War: A Love Story

Charles Voltaire

Editing Notes

Welcome editors. Thanks for taking the time to review my memoir. There are three main things I’d like for you to pay attention to:

1. If you see a simple grammatical error or mistake, feel free to correct it right away. Examples of simple mistakes are missing commas or punctuation marks and commonly misspelled words like than and then or its and it’s.
2. If you see a more complicated grammatical error that will take multiple words to correct, please leave a comment and provide an alternative if possible.
3. Pay attention to when you get bored or confused. Ask yourself when you start to get distracted and want to check your email or facebook, and leave me a comment at those spots. If something is confusing comment there as well. The confusion may be resolved in a subsequent paragraph or chapter, but I would still like to know the point at which you became confused.

That’s all. Pretty simple. Don’t worry too much about trying to give me feedback about my writing style or content. Just focus on the three things I mentioned above. Thanks again and I hope you enjoy it!

"When I say 'love', the sound comes out of my mouth and it hits the other person's ear, travels through this byzantine conduit in their brain, you know, through their memories of love, or lack of love, and they register what I'm saying and they say 'Yes, I understand’… but how do I know they understand because words are inert. They're just symbols. They're dead. You know, and so much of our experience is intangible. So much of what we perceive cannot be expressed, it's unspeakable. And yet, when we communicate with one another, and we feel we have connected and we think that we're understood, I think that we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion, and that feeling might be transient, but I think that's what we live for".

Kim Krizan, “Waking Life”

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“It was sweet like honey, till I woke up sucking on lemon. The scariest thing wasn't that it was gone, but that now it was my turn to write.” - Voltaire

**Forward**

(Not ready for editing)

# The Highway of Death

**“Death is the wish of some, the relief of many, and the end of all.”**

**- Seneca**

The midnight hour was filled with the movement of troops and the smell of diesel. It was LA traffic at rush hour, except the only Mercedes were the semi-tankers the military borrowed from Kuwait. From my vantage point in the back of my 7-ton troop carrier, I could see for miles across the open desert. We were speeding north on a six lane highway towards the border of Iraq. No one was driving south, but all three northbound lanes were bumper to bumper. All of our waiting was over, and war was in the air.

Military vehicles use blackout lights at night for concealment, and in the dark these lights look like little white dots. Every road leading to the highway had a line of these dots, and each set of dots represented a single vehicle. For hours on end, we passed road after road with nothing but endless trails of dots stretched out to the horizon. As far as the eye could see the landscape was filled with military vehicles packed to the hilt with troops, supplies, and weapons. As the tires rolled against the asphalt and the wind blew on my face, I felt an overwhelming sense of awe at the sheer size of the coalition forces. I had flashbacks to high school football games where victory appeared inevitable, and in that moment I knew how the Germans must have felt hours before a blitzkrieg.

I looked around me to take stock of everything I saw. There were M-970 semi-trailer refueling trucks. HEMTTs pulled bulldozers and forklifts, while LVS transported supplies in conex boxes. I saw Hummers with roof mounted fifty cals and 5-tons with water buffalo trailers. I even saw a column of Bradley tanks bobbing over the dunes a few meters away. There were vehicles I had never seen before and vehicles of different colors. Most were olive drab but some were woodland camo. Others were tan, which matched the desert, but all had a chevron painted on the side. Flying low across the desert sands I saw squadrons of attack helicopters and high above formations of F-18s roared. We were riding a tsunami of mechanized weapons and the inertia felt unstoppable.

I looked at my gear. I wore desert camouflage fatigues which matched my kevlar and a woodland camo flak vest which covered my chest. I carried an M16A2 service rifle with 200 rounds of ammo, and my gas mask was strapped to my leg. In my pack, dangling from the side of our 7-ton, there were 2 MREs and a MOPP chemical suit along with everything I needed to survive. Our vehicle was occupied by twenty marines carrying M16’s and a SAW gunner with 600 chain-linked rounds. Another marine carried a box of 7.62 mm ammo for the M240 Gulf, and on the ground was a shoulder launched rocket. None of us had been to war before, but we all carried that old Marine Corps spirit and a feeling of devotion for each other.

In the moonlit night I caught a glimpse of something that reminded me where I was. Highway 80 was infamously known as the Highway of Death, a nickname carried over from Desert Storm. On that road a decade before, thousands of Iraqi vehicles fleeing from Kuwait were boxed in by US forces. With nowhere but the desert to flee, the Iraqis were sitting ducks. Hundreds if not thousands of them were slaughtered. A hundred meters from the road and mostly forgotten, were the rusted carcasses of bombed out vehicles. They were the ghosts of another war, half buried in the sand and barely visible in the moonlight. As we passed the old decaying remains, I was reminded that the angel of death drew closer.

I never thought I was going to die before Iraq. I had a few close calls while growing up, like the time I narrowly missed being hit by a car or the time I fell off my bike. I survived two minor car accidents, and although they were scary I didn’t think I was going to die. I can even remember tumbling underwater in the ocean and gasping for air, as a wave came crashing over my body. I emerged from the sea and felt victorious, then went back in for more.

At four years old I met death for the first time when my great grandmother died. On the car drive to the funeral I made myself cry so everyone would think I was sad. I wanted to be sad but I wasn’t. Death felt surreal and abstract, and some sleepless nights I would stare at the dark shadows on the ceiling and think about what it meant to be dead. One night as my mother put me to bed I told her, “I don’t want to die.”

My mother was a good Christian woman, and to put my mind at ease she told me the story of Jesus and how I could live forever. At the end of the story we said a little prayer and asked Jesus to save me from my sins. Even after my faith began to fade though, my fear of death never returned. Death was always there, lurking on the street corner at night or riding on the motorcycle that flew by. I saw him in the news and heard him in the ambulance’s wail, and I could sense his tender touch as the autumn leaves began to fall. I had spent the night driving down the Highway of Death, and in a few short hours I would meet him once again, only this time I would look him in the eyes.

Yelling outside my hooch woke me in the morning after an hour or two of sleep. “GAS, GAS, GAS!!!” was yelled, and I grabbed my gas mask to slip it on. I was nervous and fumbled with my MOPP suit, and my hooch mate was already out the door as I slipped on my last rubber boot. I sprinted to the scud bunkers in MOPP level 4 with my overgarment, gloves, rubber boots and gas mask on. The bunkers were trenches dug four feet deep by an excavator. The trenches weren’t real bunkers, and only gave us the illusion of safety, but they were all we had. Marines trickled in behind me and the First Sergeant stood on top of a crate just outside the trenches.

“At 5:00 am this morning,” the First Sergeant said, “Cruise missiles were launched at Saddam and his entourage. We just received a message of ‘Gas, Gas, Gas’ over the radio, so stand by until we receive an all clear before you take your masks off.”

In the bunker we listened to the BBC report about the attacks on a shortwave radio and waited. The minutes dragged on for hours and I could feel the straps digging into the back of my head. The sharp annoying pain felt like torture and I couldn’t adjust the straps without taking off the hood of my chemical suit. I moved my head from side to side, trying to ease the pain, but I was careful not to break the seal between my face and the mask. In the desert sun, the black rubber gloves began to heat up and my body began to sweat. My forehead burned as the mask began to bake, and I felt like I was trapped inside my suit. My field of vision was limited and claustrophobia set in.

The all clear came fifteen minutes later, and not a moment too soon. We all thought the same thing at once. If there was a real gas attack, there was no way we would ever survive. Another drill came an hour later when the sun was even warmer, and I dreaded the thought of how many drills were still to come. During the second drill, a reporter from the West Coast Examiner lost her mind. She started to moan softly over and over again, “I’m going to die, I’m going to die, I’m going to die…” As she ripped her mask off, two marines pulled her from the trench and dragged her through the dirt, kicking and screaming, to the CP tent to calm her down. No one spoke for a while, but then there was a laugh, and then another. We all felt like laughing because no one knew the proper way to react. A few minutes later the First Sergeant told us we could stay at MOPP level 2 with our gloves and mask off, and our fear began to subside.

The BBC announced that scuds had been launched towards Kuwait but none of us had seen one yet. The only reported deaths I remember from the first gulf war were people who died from scud attacks. I remember watching the news as a child and seeing a video with air raid sirens and a barracks building on fire after being hit by a scud. One night soon after, I dreamt I was inside that same building, and couldn’t get my boots on fast enough as the air raid sirens wailed. Before I had time to get out, the building blew up and I woke up from the dream. In the months following that dream, every time I tied my shoes I imagined myself back inside that building.

The third drill came just before sunset. The reporter stood next to me again, but this time she was calm and the mood was mellow. Some marines were packing gear for the Executive Officer and weren’t even in the bunkers. The drill seemed like a formality and we joked and laughed like nothing was wrong. Anderson was telling everyone a story and I turned around to listen. Mid-sentence he stopped though to look into the sky. With a weird look on his face he said, “What’s that?”

As I turned my head around I saw an object quickly rising in the sky and it looked like a missile with a red flame behind it. Maybe it was the flame or maybe it was the afternoon sun reflecting off the exhaust cloud, but either way I remember the color was red. We all watched it rise high into the sky until it reached its final height.

No one said anything at first and the First Sergeant was the first to break the silence. “Will you look at that,” he said, and then he paused for a few seconds. He kept his eyes on the missile the whole time, and without turning around to address the company he said to us all, “You might want to get down now.”

As those words left his mouth, time began to slow, and madness ensued all around me. It was exactly how I imagined it. I stood there motionless as the others got down and watched for what seemed like hours but were really only seconds. The marines outside the bunker seemed to be in slow motion as they came flying in. from all directions knocking the marines inside to the ground. The reporter next to me went down hard and was pinned against the ground. She moaned again, but this time no one stopped to help her. The missile looked as though it was aimed right at us, and not just our camp but me.

