

The 51st Trans. Co. MRE Recycling Center

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August 2003, 1100 Hours, Iraq

The sun scorches my back, registering just under my threshold for pain. Wearing a brown t-shirt crusted in salt and dried sweat, I move my arms in a circular pattern, always counterclockwise and always with caution. Tightly gripping a metal fence post, I test the solidity of the remains before lowering its end into the flames. The orange dancers caress and wrap themselves around it, coating the rust spots in black, grimy soot. Like a surgeon with a heated scalpel, I make my first incision. My mouth becomes dry; saliva glands release that strangely cool liquid that only comes just before vomiting. My stomach turns in disgust as I nudge a solid mass to the left, displacing liquefied remains to the right. Oily smoke pours out from underneath, rising to meet my face. I cough and spit and curse. Flames singe the tips of my eyebrows; not even the smell of the burnt hair compares to the soot caked onto my face and forearms.

The words of my First Sergeant play again and again in my head: “We are here to help the Iraqi people secure a new future. We will leave this country better than we found it.” I know, despite the grotesque nature of this *duty*, I am doing my part.

No history books will acknowledge the work I do this day. This mission will go unnoticed; no shiny medals will brighten my dark memories. I reason with myself nonetheless: *We can't simply dump this stuff on the Iraqis' doorstep and hope for the best. Someone has to do the work that no one else will.* I dump another gallon of diesel fuel onto the fire and jump back. *That someone is me.* I drop the smoking fence post into the sand. A bit of something burns on the end before being extinguished by the earth. Stepping back from the heat and pulling

my shirt upwards, I wipe clean my eyes. My tears dry to reveal the fire but also the structure from which we pulled the remains. The building has six single words scrawled upon it, revealing the ghastly nature of my task: “51st Trans. Co. MRE Recycling Center.” Six doors. Six words. Six barrels of poop. The mark of the beast and smoldering human waste. I’m on shit detail.



I walk twenty feet and sit in a camping chair beside Sergeant Paul, the non-commissioned officer in charge. His blond hair shines out from underneath his patrol cap, reflecting the Iraqi sun. As he lights a Marlboro, his blue eyes pierce through the smoke. The cloud fades to reveal a square jaw, straight nose, and a man in need of a bath. When combined with the stripes on his collar, I can imagine those eyes as very intimidating to the unsuspecting soldier.

“What did I tell you about playing in the shit, Martin?” he teases.

“I wasn’t playing in it. I couldn’t get the fire to start.”

“You were standing over there for like thirty minutes, looking down into the fire like some kind of psycho. I yelled your name three times and you didn’t answer. What the hell were you doing?” Paul asks. He’s actually one of the more down-to-earth NCOs I’ve met since being in the Army, the type of guy that will level with you and treat you like a human being once you get to know him. More importantly, he has the sense of humor of a sixteen-year-old boy, which makes the time pass much easier when sitting in the sun and hating life on shit detail.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m sick of being the only sucker in my platoon constantly put on this detail. I mean, we—me and you—have been the only ones doing it for two weeks and there are over a hundred people in our company. What gives?”

“You shouldn’t have mouthed off to your platoon sergeant. Shit detail is a punishment as old as war itself.”

“*Wise words from a wise man,*” I think. “Yeah, but I think two weeks of sitting in the heat, stirring buckets of shit is a bit much for refusing to let him bum my smokes all the time.”

“It’s not so bad. We get to sit here all day while the other guys fill sandbags and break down tires,” Sergeant Paul points out.

“It’s the principal of the matter. And you’re a sergeant. Why are you on shit detail? I thought this was a job for us lowly privates.”

“I got in trouble on a convoy a couple of weeks ago. Some guy pulled out in front of us and opened his door all quick and terrorist like. I thought it was an ambush and fired. It was pretty nasty. The MPs are doing some kind of investigation and I get to do shit detail until the report comes back.”

“So they put you on shit detail?” I ask.

“Yeah, until they decide if my decision was justified,” he adds.

“That’s messed up on so many levels.”

“It’s whatever,” Paul shrugs. “This job’s not so bad.” He takes a sip from the straw of his lemonade box and flicks his cigarette off into the desert. The whole place is really just a big ashtray at this point, anyway.

