

ABSTRACT

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Basic is a collection of interrelated short stories which follow Sylvia Jones' progress through Army Basic Training. The stories track Sylvia's struggle to find her place both within the Army and within the family she has left behind. Numerous physical and emotional trials force Sylvia to confront her choice to join the Army. As her understanding of her fellow soldiers deepens, she begins to understand more about who she has been and who she is becoming.

BASIC

By

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Advisory Committee:
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Preface

Dear Thesis Committee,

This is simply a letter of explanation regarding the current state of this piece, some strengths and weaknesses and how I would like to develop the story as I continue to write. I began writing this with the idea to create a series of inter-related short stories, but as I worked on them I began to see the stories taking the shape of a novel. The process I took was one of writing the scenes which seemed most important or interesting, rather than writing linearly. As a result, there are large gaps of time and events, however I feel that I have enough substance to provide you with a general shape of things to come.

One thing that I feel is working well is the way in which the narrator's consciousness moves back and forth between the present and past. Also, there are complex and promising relationships and tensions between the characters, but these need to be further developed. Part of my difficulty in discovering these relationships lies in my struggle with revealing emotion, bias and motivation. Due to the military setting, I often run into the problem of explaining complex or obscure tasks in a way that makes them understandable to the reader.

Obviously, this is just a first draft and I will continue to work on this piece in the future. I plan to write more Bedtime Stories, which will be interspersed throughout the novel. They will serve as a place in the work for character development and interaction, as well as a place to provide reflection on the events and environment. The letters to and from home, such as the two included, will be expanded into a recurring feature and will function as a counter-point to the Bedtime Stories, developing the relationship with the

parents and Patrick and providing a different view point from which to understand the narrator's experience of Army training. The letters will allow more of the outside world to infiltrate the story and reinforce the narrator's liminal position. In addition, I would like to incorporate a bit for of the highly charged political and wartime atmosphere that evolved post-9/11. At this time, I have not decided on an ending for the story, however I think that the climax the story is moving towards is a reunion at the end of Basic Training with the narrator's parents and Patrick.

I look forward to your comments and suggestions.

Anne Marie.

Dedication

For Juergen whose love, patience and constant encouragement saw me through.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	ii
Dedication	iv
Table of Contents	v
Reception	1
Shipping Out	28
Victory Tower.....	44
Bedtime Stories.....	59
A Conversation in Three Parts	69
Bedtime Stories 2.....	86
Gas Chamber.....	93
<i>Dear Dad,</i>	104
<i>Dear Mom,</i>	106
A Girl and Her Gun.....	107
The Best Story.....	112
Good Jones, Bad Jones	138
Falling Out	153
The Final Test	169
Victory Forge	177

Reception

Sometime after two in the morning, after I'd been standing outside with twenty other women for over an hour, I started to wonder why I had thought that Basic Training in January would be a good idea. I never considered that a South Carolina winter wouldn't be the same thing as Florida winter, but the cold working its way under my jacket proved me wrong. My parents ensured that I'd visited the cosmopolitan centers of Europe by the time I was eighteen, but they hadn't really bothered to show me the South beyond our home state. I'd always thought of it as one continuous region of swampy summers and excellent pies, but Fort Jackson was the most foreign place I'd ever been.

It even had its own language. When the lone, sleepy Drill Sergeant came back from marching the men to their barracks and told us to line up in front of the building that read "DFAC" in big black letters on the front. He'd disappeared into the building across the square from us, the one with the sign for "HQ 120th Reception BN" and hadn't come out again. The mood was quickly disintegrating from anticipation to restlessness. I'd expected a raging hoard of Drill Sergeants to meet us as soon as I stepped off the bus, but instead we'd been abandoned.

“Will someone tell me why the fuck we’re standing out here again?” Asked a girl further back in line. I was glad someone finally had the guts to say what we were all thinking.

The Drill Sergeant had placed a black woman, April Walker, in charge of our unfortunate group by virtue of the fact that some years ago she’d been in the Army, had gotten out, and now decided she wanted back in. She looked about thirty, which was old compared to the rest of us. At twenty I was pushing the upper limit of the median age. “I told you,” she said like a weary mother, “the person with the keys to the barracks went home.”

“Why can’t we go back into that room where we were and wait there?” The tall red-head in front of me said. When she turned to look at April the floodlights lights shining up on the flagpole in the middle of the square made her freckles look black against her pale skin.

“Because the Drill Sergeant told us to wait here,” April said. There was an edge in her voice, like she was trying to put on a strong front, but beneath it she was worried that we might mutiny. Shortly after the Drill Sergeant left us, someone had complimented her blue wool trench coat. She said that she knew it was going to be a long, cold night and had dressed appropriately, implying that the rest of us were somehow at fault because we hadn’t been prepared to spend a winter night standing outside. That hadn’t won her any loyalty.

The woman in front of me grunted and turned away. I’d been studying her hair for the better part of the last hour, specifically the middle section of her braid, since she was nearly a head taller than me. Her long red hair had immediately reminded

me of my favorite childhood heroine, Anne of Green Gables. Where her hair caught the light I could see strands of gold and brown mixed with the red, like an artists' pallet prepared to paint an autumn scene. Her hair was the only beautiful thing I'd seen here so far. It was like the Army was at pains to make everything ugly. I hadn't seen much to judge by, just an empty parking lot, fields of cement and the two low-slung Soviet style buildings on either side of us, but I wasn't expecting things to improve.