Everything slowed to a snail's pace around me, until a bright flash shot its way across the blue backdrop like a shooting star. In an instant two more flashes from different points along the horizon traversed the sky and converged at one point. I had never seen a patriot missile before that day, but when I saw the flashes, I knew that’s what they were. As quickly as they appeared they vanished, and so did the scud.

When people are close to death they sometimes experience strange or magical things. As I stood there motionless and time slowed down, my memory faded between what was probably real and what must have been imagined. All the fear and madness around me only momentarily distracted my gaze from the missile in the sky. My imagination took me into some dream-like parallel universe in that moment as I watched the missile slowly descend from the heavens above. It got larger and closer each millisecond while everything around me was frozen.

There is this woman in an episode of the Twilight Zone who has the ability to freeze time. She thinks it’s a blessing at first because she finally finds the peace and quiet she desperately wants with everyone around her frozen. She stops the clock one last time though, right as nuclear war begins. As she walks the frozen streets, she sees a missile hovering in the sky just above the movie marquee for Failsafe and Dr. Strangelove. My imagination must have recalled that image as I stood there and watched the missile descend frame by frame and hit the ground only meters away. Shockwaves and a ball of fire emanated from its collision point and consumed me. I didn’t duck because I knew I was going to die, and I yearned for time to slow even further so I could experience every last detail of the moment. The feeling of awe resonated through my soul on that hot dusty afternoon as the monstrous hand of death hung above my head.

The fog of war clouds the mind with doubt and when you choose to remember certain things from that haze, it can feel more psychotic then trying to forget them. When I think of that day in which the scales of fate weighed in on my life and I waited patiently for the time of my demise, I remember seeing the face of death in all its overwhelming beauty. I’ll never forget it, nor do I want to. When I recognize it now and I know that death is near, my heart will beat a little faster and my eyes begin to shine.

# Fire and Dust

**“You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty. ” ― Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried**

“Fuck that was my last cigarette,” I muttered under my breath as I burned the filter on the ass end of the Marlboro red. The air was filled with the smell of burning plastic and dust. I broke the filter off and lit it again. I hated filterless smoking, but it was my last one, and there was no way I was going to waste it. Each drag burned the back of my throat as I inhaled the harsh smoke mixed with the dust from the air. I made love to that cigarette, and the rush of nicotine calmed my nerves as I crouched behind the berm.

Our post was situated atop a shipping container which was half buried in a ten foot tall pile of dirt that surrounded our encampment. I crawled up the side of the berm back to where Jones was waiting.

“Fuck, man, I almost wasted my last cigarette,” I said, “I lit the fucking thing backwards and had to break off the filter to smoke it.”

Jones laughed at me and said, “Yeah, I’m almost out of smokes, too. 3rd platoon better get here soon so we can go buy some back at Wolf.”

It had been one week since we had the opportunity to buy cigarettes from the PX at Camp Wolf. Everybody was running low and nobody wanted to share. Cigarettes act as a type of currency in the field. It’s similar to prison in that way, only in prison you have better access to the vices that keep a young man happy. Money has no value in a war zone, and supply and demand dictate the barter value of an item. Alcohol was strictly forbidden because Kuwait was a dry country. Porn was also forbidden, but enforcement was lax. Everyone who had porn kept it under wraps to keep it from getting confiscated, but we all knew it was floating around. MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) contained items for barter, but only if you were lucky enough to get one before it was “rat-fucked” of all the valuable items inside. As the old saying goes, “There’s only one thief in the Marine Corps and everyone else is just trying to get their shit back.” That phrase came to mind every time I strapped on my kevlar helmet which was stolen from the Army.

I arrived in Kuwait without a kevlar and there were other marines missing chin straps, canteens and other basic supplies. Our reserve base was undersupplied, and we were told we would get our gear once we arrived in Kuwait. After waiting a few weeks we took the matter into our own hands. “The lance corporal underground” was given a mission to resupply our company of all its missing gear. They raided an army supply depot at camp Wolf, while an unnamed Staff NCO distracted the supply chief. It’s tough enough to drink water with a gas mask strapped to your face in a chemical environment, but it is literally impossible without one of the special canteens that are designed specifically for that purpose. Was it unethical to steal from our brothers in arms? Maybe, but it was definitely unethical to send a bunch of Marines to a war zone without the proper gear.

“Anything to see out there?” I asked Jones as he peered through the night vision goggles (NVGs).

“Nothing but sand,” He replied.

Sitting on post was almost always boring. The days were too hot and the nights too cold. You had to spend hours staring through NVGs and when those weren’t available, you had to make due with the eyes you were born with. The desert in Kuwait was a wide open expanse of mostly flat, formless desert. There were no trees or bushes to hide behind, just endless dunes of sand. It was fun at first because you felt like Lawrence of Arabia traveling across some exotic middle eastern landscape, but over time the novelty wore off and the only thing to break up the monotony were tread marks in the sand.

We saw a vehicle approaching in the distance, but through the NVGs Jones could tell it was just a friendly. I took aim anyway and followed it with my weapon for a minute or two.

“Hey, did I ever tell you about that sniper I met back in Tucson who was Force Recon?” I said to Jones.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“He was a real crazy fucker with some messed up stories. He told me this story once about this mission he was on. He was lying down looking through the scope of his Barrett fifty cal when this truck started to approach. Through the scope he could see the guy in the driver's seat. I think he was in Kosovo or some shit so he wasn’t supposed to shoot anyone, but no vehicles were supposed to be driving down that road either, so to disable the vehicle, he shot it through the engine block. But here’s the messed up part. The engine block exploded and shot burning fuel all over the inside of the cab. He just sat there and watched through his scope as the guy burned alive inside the truck. At the end of the story he looked it me all crazy eyed and laughed like some psychotic lunatic.” I lowered my M16 away from the vehicle in the distance and looked over at Jones.

“No way!” Jones said, “that’s pretty crazy.”

“I know, right? Royally fucked up.”

“Yeah, you have to be a little fucked in the head to be Force Recon.”

“No, for sure. He had this really weird fantasy, too. He told me every time he was out in the field and lying on his stomach for hours on end, he’d imagine himself fucking some chick with his ghillie suit on.”

“What, like out there in the jungle?”

“Yeah, but here’s the crazy part. So he goes on a float to Thailand, and when he gets there, he buys himself a hooker for the night - this young Asian girl.”

“Oh my god, you mean he…”

“Yep! He took this Asian chick back to the room, pulled out his ghillie suit and told her he wanted to fuck her with it on. He said she didn’t seem to mind, so he slipped it on and started fucking her. It gets worse though.”

“Oh no.”

“So he never washed his ghillie suit, and sometimes in the field he would piss in it, because on a stalk you can’t just get up to pee.”

(Laughter).

“So he says to me, with that crazy look in his eye again, that she has a real weird look on her face because the suit smells like shit, and all this dirt and grass and shit fell out of it all over her.”

We both laughed for a while and then it got quiet.

“You’ve heard about the ping pong ball show in Okinawa right?” Jones said.

“Yeah, who hasn’t?”

“Exactly,” he said, “Well, Terrence was telling me the other day that he went to a show while he was stationed out in Oki. He said it was the same old story where a woman shoots a ping pong ball out of her ‘vag’ right into a cup someone’s holding. You know, standard shit. He said it was crazy, but the ping pong lady was the tame part of the show.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! He said some other chick got up on stage, and there were turtles crawling out of her pussy and shit. She shoved a banana up there, and then fed it to someone in the crowd one slice at a time.”

“Now there’s some skills,” I said laughing.

“Then for the grand finale, the last girl gets up there and pulls a string of razor blades from her twat, and every fifth blade she’d grab a piece of paper and slice it just to prove how sharp it was.”

“What the fuck? That’d be some shit to see, huh?” And night air was once again filled with our laughter.

“Were you on post two nights ago?” I said to Jones.

“Probably. The days all run together now.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Well, I came over to relieve Anderson and Thomson and they told me there two men spotted three clicks out in the direction of Iraq and four vehicles, including an SUV, moving towards the border.”

“What were they doing out there?” asked Jones

“Nobody knows. They called it in but no one knew what they were doing out there. It went all the way to the battalion level ‘cause nobody knew who those fuckers were.”

“They were obviously friendlies ‘cause who else would be out there?”

“I don’t know but what Anderson said was maybe they were recon or something moving towards the border.”

The wind started to pick up a little and some dust blew into my eye. I was used to it by now, but I was still a little annoyed.

“I gotta joke for you.” I said to Jones.

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“Ok, but I gotta set the joke up a little before I tell it. So I was at Marine Combat Training and our instructor gets up in front of the class and says he’s gonna tell us some jokes. He starts off with some pedophile jokes, you know, like the one that goes ‘So a pedophile and a five year old head into the forest and the five year old looks up at the pedophile and says ‘I’m scared’ and the pedophile replies, ‘You think you’re scared? I’m the one that has to leave here alone.’”

With a smile on his face and a little disgust he said,

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, “but he’s just warming up, you know, so each joke gets a little worse. So by the last joke you can see it on everyone’s face. Everyone there is like ‘This is some sick shit’ and then he finishes with this joke I’d never heard before.”

“Oh, yeah? I wanna hear it.”

“Ok, here goes, and remember, he’s up in front of a whole class of marines about to teach us all how to set a claymore or some shit.”

“Yeah, yeah, come on get to the joke.”

“OK. So here’s the joke. ‘What’s the difference between a bag of apples and a bad of dead babies?’” But before Jones could respond, I answered, “I don’t have a bag of apples,” and then I just stared at Jones without smiling, the same way the instructor had stared at us. Jones sat there sort half amazed and half disgusted at the same time, and then his face changed a little and he looked really sad.