“First of all,” I say, “the rules of engagement say that we are supposed to open fire on anyone who gets in the middle of our convoy. Second, and I don’t mean this to point the finger or make accusations or anything, but if you did shoot a bunch of innocent people, would shit detail *really* be the most appropriate punishment?”

“Yeah, it’s all a crock of shit,” he says, pointing to the burning barrel of shit in front of us, smiling.

“Anyway, guess what I saw in the ‘Trans.’ barrel when I was emptying it?” I ask, refusing to acknowledge his terrible joke. We refer to each of our stalls according to one of the six corresponding words written on the structure, a sure sign that we’ve been out in the heat for way too long.

“What?”

“No, you have to guess.”

“I don’t know ... A condom?”

“Ah, man! How’d you know?” I’m genuinely surprised that he guessed it on the first try. I can’t imagine someone having sex in those nasty, plywood latrines. They’re only a little wider than the plastic port-o-johns at your high school football field and the holes are much more intimidating.

“I see them all the time. You don’t?” Paul asks.

“Not once. How do they pull it off with a guard posted 24/7?” By order of the first sergeant, a guard must stand in full gear at the latrines every night. The reason: a villain known only as “The Shithouse Bandit.” He strikes often and without warning, doing his business like everyone else, only on the seats and the floors of the latrine stalls. In an attempt to thwart this villain, the two soldiers that are on shit detail each day are replaced by a fully armed soldier who inspects the stalls after each use during the night. Regardless of reputation, rank, or the

number of the action performed, each soldier must submit his or her stall to examination.

The Shithouse Bandit has caused a number of witch hunts which only led to a number of dead ends. The culprit was even so bold as to scrawl “The Shithouse Bandit Strikes Again” on the “51st” stall after his last attack. I didn’t ask if the words were written in feces or in marker. I didn’t want to know. We’ve speculated about his abilities late at night, theorizing that he is a shape-shifter, a terrorist, a ninja, or even a ghost. His characteristics grow at an exponentially disproportionate rate to his exploits; the myth of the Shithouse Bandit has grown to encompass other units and bases, even. I once saw the following lines of verse written in a stall on a base more than three hours away:

Writing these words
With my premium turds,
I come to your stall
To enlighten you all.
For all you haters who love to show it
There’s the one, the only, Shithouse Poet.

I don’t know if the Shithouse Bandit and the Shithouse Poet are the same person. There is no way I will ever be able to *prove* that. At the very least, I’ll wager that they are related—likely cousins. All I know for sure is that someone has no respect for the decorum of the Army latrine system and has evaded capture for months, leaving his mess for poor bastards like me and Sergeant Paul to clean up.

“My guess is that they had sex somewhere else and dropped the condom in the latrines after they were done,” Paul reasons.

“Oh, I never thought of that. That makes a lot more sense.” No longer stumped, I turn my attention to rock tossing. To pass the time Sergeant Paul and I see who can throw rocks into the burn barrel. I miss; my rock glances off the bottom left edge and kicks up a bit of sand. Sergeant Paul responds with a perfectly aimed stone. A disgusting, black goo shoots through the flame and out

of the two-foot-tall barrel, spilling over the side and into the sand. It clumps together like cat litter.

“You smell that?” Paul asks.

“What, shit?”

“No ... Victory!” The taunt strengthens my resolve. I pick up another rock and take aim. I launch it at a perfect angle; it goes up and down in an arc just as it should. Then, from behind the latrines, walks a tan uniform. The soldier’s waist stops the projectile and it falls short of its mark. I look first at the rock and then my eyes trace its impact to the soldier. It is a surprisingly crisp uniform for the desert, creases in the pant legs and everything. “This is a man who doesn’t leave the base,” I think. I look further up and spot a recruiting badge. An air assault tab is sewed on above a nametape too far away to read. Then, on his collar, I see the rockers, stripes, and diamond. “Shit,” I say out loud.

“Afternoon, First Sergeant,” Sergeant Paul says as he snaps to the position of parade rest. I follow, knowing that I am about to get hell for hitting the first sergeant with a rock.

