of these poor women subsequently reverting into a primal survival state due to the abuse of the asylums. This survival state, as ironic as it may be, happens to appear very reminiscent of clinical insanity. Therefore, for much of Western civilization, we've seen a trend where perfectly sane women are declared crazy by men who do not understand them then coaxed into madness by the methods used to “cure” their personalities. I was still young when I began following in the footsteps of my looney grandmothers. I started cutting when I was around eleven or twelve, both my hair and the insides of my arms.

Don't get excited.

It doesn't mean anyone was “right” about me. My scars aren't some “Ah-HA!” discovery moment where one can suddenly confirm my crazy, nor are they a “Psycho-Bitch Seal of Authenticity” stamped on the inside of my arm. They're a statistic: Around 20% of girls in my age group have self-harmed at some point in their life. That's one-in-five.

Now, I'm not good at math but I know my bay held around 50 female soldiers, who cycled out every week for a new shipment. Statistically, there should be 10 females per cycle who have taken a razor blade to themselves at some point. And this alone might be surprising, but I know from the showers, from all the striped thighs and bellies and arms, that this statistic is still an understatement. I'm not saying we're all right for self-harming at some point in our lives—I'm just saying we can't *all* be crazy.

I learned about cutting through a girl named Crystal. She was a neighbor girl of mine that went on websites dedicated to the “emo” subculture, a post-goth movement that was popular when I was still in school. Emos listen to melodramatic rock music. They grew their bangs out long and scraggly then pull them down over their eyes. They're known for their weepy songs, screeching vocals, and insanely tight pants. But most famously, emos were known for “cutting”.

When I said I didn't get it Crystal scoffed, “Of course you don't,” she rolled her eyes at me, “Emo kids are emotional. They're artsy, Randi. And sensitive.” Then, with a sly smile, she rolled down her sweatpants to show me the crisscrossing white lines that ran up and down her thighs. “Emo kids have to cut,” she said, letting me run my fingers across her rippled flesh. She wore striped arm warmers, a common emo accessory, to hide the same ghostly-white tally marks on her arms. “You have to cut because it helps to feel REAL pain instead of just inside pain. “This,” she tapped her fingers on her wrist, “this you can control. You can't control what's on the inside, but you can control how you cut. It's the only way I can get through how shitty life is.”

I hesitated at first, unsure of what to say; nervous, yet fully enamored. Crystal was almost three years older than me, an eternity in kid-years. I was scared and thrilled and curious all at once. Coolly, she stood up and walked to her bookshelf. From between two books, she pulled out a fresh razor blade and handed it to me. “Just give it a shot. I promise it helps.”

I took it from her nervously, rolling it between my fingers before setting it on the nightstand. I muttered something lame about not wanting to cut a hole in my pocket, and I silently hoped I'd forget about it by the time I had to go back home.

The dark mood cast by our conversation moved on as quickly as Oklahoma storm clouds. We settled into her bed and ended up playing videogames for hours. Between the music playing on her iPod and the colorful lull of the game, I almost forgot about the outside world, of all the awkward suffering of middle school, and how much I didn't want to go home. No matter my forgetfulness, come 5:00 the sun began to slip behind the hills of the valley. The street lights switched on, bathing the streets in their sickly orange glow. I had to go home.

Grabbing my jacket, I purposefully ignored the glint of violence on her bedside table, hoping to escape without it and all the strange feelings it welled up in me.

“Wait! Don't forget this!” Crystal called.

Damn. I wrapped the thin sliver of steel inside several layers of toilet paper before shoving it deep in my back pocket. Once I was sure it wasn't going to stab me in the ass as I made my way, I walked back down the street to my house for dinner.

As I walked in, I said hi to my dad who was sitting on the couch watching the evening news after work. “Hey,” he grunted, eyes never leaving the screen.

My dad was a big man, a traditional American in many respects. His skin was dark and tan from years of manual labor. Decades of sunshine had bleached the color from his tattoos, leaving them monochrome. His eyes had also been marked by the sun, squeezed tight from so many years of working outside. It gave him a distinctly Western appearance that many people found charming. A father of three, Dad still looked as healthy and strong as ever, despite a sneaky pot belly that had tightened his waistband over the years. His blonde hair had long since fallen out, but his bright blue eyes held the same clarity and sharpness of a young man. “Didja go to tutoring today?” he asked, momentarily pausing the TV to look at me.

“Yep. That's why I'm late.” I could feel the blade practically burning in my pocket.

“Good.”

Neither one of us had anything else to say so I set the table for dinner. My mom was going to be home soon and I needed some brownie points. Having my chores done without being

reminded might be exactly what I needed to get through another night. I set the table as nicely as possible: three napkins, three forks, three knives, three spoons, three drinks, one setting placed to the left for my left-handed father, salt and pepper in the center. When I was done, I waited nervously around the kitchen for the sound of mom's car pulling in the driveway. Twenty anxious minutes later, the sky was dissolving into dusk when I heard the garage door open.

Here we go...

"Hey Mom." I said as she walked through the door, forcing a smile on my face. Our Jack Russell jumped eagerly at her feet, dancing on his hind legs to greet her.

"Get back! Get back! Get back!" Mom chanted at the dog like a skipping record and blocked him from the open door with her knees. After this obligatory "Welcome Home" attack, she slammed the door behind her and looked up at me with narrowed eyes. "Randi..." she began ominously.

A wave of panic flushed through my body. Starting at my heart, it raced down my spine and settled in my toes, making them ache. Despite it, I tried to seem casual. "Hm?" I said, flicking my bangs from my face, "Yeah, Ma? What's up? Do you need anything?"

Maybe I laid it on a little thick.

"What's up?" she scoffed, "I'll tell you 'what's up'! I checked SchoolLoop again today. I still see three zero's in your math class. What the hell, Randi?"