“What’s wrong man?” I said.

“No, its nothing. I mean, it just reminded me of something.” Then he pulled down his sleeve and showed me a tattoo on his arm. “Those are the footprints of the baby my wife had a year ago. It died just after it was born. The joke just reminded me is all.”

I didn’t know what to say, and we just sat there for a while, completely silent. “I’m sorry, man, I didn’t know. Marines are fucked up sometimes and we’re always making stupid jokes. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have…”

“Yeah, I know. It’s ok. Let’s just talk about something else.”

“For sure,” I said, but there was nothing left to talk about and we just sat there staring out across the open desert as the wind picked up a little more.

After a period of silence that seemed to lighten the mood we noticed that the distant lights to the south were beginning to disappear, and a darkness was moving in our direction.

“What is that?” I asked Jones.

“It looks like a dust storm is rolling in, and fast.”

As the darkness drew closer we could see in the moonlight a faint brown wall of dirt which extended all the way from ground into the clouds. It seemed to accelerate the closer it got, and before we could decide what to do, it was already too late. There was no time to run for cover as the massive wall of dust accelerated at us with immense speed and struck us like an ocean wave crashing against our bodies.

I yelled over to Jones but my voice was silenced by the howling dust storm around me. The only way we could communicate was with hand gestures and at times we had to reach out and touch the other person to get their attention. Normally we could see for miles in all directions and the red glow of the nearby oil fire was an ever present reminder of where we were. Now, even with the night vision goggles on, you could only see a few feet away. We were all alone. Even our squad leader wouldn’t venture out in a storm like this because there was no way to guarantee he’d be able to find us. Luckily, that also meant there was no way for the enemy to sneak up on our position. After waiting fifteen to twenty minutes to see if the storm would die down we decided to climb down and seek shelter inside the shipping container.

In this storm lighting a cigarette was nearly impossible and even inside the shipping container the wind was still moving swiftly. I used a trick that I’d learned from another marine who had been taught the trick from a crusty old grunt who had made it through the first Gulf War. Every MRE packet has a set of matches in it, so even if you lose your lighter, there is always a light somewhere nearby. A single match has no chance of lighting a cigarette in a dust storm, and in most cases lighters fail miserably as well. Through a stroke of luck, though, this old corps marine had discovered or had learned from some marine before him, that if you strike two matches at the same time the chemical reaction creates an intense flame at the moment of lighting that can survive even the strongest of storms. This moment lasts a quarter of a second or less, but is intense enough to light a cigarette if you know how to do it.

“Hey man, if I can light your cigarette for you, you think I can bum one?”

“Sure. I already tried, but the matches keep going out.”

“Here, let me show you. Hand me a cigarette,” I said, and Jones passed me one.

“The trick is you need to use two matches at once like this.” I flipped the back of the matchbook over and placed the two matches between the top flap and the back and squeezed. I then positioned the matches right next to the cigarette in my mouth and pulled the matchbook away causing them to strike. The flame lit up the inside of the shipping container and then went out, but it burned long and hot enough to light the cigarette.

“Here, hand me yours,” I said, and I lit his cigarette against mine.

“Thanks! that’s a pretty useful trick.”

“About earlier,” I said, “ I’m sorry. Marines are fucked up man, you know?”.

“Yeah, its OK. You didn’t know.”

“So do you think you’ll try again when you get home?”

“That’s the plan. We probably won’t leave the house for a week,” which made me laugh when he said it.

“Well, here’s another fucked up story.” I said, “You don’t have a cat do you?”

“No,” Jones said, shaking his head and smiling.

“Did you hear the story Garcia told us the other night?”

“Nah.”

“Well, he said that when he was a kid they used to fuck with cats. Some real sick shit, but the one that really got me was about how he took these two cats and tied their tails to a pole and then made them fight it out against each other.”

“Is that even real?”

“I don’t know man, but it’s fucked up. I did my fair share of tormenting cats when I was a kid but that’s just psycho. Some marines huh?”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

The storm that raged outside the shipping container was the strongest Iraq had seen in forty years. On that night, deep in the desert, some alchemist must have discovered how to change himself into the wind, and he put on a show that would have impressed the sun.

As the wind began to die down, we ventured outside and crawled back on top of the shipping container. I turned to Jones again and apologized one more time.

“Hey man, I’m sorry again about the dead baby joke. I didn’t know.”

“No, it’s alright. Don’t worry about it. It actually was kinda funny.”

# Blood In Blood Out

**“The blood jet is poetry. There is no stopping it.” - Sylvia Plath**

(Not yet ready for editing)

# My American Dream

**“Death is something inevitable. When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace. I believe I have made that effort and that is, therefore, why I will sleep for the eternity.” - Nelson Mandela**

In early 2003, I don't know the date, I had a dream. Through the horn gate of the silent house of sleep the dream crept into my mind as I slumbered. The scene unfolded before me and it reminded me of the musical, “West Side Story”. There we were, the Jets vs. the Rockets, only it was the US against Iraq, and the two champions were Saddam and I fighting each other, knives in hand.

The two gangs formed a circle around us and began shouting and dancing like in the musical. We both danced for a while making stabbing or slashing motions towards each other, but neither of us were able to gain the upper hand. Our performance brought with it a source of amusement and pleasure for the crowd that encircled us, which was evidenced by the ever increasing volume of their chants and cries. Unlike the crowd, though, the fight between Saddam and I was absent of anger and passion and was instead surgical and precise. Our moves, almost in unison, felt like second nature, and with each stroke our knives came closer to hitting their mark. These were the roles we had been born to play and now was our time to shine.

The circle moved as we did, until we approached a set of stairs and the two of us ascended the stairs alone, with Saddam in the lead. In a moment I gained the upper hand and found myself behind him and one step above him, with my knife blade against his neck. The two of us faced the direction of the crowd which had gathered at the base of the stairs and were watching us as we ascended.

I looked out into the crowd and I could see their faces. They were my family members, my pastor, the kids down the street, my drill instructors, and all the world's leaders. The whole world, either on my side or his, waited in that split second to see what I would do. As if by second nature and absent of emotion, I sliced his neck from ear to ear and let his body drop slowly to its knees with blood spurting and gushing onto the steps below. What seemed like an unending stream of blood poured from his neck and pooled out wider each step as it spilled out towards the crowd.

The thing I remember most in the dream is not the dancing or the knife fighting, or even the moment that I slit his throat. The thing that is burned into my memory is the shared expressions, all at once, of every person in the world, whether for or against me, young or old, rich or poor. As they watched the blood pour down the steps towards them and their eyes met mine, every single face with looks of horror seemed to say all together and without words, "What have you done?"

I've always liked dream interpretation ever since I was a child. I remember hearing the stories of Joseph and his interpretation of the Pharaoh's dreams which saved the Egyptians from famine, and I always tried to imagine the meanings behind my dreams. I had a recurring dream when I was young about a dinosaur who was chasing me, and each time just before he caught me I would always wake up. Some of my dreams were easy to interpret and others were more difficult, but the meaning of this dream with Saddam was clear to me the moment I woke. It was the thing in the back of my mind that kept me up at night, and the thing that I would ponder whenever my mind began to wander. It was the same thing I found myself thinking about one night when I met up with some old high school friends a few years after graduation.

In high school we used to hang out at Denny's because it was open late, which made it a perfect spot to get away from our parents. Occasionally we would still meet up there after high school for memories sake, and this particular night our group was rather large. I had already received warning that my unit would be activated to go to

Iraq, so it was also my last chance to catch up with my friends before I left.

It was a typical night with friends which included joking and laughing and lots of silly flirtation that never led anywhere. The larger group was made up of smaller cliques of friends who usually sat next to each other, and conversations usually stayed within the cliques but would occasionally spread to the groups around them or even to the group at large, which resulted in yelling and bursts of group wide laughter.

On this particular night I found myself next to a group of girls who'd been on the volleyball team and a couple guys from football and track as well. The voices of my friends roared on all around me, but I let my mind slip away from the conversation at hand to a place far away from the witty banter. I was already there in Iraq, doing night patrols in the desert sands and scanning the horizon for signs of danger.

As the night wound down and everyone finished their meals, the waitress brought us the check. We all searched through our pockets for cash, paid our share, and made our way slowly to the parking lot. The parking lot was also a place for people to congregate, and it was the last place you could catch up with someone you hadn't spoken to yet. After a few hugs and friendly goodbyes I was approached by a friend of mine who had been sitting at another table, and he said something to me I'll never forget. I know his intentions were pure and he wanted to pump me up and make me feel good about going to war, but just after we hugged goodbye, one small phrase escaped from his lips loud enough for everyone around him to hear, and it made me cringe.

"Kill me some ragheads!" he said, which was followed by a laugh and the laughter of some of those who stood around him. It caught me off guard and I tried to fake a smile as I listened to the laughter, but his words bothered me. What bothered me more than the words themselves was his ignorance for the gravity of them. There we were in the parking lot of Denny's and I felt like I was in my dream climbing those steps chasing after Saddam.

Growing up, I spent countless hours playing war with my brother, my cousins and the boys down the street. They all hated me because whenever we played war I'd always win. When I won, though, it wasn’t that adolescent kind of win where the kid who won only beat the others because he made up some new rule or more powerful weapon. I always thought that kind of thing was cheating, and I hated playing with kids like that. When I won, no one questioned it.

One night I was playing against my brother and the neighbors and I found a spot in the bushes to wait in ambush. I worked my way into the bushes as they scratched my face and arms, and then sat there completely motionless. Occasionally I could feel something crawling on my leg but I would do my best to ignore it. I even focused on slowing my breathing so that my chest wouldn't rustle the leaves with each breath. I felt like an animal in the jungle lying in wait for his prey and it was almost spiritual trying to keep my focus and see beyond the boredom. Waiting was something I hated to do as a child, but I knew that if I could wait longer and focus on the moment of the kill, that my win would come without question.

