

Mama I'm Coming Home

—Matthew Holland

I'm looking at the crowd and it is like an out-of-body experience. I've never seen so many hot girls in one place. There is something about these girls: They are all perfect, everything you could dream of and more. It is only ten dollars for all-you-can-drink draft beer. There is something about this beer: It is the best beer I have ever had. Fuck this feels good. "Hey, bro, come check this shit out!" my buddy Bobby screams to me from the end of the bar. Then, suddenly, I am surrounded by what seems like the entire bar joined in the act of watching two girls. You can figure out for yourself what is going on. Then, out of nowhere, one of the girls grabs me by the collar. Something awesome is about to happen. I won't be pulled away this time. I can smell her perfume. She gets closer...

"Umm, this is your pilot speaking. We've got about three hour hours until we touch-down in Savanna, Georgia. The weather is looking very clear, so sit back and enjoy the ride." Damn, it was a dream. I always get so close. This happens every, single time. The smell of a hot girl's perfume, the sting of Bud Light, and my fun-loving, don't-give-a-damn attitude, are suddenly replaced by the smell of ass and ball sweat. Instead of the sounds of bar-music and seductive women, I hear my friend Bobby snoring his ass off next to me. Instead of feeling alive, visceral, and ready to *get down*, I feel groggy as shit because I had to pop four Tylenol PMs to sleep on this damn flight.

My name is Matt. I am a Navy Seabee. I'm in a pretty crummy mood right now because I'm in the middle of my fifteen-hour plane ride back to the states from Afghanistan. This isn't my first rodeo, but it's definitely a different feeling from the first time I returned from the desert. For one thing, I have a shit-ton more money than I did the first time; and, two, I'm twenty-one. Yes, I turned twenty-one in Afghanistan. It sucked ass—major ass. When I returned from my

first deployment I was groggy on this flight for the same reasons. But when I came back from that deployment it was weird: I didn't really want to come back because I was so used to the military lifestyle—the schedule, the straight-from-training-to-combat mentality, the being in the fight—and was comfortable with everything that it means to deploy. Now, I am older—I'm twenty-one—and I've spent twelve months have twelve months in Mississippi under my belt. I know people; I have a life to go back to.

On my birthday, I tried to get a buzz by drinking a case of rip-its, but it didn't work. Instead, I got hyper as shit and couldn't sleep. Now, I'm twenty-one and the closer I get to being back in the states, the more I have the same dream which I have already described. My dreams always include girls, alcohol, and waking up as soon as it starts to get good. The dreams are so real I can almost *taste* them. For the past three months, I've been looking forward to—literally dreaming about—going to the bar, buying drinks, and getting wasted. It's been a long time coming. Now, I am only three hours from Savanna. After that, I will have an hour layover before another forty-five minute stop in Gulfport, MS. I pop my last two Tylenol PMs, hoping I won't wake up until we land...

“Umm, this is your pilot speaking. We're about to land in Savanna, Georgia where the weather is a breezy, seventy degrees with sunshine.” I wake up at the end of the message, sure that I misunderstood him.

“Did he just say 70 degrees?” I ask Bobby, who is still half asleep.

“Yeah, pretty sweet, huh?” he replies.

Yes, it is pretty fucking sweet. Seventy degrees. We got to the desert in the middle of January. So, for the past—I don't know—six months, I've been used to at least ninety-degree weather and more. Don't even get me started on Kuwait. We spent two weeks in Kuwait on our way from Afghanistan back to the states. Every time you walk outside it's like putting your head in an oven while someone holds a blow-dryer in front of your face. It's miserable. Needless to say, I am pretty stoked about the breezy, seventy-degree, Savanna weather. We're

landing in Savanna before we actually get back home to Gulfport, MS. I never understood why we stop there because the plane ride from Savanna to Gulfport is only forty-five minutes. I think that the delay in Savanna is intentional so that we will see how beautiful the Georgian city is.

