

pink.

words by michael watson

I know what he's going to say. The wound in my shoulder is a reminder.

St—stuttered cough.

“That wound's a reminder,” Scott says. I was close, anyway.

I ask him what I'm supposed to be reminded of. The sneer slices across his face like he's just stolen some poor Iraqi family's life savings.

Oh, wait.

THE SCENE is the torched ruins of what used to be a house at the edge of a small tenement 10 klicks north of Fajullah. Our unit was dispatched to quell an unrest situation over the distribution of aid packages two days ago. The locals wanted to keep it all, and what I guess passes for local police around here wanted at least, you know, *all of it*. No one in the unit was surprised when we were given the order to move, and most of us just see it as busywork these days anyway.

Fucking ghost of Christ, this burns.

Gunshot wounds are nothing like they are in movies, just so you know. When you get shot, you go *down*. No questions, you're eating sand. The three basic sensations you experience after being shot are, in no particular order:

Burning,

Blunt stabbing,

And tearing, like slowly pulling at a wet newspaper. Imagine being acutely aware of the fibers of your skin separating one by one, like the recycled newsprint of the New York Times. On fire.

Imagine all of that at once, and now you've been shot.

The really painful part, the part that squeezes a lemon half on

the wound, is that I've got a searing bullet lodged in my shoulder, and every time my body shifts at all, my shoulder shifts with it. So when I ask Scott what I'm supposed to be reminded of and he kicks me in the side as hard as he can, I'm ensured that no, I really won't forget this *wonderful day*.

"We are *owed*, man. Don't you fuckin' get it?" he barks. That's the Marines for you. If someone doesn't listen, shoot. If they still don't listen, keep blasting away. I have the best job in the fucking world some days.

I cough up, "Owed what? I'm here, I get my orders done, I get my pay holdings deposited into my bank in Duluth in case I make it home. Sounds—"

Cough.

"Sounds fair to me."

Add sarcasm to the list of things lost on Scott.

"We're at war to save their jihad asses from Osama and Saddam. We get paid shit from Uncle Sam, and the fuckin' sand niggers shoot back at us. Hazard pay, man, we deserve it. Don't pretend like you don't, 'cause we *all* do."

America's best and brightest, that's Scott.

"You're not gon' fuck things up for me, man."

I'm lucky his rifle was on single-fire. He's a retard, but he's a good shot. Nailed me square in the shoulder. A three-shot burst probably would've torn my arm off. In hindsight, I wonder if I should've said anything to him at all.

Maybe I just shouldn't have pulled my sidearm on him.

Cough.

"There is just no way," he says, that slight Virginia drawl leaking over the tip of his tongue, "that you're gonna talk to the C.O. about this, other than you got shot by a sand nigger out here. Just ain't no way."

I try not to laugh. I really, honestly, truly bite my tongue.

But I can't help it, and a let slip a high-pitched snicker. A girl's laugh. It gets me kicked in the shoulder this time, and I crow out in pain about as loud as I can.

Two inches from my face, he screams at me.

This ain't no joke.

Do you see a joke here?

'Cause I don't see no jokes, nigger-lover.

In-between shooting pains cascading across to my other shoulder, I think that maybe if he just stopped using that word, I might actually keep my mouth shut about what happened today.

I met Scott in boot camp. Really, I suppose it was more that *he* met *me*, in the same way a foul smell finds your nostrils.

Now, I'm not an intellectual elitist, but I cemented my opinion of him the day I met him, when the depth of his vocabulary shone bright upon the world during a twenty-minute rant about the "fags and nigruhs back home". I guess that's what he considered bonding.

I didn't pay it much mind. The way I figured it, we'd finish our six weeks together and be assigned to different posts somewhere, and it wouldn't matter anymore after that. When we ended up in the same unit, I realized that if it hadn't been Scott from Virginia, it would've been Billy from Alabama, or Jerry from Arkansas, and I sucked it up and moved on. You just can't escape that stuff in here.

