

IT DOESN'T RAIN IN AFGHANISTAN

STEVEN GONTARZ

The meek, grey sky hung overhead peering through the plate-glass windows. Suddenly, a whoosh, I heard the beginning pitter-patter of rainfall. In an instant this light tapping was followed by what sounded like sheets of rain being beaten down by intermittent gusts of wind. The pitter-patter turned into a snare drum of rainfall as I sat there trying to read.

I was in the Seattle Room on the tenth story of the downtown Central Library. I couldn't help but think of Arizona where I grew up as I read a collection of Native American tales for my Native American Literature class. Arizona rain had a much different heartbeat than the Seattle rain I had now become accustomed to. I wondered if the Hopi still performed rain dances.

You see, in Arizona we would get monsoons, storms that started with a vicious bout of thunder and wind and lightning as if it was a statement from the gods. After the torrential downpour of a monsoon they always ended with a slow, steady day or two of light rain. I thought of this extended shower as a time of cleansing. As if the gods had made their statement with the initial impact of the storm and decided that now it's time to reflect.

I couldn't help but think as I sat there with the rain still dropping above me. The stories I read spoke of tricks being played by the sneaky Raven or some other mythical creature. In almost every story there was mention of death or some question of existence. I kept thinking about death and what it means to truly be alive.

Her name was Jennifer Moreno. I had the pleasure of serving with her in Afghanistan. She was a member of a special operations unit called CST, short for Cultural Sensitivity Team. Brave women were paired up with Ranger units in order to help manage the women and children as we encountered them on our mission. It wasn't proper for the men to handle them so the CST played a vital role in our

operations. Jennifer was a commissioned officer at the rank of first lieutenant who volunteered to work with the CST. She decided to join the CST after working as a nurse at the Madigan Medical Facility on Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

I was the Radio Telephone Operator or more like the Satellite Communications Operator. RTO is one of those old Army names for a job that hasn't changed since World War I. My job was to maintain a satellite link with the main base when we were out on target. I was the link between our platoon leader and higher command. Communications were flawless for the most part thanks to the constant clear skies in the Middle East. We never saw the cloud cover we had become accustomed to back home in Washington that would wreak havoc on comms during training. So our unit of command and control consisted of myself, the platoon leader, and other special teams members, including Jennifer. I didn't know her as well as say the other RTOs I hung out with, but we were acquainted and developed a friendship over the course of our deployment.

We raided multiple compounds in and around Kandahar that deployment. Although we had multiple resources to help ensure mission success and our safety there was always that looming threat of improvised explosive devices. You never knew when you might run into a trap set with IEDs. There was always this dark cloud hanging overhead no matter how many times we had been out on a mission. The enemy seemed to always be one close step behind with learning our methods and then using them against us. I would say more about these methods but that's classified information. The point is these bastards are smart and they know how and when to hit us where it hurts.

My back was getting stiff as I continued reading, two hours or more had gone by. The rain continued to fall from the ash colored sky as it scattered among the glass. The Hopi believed that a very long time ago there was a hole in the earth. Out of this hole came mankind and a mockingbird that would give man his name and language. I couldn't help but think we live our whole lives only to end up buried in the ground and yet the Hopi believed this is where all life started. Is this another way of saying we are all reincarnated?

I remember one night myself; Jennifer and five others were crammed in the back of a Stryker getting ready to head out on another mission. Jennifer was always cheerful and in good spirits. We

often made small talk between the platoon leader and us. This was our attempt at lightening the mood just enough after the stress and running around that came from preparation. I often saw Jennifer in the gym, kicking ass. The CST was tough and there was no doubt they had earned their place with us. Jennifer Moreno wasn't just another gear in the machine, she was an operator. She was one of us.

It hadn't been but a couple weeks since we got back home. I was over at my buddy Caleb's house helping him install his fence. There was a light drizzle that day. A typical Seattle grey-sky afternoon.

"Did you hear what happened?" Caleb asked.

"No, what are you talking about?" I replied.

It was then that I got the news. You see the CST team was on a longer rotation than we were. So even though we all got to come home late that August the CST team would remain in country for another couple months.

"There was an attack. A whole compound full of IEDs." He told me.

Turns out it all started with the call out. That's the part where we ask everyone to come out of the compound. An early attempt at a smooth raid. There were two women with suicide vests the reports said. After they both clacked off there was another blast setting off a deadly chain reaction. Other IEDs in the area started going off as Rangers responded to the initial wounded; a total of 12 would blow that night. It wasn't until the fifth one went off that she would be washed away from this life. Three others would die that night in what turned out to be a literal living hell.

The constant whisper had slowed above me and the marble sky was there as if to mock me now. It doesn't rain in Afghanistan. There's no cleansing for the horrors of war. I hadn't thought about how to deal with the death of Jennifer since Caleb gave me the news that cold, rainy day. I had some nights where I broke down into tears at the thought of this 25 year-old on top of the world being suddenly ripped away from us. Not just her but other Rangers too. Suicide would claim two others while I was there, a staff sergeant and another young lieutenant. There's no telling what the next world holds in store for us.

Maybe the Hopi knew as they danced and prayed for rain. Every storm is the beginning and the ending of something bigger and more powerful than us. There were times in Arizona that you couldn't even believe how much water fell so fast. Roads would shut down from flooding and there would always be coverage on the news of people getting their vehicles stuck. The forces of nature are always greater than us. The forces of life and death were greater than her.