When the plane finally lands, I take the first steps off and immediately notice how much cleaner the air is. The surroundings are so much greener than what I have grown accustomed to. It is green in Hindu Kush mountain range in Afghanistan; there *are* trees and vegetation. But after eight months you forget what *real* trees and *real* grass look like. After eight months of living in the smell of burning trash, port-o-potties (I can't even describe the smell they were so bad), and constant man sweat, it is literally "a breath of fresh air" as soon as I step off of the plane.

In my last deployment to Afghanistan, I took constant trips to the burn pits in FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) Ghazni and Shrunna. The smell from the pit—the trash, feces, wood, and everything else that needed to be disposed of—would blow into my face and cover my body. We had to keep things like wires, nails and sensitive materials away from the locals who worked at the pit. The crafty little fuckers would go through the pits and make IEDs and booby traps from our trash. You couldn't trust the people they let on base. Sure, they do background checks. We even watched over them whenever they did work. Still, they would always pick up random objects and we would have to get them back. It is an awkward conversation asking someone for a nail and explaining to them why they cannot have it, especially in another language. You couldn't trust anyone. But all of that is over now.

I walk inside of the terminal and see all the volunteers welcome us back with cookies and cake. That's when it really hits me: "Damn. We're almost home." Only members of the military and their families can describe this feeling. I just feel good. To see people taking time out of their day to thank us is awe-inspiring. I didn't expect it to be like this—for the people to be so nice—and I am really

surprised. We are momentarily humbled. Then, out come the phones. The planning begins. It's a weird feeling, actually using my cell phone other than to just look up numbers to call from the phone-center. Me, Bobby, and a few others start "officially" planning what we're going to do that night. After all, when we land in Gulfport we will have forty-eight hours of liberty. I'm starting to get excited. My dreams of bar-hopping and woman-chasing are soon going to be a reality. What a feeling.

Before the partying can commence, we have to get back on the plane. I'm not the only one who is starting to get antsy. The plane takes off: "Next stop, Gulfport, Mississippi." The sounds of yells, screams, hoops, and hollers (you name it) roar over everything the pilot tries to say. I look around; everybody is smiling and talking to each other. Even those who had grudges against each other—who hated each other's guts—are friends for the forty-five minute flight. The majority of the people on this flight are happy and joined together by that common feeling.

I don't know if this is a tradition for every unit coming back home, but I made three deployments with the Seabees and every flight ended with a "blanket party." No, this is not the party where you hold someone down with a blanket and beat the shit out of them with pillow cases full of bars of soap. Our blanket party is where, on that short flight from Savanna to Gulfport, pillow cases stuffed with water bottles, trash, magazines, boots, and anything else around are thrown at everyone on the plane. It's funny to watch the flight attendants because you can always tell the experienced ones from the rookies. The experienced flight attendants know what's coming; they know they can't stop it. The rookies get all pissy and try to calm everyone down. That usually happens at about the same time they get decked in the head with a pillow case full of something or another. I have never come home without this happening; I wouldn't have it any other way. It's a feeling of freedom for me. The blanket party says, "I'm going to do

whatever the fuck I want to do these next three days. And I deserve it.” It’s a memory I will never forget.

Despite having to pick up everything we just destroyed, it doesn’t even come close to dampening everyone’s mood. People begin to yell random things:

“We’re going the fuck home!!!”

“I’m getting fucking drunk!!”

“My wife’s not gonna know what hit her!”

These are the anonymous screams. They get louder and more frequent the closer we get to home. The time is near. With the captain saying that we are about to descend, no one can sit still. Trust me, I was one of them. I can almost taste the beer. Finally, we land. Even those holding back their emotions instantly let loose as soon as the plane touches the ground in Gulfport, Mississippi. The crowd erupts. It is so loud that my ears hurt. Awesome.