My brother entered the backyard where I lay in wait and approached the corner of the yard where I was hiding. He slowed as he approached the bushes and peered in trying to see through the dark shadows cast by the foliage to catch a glimpse of my silhouette. I had my plastic, orange tipped AK-47 in hand pointed right at him, and I could have pulled the trigger and ended his virtual life right then and there. I waited longer however, and after he turned to walk away because he was satisfied no one was there, I sprang from the bushes and fired.

I remember another occasion where I moved into position by slowly lifting myself over a brick wall that was within the line of sight of the boys who were trying to shoot me. I chose a spot behind a tree to hide my silhouette then grabbed the top of the brick wall and slowly lifted my body with my arms. I could hear them talking on the other side of the wall so I knew that any sudden movement would give away my position and would be immediately greeted with a barrage of automatic fire noises. I barely noticed the strain in my arm muscles because my mind was focused on one objective. As soon as I had my head above the wall and could see the boys on the other side, it was my goal to never lose sight of them.

For a few seconds as I lifted my body up onto the wall, I was completely exposed to them and I had no way of defending myself since my plastic weapon was firmly against the wall under my hand. Once my knees were high enough I was able to set them on the wall, but not without expense. The rough slump block wall, which had already scuffed up my elbows and forearms, now did a number on my knees as well. This move bought me a few precious seconds though, and it allowed me to raise my weapon before making my final move to a full standing position. The look of shock on their faces as I fired on them from a full standing position was worth the pain that I endured. Their plan to gang up on me together had failed, and the war game was over for the night. No one wanted to play anymore.

About a year after 9-11, I had another dream one night. In this dream I found myself walking through the desert at night. I was on night patrol with my squad and we were in two columns. It was a moonlit night and my squad and I walked in silence with only the sound of our boots treading softly across the desert sand. I was in the right column and staggered diagonal to me, about five yards to the left and ahead, was my brother. It was a normal patrol like any other night, but there was a feeling inside of me that something was off. Suddenly, there was an explosion in the corner of my eye and my brother blew up and shrapnel flew in all directions. I hardly had time to react before I heard the familiar sound of my phone ringing, and it woke me from my dream. In a daze and still only half awake, I looked down at the caller ID on my phone and saw my brother's name. I answered the phone and said,

"Hey, What's up?"

He responded, "Have you heard the news?"

I said, "No, what news?"

He replied, "Ryan, he's hurt really bad and he's in a hospital in Germany."

"What happened?" I asked.

He replied, "He was on patrol in Afghanistan and someone in his squad stepped on a landmine. He took on shrapnel from the explosion but his friend died. It happened last night so I thought I'd call you and let you know."

"Wow! I can't believe it. I just woke so I'm going to let you go, but thanks for letting me know."

I hung up the phone and took a moment to think about what had just happened. Ryan played football with me in high school and was a year ahead of me. When he graduated in '99 he joined the Rangers and after 9-11 he had been deployed to Afghanistan. He was the first person of anyone I knew who'd been sent to a war zone after the September 11th attacks, but he wouldn't be the last.

In high school, there was only one time that I went against him in football hitting practice. Ryan was a running back who was built like an ox, and as he ran down the field defensive backs would ricochet off him in all directions. I was nervous when coach paired us together, but I knew he liked to pair up the older, more experienced members of the team with the younger ones from time to time to see how much they had improved. This would be my opportunity to either prove myself or fail miserably. As we advanced towards each other and he had the ball in hand, I thought about what I needed to do in order to make the tackle.

He was shorter than me so I knew I had to lean down or he would tear me in half, but the feeling of terror was strong as I saw him approaching. Sometimes the other running backs would juke or move side to side to avoid the tackle, but Ryan always plowed forward like a freight train. It was good and bad because you knew his path would be right down the center, but even though he wouldn't juke you, he might just plow through you like you were a stalled pickup truck on the tracks.

As the two of us met in the center for the tackle, I could see his eyes were absent of fear, unlike mine, and I knew I would only have one chance, so I leaned in and met him face mask to face mask. As our bodies crashed together, we stopped dead in our tracks, with no forward or backward movement, just a stalemate right there in the middle. At first I was a little dazed and not quite sure what had happened, but it wasn't long before I figured out I had made the tackle. Not only had I stopped the unstoppable, but I had gained the respect of my coach and teammates.

It was hard for me to imagine that Ryan, who had seen the fear in my eyes as we crashed together that day, was now lying helpless in a hospital bed in Germany. He was my obstacle to overcome, and now he himself had been beaten, and that was hard for me to swallow. My brother on the football field had become a casualty of the war in Afghanistan and it felt like some kind of dream.

When I was younger, I had this romantic type of dream and I'm not sure where it came from. I dreamed of becoming a soldier at first, and then that dream grew and I knew I wanted to be a marine. I surrounded myself with war. I watched war documentaries on the History Channel, I played war games with my friends, and I read books about tanks and fighter jets. As the acceptance of my role grew, however, I realized all the horrible things I would experience one day by choice. So many people I met had never imagined the things that I imagined, and instead went on living their lives safe, free, and far away from harm. I began to realize that my role as a soldier and marine was not just to wage war, but to also allow those people the choice to live free. It was my job to be a buffer between their innocence and all the horrible acts of violence that must occur to safeguard that innocence.

"Kill me some ragheads!" my friend had said, which although grotesque, had come from a place of innocence. I didn't want to kill ragheads. I wanted to meet my enemy on the battlefield face to face with my brothers at my side. I wanted our eyes to meet, absent of fear, and to fight as equals. I didn't want to diminish his humanity in my mind so that I could exterminate some cockroach and move on to the next. I wanted to meet a worthy adversary who had a story much like mine. I wanted him to be a man just like me, whose goal was to shield the ones around him from the horrors of war and protect their beautiful innocence.

Saddam Hussein was a revolutionary. When I was in 8th grade I wrote a research paper about him for one of my school assignments. It was just after the first gulf war and I wanted to know everything about him. When he was young he took part in a coup attempt gone bad, and his rise to power was bloody. His politics were less than democratic, and he fought his way to the top, then ruled with an iron fist. Sometimes he would stand on his balcony and fire his AK-47 into the air to remind his loyal subjects in the crowd below him why they should remain loyal. He commanded the fourth largest army in the world and his invasion of Kuwait in the 80’s put him near the top of my list of worthy adversaries. He was no raghead and he embodied to me the type of soldier I was born to fight.

"Kill me some ragheads!" my friend had said, but killing ragheads was the furthest thing from my mind. I knew the act of waging war and killing was a dirty business. I knew this fact deep down inside even though I had never experienced it. I knew it because I was observant and could read between the lines. I knew it because I could see it in the blank stares of old veterans who had seen war and whose stories left an emptiness in their eyes. I knew it because I’d been preparing myself for it and dreaming about it my entire life. Every opportunity I had I was acting it out. I kept imagining how it might feel. I kept imagining what it would be like, in that moment, as I took another person's life.

Once when I was young I tried to catch a baby lizard which was scurrying about on the front porch of my parents' house. I only wanted to play with it, but when I slapped my hand down, its little body couldn’t handle the strain and its organs squirted out its sides. I cried a little because I loved lizards and I wanted to keep it as a pet, but behind the tears was a feeling inside of me that was hard to describe. It was the sick feeling you get when you take another creature's life. Luckily it was only a lizard so I was spared the wrath of Curley’s lynch mob.

That was the first time I took part in death, but not the last. Later I would hunt birds in my parents’ backyard with my pellet gun. The feeling was much the same each time, and each time it felt like a small part of me had just died, a part that I would never get back again. Each time I killed however, a part of me wanted to feel that dirty feeling again. Maybe it made me feel powerful or maybe it made me feel alive. I think about that feeling sometimes when I think about life's only real question - what is the meaning of life?

"Kill me some ragheads!" he said and the dream explained it so well in a way that words could never describe. Maybe taking another human's life would feel much the same as the lizard or those birds, and it seemed inevitable that one day I would experience that feeling, and I couldn't explain why. I had been preparing myself for that moment ever since I had chosen this path, and to talk about it so trivially like I was about to squash a bug seemed unfit to me of its significance. My friend’s face was another one of the faces in the crowd cheering me on, and I knew that just like them, he would one day look at me horrified. Few of them understood the horrible things that must be done at times to protect innocence. Few of them knew the things which had already been done so that my high school friend could utter those words and have no idea what it was that he was saying.

Dreams come in different forms to different people. This dream was mine. I was born and raised in the American southwest. I grew up playing in the forests of northern Arizona and dreaming of cowboys and Indians. Sometimes I would find rocks in the shape of arrowheads and imagine I was out there on the open range all alone tending my campfire at night and gazing up at the stars. I attended Sunday school and sang songs about Abraham and Jesus, and I would sketch things in my free time. My parents sent me to private school and I got good grades because they pushed me to work hard to cultivate my inquisitive mind. In high school I played varsity football and got a gold medal in discus at the state competition. I graduated with honors and joined the Marine Reserves to pay my way through university so I could become a Marine Corps officer one day. My first year of university, I had a small books scholarship to throw the discus for the local community college, and my second year I fell in love.

She was nineteen and the captain of her high school's cheerleading squad. It was love at first sight and we were inseparable. I once caught her signing her name with my last name on a piece of paper over and over again to practice how it looked, and although she was a little embarrassed, I couldn't help but smile. I was living my American Dream and all was well.

The war came and I jumped at the opportunity to fulfill my duty in battle. While I was gone, her pictures and letters kept me warm. She was there, along with my family and friends, to greet me when I returned home, and with the war behind us our future seemed bright. But as George Carlin once said, "The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it."