“What the hell is going on here? Private Martin, have you lost your military-lovin’ mind? Hitting me with a rock. You must be crazy,” the First Sergeant scolds. “You two are out here to perform shit detail—no, a very important task for the company—not to play lollipop games and tell each other love stories. Beat your face!” The First Sergeant puts his hands on his hips, waiting as I get into the prone position and start counting off pushups.

“One, two, three, four, five,” I count, hoping that he will show the least bit of magnanimity. My chest drops to the ground and I recover, locking my elbows only to drop again and again into the sand.

“One *what? Buddy? Pal? Dickhead? Peckerwood?* Am I your *pal*, Private?” He places emphasis on each of the pejoratives, convincing me that he has taken my lapse in military bearing as a personal insult. I will receive no mercy today. “Start over, Private.”

“One, First Sergeant. Two, First Sergeant. Three, First Sergeant...” I continue as he talks with Sergeant Paul.

“Paul, you’re an NCO. I’d hate to see you setting a bad example for the privates. Look at all that mess over there on the ground,” he points to the solitary cigarette butt that Paul had thrown onto the sand earlier, gesturing toward about one-hundred square feet of desert. “This place looks like a dump. Clean up your area of operations!” he orders.

As he yells at Sergeant Paul, I take advantage of the situation: “Twenty-two, First Sergeant. Twenty-three, First Sergeant. Seventy-six, First Sergeant.”

“Once you get to eighty recover, Private.” I do four more pushups and snap to the position of attention. “Now, let that be a lesson not to throw rocks at your First Sergeant. You know, in a time of war that could be taken the wrong way and you could be court martialed for treason. Do you want to be shot as a traitor, Martin?”

“No, First Sergeant!” I yell with as much fake enthusiasm as I can muster.

“Martin, go pick up all that trash.” Sergeant Paul motions to the cigarette butt.

“Yes, Sergeant.” I follow his order and pick up the lone cigarette butt. Not seeing anything else, however, I look back for further instruction. Paul motions a loose hand behind his back, signaling for me to look busy. I proceed to walk around in circles, pretending to pick up imaginary trash. After about thirty seconds the First Sergeant calls me back over with a more serious tone.

“Listen. You two are the first line of defense against the Shithouse Bandit. Have you gotten any leads?”

“No, not today. And we’ve inspected the stalls after each use, just like you ordered,” Paul responds.

The First Sergeant pounds his fist into his hand: “Damn it! He’s a clever bastard, whoever he is. But I’m going to catch him. God as my witness, he’ll be burning shit and cleaning latrine stalls day and night until he can’t stand it anymore.”

“Don’t worry, First Sergeant, if the Shithouse Bandit strikes on our watch, we’ll take him down,” I bellow as I grab my rifle and pound it against my chest.

“Glad to hear it, Private. I looked at the guard roster for tonight and it looks like you are on shit guard from 2400 to 0200 hours. I bet he’ll strike when he thinks we’re not looking. So, you keep an extra close eye on those latrines.” I’m all out of false enthusiasm as I acknowledge the First Sergeant’s orders. Since moving from Camp Dogwood to Forward Operating Base Anaconda, the company has been on a maintenance stand-down for almost a month, repairing trucks and preparing for new orders from a new chain of command. I’ve been out here burning shit every day for two weeks, hoping for a mission or anything to get me away from these latrines. Now, while the other guys get to lounge around and enjoy a peaceful night’s slumber, I’ll be guarding the shitters, once again. I’m furious. But I don’t dare let the First Sergeant know.

August 2003, 2400 Hours, Iraq

I awake to someone whispering and shining a flashlight in my face. We have, at any given moment, five people guarding the company at night. That may not seem like a lot, but our company is nestled within a quiet corner of the base outside of Balad. Anaconda itself is surrounded by guard towers and a much larger security force that operates at all times. To supplement the base security (and to keep us busy), two soldiers rove the perimeter, two sit in a foxhole at the front gate, and another guards the latrines. All of the guards carry a radio and report in regularly to the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), where an officer is on duty at all times. Because alarm clocks would wake everyone in the tents, guards from each shift are responsible for waking up their replacements. I sit up, acknowledge that I am awake, and slip on my boots, flak vest, load carrying vest, and helmet before wandering to my designated spot: the latrines.