A funny thing happens sometimes when you learn to ignore the really bad parts about people: you end up befriending them somehow. First you ignore them; then you can tolerate them; then you're at their poker nights; and before you know it, you're attending their weddings. That's just how it works when you're in a unit with someone. If you're not a cohesive, functioning family, something goes wrong and someone gets shot.

Cough.

Someone gets hit in the field. People die. Snipers no one saw because they were too busy bickering with someone in their unit. An

ambush everyone should've seen coming. Improvised explosive devices.

I'm still completely unable to control my laughter, and now Scott's *pissed*. If his anger was a mountain before, it's Mount St Helens now.

He gets down in my face and grips my wounded shoulder. I listen to the creak of the black leather glove as the thumb digs into the crater where part of me used to be.

I cringe. There's hurt, there's pain, and then there's *this*.

St—stuttered flinch.

Pain management is an art form to the point that it's science. When Scott starts yelling more shit at me, showering my face in spit-laced patriotisms-as-justifications, I go into my *bunker*, the place where I can't feel the sharp compression pain.

Like I was saying, you wind up attending their weddings.

"I'll be right back, stay here," says Scott. "Shoot 'im if he moves."

"Where the fuck are you going?" I yell across my shoulder. I keep my M911 anchored on the guy while I try to figure out where Scott's going. We usually just call 'em *nine-elevens*, these days.

THE SCENE is a two-room hovel in this tenement north of Fajullah.

THE GUY is a corporal in the local militia we caught trying to collect this month's "protection tax" paid in the form of thirty minutes alone with the youngest of the family's two daughters. There's usually no commotion at all, no alert, and no one would ever find out, but serendipity is a strange thing.

Today, the little girl's mother decided she was sick of it, and began yelling at the top of her lungs. *No, you can't have her today*. Today, the corporal decided to wave his rifle around like a fucking maniac and get everyone *else* in the room screaming. Today, we were patrolling the town and his sergeant didn't get the word out to him.

Our big, black, American combat boots broke down the front

door with all the *patriotism* of an oil tanker full of testosterone. Tactical two-by-two. The corporal started to swing around and open fire when he got the memo and dropped his rifle and his grip on the little girl.

Present tense.

I start to wonder what the fuck is taking Scott so long.

“Just,” I start, as though the corporal understands me, “just stay there. Don’t move.”

He mumbles something in broken English, what’s probably the only English he actually knows, and starts to bend down. I can’t risk that he’s going for his rifle, which would be the stupidest move in the history of man since the Hindenberg, so I make sure to yell at him some more in a language he doesn’t understand.

It’s all about inflection, really.

I push the gun closer to him and shout orders at him. He snaps back up and now we’re back to where we were before.

“Hey, what the fuck are you doing?” I call back to Scott.

“Looking for something!” he radios. “Did you shoot him yet?”

“What do you think?” I yell.

A gunshot at his range, through a stone wall, that registers about 140dB. That’s lost on Scott, but I try anyway. I’m thoughtful.

Scott comes marching out of the back room with a wooden box under his arm, service rifle precariously held forward like he’s actually going to shoot somebody.

I look at him like he’s carrying an ostrich egg. “What the fuck is that?”

Hazard pay, he says. “You just keep that barrel level.”

Fuck.

I’m looking at Scott, and he’s looking at me.

Fuck.

The corporal’s almost down to the floor, to his rifle, when my eyes come back in line with my pistol sights.

Get up, we both scream at the guy. He doesn’t know what we’re

saying, but he damn sure knows what we mean. But he's too close now, and the crazy guy carrying the box is liable to shoot him anyway, so there's really no reason to stop. The decisions we make in the heat of the moment.

Scott drops the box like it's radioactive, sighting in on the corporal.

HEY.

GET UP.

DON'T FUCKING TOUCH THAT WEAPON—

The corporal's hand on the grip of his rifle.

I wonder if it matters at this point that we weren't supposed to be in this area of the town.

I wonder why I let Scott leave my visual.