I tried to put the war behind me but the world was different when I got back and I still had too many unanswered questions. It is hard to pinpoint the moment when I first realized my dream had been lost. For a while, I tried everything I could to get it back, but one day I finally knew it was gone forever. We were kids and in love, and even after it was gone it was hard for us to give it up. The shriveled up remnants of that dream are all that remain in pictures and memories. Somewhere along the line, I had lost my way and in so doing I lost respect for myself. She would never admit it, but when I lost respect for myself, that is when she lost respect for me as well. After it was gone, I felt like I had lost faith in the American dream altogether. I began traveling and searching for something to fill its place, and eventually, with time, I remembered that the American dream was something more than just my own. I had forgotten all the dreams of all the other people out there who still believed in their American dream.

In my slumber I dreamed about a beautiful cheerleader who fell in love with a high school football star who went off to war to protect her innocence. After the war, he came home to a white picket fence, a dog, and 2.5 kids, and the two of them lived happily ever after. It was a beautiful dream, but it was written by someone else, and I read it somewhere in a movie or at a high school football game.

The real American dream is not about living someone else's dream. The real American dream I remembered was about having the same opportunity as anyone else to follow your true passions. It was about using and enjoying those opportunities and freedoms wisely without wasting the blood and sweat of those who paid for those freedoms for you. Above all else, it was a dream that could only survive if each individual American dream spread those freedoms and opportunities to the people around them whenever they had the chance.

Now that the melody of my American dream has begun to fade, it is the time for me to write myself a new song. Until I can find the words though, and the song is done, there is still one lullaby that I can hum.

Hope.

# Phantoms in the Fog

“Believing and seeing are both often wrong.” - Robert S. McNamarra

The sounds of movement outside my hooch woke me from the land of dreams. I had fallen asleep like most nights, with my headphones on and listening to the one album in my possession, Amnesiac by Radiohead. It was hard to know exactly when I had nodded off or what time it was, but I could sense frenzy in the rustling and footsteps outside. Before I had time to unzip my tent and look around, I heard the booming but muffled voice of my squad leader Anderson.

“Voltaire,” he said, “Stevens, get up! Something happened! Staff Sergeant wants all hands in the fighting holes. You’ve got two minutes to get dressed and meet me and the squad at my tent for hole assignments.”

I had spent all day in the sun digging in the rocky soil to prepare a fighting hole for the defense of our position and I was still trying to catch up on sleep after our first three sleepless nights in Iraq. My body was fatigued and my mind hazy, but as I finished tying my boot laces and the adrenaline kicked in, I forgot my fatigue.

“Hey, Stevens,” I whispered to my hooch mate, “What do you think happened?”

As he slipped on the trousers of his chemical suit, he shrugged and muttered,

“Can’t be good.”

Our mission in the preceding days was that of fueling engineers and our company, along with two others, had been tasked with the objective of laying down a fuel pipeline from Kuwait that stretched across the open, uninhabited desert to a giant two million gallon fuel farm eighty miles inside the border of Iraq. This temporary pipeline was an oversized six inch garden hose designed to transport fuel at high pressure to the huge fuel bladders that made up a makeshift gas station on the receiving end. Every five miles there was a booster station with a trailer sized pump that would keep the fuel moving its way along the sandy stretch of desert, regardless of the terrain. At each booster station there were two huge 20,000 gallon bladders of fuel to facilitate the continuous flow of JP 8 diesel fuel at all times even if a pump went down or the hose line was cut. Fuel could continue traveling from the fuel bladders to the next station for an hour or more while a repair crew was dispatched to find and fix the problem. Each booster station was manned with a squad of fifteen to twenty marines whose job it was to keep the pump running at all times and to patrol the five mile stretch of hose between them and the next station.

Anderson had just begun explaining the situation to the squad as Stevens and I arrived at his tent.

“Less than ten minutes before” he explained, “a call came in over the radio from Booster Station 4. The call lasted only seconds and was repeated only once, but the marine making the call sounded like he’d lost it.”

“Booster Station 4 has been overrun!” was the message followed by a short pause, “I repeat Booster Station 4 has been lost and we are falling back to Booster Station 3, over!” then the line went dead.

Anderson continued, “Jackson is still trying to ring them back, but Captain thinks we’re next. Booster 4 is only five miles away so we need to get ready!”

Each station was equipped with two Vietnam-era field phones which were hardlined to the station on either side of them. None of the stations possessed the standard issue PRC 119 radio which is the most commonly used radio of Marine units worldwide. Nicknamed the “prick,” it communicates by radio waves not by wire, has an effective range of about five miles, and depends on a power source to charge the batteries. Just like kevlar helmets, however, we were in embarrassingly short supply.

“Man, I hate the prick,” Stevens joked, “but if Booster 4 had a prick right now maybe we could call them up for a little phone sex. The only thing worse than a prick is the old string telephone we’ve got.”

His joke seemed to cut the tension in the air a little.

The field phones were true technological marvels, built years before I was born and they operated similarly to the old style crank telephones our grandparents used when they were kids. To make a call the operator had to turn a crank on the base of the phone causing a little bell to ring on the phone on the receiving end. This was our only form of communication with the outside world aside from a shortwave radio receiver someone had brought with them to pick up world band radio stations. Communication like this had its obvious limitations, but similar to the prick, it lacked the functionality to perform bi-directional conversations. Only one end could talk at a time, and if both sides attempted to talk at the same time neither side would receive the message. Another problem was you could never be sure if the receiving end had heard your message unless they confirmed receipt of it. Without confirmation, the sender would have to ring back the receiving end repeatedly until they confirmed.

I leaned over to Stevens and whispered, “Can you imagine what third platoon is thinking up at Booster 10?”

“If they’ve even heard yet,” Stevens said.

Even as our squad leader was explaining to us the situation, Jackson was still attempting to call back Booster 4 in order to confirm the message while simultaneously relaying the unconfirmed message to Booster 6 so they could relay it all the way down the eighty mile stretch of boosters. Imagine playing the telephone game in the middle of the night in a war zone and the operator on the end of the line is your only source of information.

Over the past four or five days there had been no reports of enemy combatants anywhere along the fuel line and the only other reported sightings were that of the occasional caravan of camels in the distance slowly traversing the desolate landscape. We were alone in the desert and our fuel line was a vital part of the war effort, making it a high value target. If the message we received was true and enemy soldiers were on their way, the nearest reinforcements were over five miles to the north of us. Their standing orders were to keep the fuel running at all costs, leaving little to no chance they would come to our rescue.

We had stopped receiving fuel from Station 4, so the marine operating the fuel pump switched the inlet valve from the pipeline to the fuel bag reserves. It would only be a matter of time before the fuel was gone. Anderson assigned everyone a fighting hole and a partner so that one marine could continue digging out the hole while the other watched for signs of movement in the dark open expanse.

“Voltaire, you’re with me,” Anderson said, “and here’s a shovel. You get to dig.”

The moon was a mere sliver in the sky, making visibility low while tensions were high. With my gas mask strapped to my side and chemical suit on, I quickly made my way to the north-eastern side of our encampment and began digging. The ground was hard and the digging slow. Our hole was only a few feet deep so we were unable to stand, but deep enough to crouch on our knees. Only part of the squad stood watch at all times so only a quarter of the holes had been fully dug. My rifle, which leaned against the side of the hole next to me, was loosely wrapped in a spare tire cover with desert camo printed on the cloth. I learned from a marine who had been through the first gulf war in ’90 that he had used a spare tire cover to protect his weapon from the dust. He said that unlike many of the marines he had been deployed with, his rifle never failed to operate. I took his advice and added the cover to the list of gear I had to buy before we shipped out.

After about fifteen minutes of being on post, Staff Sergeant Sawyer approached quietly from the west and ordered us with an angry stare to show him our rifles and to rack a round into the chamber. We had been ordered to clean our weapons without lube upon arrival in Kuwait because they told us it would attract dirt and gunk them up. As a result, our rifles were covered in a thin, almost invisible layer of dust and were drier than the surrounding dunes. It took me less than a second to unwrap my rifle from the spare tire cover, and another to pull the charging handle back. As I slid the handle forward, the bolt carrier advanced, which pushed a 5.56mm cartridge from the 20-round magazine into the chamber of my M16A2 service rifle.

Every millimeter the bolt slid against the inside of the metal receiver, it created a scraping noise which was reminiscent of the sound that fingernails make as they scratch against a chalkboard. I could feel the grating in my bones as I pushed the cold metal handle forward until the bolt locked in place with a tiny click. A wave of relief washed over my body. This was the first round I had ever chambered into any weapon my entire life with the sole purpose of killing another human being.

Sawyer’s angry face softened a little. “Will you look at that. Now we’ve got three men out of a whole squad of marines who are ready to fight. I was beginning to think I’d have to fight these Hajis all alone.”

At that moment, reality began to sink in. Sawyer had already checked most of the squad and many of their rifles had jammed as they tried to chamber a round. Three un-lubricated M-16’s and staff sergeant’s 9mm were all that stood between us and the force that had overrun Booster 4. Lance Corporal Lopez stumbled up a few minutes after Sawyer left, all wide eyed and jittery, carrying a spray bottle full of lubricant.

“I’m on orders from Staff Sergeant to spray everyone’s chamber with CLP.”

We readily complied.

It was a cold winter night in Iraq and my fingers were almost numb. The inside of the fighting hole was wet, which made it easier to dig, but made it a miserable place to spend the night. The mood in the air was one of pensive nervousness, and we kept ourselves calm by conversing at a whisper level. What do you talk about when you find yourself on the edge of impending doom? At first you exhaust all conversations about how to react to the enemy forces by creating plans for the different scenarios based upon the size of the force or where they might attack from. Afterwards, conversations begin to resemble those you had before you thought your hours might be numbered. Life back home dominated most of the time, but then our conversation moved on to stories about Iraq and the preceding days.