Tonight’s guard shift begins with an unusually strong wind. The normally beautiful Iraqi sky is blotted out by gathering clouds. A few, rare drops of

moisture strike my neck, then my hand, and finally my face before the sand rises and erases any chance of actual rain. Within four or five minutes I find myself in a genuine sandstorm. The wind gets stronger and stronger until I literally struggle to stand. I take a knee and radio to the other guards: “Roving guard, this is latrine guard, over.”

“Latrine guard, this is roving guard, go ahead.”

“Roger, this is really turning out to be quite a storm, over.” I struggle to make myself heard over the wind and sand that buffets the talking end of the radio.

“Yep, just a few more hours and we’ll be done.” Their reply is crystal clear and I can hear laughing in the background. They are in the TOC—out of the storm—while I am standing here being pelted by loose sand and rocks.

“Everything all right, latrine guard? Over.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Latrine guard out,” I say, ending the conversation. As the sand gets thicker, I find it harder and harder to breathe without coughing. Then, a stroke of genius: I reach down and undo the Velcro strip that secures the most useless gear attached to my body—a gas mask. I remove my helmet and secure it between my knees, fumbling to attach the device to my face. The training pays off and, within five seconds, I am no longer coughing and am free to stand and watch as the storm does its duty of rearranging the Iraqi landscape.

The sea of dark sand ebbs and flows throughout my shift. I lean into the gusts as a sort of game to keep awake, falling a few times only to catch myself with the buttstock of my rifle. After the storm abates, my replacement arrives and cracks a joke about the gas mask. He tries to keep me around for banter, hoping to kill some time. He talks and talks and talks as I inch closer and closer to the tent. Then, a loud thud comes from the direction of the latrines; the “Co.” door swings out into the wind before a bottle of sand used as a counterweight snaps it back into place. A dark silhouette scuttles from inside to the hidden side of a supply container. “Hey, we didn’t check your stall,” the replacement shouts.

“Not again,” I mutter. We pull our unloaded weapons to the ready and move towards the stalls to investigate.

“Ah, man. He shit all over the place,” the replacement observes. I count myself lucky that we’ve officially been on his shift for the last ten minutes. The First Sergeant is not going to be happy. Without a second thought we turn to pursuit, flanking each side of the container. The replacement gets on his radio and calls the roving guard for backup: “Roving guard, this is latrine guard, over.”

“Go ahead, Latrine guard.”

“Roger, he’s done it again. He just hit one of the stalls and we’re in pursuit, over,” the replacement informs.

“Understood. We are in route to your location. Roving guard, out.”

“Let’s get him before he gets away!” the replacement shouts.

The dark of night masks the mystery awaiting us on the other side of the container. For months we’ve been guarding these shitters on extra shifts, desperately wanting to catch the infamous Shithouse Bandit and exact some measure of revenge. The First Sergeant wields our suffering as a weapon, creating a common enemy that is both the cause and solution to our problems. The replacement slides his barrel around his side of the container as I do the same. We do not have to speak. I notice that my hands are sweating; sand sticks to my palms; I wipe one upon my pant leg before clearing my brow of a mixture of dirt and debris. With a final adjustment to my helmet, I take one step forward with my left foot, raising the barrel of the weapon up and over my head, preparing the opposite end for use as a bludgeon.

I can see the Bandit in my mind’s eye, wrapped in darkness and huddled up into a tiny ball, hissing venomously and growling at its attackers. His eyes glow orange—the same orange as the flames that come from the burning shit in the middle of the day—as he claws at his hideous face with creaturely claws. I see him balled up in his own shame, covered in shit, with bits of toilet paper clumped to his skin. I know exactly where he lies before the thought of moving my other

foot forward processes. I prepare to strike downward with all of my might. The creature will instinctively cower; I will land the butt of the weapon one foot lower than initially planned.