Fuck. I tried desperately to keep my poker face in order, but I knew she already had me. SchoolLoop was a service my school provided for parents to keep track of their children's grades. It automatically posted them every night and emailed them to the parents. Under other circumstances, it may have been a really great tool. Unfortunately for me, I had gotten a little behind in math. About... seven years behind.

It's true what teachers say about how failing to learn a lesson in the moment will eventually catch up with you later in school. I fell victim to this early on. I hated math from the moment it was introduced to me. I think I was born hating math. Had someone presented my tiny,

bloody, newborn self with a math book, straight out of the womb, I probably would've politely, but firmly, asked them to leave my birthday party, as well as my life.

I liked school just fine but how could you convince a kid that numbers and equations are just as important as animal dissections and Edgar Allen Poe? It's not easy, I'll tell you that. The teachers all tried to make it interesting. They turned the fractions into pieces of pie and made rate of velocity into roaring sports cars or two trains on a collision course.

In a test situation they'd always try to have "real life" scenarios. It didn't make me any more interested. "Jack had nineteen pineapples and gave three to Linda, how many pineapples does Jack have left?" or "Josh bought 6 candy bars with \$20, how much is his change?"

My answer?

"Whatever the hell the cashier handed back." Or better yet, "What it said on the cash register's screen, that's what it's for."

Inevitably I'd refocus my attention to the more pressing question: "What the hell does Jack plan to do with all those pineapples? And why is he so concerned about giving away three?"

Over the years I fell increasingly behind. Starting the 6th grade finally sealed my fate by introducing Pre-Algebra and fractions. Every day I went to class feeling sick. The work was impossible to focus on. The teacher's voice sounded more like garbled binary than a math lesson. I struggled from day one, and by December I felt like I was drowning. Order of operations was impossible for me to remember, equations looked as familiar as Mandarin Chinese, and I still didn't know how to multiply in my head. Every test was a chaotic mess of anxious scribbles, extra steps, and too much handwriting for a student my age. I felt so stupid.

At a point I just stopped doing my homework. Why bother? I was tired of sitting next to classmates who missed one or two on the homework when my page was filled with red marks and eraser smudges. It was easier not to try. It was less embarrassing too. I think most kids would prefer to be seen as a rebel who doesn't do their homework out of some disregard for responsibility, instead of a moron who does their homework but can't get it right.

My parents caught on quickly enough. At first they were patient but firm, like any good parents. They explained that it didn't matter whether or not it was hard. I *had* to take my education seriously. They said I was smart and I could do it. They hired a lady across town to tutor me every Wednesday afternoon. They made me stay after class to get help from teachers. Of course, I always agreed to these things in the moment, but I often refused to show up, opting instead to dilly-dally around school or my hometown's extensive bike trails. Sometimes, I went across the street to Crystal's house where we'd play video games or read comics.

We never got into any real trouble. We were good kids, the kind that don't get caught because they know where the tipping point is. A couple of times, we smoked cigarettes, passing the stolen treasure back and forth inside her parent's abandoned and dilapidated trailer. Once we even shared a beer, but I hated the taste so much I only pretended to take sips.

It took a while, considering my reputation as a good kid, but eventually I nurtured my parent's firm patience into a worn-out rage. Yelling happened at least every couple of days, but I didn't budge. When yelling and begging and pleading didn't work, they had to get creative. They made me start keeping a planner. So I started leaving out the assignments I didn't want to do. They made me start getting the planner signed by a teacher every afternoon, so that I couldn't do that anymore. In retaliation, I learned how to scribble so it looked like initials.

I was perpetually grounded. Mom called it "kiddie jail" and she wasn't fucking around. No TV, no music, no internet, no books, no drawing, no phone, no games, no friends, no toys. They took half my belongings and put them in a box in the attic. At its worst, they even took my dog. Rusty slept in the living room and wasn't allowed in my bedroom under any circumstances, a punishment that absolutely killed me. They made sure I had nothing to do but homework. And I still didn't do it.

I pushed my mom so far that home life was becoming a constant battle, usually beginning as soon as she walked through the door. The day I got the razor was no different.

Mom rifled through her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. She smacked the paper on the counter and I saw that she had three zeros circled in red ink. “Why are there still zeros, Randi?” She yelled, pointing with one long, chipped pink nail. “Why is this STILL happening?”

The ass-chewing went on for about half an hour. For most of the conversation, I stayed perfectly quiet. Kids in my family don’t have “fights” with our parents. You’re really only allowed to shut up and listen. Arguing is a sure-fire way to have your ass lit up with a switch or a spoon. So I knew to keep it shut. It’s not like I had any real excuses anyway.

“What you do today affects your future, Randi. Do you realize that? How are you going to get into college if you don’t have good grades? If you just keep being lazy, what’s gonna happen? You’re gonna end up flipping burgers for a living, is that what you want?”

I didn’t answer and mom buried her face in her hands. She looked tired. “Just go to your damn room. You can have your dinner when we’re done eating. I just... I want a nice freaking dinner for once.” She stomped out of the room and to the back of the house to change. My dad sighed and un-paused the news.

When I got to my room I kicked off my sneakers, a pair of white converse high-tops, just like my dad wore in high school, and shoved them under my bed. Then, the filthy, oversized, hoodie I wore every day like a second skin. I avoided looking at myself in my mirror as I undressed. Seeing my reflection would only make things worse. I sat down, and the clock said 6:36. I had at least 3 hours of nothing. I dreaded the thought. I wished I could just sleep until school tomorrow, but that wasn’t allowed either. Part of the terms of my grounding meant I couldn’t nap. A couple of days ago I had tried and mom damn-near kicked my door in. “Sleeping is not homework,” she said and made it so I couldn’t sleep until at least 9:30 pm.