“You won’t believe this” Anderson said, “but swear to God it’s the truth. Bennet and I were on watch last night and he pulled his blacklight out.” Making a slow sweeping motion with his arm across the horizon, he said, “As Bennet pointed the light out across the desert, guess what happened? You’re not gonna believe this.”

“What?” I said, “What did you guys see?”

“Scorpions! And not just a couple of them, thousands of them as far as the light could reach.”

Although I took his use of the word “thousands” to be a slight exaggeration, I got the idea. Having grown up in Arizona, I was no stranger to scorpions, but imagining all those scorpions scurrying around in the dark just a few feet away from me still gave me the creeps.

“Have you seen the dung beetles yet?” I said. “These little bastards just came scampering past my hole on their front legs the other day. They were rolling their little balls of shit off across the sand, off to who knows where.”

“They must have found Gomez’s cheese baby,” Anderson joked, “Remember? Yesterday? When he said his ass was bleeding.” We both laughed softly as we pictured his expression from the day before.

As we waited and talked, the boredom became the real enemy advancing on our position, and our conversation kept that danger hidden in the shadows somewhere in the distance. The night dragged on for what seemed like hours until the sputtering engine of the fuel pump broke up the monotony of the night. As it swallowed up the last few drops of fuel and struggled to fire, I realized two hours, maybe less, had passed since the lines had been switched to the backup. The constant droning of the diesel engine had created a type of silence to our surroundings that we were only then fully aware of.

At first we didn’t say a word and every rustle of our uniforms or movement of our feet against the dirt dominated our attention. The sound of footsteps in the distance made my head wrench sideways and my eyes grew wide until I realized it was just the pump operator checking on the fuel bags. Digging could be heard somewhere to the east of us, which made me glad I had dug fast and was already done. The desert was silent now, and we were the only crickets. As we slowly regained a relative sense of comfort, our discussions about life and the war continued at a whisper. An uneasiness still lurked somewhere beneath the surface, though, and in the shadows.

Sawyer approached our fighting position again, eerily silent, a few hours before sunrise. He told Anderson to relieve half the squad so they could get some rest and Anderson asked me if I wanted to hit the rack. I was wired and I told him, “I couldn’t sleep even if I wanted to.” So he left me there to stand guard alone.

A fog rolled in after he left, and visibility was reduced to about twenty yards out in all directions. I was elevated to new heights by the adrenaline pumping through my veins. The nervous euphoria I felt was better than that of any drug. My heart pounded against my rib cage and felt like any moment it would burst through and leap out onto the dirt. I fingered the trigger selector, moving it from safe, to fire, to burst, and back again. From the ready position, I strained my eyes and slowly fanned the muzzle of my M16 across my lane of fire, taking aim at dark patches in the fog.

As I grew accustomed to the dark, I descended into the twilight of my own imagination. The mix of stress, sleep deprivation and solitude caused my mind to play tricks on me. As the gloom rolled on, dark figures began appearing between the folds of mist. My finger twitched towards the trigger each time they appeared, but before I could make them out they would disappear again and fade into the fog. One of the apparitions seemed to rush in my direction, evaporating into a cool breeze which blew across the hair on the back of my neck and sent shivers down my spine. The ghostly shadows drew closer, and each time they caught my eye, I took aim at them and was determined to fight even if that meant I might die. Those phantoms in the dark kept me awake until the dawn when the fog began to clear.

These were the ghosts of the nameless warriors who had fought and died in long forgotten wars. They were the Babylonians, The Assyrians, the Persians, and the countless empires and clans who had conquered or been conquered while staking claim to the cradle of civilization. Somewhere in the surrounding landscape they had spilt their blood, and now they slept in a shroud of darkness hidden from sight. In that dark hour, when the shroud thinned to the thickness of the fog, I faced these inner ghosts in a trial by combat to judge the wisdom of my endurance. My innocence was all they needed to reach their final verdict. I survived.

We were never attacked that day. In fact, neither was Booster 4. Information slowly trickled in over the course of the coming week. In the confusion of the onset of war, communication between the allied forces had failed miserably at times. Booster 4 was just inside the border of Kuwait and no one on the US side had informed the Kuwaiti forces of our pipeline. They in turn had failed to relay the location of a Bradley tank company dispatched to patrol the border. As the tanks approached the station, the marines realized they were completely outgunned. They made a quick distress call and then fled to Booster 3. Neither the squad of marines, nor the Kuwaiti tanks fired a single round that night, which saved the marines at Booster 4 from becoming casualties of friendly fire. The events that unfolded that evening may seem trivial to some, or even comical, but peering out over the foggy desert alone is a haunting memory for me in which I faced my fears and the inner darkness of the night.

Just after daybreak I was relieved from my post. That evening as I laid down in my hooch and shut my eyes, I listened again to the tranquil sound of Thom Yorke’s voice, coming through the headphones. As I began to drift away he sang “Come on, Come on, You and whose Army…” melodically to the strumming of guitar and humming. As the song climaxed, the drum and cymbal kicked in, and in long drawn out tones the lyrics “We ride tonight, Ghost horses” slipped from his tongue.

Those words he sang were not the words I heard, though, as my mind wandered somewhere between my waking life and sleep. "Relax, Relax" took the place of the words “we ride tonight.” Over and over again, “Relax, Relax” were the words I heard and needed to hear, because deep inside my soul, the song’s message transcended its meaning in the English vernacular. A ghost inside of me had begun to stir in the cold Iraqi night as I lay there, far away from home on that foreign battlefield. Like an old friend, the song whispered in my ears and told me to keep on dreaming beautiful dreams in the night, because one day those dreams may end, ending with them the time for me to rest my bones. “Dream on," it murmured, “till all the dreams are gone and truth fades away into the shadowy night. Only then,” it said, “when all hope is gone, should you rise again from your slumber, cast off sleep’s illusion, and open up your eyes.”

# Dump Truck Transit

**“As she spoke the goddess dispersed the mist and the land appeared’**

**- Homer, The Oddessy**

We left our base in southern Iraq which was code named “Cobra” on a convoy consisting of about 100 military vehicles. We were moving north towards Baghdad and MTVRs carried equipment and supplies while hummers provided security. Half the vehicles were 7 ton troop carriers packed full of Marines armed with M16 rifles and crew served weapons. Before we left, our detachment was briefed on how to respond to an ambush. In the event of an attack from the side of the road, our orders were to fire an entire clip from our weapon over the side of the vehicle before we took aim. The road took us through insecure enemy territory and vehicles were regularly ambushed by roadside combatants. Only a week before, Jessica Lynch’s convoy had crossed the Euphrates river at the same spot and was captured after taking a wrong turn. Our crossing was uneventful though, and we continued north through the open desert at night.

As you approach the heart of darkness, signs of that darkness begin to appear all around you. All night we passed broken down US vehicles on the side of the road which were filled with bullet holes and smeared with blood. At one point our convoy slowed and steered wide to pass a burning fuel truck. The heat of the flames were intense and I held my breath as the flames from the cab danced closer to the 5,000 gallon fuel tank it was hauling. The convoy ahead of us had been attacked within the hour, and the flames were not yet extinguished. I watched the flames leaping up into the air for a mile or more before they finally disappeared behind us.

We were surrounded on all sides by the night, and each of us nervously watched and waited as the headlights cut their way through the dark wide expanse of desert. When the night was at its darkest, our convoy slowed again and shots echoed over the sound of the diesel engines somewhere towards the rear. They were close, but none hit our vehicle and within seconds our squad leader received a call over the radio which told us to “Open fire.”

All at once we switched our weapons to burst and unloaded a clip into the open desert. The red tracer rounds flew in all directions across the horizon and the smell of gunpowder was thick. The engine of the 7-ton roared as we lurched forward picking up speed. My magazine dropped to the floor as I pulled another from its pouch and reloaded. I scanned the desert with my M16 for the muzzle flashes of small arms fire as we sped away. None of us spoke for some time until a call of “all clear” came over the radio and our convoy continued on. We never found out what happened that night on the road or if any of the rounds we fired ever hit their mark.

There is something about this story I must confess though. That isn’t exactly how it took place. The basic elements of the story are true. We were on a convoy, but I don’t remember the number of vehicles. It could have been ten or a hundred, but for me it felt like a hundred. Half of the vehicles were filled with Marines in troop carriers and our standing orders really were to unload a clip into the desert before we took aim. We did cross the Euphrates river, and someone did tell us that we were going to cross where Jessica Lynch’s convoy had been ambushed, but I don’t remember who told me that story and I have no way of confirming if it was true.

We did pass a vehicle that had bullet holes in it and blood on the glass, but as I try to remember the details of what I saw I only remember it in flashes except for the burning fuel truck. That part was true. Our convoy came to a complete stop and our squad leader did tell us to get ready, but he didn’t have a radio and no one gave us orders to fire because we never heard any gun shots. I never fired my weapon that night but I did take aim into the dark nothingness.

There is one more thing I must confess though. When I came home from Iraq and people asked me questions like “Did you see any action? What was it like to be at war? and did you ever kill anyone?” I told them all a lie - only not at first. At first I told them stories about all the times I thought I was going to die. Those seemed to excite people at times, but no one ever looked fully satisfied. So I lied. I made up a story about how every time our convoy came under fire we unloaded a clip over the side into the open desert.