We are lining up to get off of the plane. I’m ready to jump out of my boots I’m so excited. As we step off of the plane, we are welcomed home by a line of about twenty to thirty Captains and Master Chiefs who shake our hands and tell us that we did a good job. True to military form, we get our kudos in an assembly line type of fashion. Next, we get on the buses. It seems to take an eternity. As soon as everyone is on the bus, people from the other battalions load our luggage. It is pretty awesome because I don’t have to do it. I get a sense of pride, because, we are being treated with respect. We have earned our right to have these people load our luggage. It seems like a small gesture, but the people loading our luggage are indicators that we are home. When we left for Afghanistan, we loaded our own things. Now we are back. Things have come full circle. People are walking around, handing out flowers for whoever might want to give them to a significant other. I don’t have a girlfriend to give a flower to, or to welcome me home. Still, I think it was a pretty cool gesture for those who did. More than anything, I can taste the beer.

Everything is loaded up, ready to go. Why are we still sitting here? After about five minutes I turn to someone and ask, “Why the fuck we still sitting here?”

“Waiting on a police escort, I think.”

“No way, a police escort?” I think to myself. We didn’t have one last time. This ought to be pretty cool. Sure enough, the police show up and we roll out. On the whole ride from the airport to the base, I have a smile on my face, which is constantly stuck to the window. I feel kind of special and a little proud as we run through the red lights. People stare. A lot of people realize who we are and it is pretty cool when they honk their horns. I even see three old men on the side of the road, saluting as we drive by. That gives me chills.

Despite all of this, the one thing that really makes me feel at home is Rowdy Randy, or “RR,” as he is called. You can’t get the full RR experience unless you’re a relative of his, or unless you’re stationed in Gulfport, Mississippi. RR is a thirty-five year old, fat, Hispanic male who loves not wearing a shirt. He always has a shirt on him; but it is usually in his hand or around his waist. Oh, and he’s mentally handicapped. I’m not sure if I can prove that fact, so just trust me, he is. RR and his family live just outside the base; he has the tendency to hump the air and make sexual gestures to anyone he sees driving by. He actually had the cops called on him a few times for pulling his dick out of his pants and showing it to girls...

Anyway, back to where I’m going with this. As we pull up to the base, who do you think I see vigorously humping the air? It is none other than RR! Once I see him, I know we are back in Gulfport. RR’s knees are bent and his hips are thrusting forward and back with no rhythm at all. His gut hangs over his belt and sweat drips from his greasy black hair. It is beautiful. After watching the show, we get on base and start seeing all the signs made by the military families. They say things like “Welcome Home” or “We missed you,” stuff like that. At this point, it seems kind of surreal. I mean, I’ve been thinking about this day for the

past two months. Now that it's here, I really don't know what to do. Oh yeah, I'm twenty-one; I'm going to get smashed. We pass all of the signs, and as we start to turn the corner, I start hearing the screams. I see the families waiting for their husbands, wives, sons, daughters, moms, and dads to finally be back in their lives again. "Damn, this is really happening," I think to myself.

After they let all the new dads go home (there weren't many since we were only gone for eight months. If there were a lot of new dads, I'd be a little worried), the rest of us get off of the bus. It doesn't bother me too much not having anyone there to welcome me back. Plus, I always thought that kind of stuff was more for the people married with kids. I find my friend Bobby and am pleased to find the NEX (Naval Exchange) conveniently close to where they dropped us off.

I walk through the crowd of families to talk to my friend: "Hey, you want to run over with me and pick up a 12 pack before we grab our stuff?"

"Yeah, let's go," Bobby replies. I pick out a twelve pack of Bud Light. This is the same beer I always have in my dreams. It was the beer that was always around when I was drinking underage. Well, there was beer and cheap whiskey. I don't want to get wasted at two in the afternoon, so I choose not to get any cheap whiskey. I want to last until the night time, when the partying will really begin. The twelve-



pack is cold; I set it on the counter; I am getting excited. Bobby is twenty-three and has bought his share of beer. I am twenty-one now. I just got back from deployment. And I immediately step up to pay.

“Can I see your I.D?” the cashier asks.

“My pleasure.” The moment I’ve truly been waiting for is finally here. I am legally buying my first beer, and (legally) taking that first drink. It is great. Me and Bobby step outside, pop the top, cheer to a good time, and then, well, that’s a whole other story.