I lay back in bed and watched my ceiling fan spin; losing myself in the soft, rhythmic, clinking of the chain. I’d bet all the money in my wallet that I had math to do that night. I can’t remember exactly all these years later, but I’m sure I did. But I was too tired, too tired of everything. Tired of being dumb. Tired of fighting with my parents. I was getting real tired of

school. I wondered if I'd be stuck in Pre-Algebra forever—the thought was enough to make any middle schooler shudder.

Pushing out the thoughts of eternal, mathematical suffering, I focused back on the clinking. It was a relaxing kind of rhythm, one I knew well. Even when it was cool outside I liked to have my fan on low, if just for the white noise. The thing had been on for so long it was rarely cleaned. As a consequence, the blades had long dust tails flowing behind them, like the tails of a comet. I imagined them burning, blazing hot, like real comets cutting across the sky, leaving behind white-hot scars.

Suddenly, I thought of the secret in my pocket.

When I pulled out the razor I was surprised it hadn't cut through the toilet paper shield. *Maybe it's not really sharp...* I thought, gently touching the blade with my index finger. It looked sharp, felt sharp too. And it was huge! I wondered how they fit the whole blade into the little, orange, plastic razors I saw my mom buy at the store.

As I fingered the razor's edge I thought of Crystal and her crisscrossing lines. She looked like a map of a city laid out in a grid, with miles and miles of intersecting roads. A weird sensation, something between thrill and disgust bubbled up inside me. I threw the razor deep into a drawer on my desk, and I tried to forget about it.

CH. 11

After about a week of me living on base, I overheard an officer saying we had “too many daggone holdovers.”

That's the thing about holdovers. They're a virus, a plague. The more holdovers a base has, the more refusals and psych discharges they get, which just begets more holdovers, which begets more crazies and quitters. Word travels fast that there's a way out, an exit strategy for those who are tired, sad, and lonely—which is everyone.

Soldiers begin panicking. One sits at the top of the bleachers and begins punching himself in the face to get a psych discharge. Another lies that his back is broken, despite being able to walk and jump around. Another still weaves fantastic tales about his mental illness, then brags about his clever lies to us in private. The crazy inside us all begins to crack away at people's shells. Everyone wants to go home, and the holdovers can. At least, that's what legends say. I wasn't completely convinced.

That's why everyone hates the holdovers, because they're getting the "easy road out." The soldiers hate the holdovers, the Drill Sergeants hate the holdovers, the First Sergeant hates the holdovers.... Everyone hates the holdovers. I can't even blame them. Or at least I shouldn't. I know how it is, holdovers haven't got the will to be anything more than a nuisance. It's a constant power struggle between the holdover and everyone else. They ruin the hierarchy. They're not afraid of the Drill Sergeant. They don't respect the other soldiers. Most don't march correctly or even bother with singing cadences. They speak when they should be silent and are silent when they should speak, because why not? What is there to gain from following the rules?

A holdovers main goal is to break out of the soldiering superposition. The ambiguity of the state is far too difficult to deal with. They'd rather break the vial of hydrocyanic acid themselves than remain a part of Schrodinger's experiment. Self-destruction is inevitable. You can play it safe and stay alive, and in the box; but most choose to cackle madly, smash the vial, and ruin the experiment.

A great example is Pvt. Edwards, who smashed the vial so fast there was never a question of whether he was a soldier or a civilian. Edwards was always a civilian. He just dressed like a soldier.

When I met him it was sweltering. I think the temperature gauge said it was over 100 that day, and we were all tense. The heat makes people mean. Anything over 100 degrees is just asking for trouble. It shortens fuses, even lights them sometimes. I was sitting on the bleachers in the pad, crammed so tightly with the other soldiers that my chest rested against the back of the

soldier beside me. Everyone had to sit with a slight twist in their waist to accommodate for the shoulders of 15 soldiers on each bench.

As we waited, I felt something wet dropping on me from above. I looked up and saw beads of perspiration dripping down another soldier's patrol cap and plopping on the back of my neck. "Dude," I said then shifted as far away from him as possible, crowding the soldier in front of me. He glared at me and I scowled back. Another soldier who apparently wasn't feeling very well coughed in my ear every few minutes, so I scowled at him too.

"Read your Blue Books if you have nothing to do!" Drill Sergeant called from the floor.

Ha. I couldn't even get to my Blue Book, let alone be expected to read it. Another drop landed on my neck, and I scrunched up to the person next to me. He scooted further to get away from me and glared. Between the heat and the Sea World attraction sitting behind me, it was impossible to focus on anything. Besides, I had no reason to study the Blue Book anymore. It had become more of a backup notebook, full of hand written calendars, calculations of my pay, and little observations about base.

Under the cover of the pad, soldiers were lining up for shots. I watched them absentmindedly, noting the Trypanophobics, who outed themselves as needle-haters by the way they shifted anxiously from one foot to another, their faces twisted in fear.

Poor souls. I felt bad for them. I had heard rumors about the "vaccination train" long before shipping. Every soldier that goes through Basic Training has to endure a literal gauntlet of shots. The soldiers line up and walk through a line of nurses who poke them for everything from influenza, to the measles, the mumps, tetanus, polio, meningococcal, rubella; plus a hormone-stunting pill that help cut down soldier's libidos, and a couple mystery pills we could never figure out.

The worst of them is affectionately nicknamed "The Peanut Butter Shot". It's a shot of penicillin that goes right into the soldier's butt cheek. It got its nickname because it afflicts them with a condition the Drill Sergeants like to call "Peanut Butter Ass", where their ass feels as if it

had peanut butter injected into it. You can always tell who just got shots by watching for who's hobbling around rubbing knots out of their butt cheek.

On the floor, each name was called off with a steady, bored, cadence: "Johnson... Cleary... Adams... Paulson... Eriks... Jackson. If your name was called line up for shots! HEY! I said get in the damn line, soldier!" An overweight Specialist in digi-cam scrubs hollered at soldiers, obviously enjoying the thrill of frightening newcomers.

"Hey!" A hand clamped down on my shoulder. "Hey you, how do you say your name?"