The truth is I never fired my weapon once while I was in Iraq. Not because I didn’t want to, or I wasn’t ready to, but simply because I was never given the order. I wanted to tell everyone a story that they could believe to satisfy their curiosity, but I didn’t want to tell them I had killed someone when it wasn’t true. So I made up a story which felt more real to me sometimes then what really happened. The true story was this: a Marine goes to war and never fires his weapon. Which story is more believable?

Every time I told the convoy story people seemed satisfied. I don’t mean that it satisfied the war mongering militant ultra right wing conservatives. What I mean is I could tell the story to my grandmother and she seemed satisfied or I could tell the story to a circle of hippies smoking pot at a little collective in New Zealand and none of them looked disgusted. Everyone appeared to be comfortable with the idea that I was a human being who may or may not have taken another human’s life.

I must take the time to explain something about the stories I tell and how I write them. All the stories I write are true. None of the stories are fabricated or made up, except some of the details. When telling a story, I try to write so that you, the reader, can see it through my minds eye. I may not remember what a person said to me one night in a fighting hole, but it could be something they said to me another time, or something they might have said if they had the chance to. The details of the conversation have to feel like the person I’m talking about, even if I don’t use their real name - even if I don’t use mine.

It’s not just about feeling real though. Both of the convoy stories feel real to me, but only one of them is the true story as seen through my mind. Maybe the squad leader did have a radio or maybe there were more vehicles with bullet holes and blood, but that’s not how I remember it. I write, so that as you read it, you can see not only through my eyes, but through my memories and imagination.

Sometimes the things you can’t remember say more about a story then the things you can. Here is a story written in a way I’ve never told it before:

I don’t remember her name. In my mind, I can picture her as she walked up and said hi, with dark latin skin and thick black hair. I remember sensing a little fear in her big brown eyes as she clung to the 5 gallon water jug and my arm. She didn't know how to swim. She smiled and held on tight and tried to look confident, but the firm squeeze in her grip said it all. As we swam I forgot about the war around me. I smiled back at her and paddled with one hand effortlessly next to her. I floated with her all around the watering hole and then safely back to shore. I don’t remember what we said to each other, but I remember the fluttering of my heart. I remember her brown skivvy shirt was wet against her plump young body, and I remember how scared I was, because I had no idea what to do next. I wanted to kiss her, I wanted to make love to her, but I didn’t want to move too fast. I remember her walking away, and looking back at me for the last time with a smile on her face, and those beautiful brown eyes. Out of everything I remember though in those two short hours I spent with her, there is still one fact that always slips my mind. I don’t remember her name.

I might fill in the missing details of stories like these at times to make the story feel real. In this story I could add some dialog or talk about the people swimming around us, even if I can’t recall who they were. Maybe I’ll give her a name or maybe I won’t. Then again, maybe I’ll leave it just the way I remember it, because sometimes it’s the missing details that make a story real.

I kept a journal while I was in Iraq and here is a passage I wrote down while I was there:

“03/20/03

Today was a very interesting day. In my last entry I told of one of the craziest days I’ve had since I’ve been out here. Today though, was much crazier. Last night while we were asleep at 5:00 am the first attacks on Saddam began by way of cruise missiles crashing into the streets of Baghdad. From what we heard on the BBC radio broadcast they were precision targets that were possibly aimed at Saddam and his entourage. Yesterday we also switched over from our cammies to our mop suits to expedite the time it took to go to Mopp level 4 (level of protection against poisonous gases and biological agents) in the event we were attacked with gas.

Well today we actually got to use them. We had 3 gas/scud drills (or so we thought) that sucked. I don’t believe there has been a point in life where I was tortured like I was in the scud bunker in my mop suit those 3 times. The persistent uncomfortable annoying pain the gas mask straps have against the back of your skull, the burning in your hands from wearing black rubber gloves in the sun, and the heat and sweating; Oh the heat!!!

After the first “drill” we heard on the BBC that a scud had been shot off toward Kuwait and some military installations there. One of the warheads after being hit landed in one of the empty camps at [Redacted]. Crazy how things work like that huh. Anyway but the third “drill” we began loosening up and they let us keep our masks off (which helps like you would not believe) …

Wait, I forgot that during the first drill I was in a bunker with a reporter from the [Redacted] who started to freak out (kinda like I wanted to) and started saying she was going to die and she needed to take her mask off and all this stuff. Needless to say with the first Sergeant right there, a bunch of Staff NCO’s and him grabbed her and took her inside the CP tent to cool down. I can understand how she felt though cause its almost like claustrophobia in the sense that you feel like you just have to get out of it. Back to the third drill. So we have our masks off and we are chilling in the bunker either right at or right before sunset and all of a sudden someone said what’s that? As I turned around time stopped…

At a 45 degree angle and rising slowly was what appeared to be a missile. Even though it was far away you could tell it was moving pretty fast but in a instant it stopped moving up but you could tell it was still moving. It looked as though it was aimed in right on us and not only us, but me. I watched for what seemed like hours but were really only seconds until Marines began flying into the bunker from all sides. One female Marine landed on top of the reporter chick sending her to the ground. I remember I heard her softly moaning for help and I looked over and her head was literally pinned sideways against the ground. The only thing that probably saved her from injury was her kevlar on her grape.

The best though was the story [Redacted] told me of the captain (from now on referred to as [Redacted]) running full speed, yelling incoming, and going fully horizontal only to take out five marines ([Redacted] included) in the bunker where he flew. It turns out that the missile wasn’t a scud and we know it was probably either a patriot “chasing scuds” as the first Sergeant put it or it was one of the army surface to surface type missiles. Either way I’ll never forget it. Oddly my life never flashed before my [eyes] and I never feared dying as I watched the rocket in those few seconds that lasted hours. All I felt was the awe of it. The utter reality of where I was, never set [in] until that very moment in time when I saw the monstrous hand of death hanging above my head and I had no control over it. How amazing it was. How amazing.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

I’ve told this story countless times, but years after I wrote it in my journal I went back and read it again. There, staring back at me on the page were the words “It turns out the missile wasn’t a scud…” I was shocked and I read it a few more times before I could believe my eyes. Had the First Sergeant really said those words to us and if so why couldn’t I remember him saying them let alone writing them down? I must have known it when I wrote the words “Either way” but I still can’t remember, no matter how hard I try.

The whole world knows there were scud missiles launched that day and I’ve seen videos of patriot missiles that looked very much like the flashes of light I saw converging in the sky. Every Marine who was there, including the First Sergeant, saw something in the sky and even the reporter who was standing next to me could tell you everyone questioned whether or not they were going to die. So why do I struggle, even to this day, trying to remember writing those words every time I read them?

Read this story from my journal now, only this time I’ll add in some missing details so you can feel the way I felt when I was there. Unlike my journal entry though, or the convoy story, no part of this story contradicts with what I remember. Some details may be added from my imagination to accentuate the feeling I had in that moment but are details that could be true if I could remember them. I can read this story and no part of it “feels” like a lie.

This story is an example of how I try to write:

(The rest isn’t ready for editing)

# That Fateful Moment

**Peace is his highest value. If the peace has been shattered, how can he be content? His enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself. He doesn't wish them personal harm. Nor does he rejoice in victory. How could he rejoice in victory and delight in the slaughter of men? He enters a battle gravely, with sorrow and with great compassion, as if he were attending a funeral.”**

**- Tao Te Ching**

The movie theatre was packed as Mark and I arrived, so we made our way to some empty seats in the back. As the movie previews flashed across the screen, my stomach felt sick like I was about to do something wrong. As a child my mother always warned me to stay away from anything Satanic. Once though, I found a book on occult symbology in my teacher’s desk hidden amongst books on theology and world religions. It felt almost sacrilegious as I flipped through the pages not knowing what I would find. As I sat there waiting for the movie to start, I could hear my mother’s voice once again warning me to avert my eyes in the hopes that her son may never discover his nakedness.

The anticipation began to build as the opening credits rolled. The movie title came onto the screen and then the room went black. The theatre was dark and the sound of an airplane approaching at high speed cut through the silence. An explosion, then screams were followed a few seconds later by another explosion and more screams. I was transported back in time to the confusion and terror of the September 11th attacks, seeing them through the eyes of a blind man. No one spoke as the theatre lit up again with footage of the busy Manhattan streets filled with onlookers staring up at the towers. As I watched I remembered the numbness which followed the attacks and my dirty anticipation was gone. My eyes were fixed on the screen not knowing what to expect. Each new fact the movie presented took my mood to a deeper low. How was any of this possible, and how is it that I didn’t already know? Mark and I exited the theater completely silent and just below the surface a thought was beginning to form. I didn’t know if I could trust my president.

I remember the morning of September 11th. I woke to a phone call from my mother and she told me to turn on the television. I had one of those old TV’s with the knobs on it. I was nineteen and living on my own, broke as hell. The whole day seems like a blur to me now, like the day after an all night drunken bender and I can’t remember if I saw the second plane hit live or if I saw the replay.

I had class that day but I skipped it to stay home and I spent the next two days in front of the television. Finally, at the end of the second day I forced myself to get up and go outside. I walked to campus and I found a spot all by myself near the library to sit and reflect. I looked up and and in the distance I saw the flashing lights of military planes, patrolling the empty skies. As I watched them dance in formation I realized how my grandfather must have felt when WWII ended just before he finished his training in the Army Air Corps. My country had been attacked and even though I was prepared to defend it there was nothing I could do. Islamic extremist terrorists had perpetrated the attacks and they don’t send Marine Corps fuel system engineers to hunt down terrorists. All I wanted was to be on the next boat or flight to Afghanistan or wherever the hell they wanted to send me.

I remember watching the speech that Bush gave to congress and for the first time I felt proud and confident that as a nation we would get through this disaster. He made me believe that we would catch the terrorists who had committed these atrocities and his strength gave me courage to keep going during those dark hours. The events of 9-11 seemed so clear and simple. America had been attacked by one of the usual suspects and the government stood united against those involved. Above all it was clear we would get to the bottom of it.

