

THE assessment OF Pain WHILE IN LABOR

Jacqueline Jones LaMon

Sometimes, it is a luxury to be
able to focus on the body's distress
and not be held by the eyes of the mistress
—she, who knows what she needs
from your husband and gets it and gets it

and soon, the nurses will ask where you are
on a numeric scale of one to ten,
and what will you say then of your level
of pain? Right now, in labor's transition
—or now, when she enters the birthing room,
stands next to your stirrups, and asks
if there is anything at all that he needs?

How can you tell them this scale knows
no limits—it rises and rises again?

FICTION

HYPOTHETICAL

C.S. Samulski

So let's say that I am an intelligence analyst working for the United States Government. Let's say I'm in my early thirties—you know, old enough to actually remember 9-11, but young enough to feel like I had to do something about it. Let's say I came from a good family, somewhere in the Midwest—oh, I don't know, pick a state. A family with values, humble people who know how to work, churchgoing, raised a good kid. Let's say I'm athletic but not a jock, that I made good grades, went to a decent college, kept up the GPA, didn't party too hard, a little drinking maybe but no drugs, and got recruited straight out of undergrad. Almost like I had planned it that way.

So let's say I fly or maybe I take the train down to D.C., and let's say I do all right with the interviews—good background, no red flags, good head on my shoulders, love my country, know why I'm here. And let's say they sit me down and say, "Well, son, here's the thing, we like you—all your scores, very promising—but this is a new kind of war we're fighting, a new kind of enemy and, well, field work is only about five percent of what the Agency does, and we know you're excited to make a difference..." And maybe they go on a little like this and I'm thinking like, I skipped out on pot and ecstasy for *this*? Maybe it's not their first time to let a guy down easy and all that, so they start saying things like Your Skill Set and Top Secret and Special Opportunity, which, for a kid like me, maybe doesn't sound like so much of a letdown after all. So let's say I sign on and the next thing you know, this Special Opportunity turns out to be doing all the things no one else wants to be doing and my Skill Set turns out to be getting yelled at. A lot. One day, maybe they're sending me to the Pentagon, and then the next day I'm off to some office building in Maryland, and then the next I'm in Virginia, until I've learned to hate how commuters drive, until finally, you know, let's say my interviewers come around and they're like, "We've got a great position for you, how would you like to go to work for the NSA?" What do you suppose I say to that after all the driving all over the place and the McDonalds breakfast in my lap every morning so that I'm always

smelling like eggs and the Yes, Sir, Right Away to a new boss every day, none of whom really seem to like me or want me there, and the always being just a little bit late everywhere and everyone being a little ticked off at me? You think I go diving for that steady desk job?

Now let's say that those interviewers, turns out they weren't just bluffing because as soon as they get me cleared for this work and take me downstairs it becomes obvious that even figuring out just who the enemy is, you know, who actually has it in their head that *America Must Pay*, when you get right down to it, isn't really all that obvious. Like at all. And maybe I'm the kind of guy that it's like, "Guys, I got into this to get Bin Laden, you know, and I haven't even seen the word Afghanistan since I got here and what are we waiting around for?" Which maybe ruffles some feathers a little, like, "Who does this guy think he is, anyway?"—maybe not exactly the right attitude to have when you're still learning everyone's names. Or maybe it's been getting under their skin, too, all these guys stuck in front of their computers, not blowing up bad guys, and they aren't so thrilled to be reminded of it. Either way, let's say my next performance review goes something like I'm not "acclimating to the team," and the next thing you know I'm in some concrete room six floors underground with fluorescents that flicker every thirty seconds, and it smells like cheese left out in a locker room, and the only other guy in there has pizza stains all over his shirt and tells me he has all the Transformers VHS tapes and talks with a kind of lisp—Frankie let's call him. So now maybe, I'm thinking, you know, hey, those kids I graduated with are making six figures on Wall Street right now, and they are pretty much sitting around and looking at computers all the damn day just like I am—only at least they have a window to look out of and nobody throwing Optimus Prime quotes their way, and let's say I'm starting to wonder if maybe I didn't quite think this all the way through because Frankie, well, he doesn't exactly look like promotion material, does he? And what does that say about me, really?