I shook off the hand, disgusted by any additional human contact that may intensify the heat. Irritated, I craned my head around to see who it was. Another private was grinning at me from a few rows up. He was tall, very tall, maybe six foot four, but thin like a rake. He looked like a bald scarecrow with his baggy, oversized, uniform draping off of him. I glanced at his nametape: "Edwards."

"It's pronounced 'Suh-kwar-ah'." I said, pronouncing it slowly.

"Right, right, right... 'Sah-queer-ah'."

Nope. I smiled tightly. "You got it," I said and turned back around.

He tapped my shoulder again. "So what are you getting out for?"

"Why do you care?" My temper was already baked, I knew this interaction couldn't go well.

"Ah, so you quit?"

I whipped around and glared at him. "No, actually."

"Then what? Oh! I know! You're pregnant! I hear girls get kicked out for that."

"I'm not fucking pregnant!" I couldn't believe this asshole. "I'm getting kicked out for mental issues. They say I'm a suicide/homicide risk."

"A what?"

"They mean I'm gonna kill myself or someone else."

"Are you?"

“No. I’m not fucking crazy.”

“Ah yeah,” he sighed arrogantly, as if he had known the whole time and my telling him was more or less a waste of air. “Well I’m a refusal. Had to quit. The army life just isn’t for me.”

“Mmhm.” I turned around, hoping he’d get the hint and fuck off.

“I miss home a lot,” he continued, “I mean, it sucks here. I thought the Army would be cooler than this. Like, guns and shit. The recruiters lied, all we do is clean and stand around all day. It’s retarded.”

“That’s what recruiters do. They lie.”

“Yeah, you can’t just believe everything people tell you, I guess. I think I miss music the most.”

“Mmhm,” This kid had a bad case of verbal diarrhea.

“Lucky for me, I know a bunch of songs by heart. Sometimes I just sing.” He grinned real wide. “You wanna hear?”

I turned around and smiled, “That is exactly the opposite of what I want you to do.” My smile, too-wide, too-ingenuous, hung on my face for just slightly too-long. Somewhere within the dashboard of my mind, my “Bitchometer” warning light came on.

Edwards narrowed his eyes at me for a moment, obviously irritated by my unwillingness to socialize. Then, his eyes relaxed and the smile crept back across his face. He suddenly began singing: “Sunday morning rain is falling/ steal some covers share some skin...”

For a moment, for a brief moment, I was so baffled I couldn’t get my brain to communicate with my body. All I could do was stare. He was SINGING in a place where we weren’t even supposed to be talking, and half the Drill Sergeants on base were under that pad with us. I ducked down to try and hide within the mass of sweaty soldiers. “Shhh... Edwards!” I hissed, “Dude, what the fuck? Shut up, shut up, shut the fuck up!”

“Clouds are shrouding us in moments unforgettable/ you twist to fit the mold that I am in....” His voice grew louder and more confident. He put a little swaying dance to his song. Heads swiveled in our directed as soldiers around us starting to pay attention.

“Shhhh! Edwards... Come on.” Another drop of sweat fell on me from above.

“But things just get so crazy, living life gets hard to do.”

“Edwards!”

“THAT SOMEDAY IT WOULD LEAD ME BACK TO YOU!” he leaned in close, knowing he was irritating me, “Paint a picture with my hands... What’s wrong, Sah-queer-ah? Don’t you like Maroon 5?” he kept his little dance going, pushing on my shoulder with one hand as he did.

Somewhere, beyond the urge to slap this skinny scarecrow off the bleachers, I could hear the SPC calling names again from below: “Buffet... Lassen... Roset... Smith... Russells... Clary. You’re all up!”

Suddenly, a cruel epiphany soaked up every bit of anger I had like a sponge. The weather felt 30 degrees cooler. The SeaWorld attraction behind me got shut down by the Health Department. I swear I had more leg room.

“Hey Edwards,” I smiled calmly. “Didn’t you hear that? I think they called your name for shots.” I pointed to the pad with my chin.

“What?” his face scrunched up in confusion. “No, I don’t. Like I said, I’m a refusal. I don’t need to get shots.” He started dancing again.

“Oh no! You do. You really do.”

“What? Why?”

“Grunlo told me, ya know, the Drill Sergeant in charge. He said to out-process from the Army, you need to finish in-processing first,” I explained. “If you don’t go through the whole process of getting into the Army, how can they possibly get you back out?”

“Oh right...” he paused for a second. “Yeah, yeah, no, you’re right, that makes sense. You said they called my name?”

“Yeah, the big fella right there.” More chin movements. I knew better than to point. “You better get down there before the ‘Drill Specialist’ realizes you’re not moving.”

“Shit, thanks man!” Edwards scrambled down the bleachers and filed in behind the other soldiers for shots.

I laughed quietly to myself, pleased with my own cruelty, when I felt a pull on my back.

“Hey Sequeira?” PVT Kett, a soldier from my bay, was tugging gently on a strap of my camelback.

I was still chuckling. “Yeah? What’s up, Kett?”

She looked confused. “I just, I don’t understand... Why aren’t you going to get shots, Sequeira? You’ve been here for like, two weeks now and you still haven’t gotten your shots.”

“Shit, Kett. Don’t be stupid. I don’t have to get shots. None of the holdovers do. It’s a waste of money.”

“Then why--?”

“Is Edwards getting his?” I grinned, “You heard him, didn’t ya? For all the stupid shit he was saying, he had a good point. ‘You can’t just believe everything you hear’.”

Unfortunately for Edwards, my plan worked even better than I intended. Not only did nobody stop him from getting shots, like I thought they would, but they gave him every single shot in the Army. I couldn’t fucking believe it. So much for our nation’s finest.