My left foot hits the ground on the side of the container that belongs to the villain. I lean forward into my next step with my weapon raised. My right foot comes down with the butt of my rifle. I push downward with the gravity; the force of my blow gets exponentially harder with each millisecond between me and the ground. My weapon and I come crashing down on whatever lies below as my replacement fans out to the side, preventing escape. With no light to see, I anticipate the feel of my rifle striking flesh. Contact. I feel crunching—yes, I had longed for this—and squishing—sweet payback—only to realize that the form does not give way—something’s not right—and my weapon glances off, turning the force of my blow into a fall into a pile of freshly filled sandbags below.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!” I shout.

“He got away?” the replacement asks. I stand and dust myself off, looking with disgust at the fellow soldier. “Well, you are going to explain this to the roving guard, right?” he pleads.

“Like hell,” I reply as I walk toward the tent. “This happened on your shift. You explain.” As I depart, the roving guard arrives to a dumbfounded latrine guard with a lot of explaining to do.

August 2003, 0800 Hours, Iraq

“Company, attention!” The First Sergeant walks to the front of the formation and takes charge. “Parade, Rest!” the First Sergeant orders as he begins his obviously rehearsed speech:

“I have some very bad news to report, Steel Knights. At some point, between 2400 and 0600 hours, our company was disgraced—once again—by that unnamed menace known only as ‘The Shithouse Bandit.’ Despite twenty-four-hour guard, opportunity for amnesty, and my personal pleas, he continues to

leave his mark on our latrines. Don't think that I enjoy making you soldiers pull extra guard shifts each night. No, this can all stop if the perpetrator simply comes forward. So, once again, if you are or if you know who The Shithouse Bandit is, please break out of formation and see me." The First Sergeant waits as a wave of disappointment sweeps over his face. No one moves. "Company, Attention! Platoon Sergeants, take charge of your platoons."

The Platoon Sergeant does an about-face and talks about the plans for the day, covering some general housekeeping principles for the tent and releasing soldiers to their appointed details. For me, of course, that means marching over to the latrines and beginning the day's work. Sergeant Paul greets me, "What's up, Martin?"

"Not much, Sergeant. Ready for another fun day in the sun?"

"You bet! I'll empty out 51st Trans. Co. if you'll get the rest."

"Sure thing, Sergeant." I drudge over to Center while Paul positions himself at 51st so that we can work our way toward the middle. On the back side of the latrines there is a single, wooden flap hanging from the rear exterior wall that folds upward and latches to the frame of the structure. Behind each flap is a compartment containing the rusted bottom of a steel drum. We each take one of the drums and position it a safe distance from the latrines and other structures before pouring enough diesel fuel to cover the solid matter. Then, we each light a piece of paper and toss it into the barrels, using the metal fence poles to get the fire going. Once the fire can sustain itself, we retreat to our camping chairs.

"I can't believe that bastard struck again!" Sergeant Paul exclaims.

"I know. But it didn't happen on my shift."

"But how did he do it?" Paul asks.

"My guess is that he used the sandstorm for cover. I had my gas mask on and couldn't see more than a few feet. You should ask my replacement. It happened on his shift."

“If you couldn’t see, how do you know he didn’t strike during your shift?”

Paul asks.

“I don’t, Sergeant Paul.” I turn to him and take on a dire tone, “I don’t. And you know what? That’s what scares me.”

“We’re all scared, Martin. We’re all scared.”

August 2003, 0900 Hours, Iraq

Because of the previous day's events, Sergeant Paul and I decide to forgo the rock-throwing game indefinitely. As the sun rises, so does the heat. Once we realize that we really have nothing new to say to each other, the heat takes its toll and we start venting about the world’s injustices. “Two weeks. Two weeks of burning shit while everyone else is living the dream,” I say. Paul leans back in his chair and pulls his hat over his eyes, kicking one leg over the arm before responding.

“I know. It never ends. I mean, how much shit can one company have in it?”

“You know as well as I do, Sergeant Paul, that they are all full of shit,” I say, pointing to the burning barrel of shit in front of us and smiling.

“Anyway, guess what I saw in the Co. barrel when I was emptying it?” Paul asks. A wave of déjà vu hits and I pause before responding.