So maybe, you know, I'm getting an early retirement plan together, bulk-ing up my resumé on a desktop that's ten years out of date, looking up finance terms on Wikipedia, and bouncing a tennis ball off the wall just to keep myself from totally losing it. And maybe one of those days—bouncing, bouncing—Frankie says something like, "Get a load of thisch Starscream

motherfucker," which, knowing Frankie, could just as easily be cartoons as anything else, but maybe for some reason I don't just write off this invitation like usual, and, what do you know, turns out there's this unhappy-looking dude staring back at me in black-and-white, the kind of picture where you can tell he doesn't know he's being photographed, and Frankie says something like, "Abu Kaschmir El-Funoun—aka the gopher," you know, cause he pops up one place, you bring down the Predator Drone mallet but he's already gone, pops up somewhere else. Well let's say we get to talking about Abu Kashmir— not like I have anything better to do— and it turns out we don't even know if that's a real photo of him or what his real name is, only that we've got all kinds of chatter coming across the wire about him, like he's got a finger in every pie from Yemen to Chechnya, and maybe enough of these calls are coming into the States to make the boys upstairs a little jumpy, like what if there's some Imminent Threat type stuff going on? What if the gopher is putting his own mallet together? Only who's to say who Abu Kashmir actually is, or why he seems to be so connected, even though it's like he just appeared out of nowhere—which maybe that gets Frankie and me thinking that this guy, what if it's more than just one guy? What if Abu Kashmir is like some code word pretending to be a *nom de guerre*?

Maybe Frankie's like, "That'sch not a bad theory, actually. Wanna try cracking it?" and maybe I'm like, "What the hell, sounds fun." Because what else am I going to do anyway? But let's say—surprise—it actually is kinda fun working the problem with Frankie, he's not half bad at this stuff, and the next thing you know we're hauling pizzas down from the cafeteria and camping out in the dungeon after hours, you know, and maybe there's not so much tennis ball bouncing and Wikipedia surfing anymore, more of a kind of crossword puzzle thing with Arabic letters and GPS coordinates and cork boards covered with yarn strung between names and dates and All Kinds of Bad Shit Goin' Down in the World and a printout of a gopher covered in dart holes. And maybe after a couple months of soggy pepperoni and shit coffee and forgetting what daylight looks like, we turn this name, Abu Kashmir, inside out, and out pops, among others, Anwar al-Awlaki, an American living in Yemen who is pretty pissed off about our foreign policy decisions. And where, do you suppose, could that American passport take him if he really believes all that *America Must Pay* stuff he's preaching? You

think he's gonna go bother some Chechens or Shiites?

Now let's say us cracking open Abu Kashmir turns out to be some kind of major discovery, the kind of stuff that goes straight up the line until some general's head spins around, and the next thing you know someone's fitting Frankie for a suit, and we're getting hauled into all of these swanky conference rooms with mahogany everything and great views of the Potomac to add our two cents on this "Abu Kashmir theory," as they keep calling it. Which mostly just means agreeing with everything our bosses' bosses say about it and trying not to breathe too loud. And let's say everyone's a little excited because our work proves al-Awlaki's involvement in some things, legitimizes him as a target, and offers us a chance to set precedent- you know, do we blow him up as an American or do we nix his citizenship first, then blow him up? Which sounds almost like the same thing, but what if it's not? What if one way is "leaving our options open," as some of the lawyers keep saying, because, what if killing al-Awlaki as an American means, well, now we have the right to assassinate any American that we deem to be a threat, which could then, you know, be extended into other useful circumstances? Whereas if we strip the guy of his citizenship first, but then we find an American on the verge of pulling the trigger and we don't have the time to fill the paperwork to smoke him, what do we do then? And let's say there's a lot of talk going around like, "Well let's not tie our hands, boys, we gotta go for maximum leeway here, right?" And let's say it turns out there's a hell of a lot more lawyers in the Pentagon than you'd think, and they're just drooling all over this little conundrum, trying to figure out how to spin it around for "maximum leeway" while not totally freaking out the American public. And let's say that meanwhile Frankie and I are pulled out of the dungeon and promoted over guys whose eyes bug out when they find out how far we jumped up the totem pole. Well eventually (I suppose you already know this part) Al-Awlaki gets smoked, American citizenship and all. And it's like high-fives all around, big success, Making America Safer, etc. etc., so let's say that for a while things are looking pretty good for us because of how this Abu Kashmir thing played out. Let's say Frankie and I are getting a lot of leeway, too, to work on whatever we like, and if Frankie wants to wear a tee shirt with Optimus Prime holding up his robot fist and a little speech bubble coming from his robot mouth that says, "Freedom is

the right of all sentient beings," if Frankie wants to wear that to work and still be taken seriously, well then, by God, he will be taken seriously, dammit, this is the guy who cracked Abu Kashmir, don't you know?