Regardless, it just made it that much funnier. He waddled around on a sore ass cheek for days, bitching and griping about how stupid it was that he needed to get shots. Even worse, the live viruses in the medication ended up making him sick. He lost his voice almost entirely a few days later. He didn’t go to Sickbay or anything like that, what with Holdover’s Paranoia and all, but he was very quiet during details. And that’s the next best thing.

CH. 12

The details, as welcomed of a distraction as they were, left me exhausted most days. Tired didn't even begin to cut it. My body felt shattered when I woke up each morning. My shoulders, my back, my hands—all of them were sore from carrying boxes, chipping ice, throwing blankets, not to mention all the sitting. An old sunburn was peeling off my nose, making my face an itchy disturbance throughout the day. My thighs were chaffed and red from a poorly fitted uniform and marching. My feet had long since turned green and yellow with blistering infections. Some of my toes had taken on a “mushy” quality that made me nervous. I was afraid each time I took off my boots that the skin of my feet my slough off with them. I had heat rash spreading across my belly, and judging by the purple bruises that bloomed on my hips, I was starting to get anemic.

It's strange though. Like the rain, you can almost find a way to enjoy it—almost. They call it “Embracing the Suck” in the Army. It's an aggressive attitude change. The best soldiers can be waist-deep in shit and mud, roasting in the sun or freezing in the rain and still find a way to make a joke about it. It's an appropriate level of craziness according to the Army.

My brother told me a story about a soldier once who was going through some kind of training for Special Forces. Looking to break the guy down, his cadre locked him in a flooded dumpster for hours on end. The soldier only had a couple inches of air at the top, forcing him to sip breaths from the surface with his entire head and body submerged. When the cadre came back several hours later, he threw open the dumpster, shined a flashlight in the guy's eyes, and yelled “How ya likin' it, soldier?”

The soldier paddled back and forth from one side of the dumpster to the other, gave the cadre a big ol' grin and said: “I love it! I can't remember the last time I got in a good swim.”

I tried to remember that story as I gently lanced the blisters on my feet with a thumbtack from the bay bulletin board. I dumped Purell into each cut, cursing every Drill Sergeant who didn't let me exchange those piece-of-shit boots. Some of the other soldiers watched me

squeamishly as I worked, puckered in disgust at my savage surgical attempt. At first I was offended by their looks, but seeing their expressions, twisted and contorted as if they smelled something bad, made me laugh.

At first I chuckled. Then I snorted. Then I threw my head back and laughed until my sides hurt. I didn't even know why I was laughing. Maybe it was their expressions, maybe it was the minimalist first aid I was trying to perform, but something bubbled up inside of me. Before long I was laughing at everything. At Edwards and his peanut butter ass, at Pollock and his stories, at the long, stupid, journey I had taken to get there. The soldiers smiled awkwardly back at me from their bunks, trying to figure out why I was laughing, but I couldn't get a breath to explain. Tears streamed down my face as I laughed at Dr. Kozik and his saggy eye, the dead soldiers from formation, and Fournett's broken leg. I laughed at Drill Sergeant Liming's monkey arms and Drill Sergeant Smith's crayon-eating teeth. I laughed at my stupid tan and my stupid recruiters and my stupid self. I laughed until I couldn't laugh anymore. And then I laughed some more.

CH. 13

For all the suck I was able to embrace with those gangrenous toes, the next day therapy had me on the brink of tears. Infected blisters are one thing, but trying to control your heartbeat is another task altogether. I went in as chipper and fake-happy as a holdover could be, repeating the mantra "Third time's the charm!" like some kind of middle-aged mom with more optimism than brains. Despite the change in attitude, no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get my heart to stop dancing the Cha Cha in my chest.

That day's game involved a picture of a scenic and well-groomed garden. The goal was to make it "bloom". Dr. I-Don't-Want-To-Be-Here hooked me up to the Biofeedback Machine and explained that every time my heartrate fell to an acceptable rate, part of the picture would "bloom" and switch from greyscale to vibrant colors.

“It’s like a reward system,” he said. “And the map should help you relax. Hopefully this will be better than the balloon game. We’re just not getting much luck with you and those balloons...” he muttered as he turned away.

Unfortunately, whether flowers or balloons, I couldn’t force myself to relax. The anxiety and irritation, brought on more by the game than anything else, was starting to make me physically uncomfortable. I caught myself scratching absentmindedly at my left arm, a nervous habit I’ve had for years. Beneath the desk, I rolled up my sleeve and saw my pale, white wrist, enflamed but undamaged. Five distinctively dark scars stood out like tally marks against the red. I took a moment to examine them, running my fingers along their edges before thrusting my arm back into my sleeve for safety.

If they thought I was crazy now, I couldn’t imagine how they’d respond to the scars.

A year after I got my first razor blade, despite the claims of control, my arms and legs were draped in shallow cuts and textured with scars. I had friends and family who loved me, but nobody ever noticed. It wasn’t their fault. Like most cutters, I took to wearing hoodies and jeans regardless of the weather. The closest I ever came to being caught was in the locker room, when one of my best friends made a joke about how I looked so “emo” with all my latest scratches. At the time, I laughed with her and blamed them on the fences I climbed, on the protruding nails in the neighborhood, on my various pets... anything but a razorblade.

After a year of these games, the lying and hiding and sneaking around, everything was falling apart. I was home alone, grounded for lying about another assignment, and staring at a half-bottle of pills I had lined up in front of me. After missing dozens of math assignments and getting caught up in countless lies, I was simply too tired, too far behind. My parents were fed up. I had nothing but the punishments, and the punishments meant nothing by then.

That night, I had been left home so they could go out to dinner with my Papa, my father’s father. It was a weekly tradition. Every Monday night we invited the extended family to come

over for a meal. Usually it was homemade, but on some occasions, like that night, we went out for dinner. Unfortunately, on that same night, Mom had caught me lying about assignments again.