“Nah, man, I’m sick of this same old routine. We have to think of a way to get these bastards back.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asks.

“What I mean is that we are being screwed over, hung out to dry by our leaders and fellow soldiers. This is a travesty and I, for one, will not stand for it any longer!” I shout.

“You’re talking crazy, Martin. I think the heat’s getting to you.”

“No. We need justice and I’ve got a plan. But you need to be willing to follow through with it.” The indignation in my voice gets Paul’s attention and he repositions his hat, sitting up in his chair and listening thoughtfully. “What’s the

one thing that we have control over?" I look to the latrines to see if Paul is following.

"Shit."

"Yes, but what else?"

"I have no clue. But I'm listening."

"Damn it, man! Don't you see? Look at the bigger picture." I point to the latrines and move my hand slowly to the left, resting my pointer finger on the olive green container lying, ever so innocently, on a table next to the stalls. A soldier leaves "Recycling," walks to the container, and rubs pink, Army-issue soap on her hands before rinsing the lather off using the container's release valve. I follow behind the soldier and inspect her stall, telling her "You're good to go" before walking over to the hand-wash station and motioning to Paul.

"My God, you're a genius!" Paul shouts.

"No, Sergeant Paul, I'm just one private fighting for freedom, democracy, and the American way like everyone else."

August 2003, 0945 Hours, Iraq

"If we do this, you have to promise never to tell a soul," Paul pleads.

"Why would I tell anyone? It'd be both of our asses if we got caught."

Paul looks at me. Then, he looks at the hand-wash station before scratching his chin and looking back at me: "Let's do it." We stand up, straighten our uniforms and walk nonchalantly over to the stalls. Paul grabs one handle and I grab the other. Together, we haul the water-filled container over to the broken shower stalls and open the lid. "You promise you won't tell?"

"Not in a million years," I say. "You have my word."

"Okay, keep a lookout," Paul orders. As I walk to the edge of the building, Paul undoes his trousers and urinates into the container. Sweat trickles down my face as I nod nervously at a passing soldier. I'm sure he knows we're up to something but dismiss my paranoia, turning to see what's taking Paul so long.

Just as I begin to utter the words “Hurry up,” he emerges from the shower ghost-white pale and motions for me to grab a handle. Together we walk the vessel back to its table and return to our seats.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” I say in an awestruck voice. Paul doesn’t say anything. I gather he is thinking about the consequences more than the humor of what’s about to happen. “Remember, they asked for this. Two weeks, man. We’ve been on shit detail for TWO WEEKS.” Some color returns to Paul’s face as he regains his composure.

“You’re right,” he says. “They got what’s coming to them.”

We each light a cigarette and smile as we wait for the first victim.

August 2003, 1000 Hours, Iraq

We are amazed to see who first approaches the stall. It is none other than the Company Commander himself. With his pistol strapped overly tight to his leg and a huge, leader’s smile on his face, he enters to excise his morning glory. Sergeant Paul and I wait at least ten minutes for him to emerge. He, like the others, refuses to look us in the eye when he exits; bodily functions are especially shameful among officers. As he walks over to the hand-wash station, I have to bite my knuckles not to laugh. He runs the water over his hands generously, applying soap and scrubbing vigorously, a testament to his education. He sniffs his hands and shakes his head. Just as we think he’s onto us, he walks away as if nothing ever happened. “We’re playing for keeps now,” Paul says.

August 2003, 1015 Hours, Iraq

We haven’t even the time to reflect on the event before the next soldier walks up. This time, I feel a certain satisfaction hit as I see his collar and look him in the face. It’s the First Sergeant. He does his business and exits the stall, walking over to the station. The First Sergeant does not scrub as vigorously as the Company Commander; what he does instead leaves me speechless. After wringing his hands dry he pulls up his sleeves and runs the water over his

forearms. Then, as I lose balance and almost fall out of my seat, the man cups his hands, fills them with water, and splashes it on his face. He rubs it in, nice and good, and washes his hands again. After drying off he looks at the two of us, shakes his head disapprovingly, and returns to the TOC. “That’s enough. I think we’ve made our point,” I say.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Sergeant Paul adds. We both rush over and grab the container, pushing a soldier out of the way. We empty it out and take it to the water buffalo. After rinsing it out we fill it back up and return to our seats. “I can’t believe we just did that,” Paul says.