So now let's say I'm a few years into my career, made a few high-profile takedowns from the series of nut bags who think they can be the next Bin Laden. Maybe Frankie's actually got a real girlfriend now and is regulating his body odor and, turns out, is a pretty damn good friend and a bit of a genius. And let's say we still get to have fun with our cork boards and our yarn and our theories, only now a bunch of bright-eyed kids fresh out of college are hanging around to fetch us things from the archives and brew our coffee and ask us questions whenever they work up the nerve. And let's say my attitude thing doesn't get to people so much anymore, like maybe my bosses are using words like "aggressive" and "tenacious" on my reviews instead of "reckless" and "overconfident"—maybe now the team is just going to have to "acclimate" to me. So let's say I'm feeling pretty good about this whole sticking with the career thing after all. Let's say I've settled down with a girl too, nice girl, Capitol Hill lawyer, whip-smart, Georgetown sorority, and we've got our subdivision picked out, and we've got the SUV in the driveway and DirectTV with all the damn channels, and we're shopping for baby clothes, and whenever the father-in-law stays with us he's always got his arm around me saying stuff like, "We're really proud of what you're doing for the country. I want you to know we're praying for you and all your guys," even though he doesn't really know what I do exactly, and maybe I'm not too hot on getting prayed for, but hey, it's always nice to have an in with the dad, so I'm like, "Just proud to do my part, sir," and all that, which, hell, maybe I am pretty damn proud about it. Let's say that in the intelligence world, this is about as smooth as the sailing gets for an early-career guy like me. Should be smooth. Only let's say that the problem I first talked about, that tricky business of figuring out just who thinks America Must Pay, isn't going away, and I'm starting to think, "Just what does that mean anyway, that we can't figure out who means business and who's just pissed off and loud?"

See, let's say that "maximum leeway" equation we started with, al-Awlaki's assassination, just keeps getting bigger and broader. This is a global war, you know, lots of targets, lots of tricky situations to consider, lots of gray area. Let's say it's not the most simple thing to fight a war on that scale,

and it turns out there's an endless supply of radicals who are excited about making some kind of revolution happen in the Middle East or just blowing shit up. Some of them are genuine idealists—maybe the rest are just wired for idiocy. But with the internet and social media and a whole lot more ways to get across borders, let's say guys are starting to funnel into these conflicts from all over the place, from the West even, guys with some pretty radical ideas about Islam and freedom and how to resolve political differences. And not exactly the type of guys you'd expect to see over there either, guys who grew up in families just like mine, who went to high school just like me, who did their extracurriculars and kept their grades up and probably could have really “made something of themselves,” as my father-in-law would say. Let's say these guys, kids really, who are just as inexperienced and innocent as the ones fetching coffee for Frankie and me, these kids keep running off to join the next Islamic revolution, which becomes the next civil war, which becomes the next shit show, and then they trudge home a few years later, hardened or broken, looking for something to spend their anger on. Let's say they've got the same symptoms as the guys who go to VA hospitals to get checked out for post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries—that nervousness, that rage, that confusion—only nobody is going to be counseling these kids at the VA or anywhere else because, while they sure as hell are veterans of a war and they've seen some heavy shit and some of them need the therapy, they're on the wrong side of history. See, if you had a *keffiyeh* wrapped around your face when you were out fighting for “freedom,” counseling is not really going to be an option for you. You probably want to keep your involvement on the down-low because you're already looking over your shoulder for the FBI as it is. You're not exactly jumping into a doctor's office going, “I saw some guy get beheaded for believing the wrong thing and now I don't sleep too good anymore,” because you know they are going to ask where you saw this and why you were there in the first place. So maybe more and more of these kids—disillusioned, angry, isolated—keep coming home with nobody to talk to except for some loonies in Pakistan who've got some great ideas about how to turn your life around with a rental van and a few thousand pounds of fertilizer. And being angry and young and, yeah, let's say it, foolish, do you think that maybe more and more of these kids are starting to fall into that blurry category of people who think *America Must Pay*?

So let's say that one day I'm in the office, looking over my morning brief, and I realize that for the past three months I've been tracking a nineteen-year-old named Jason around the malls of Madison, Wisconsin, watching him shuffle from one retail job to the next, and Jason, funny thing, he's never even been outside Wisconsin, but he happened to meet another kid, Yousef, who disappeared into Libya for a year. Let's say Jason and Yousef happen to go to the same mosque together and made friends real quick, and Yousef has been showing Jason some pretty gnarly videos of morons driving up to buildings and blowing themselves up—let's say not exactly YouTube appropriate—with a lot of singing in the background about duty and honor and paradise if you happen to know the Arabic, and Yousef and Jason are having conversations about “doing something,” maybe “over here,” to “show them we're serious” and “be a good Muslim.” And let's say Jason has started to research the history of America's involvement in the Middle East, is starting to look up names like Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki and terms like “number of civilians killed in drone strikes,”—my bread and butter—and here I am, looking through his search history, listening in on his phone calls, trying to figure out if this is a kid just mall hopping or a militant scouting targets. Because, here's the thing, maybe Yousef was the original suspect, looked pretty messed up by his time playing war, your typical Angry Young Man, and has connections to a high-profile target back in Libya, you know, someone actually worth chasing. But following Yousef's trail has opened up this situation where the lawyers say we've got a chance to create some leeway. Because let's say Yousef is starting to look like a stateside groomer, and he's getting a bunch of kids to start thinking about what our historical role has been in oppressing Muslims and what if *America Must Pay* and wouldn't it be glorious to be a martyr? Which means, what if Yousef's not shell-shocked by what he saw in Libya, what if he's devout? Or what if the difference between those doesn't matter? And if these sheltered kids he's proselytizing are going to try blowing up a shopping mall, don't we have to do everything we can to catch them in the act?