I've come to realize that loneliness is a tremendous exercise in learning to hate yourself—especially when it occurs in the wake of failure. My lies had spread further than I'd ever imagined. I was becoming increasingly isolated as consumed me, inch by inch. I had to hide them with layers of clothing, sweat bands, long-sleeves, and leather braces. My favorite lime-green hoodie had gone from being a comforting second skin to an obligatory veil, meant to shamefully hide instead of soothingly hold. My arms had become a secret, my legs had become a secret; every aspect of my life had become a secret. And therefore, every aspect of my life had become a lie—something I felt couldn't be shared with anyone else.

I lined up each aspirin perfectly, like little orange tombstones. I looked it up on the internet. They said aspirin was very toxic, that I could use it for what I wanted, just as long as I took enough. I swallowed them one at a time at first, letting each one drop down my throat. I didn't like the taste, plastic, as if they were dipped in latex. I was sick of the flavor by the time I made it to 40-some odd so I started taking them in handfuls.

When I was done, I drank a big cup of water and lay down in bed, sobbing but oddly peaceful. No more math. No more school. No more parents to disappoint or friends to miss out on. No more cruel kids at school. No more ugly body, ugly face, ugly soul. No more razor blades and blood and looney tune bandages and scars. No more excuses. I was done. Ready to go out the way we all want to. All I had to do was fall asleep, and I'd never wake up again.

Of course, the next morning I did wake up—which is exactly what you don't want to happen after a suicide attempt. I was startled awake by a loud, obnoxious buzzing and realized that despite the certainty surrounding my death the night before I had habitually set my alarm for school.

Immediately, I was assaulted with a cacophony of sensations, most of them unpleasant. My entire body felt achy and sick, like the mother of all flus. With great effort, I dragged myself to the mirror mounted behind my door. When I saw my face I was horrified. My eyes looked hollow and bluish around the sockets. My brows were still swollen from crying the night before. Strands of auburn hair hung limp and greasy in front of my forehead, clinging to my crusty lashes. I pawed at the mess uselessly, trying to make it look nicer, but quickly realized the futility. It was too soaked in sweat and I couldn't stop my hands from shaking.

For the only time in my life, my reflection didn't just upset me, it terrified me. I had never looked so horrible. My skin and eyes were vaguely yellow. I'd taken on a waxy quality, like that of a corpse. But that I hardly noticed in lieu of other symptoms.

Namely, I couldn't hear anymore.

Apparently, aspirin is known as an "ototoxic" medication. Literally translated, that means "ear poisoning". Long term chronic use (or acute overdose, in my case) causes a form of hearing loss known as "tinnitus" which is a constant ringing in your ears. I woke up with almost no sense of hearing. Everything, the entire world was being drowned out by one, long, piercing tone.

. To this day, I'm still amazed that I'm alive. That much aspirin should have killed me. It should have torn apart my liver. It should have destroyed my kidneys. I should have had respiratory problems and Hypokalemia. I should have gone to a hospital.

But I didn't.

Instead, I pushed past the nausea and the dizziness. I put my clothes on as fast as possible. I grabbed my backpack, skipped breakfast, and left mom a note that I left for school early to try and get some help in math. *Another lie*. I thought, and realized my thoughts were louder than ever.

I could hardly walk, but I managed my way down the road with gasping difficulty. I panted and groaned every step of the way. The world felt mushy when I stepped on it, as if nothing was solid and everything was soft and swaying. Every few yards, the stomach cramps got

so bad I had to sit on the ground and wait them out. Twice, I had to stop and puke. When I did it was nothing but acid, dyed orange by the plastic-flavored pills.

When I got to school I had to climb a tree to get over the fence and into the school yard. To walk to the front gate meant another half mile, and that wasn't worth it for me. This was something I did every day with no problem, but on that day just the thought made me feel ill. I climbed the tree as if I had aged 30 years overnight. My joints felt creaky and fatigued. I could barely pull myself up. When I got to the top, I was so exhausted I couldn't bear the thought of dragging myself back to the ground through all my suffering, so I jumped. My feet hit the ground hard, my teeth clacked in my skull, and I was thrown down to the floor, which didn't feel quite so mushy against my ass. For a few moments I just sat there and puked. When I was done, I stood up and dragged myself to homeroom.

My school, despite being a staggeringly expensive private school, still had us learning in mobile classrooms. They were little more than trailers packed with educational materials. My homeroom was the biology trailer, which was convenient, because biology happened to also be my first period. I walked up the ramp, leaned against the railing to get a couple of much-needed deep breaths, then put on my best "normal" face and entered the room.

My teacher saw me immediately. Not only because I was late, which was a rare if not unheard of occurrence, but because I looked like death and reeked of vomit. I could still taste it in my mouth. As I walked, waves rocked my stomach and tsunami warnings flashed in my eyes.

"It's good." I said, waving my hand at the teacher to ignore me. "Go ahead. Teach."

Mr. Bartsch hesitated for a moment, briefly opening his mouth as if he were going to argue, then snapping it shut. He returned to the lesson reluctantly, offering only a polite nod as he did. I sat down, taking a moment, thankful that I was at the front of the classroom where I could actually hear parts of the lecture. I watched his mouth and tried my best to listen through the roar of the ringing.

As I wrote my notes, beads of yellow sweat dripped onto my pages. The ink bled and smeared as I tried in vain to wipe it off. Horrified, the girl next to me scooted her chair further away from me. My stomach groaned and I wondered if anyone could hear it. I couldn't. A painful flood of cramps forced my head down onto my desk. I rested my forehead on my book and closed my eyes.

With my eyes closed, it was so quiet that I could almost pretend I was alone. All I could hear was the sound of my pounding heart, and the shriek of the banshee that hung between my ears. Lying there, with all those little orange fires still burning in my belly, I realized that I felt numb, like I was empty. Like I didn't have very many emotions left anymore. Depression, anxiety, anger, frustration—they'd eaten everything. The little orange fires consumed everything. I was empty inside besides the pills. And even then, I could feel them clawing at the back of my throat, looking to escape my stomach through my lying mouth.