When I was eighteen and could vote for the first time, I cast my ballot for George W. Bush. As a Marine who was raised Republican in a pro military family there was really only one option. His father George H. W. Bush was the first president I can remember as a child, and at the time I can’t remember a single person who spoke in disapproval of him. My family and church always held him in high regard, unlike his successor Bill Clinton. The policies Clinton pushed were too liberal for most conservatives, similar to his morals, but as I grew old enough to decide for myself, I held him in similar regard to other Presidents my parents spoke ill of, like Roosevelt. The feeling I was experiencing now though, was not one of dislike or even hate. My faith in my country was beginning to crumble .

Back in the theatre I watched the screen intently. There he was up on the screen, and I couldn’t understand what was going on. It didn’t make any sense to me and I kept asking myself, “How can he just sit there?”

When in the history of warfare has a general reacted to an imminent threat in such a way? How could he just take his time and sit there reading a book to little children as his nation was under attack instead of jumping from his seat, tossing the chair aside and racing to defend it. To hell with scaring the children, fighter pilots were in the air waiting for his orders and it was unclear what other threats lie waiting in the shadows. If the official story is true, how can we see George W. Bush as anything more than the worst commander in chief in US history.

I spent some time digging into the events surrounding 9/11 and as far as rabbit holes go, that one runs deep. There are stories of cruise missiles hitting the Pentagon and buildings packed full of explosives to demolish them. I’ve heard people talk about death ray devices, and mini nuclear bombs. It gets worse though, because the sinister plan was perpetrated by the Illuminati working together with shape shifting reptilian aliens, and the artist formerly known as Prince.

It’s unclear exactly what happened that day but national polls point to a growing distrust for the official story. It’s hard to get to the bottom of things when you use terms like 9.8 m/s2 and the average person with a high school degree has no idea what you are talking about. Like the JFK conspiracies though, we may never know what really happened.

I believe that the war in Iraq was based upon a lie fed to the American people to convince them to support it. 9/11 served as an excuse to get the lynch mob going.

The truth shall set you free, and the truth is America wanted to remind the rest of the world how big our military was and what we could do with it. There were other motivations, too, and it's hard to escape the most obvious motive, which was oil.

Timing is everything. If there is nothing else you pay attention to in life it should be timing. In October of 2000, under Saddam’s rule, Iraq dumped the US dollar for the Euro to sell its oil to the world market. If the rest of OPEC had followed it could have meant serious consequences for the American dollar and economy. Why the lies then? We live in a “civilized” world where people follow the rules and good wins over evil and we all get our American dream. When times are good no one wants their friends to die in a war waged for reasons they don’t understand, somewhere in a place they can’t even identify on a map.

Going to war with someone for selling oil in a different currency is sort of like playing a friendly game of poker that gets a little out of hand because you went all in, but then realized you were about to lose big. Instead of starting again at your beginnings you decide to pull a gun out and take your money back. In Roman times you didn’t need a reason to start a war, but then again they also packed stadiums full of spectators to watch gladiators slaughter slaves for the audience’s pleasure. That kind of thing would be politically incorrect today. No, we needed other motives and the motives were presented to the public and we swallowed them up. The seeds of war had been planted years before, and 9-11 became an opportunity to water them with lies. We went to Iraq because our bloody nose was still healing from the sucker punch dealt to us at 9-11 and we wanted our revenge. Did we get it?

The war in Iraq wasn’t the most glamorous war, but it was just that - a war. My whole life I wanted a mission but I wouldn’t have chosen that mission if I’d known it was a lie. Choose your battles wisely is how the saying goes. The trick is to pick the most important ones and focus on them, because you can’t waste your time and energy on the battles of lesser meaning. The hard part for a person enlisted in the military, however, is that when you sign your contract you sign your life away and for the term of that contract you have no choice in battles you get to fight. If you don’t like the battles that are chosen for you there are two choices - do what you’re told or pay the consequences. My American dream was the cheerleader and the white picket fence, but it was also a sea of red, white, and blue in the ticker tape parade as I returned home victorious and stood tall on my chariot with a crown of laurel on my head.

That’s not the battle that was chosen for me, though, and after examining the lies and measuring the odds I knew the government would lie to me again. From a young age I had been building up my dream of being an American war hero who served his country proudly for thirty years, retiring one day a decorated officer and maybe even a general. Then I’d settle down someplace in the American countryside with my wife to start a farm and grow my own food and raise my own cattle and die an old man with her and my family at my side. How could I live with myself if I knew it was all a lie. The final nail was driven into the coffin of my dream in 2007 when I received my honorable discharge at the end of my first contract. I didn’t re-enlist.

Each time I learned more about that fateful day in September I realized there was very little chance I would ever know what really happened. The defining moment wasn’t when the second plane hit the tower or when the first tower fell or even when I flipped the TV on that morning. The fateful moment that irreparably damaged my faith in my country didn’t even happen on September 11th 2001. The moment happened to me years later after I’d already been to Iraq to fight a war for my country and president. The moment happened as I sat in the dark staring up at a movie screen and watched the man whose orders I was sworn to follow do something I couldn’t understand — nothing.

# If I die in a combat zone

**“Momma, Momma cant you see, What the Corps has done to me....” - Marine Corps running cadence, Unknown Author**

(Not ready for editing)

# Nice Bombs

**Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough."**

**-Franklin D. Roosevelt**

(not yet ready for editing)

# An Oath an Oath

**“It's not the oath that makes us believe the man, but the man the oath”**

**- Aeschylus**

(not yet ready for editing)

# Mere Christianity

**There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.**

**- Ecclesiastes**

(not yet ready for editing)

# Le Petit Mort

**“No man knows the value of innocence and integrity but he who has lost them”**

**- William Godwin**

(Not yet ready for editing)

# The Last Crusade

**“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done.” - Tim Obrien, “The Things They Carried”**

(not yet ready for editing)

# ”Fucking Hajis”

**“Son, all I've ever asked of my marines is that they obey my orders as they would the word of God. We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out. It's a hardball world, son. We've gotta keep our heads until this peace craze blows over.” - Pogue Colonel, “Full Metal Jacket”**

(not yet ready for editing)

# Us Vs. Them

**“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” - Mark Twain**

(not yet ready for editing)

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# The Man Who Planted Trees

“If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant trees; if in terms of 100 years, teach the people.” - Confucius

(not ready for editing)

# The Art of War

**“Paint and weapons have more in common than I previously realized. They both suggest to their owners surprising and possibly noteworthy things which might be done with them.” - Vonnegut**

(not ready for editing)

# The American Mortgage

**“Any informed borrower is simply less vulnerable to fraud and abuse” - Alan Greenspan**

(not ready for editing)

# What is Love?

**“For love is the desire of the whole, and the pursuit of the whole is called love.”**

**- Aristophanes, Plato’s Symposium**

(not ready for editing)

# 

# My First love

**“It seemed like a matter of minutes when we began rolling in the foothills before Oakland and suddenly reached a height and saw stretched out ahead of us the fabulous white city of San Francisco on her eleven mystic hills with the blue Pacific and its advancing wall of potato-patch fog beyond, and smoke and goldenness in the late afternoon of time.”**

**― Jack Kerouac, “On the Road”**

(Not ready for editing)

# How to tell a love story

**The Greatest fact remains always the precociously panhellenic HOMER. All good things derive from him; yet at the same time he remained the mightiest obstacle of all. He made everyone else superficial, and this is why the really serious spirits struggled against him. But to no avail. Homer always won. - Nietzsche[[2]](#footnote-1)**

(not ready for editing)

**“Il faut cultiver notre jardin.” - Voltaire**

**"Si vis pacem, para bellum.” - Vegetius**

**About the Author**

Charles Voltaire is an idea. He was first imagined as a joke, then as a pen name, until eventually he became a symbol of something bigger than the author himself. His words stream from his eyes to his pen and with each stroke he connects ideas, symbols, and stories revealing deeper mysteries long since forgotten.

He symbolizes that part in all of us that wants to be heard — that part of us that wants to do what’s right and speak up but doesn’t know how. He embodies everything you wish you could have said if you’d had the courage to speak your mind without fear of the ramifications. He’s a sinner, but his conscience is clear because he took the time to confess his story. He’s Rodin’s “Thinker,” naked and perched atop the gates of hell pondering a way to clothe his pride so he can make his way home to Eldorado.

Love him or hate him but don’t question his honesty. He wears his heart on his shoulder and the power of his speech and actions are tattooed on his face. He uses myth as a tool to tell his story and is rooted in poetry. He is a soldier, only his weapons are far more powerful than those of conventional warfare and just like a samurai he carries two swords on him at all times.

**(Back Cover)**

War: A love Story is a book about a patriotic young man whose life is deeply rooted in religion and dedicated to the cause of fulfilling his American Dream. From childhood he devoted his life to joining the military and following in the footsteps of his Grandfather who was a Lt. Colonel in the Air Force and who took part in top secret missions during Vietnam and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Just as he begins to realize his dream though, something goes terribly wrong which catapults him into a journey of self discovery on the American road and abroad. His adventures and hardships seem to echo at times those of the character Candide who was first imagined by the french philosopher Voltaire.

In his search to find new meaning, and as his old life crumbles all around him, he finds himself living in another country and re-discovering his spiritual and earthly roots. With this reawakening of passion inside of him he sets out to mend with worn out tools those things he once held sacred in order to restore his honor before it’s too late.

1. Some punctuation grammatical and spelling mistakes were corrected and names were redacted. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Frederick Nitzsche, ‘Notes for “We Philologists”’, tr. William Arrowsmith. quotation from page 335 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)