I wonder if I'm going to have to shoot this guy, or if Scott's going to beat me to it.

The corporal's hand on the grip of his rifle. I wonder if it's going to matter *more* now.

When you grow up in the boonies, Scott says, you gotta hunt. It's what every boy does. Your daddy hunts, your granddaddy hunts, your great-granddaddy hunted. Your friends hunt. Your teachers take the day off when hunting season starts. When you go hunting, he says, you gotta be okay with killing the animal. You can't have second thoughts, or when that buck jumps toward that grouping of trees and you don't take your shot right away, you might miss him. The shot scares away all the game in the area, so if you miss, you come back empty-handed.

Scott doesn't react so much as he *springs*, like a bear trap, and the corporal hits the floor. I swear I hear the shot a full second later.

The corporal's rifle falls in succession and I kick it out of the way.

I don't advance, instead looking over at Scott picking up the box and the jewelry spilled out on the floor.

"Leave it," I command.

“They owe us after what we just did to that camel fucker,” he mutters calmly, as though I weren’t standing over some Iraqi militia corporal he just shot.

“Bullshit, drop it. Put it back. Just leave it there, let’s go.” I can’t decide which, but I’m okay with any of them, I guess.

He ignores me completely this time. The jewelry back in the box, he politely steps over the corporal—

Who’s only in shock, not dead yet—

And walks right out of what’s left of the door we freight-trained through.

None of this is happening.

None of this is happening.

I look at the door.

The quivering, hysterical mother and her girls.

Back to the door.

The decisions we make in the heat of the moment.

I come up for air after his grip on my shoulder subsides.

“You honestly think you can hide that from Grotz? That man sees everything. You think he’s gonna let you keep any of that? How far ahead have you thought?”

“Whatever’s left goes in th’pile,” Scott says.

“Whatever’s left?”

“I give a little to Grotz, he lets me keep the rest. It’s a symbiotic.”

Symbiosis, you stupid fuck.

“You seen how these people lived before. Only thing that stood between them and Saddam was—”

He smacks the side of his rifle—

“Me and this here M16. This shit is my reward for helping these people get freedom. You ain’t takin’ that away from me, son.”

My worst nightmare realized, I think.

I look up at Scott.

“Look around, you moron. You can count the freedom on one

hand. Nobody's got it better off than they did before, and now they've got rednecks stealing their shit from them."

The stock of his rifle clears my mouth with a decidedly liberating *crack*.

I keep talking through the blood pouring from my gums.

"What the fuck are you going to do about me, now? You can't pay me off and even if you could, it'd be a total bust for you—"

This time, it's my nose.

Cough.

Scott assures me calmly, "Ain't nothin' comin' outta my mouth but God's truth."

Flash back to me chasing Scott out into the dirt street, ordering him to stop as I point my nine-eleven at his back.

"We tried to resolve the conflict with the corporal but languages bein' languages and all, things escalated to a boil real fast."

I keep my pistol level at Scott, tightening my grip when he spins around to match me barrel-for-barrel.

"I couldn't take down that sand nigger before he hit you, and I feel real awful about that."

I hit the dirt hard when the bullet lodges in my shoulder.

"Real sorry."

I spit up and clear out my throat enough to talk.

"You're a piece of shit," I say. Just getting that out there in case he didn't know already.

He starts in on me again, mixing it up between boot and rifle stock, and I go back to my bunker.

Eventually, you attend their weddings. My bunker is Scott's wedding. His wife, so white trash that she had a pink tuxedo made for him so he'd match her dress. And her bridesmaids. And the flowers. And the aisle carpeting.

I think about how he called it seventeen different types of gay, and how she broke down and cried right there in front of everyone. That's you, Scott, the big redneck asshole. The first taste of the rest

of your life.

Pink.

Every shred of masculinity stripped out of you.

I think about how you were so powerless that your only choice was to make your wife cry.

I think about the pink tux that matched the flower girl's sundress.

And I can't contain myself.