I wondered what I was supposed to do from there. Try again? I already fucked it up once, why try again? Because I still want to die, of course. But why do I want to die? Well, right now, I want to die because I feel like I'm dying.

Suddenly, my stomach let out a long, monstrous growl and a sharp pain shot through my abdomen. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the poor girl beside me slowly turn to look in horror at the source of the noise: me. A sickening feeling washed over my body and landed in my lower abdomen like a jumbo jet. Something shifted in my guts and I threw my hand into the air.

"Bartsch," I interrupted him mid-sentence, "I gotta go."

"What?"

"Now."

"Well go!" He yelled and waved me away, somewhat frantically. I could feel my classmate's eyes burning holes in my back as I ran out.

Once I was outside I puked on the ramp. Then I ran with a fatigued, lumbering motion to the bathroom. I found a stall, prayed I was alone, and felt myself torn apart by the worst diarrhea

I've ever experienced. I threw up in the tampon basket as I shit out every meal I've ever eaten, guilty and embarrassed for the janitor who'd have to clean up after me.

Fifteen minutes later, Bartsch sent a friend to come and insist that I leave. "He says he doesn't want you to come back," she said through the crack in the bathroom stall. "You need to go home."

Once I had finally exorcised myself of all my remaining dignity and pride, as well as half of my body weight in shit, I walked back to the office, hoping not to attract anymore attention. Lucky for me, and my pride, I had everyone's attention the moment I walked into the room.

"Oh my goodness!"

"You look terrible!"

"You're so yellow!"

"I just need to call my mom," I said, ignoring their comments.

When they gave me the phone, I dialed my mom's work number and waited:

"Hello, thank you for calling Les Schwab, this is Michelle."

"Hey, mom."

"Randi?" Her voice immediately got tense. "Why are you calling me at work?"

"I'm sick. I have to go home. THEY SAY I have to go home." I tried to emphasize it was them, not me, that thought I should go home.

"No, I'm not falling for this shit again. If you're sick, you'll just have to wait it out.

When I'm sick, I still have to go to work. Same goes for you."

"But I'm really sick mom..."

She paused on the other line, furiously silent.

"Give me to one of the office ladies," she said finally.

I listened patiently as the office lady talked to my mother: "Hello Mrs. Sequeira. Yeah. Oh I see. I see. Well... Well, I think she looks pretty darn sick.... Yeah. No. Well, she's all shiny... and she's real sweaty. And she says she's been throwing up.... She looks like it too.

Okay. Okay, yes. Yes, of course, thank you. Alright, bye-bye now.” She hung up the line without giving me back the phone. “She says she’ll call your grandmother to come and pick you up, but you have to go to each one of your classes and get your teachers to give you your homework and sign your planner.”

“Okay,” As I picked up my bag another wave of nausea ran over me. I bolted outside and leaned over the railing, emptying my stomach’s contents all over the lunch area directly next to the office. A nice office lady came rushing out a few minutes later, carrying a trash can.

“I’m sorry...” I burped, embarrassed, as she stroked my hair and handed me the can.

“Oh honey! You don’t have anything to be sorry—“

“Not you.” I interrupted and pointed down to where my vomit had landed—directly on top of a brown sack lunch. The name “Brandon” written in sharpie on the front. “Brandon,” I explained, spitting into the lunch area, “I’m sorry to Brandon. I just ruined his lunch.”

“Well,” The office lady said, scooping me up and directing me back into the office along with my trusty vomit-can. “He shouldn’t have left his lunch there anyways.”

After realizing that I was an unstoppable puke-machine, the office ladies sent my friend to go and collect my homework for the evening, a sentiment that I’m sure was appreciated by the janitorial staff who were in for a busy day of cleaning because of me.

My grandma came in about an hour later. When she walked through the door, I was half conscious in a lobby chair, balancing my head on the rim of the trash can and puking apathetically. I had a jug of water next to me to ensure I had something more to throw up than just acid. Throwing up slightly acrid water meant more vomiting, of course, but less heaving, which means less of a chance of me accidentally shitting my pants. To this day, this is the only time I’ve ever had to do risk-assessment just to avoid crapping myself in front of the school.

“Hey grandma,” I smiled as she walked in.

“Oh my goodness! You look terrible.”

“I know.” I wondered how many times I’d hear that that day.

We packed my stuff up in the car and she drove me back home, where I immediately fell asleep in the shower. When I woke up nearly an hour later the water was cold, so I finished cleaning myself and crawled into bed, a red plastic bowl cradled delicately beneath my chin.

Phantom shrieks filled my ears again, but I forced myself to sleep. It seemed like the only thing to do, the next best thing to suicide—which had proven far more complicated than I had once hoped. I thought that suicide would be easy, like on TV. Just a handful of pills and POOF, you're gone. Life is always so fragile in the movies—but we're a lot tougher than we think.

As I began to doze off, I gently stroked my left arm where the deepest scars had formed, and the skin rose up like broken fragments of an old highway. The edges felt soft and fleshy beneath my fingertips, like a newborn baby bathed in pink. I sighed, allowing the darkness behind my eyelids to slip deeper into my skull, wondering, perhaps even hoping, if the chemical reaction of the aspirin was simply delayed and whether I'd wake up a second time.

But, of course, I did.

(Author's Note: This is NOT a complete work—With the latter half of the story, I plan to explore my experience being sexually assaulted, the inconsistent and often sexist treatment of female soldiers, and my eventual journey home.)

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Burroughs captivating memoir recounts his experience as the gay son of an alcoholic father and an unhinged mother. The novel explores his life from the age of nine to the age of seventeen. After his father leaves, Augusten is left to deal with the ups and downs of his mentally ill mother. As the book progresses and the mother's state worsens, she eventually gives him to her strange therapist and his eccentric extended family. *Running with Scissors* deals with issues of identity, sexuality, and social status as Augusten faces the trials of his teenage years.