So let's say, here I am, three months into logging Jason's texts, his phone's pings to the GPS system, his prayer life, his pet names for his girlfriend, his pornography habits, three months of this, because, hey, there is leeway here, these are new threats, which take new methods, methods

that must be proven necessary, with new lawyers that are “really excited about the potentials here,” all because of the remote chance for some info on our real asshole friends across the Atlantic, the ones I joined up to hunt all those years ago, and let’s say suddenly I’m thinking to myself, “Wait a minute, when did I go from looking for Abu Kashmir to looking for Jason?” When did this become more about us than them? And if this is what the job is, what kind of job is it?

Because, here’s the thing, if Jason intends to hurt someone in the near future, it’s our duty in the interest of national security to prevent him from doing that. Not if Jason intends to drive drunk into a minivan full of kids coming home from soccer practice. Not if Jason intends to rape a coed at a frat party. Not if Jason intends to rob a Denny’s. No, not those things. Only if he intends to hurt someone in the name of Islam. So let’s say the thousand other bad decisions we watch Jason make are going, more or less, unlogged, but if Jason decides to get political about it, we’re going to fuck his life. And let’s say that here I am in my mid-thirties with my mortgage and my car payment and my preschool tuition and my retirement plan, here I am just trying to do this job I love, and I’m following a bunch of teenagers around Madison, Wisconsin, teenagers whose most suspicious features are that they are teenagers and Muslims and interested in our history of involvement in the Middle East. And hypothetically speaking, sure, Jason could be up to no good, he could be convinced that *America Must Pay*, and so long as this is possible, so long as he might be thinking about some real or perceived injustice and planning to do something about it, and that something might be violent, and that violence isn’t sanctioned by a government and therefore, technically, yes, terrorism—so long as that thought of a possibility of a theory of an act exists, I can turn his life inside out. Just to be sure. Just in case. But let’s just say that everyone I talk to, what they really want from us is to keep growing that circle of possibility, keep pushing that boundary of things we’re allowed to do, things we *must* do, “maximize leeway,” which means that, theoretically, one day, everyone’s a suspect, everyone’s a potential terrorist, and what then?

LATE NIGHT, 1944

Sandra Inskeep-Fox

Late in the thick, dark night, long after the aunts have put away the cards, turn off the radio, and shuffled up to bed; long after the chirping crickets have stilled their arguments and the shadows cast by the moon have faded toward dawn, my mother sits crying in the kitchen.

When I reach across with my toes to her side of the bed there is no warmth, the sheets are cold and smooth, and I know I have been alone here for hours. From the living room, the clock has chimed three times and its ticking, while not interrupting the silence, seems a dotted line marking the boundaries around us. Then there is a perceptible shift in my understanding, and the dotted line becomes a tether.

This is how I learn about heart strings...the whole house is silent. Too silent for sleep. I feel connected to the silence and to the powerlessness of all the others who are listening with me. There is a piercing string knotted through each of our hearts, and though I can’t hear the sighs clearly each shuddering sob, each tick of the old clock tugs at the string and tears at the muscles of our hearts, tears at us one by one through the darkness. This sound tethers us, so that now we are all joined in her crying.

The ticking string that ties us together also binds us in place so that we cannot move to help her. This long night is private and solemn; not secret, but deeper. It is more than grief, which could be shared, for this contains shame and betrayal through which none of us can reach to hold her hand.

In yesterday’s mail was a letter with foreign stamps, written in a shaky, flowery foreign hand. My mother was smiling when she opened the letter, but then she wasn’t. The writer was a woman who knows my father, who lays claim to him from some great distant land where this war is. This is as much information as I can gather before the others realize that I am listening and send me off next door to dust Aunt Nettie’s bedroom. “Go tell Aunt Nettie she needs you,” is what they usually say, but yesterday morning there was no laughter and Aunt Maxine put on my coat and hat and patted my bottom as I went out the door. The others are all sitting