“Two weeks,” I say.

“You can never tell a soul,” Paul reiterates.

“Not in a million years.”

August 2003, 2100 Hours, Iraq

I return to a quiet tent after a smoke to find a dozen or so soldiers sitting in silence. Our first living area is for lower enlisted. A three-and-a-half-foot-wide dirt walkway runs straight down the middle of two rows of tightly packed cots. A tattered American flag hangs between the doorway, separating the privates from the sergeants. Dust and debris litters the cots and the walls; white salt stains from human sweat reveals the shapes of sleeping soldiers on each cot. These soldiers, fully awake, sit upright and aware, however, staring directly at me with looks of intent. I attempt to walk to my cot only to have two platoonmates stand in the walkway and block my path. “What’s this?”

I ask. But I already know. I told Lockner the whole story over chow after he promised “not to tell a soul.” I told him about the two weeks, about the First Sergeant making me do pushups, about my frustration in not being able to nab the Shithouse Bandit, the whole thing. I told him about the Company Commander’s extensive washing and the First Sergeant’s face splash. How else could I explain my snickering during the whole meal? I mean, where’s the humor

if you can never tell a soul? But it backfired and now I would answer for my actions.

“I heard you like to piss in hand-wash stations, Martin,” says George.

“It’s not like that,” I say, as I hold my hands up. “Screw you, Lockner,” I say as I look him dead in the eye.

“Don’t worry about him. You need to worry about us,” France asserts. The soldiers blocking my path step forward as another enters the tent from behind. I’m trapped.

“We’ve got ways of dealing with people who piss in hand-wash stations,” George says as they close in on me.

“Look, we washed it out. Only the two people...” I can’t finish my sentence before I am grabbed from behind and punched in the ribs. “I wasn’t even the one who...” I bend over, trying to catch my breath, only to feel a boot strike me behind my left knee. As I try to stand up, someone—a friend and fellow soldier—lunges over two cots and spears me into the ground. Beat down sessions follow a standard pattern at this point: I lie on my back and try to protect my vital organs as two soldiers hold my legs and keep me from kicking. As other soldiers punch at the stomach and the thighs, two more grab at my arms and subdue them. Then, a soldier—the strongest of the bunch—delivers blows to the ribs and sternum. A few well-aimed kicks find my sides, but the face—possible evidence—remains unscathed except for the occasional glance. Beat downs never end with just the victim being beaten. No, once the smell of blood is in the water the sharks usually begin fighting among themselves for rights to join in. At this point, chaos ensues and everyone fights everyone before being broken up by a sergeant or running out of steam. About midway through my beating the Platoon Sergeant walks in and calls the room to order.

“What the hell is going on in here!” he yells. The soldiers pull themselves off of me, exposing my sides to those who haven’t yet got in their shots. Silence takes over the room, save for the loud thud of a boot hitting my ribs.

“Internal affairs, Sergeant. Just dealing with a lack of respect, that’s all,” France says.

“Oh, well, if that’s the case, carry on.” The Platoon Sergeant exits, leaving the soldiers to finish their work. I’m not entirely upset that he’s gone. At this point, I’m numb and figure it would be best for them to get it out of their system so that they don’t come back later wanting more. Kicks and jabs and elbows easily outmatch my flailing arms. After about another minute of the onslaught, I’m lovingly picked up, brushed off, and helped to my cot.

“Was it worth it?” a platoonmate asks. I pull off my ripped up shirt and check the top of my head for blood. Finding none, I dust out my hair and unstrap my boots. Welts and bruises begin to form on my sides and back. As the adrenaline leaves my body, pain takes its place. After rinsing the dirt from my mouth, I pull out a couple of wet wipes and start cleaning the debris from my face. The sand comes off but so does the black, grimy soot from two weeks of shit detail, serving as a reminder of why we did what we did.

“Sure,” I half-say, half-whimper through the pain.