Swofford, Anthony. *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.

Jarhead is a Gulf War memoir written by Anthony Swafford about his time in the war. Swafford's tales of the boredom of war is frustratingly uninspiring. Despite being a Marine sniper, Swafford never gets an opportunity to fire his weapon. Instead of focusing on violence, the narrative explores other traumatizing effects of war: loneliness, fear, boredom, and madness. Throughout the novel Swafford considers suicide, trains weapons on his fellow Marines, and is forced to consider what it means to be both a Marine and a man.

Lt. Lynn, "Buck". *Call of Duty: My Life Before, During, and After the Band of Brothers*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.

This memoir came out seven years after the award-winning mini-series on the History channel: "Band of Brothers" which recounted the stories of World War Two Veterans from the famous "Easy" Company (506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division). In this memoir, Lt. "Buck" Compton recounts on his personal experiences in the so-called "Band of Brothers". This highly informative memoir goes into detail about military life, specifically life for an Officer in World War Two. Lt. Compton reflects on attending college to earn a slot in OCS (Officer Candidate School), what Airborne School was like, and finally what the hardships of war were like.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Nick Adams Stories*. New York: Scribner, 1972. Print

This collection of Hemingway short stories is the complete narrative of one of his most famous characters, Nick Adams. The story of Nick has been organized in such a way that you read from the beginning of his life until the end (as opposed to being organized by publication date). He watches a Native American woman give birth, he goes to war, he comes home, and all the while he aspires to write. The Nick Adams character is said to be closely paralleled to Hemingway's own life.

Sites, Kevin. *The Things They Cannot Say: Stories Soldiers Won't Tell You About What They've Seen, Done, or Failed to do in War*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013. Print.

In this collection, Kevin Sites (a journalist) interviews soldiers and marines to answer the difficult questions of war: "What is it like to kill?" "What is it like to be under fire?" and "How do you know what's right?" are some of the riveting questions that Sites offers to the men, and the stories that follow are deeply moving. Some men talk about their injuries such as the soldier who believes his head trauma has taken his ability to love. Some talk of war time horrors; others, of redemption, and how to cope after the battle has ended. The novel also includes Sites own experiences dealing with failure, triumph, and bravery in war.

Knutsen, Kimberly. *The Lost Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Illinois: Switchgrass Books, 2015. Print

Set in the American mid-west, Katie Lavender and her self-proclaimed genius husband, Wilson Lavender, fight to find themselves and save their marriage despite the stagnation of the modern life. Meanwhile, Katie's sister January deals with her own issues of love, an unwanted pregnancy, and an obsession with an old rock-star fling named Stevie Flame. When January moves in to the Lavender home, the seemingly quiet life is split open into chaos and allowed to breathe.

Tzu, Sun. *The Art of War*. Trans. Thomas Cleary. Boston & London: Shambhala, 2005. Print

The thirteen chapters of *The Art of War* deliberately creates a science out of the chaos of war. Written in a cyclical manner that is characteristic of Eastern philosophy (beginning and ending with positional strategies) Sun Tzu reviews positional strategies, methods for mapping the pros and cons of positional strategies, advancing strategies, and situation response strategies for military forces, many of which are still acknowledged by military personnel today.

Maginnis, Robert L. *Deadly Consequences: How Cowards Are Pushing Women into Combat*. New York: Regnery, 2013. Print

This incredibly controversial book by Robert Maginnis sets up arguments for why women should be allowed in combative military positions and how the decision to put women in such positions will erode the American military and ultimately put the nation at risk for foreign attack. Maginnis claims that the recent decision to allow women in combat has been handled poorly and points to difference in physical requirements as an omen of the dysfunction that he suspects will result from the decision. Maginnis also cites biological differences between the genders as reason to keep women from direct combat and claims the epidemic of sexual assault and rape amongst military personnel will only be aggravated if women are allowed to fight beside men. Finally, Maginnis points out the sexist hypocrisy of allowing women to be in combat only when they want to, but still requiring men to sign up for the draft.

Williams, Kayla, and Michael E. Staub. *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. Print.

This personal memoir recounts female soldier, Kayla Williams, and her experiences as an interpreter in the U.S. Army. It follows from the time of her enlistment in 2000, through her tours overseas, as well as the trials of returning home and acclimating to civilian life. Intermittently throughout the novel, Williams reflects back on her life as an intelligent young rebel who gave up a life of party and drugs for a life of challenges and pride. The most unique part of the novel is Williams' reflections on her identity as a female soldier who at times can feel perfectly at home in the hyper masculinity of the Army, but at other times can feel wholly isolated as well. One particularly humorous scene involves Williams female battle buddy attempting to pee into a bottle, while wearing a full 60lbs kit, and driving in a convoy with all her male teammates around her.

Hornbacher, Marya. *Madness: A Bipolar Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Print.

This memoir has received national attention as one of the best modern, female-authored memoirs of all time. When Marya Hornbacher was 24 (Note: after the publication of her first memoir, *Wasted*. Involving her struggle with eating disorders) she was diagnosed with rapid cycle bipolar disorder, the most severe form of bipolar one can have. With the same brutal honesty as her first memoir, Hornbacher paints a shockingly accurate picture of mental illness, one that leaves the mad comforted and the sane in disbelief.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.

Toni Morrison's "Beloved" is a masterfully written fictional account of a recently escaped slave family. The novel follows freewoman Sethe, her born-free daughter Denver, and the ghost of a murdered infant as they each struggle with the darkness of their own respective pasts. I'm using *Beloved* as a reference for skillful use of the past-tense voice.

Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1998. Print

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is without a doubt the most impactful book I've ever read. His volatile, electric style of writing, peppered with obscenities and exaggeration, caricatures and vulgarity, has been the primary source of inspiration throughout the project. Thompson's unique grasp of language and his ability to convey satire organically and humorously is among his greatest talents.