Even its people were ugly. I'd only met a handful so far, but with each one I felt worse about enlisting. My used-car-salesman of a recruiter was the least offensive, a middle aged man with a blonde buzz cut. He read my determination not to rely on my dad's money and laid out the bait of a National Guard contract with free college tuition and an eight thousand dollar bonus. Then there was the nurse at the MEPS, Military Entrance Processing Station, down in Tampa who was pushing fifty and still trying to pour herself into the same short white dress she'd worn twenty years ago. Worse, she seemed to take delight in making soon-to-be recruits pass out during the blood drawn. From MEPS I was passed off to a van driver who chauffeured fourteen of us from Tampa to Fort Jackson. He weighed three hundred pounds, wore a blindingly bright Hawaiian shirt and alternated between muttering to himself and dozing off at the wheel. The lone Drill Sergeant I'd seen didn't seem to have five words to his vocabulary. Finally, there was April Walker. I'd already decided that after her first time in the Army, she'd failed at whatever career she'd attempted and had to come back like a repentant child. I was pretty worried that I'd fallen in with a bunch of idiots.

For the tenth time that night the wind blew hard and picked up the long red braid of the woman standing in front of me and threw it back in my face. “Sorry,” she said, and pulled her braid over her shoulder. But since we were supposed to be at Parade Rest, with our hands clasped behind our backs there was nothing she could do to keep her hair to herself.

After my mom read me *Anne of Green Gables* for the first time, I begged her to let me dye my hair. After months of talking about it she finally consented to a henna wash, which didn't change my brown hair to red, but gave it an auburn sheen in the sun. My dad had been furious at the minor cosmetic enhancement of my God-given features. He didn't even approve of me playing dress up with Mom's one tube of lipstick. Thinking about my mom, even my dad, made my eyes start to water and it was too dangerous to cry right now. Crying would be like opening a crack in the Hoover dam. My parents, my little brother Mike, my boyfriend Patrick and all the friends I'd left behind at college saw around in the reservoir on the other side and if I thought about any one of them too much they'd all come pouring out and drown me.

“Hey, Walker,” the red-head in front of me said, flagging her down with a wave of her hand. April, because she was in charge, had decided that she had free reign to walk up and down our line. Walker came over, half her face covered by the up-turned collar of her coat. “I need to use the bathroom,” Red said.

“Latrine,” Walker corrected. “Take a buddy.” She pointed back across the concrete square to the Reception building. The cold had somehow made me forget, but as soon as Red said something I was ready to pee my pants so I tapped her

shoulder to let her know that I'd go too. "And don't be long, ten minutes tops. And run. You should always run."

Next to me Red rolled her eyes and set out at a slow jog. "What are we, five?" She snorted once we were out of hearing distance from the others. "Next thing you know she'll order us to hold hands."

I wanted to tell her that two women holding hands might violate the Army's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, but my jaw so sore from my teeth chattering that I couldn't talk.

As we crossed the square, I realized that it was actually a very long, wide cement path. You could easily march fifty people abreast up it. It dead-ended a couple hundred yards to the left in a horseshoe of four-story brick buildings which looked like a cross between dorm rooms and jail houses. When the Drill Sergeant had split us into males and females he'd sent the males in that direction, so I figured those buildings were the barracks. To the right, the path was lined with buildings, all long, low and made of red brick, which failed to make them attractive.

The building that Red and I were running towards was the first and only one I'd been inside of since the van driver had dropped us Florida recruits in an unlit parking lot and sped off. Five minutes later the Drill Sergeant found us milling around the flag pole, lost and too scared to try the doors of any of the buildings. Over the doors to the building he led us into were foot high black letters that read "Welcome to the United States Army." Then, the last thing I felt was welcomed. Now, two hours later and frozen through, passing through the doors of that building and into the heated lobby was like a homecoming.

Red led the way. It was dark and silent inside, but I didn't trust that the Drill Sergeant wasn't lurking around somewhere. The dimly lit interior reminded me of the administrative offices at my high school: all the surfaces were hard and washable. We hurried by a wall that displayed pictures of all the Presidents. On the bottom row, last picture, President Bush smiled at me like we'd just run into each other and he couldn't recall my name. I wondered what would happen when they ran out of space on this wall. Would they just chuck out the oldest Presidents first or maybe start with the non-wartime Presidents?

We passed by the door to the room we'd all been in together, but it was closed. That was where the Drill Sergeant had brought the fourteen of us to join another eighty people who were sitting on the floor, Indian-style. They had the dazed looks of people who had been doing nothing for hours. Once our Florida group was seated, the Drill Sergeant showed an introductory video that told us all the things we could expect to do in our week at Reception: haircuts for the men, uniform issue, medical screening, immunizations, physical fitness test. It wasn't really Basic Training, just the place where we waited for Basic to start.

"Here it is," Red said.

The bathroom looked like any office building women's room; it was so normal that for a moment I thought I might cry with relief. I hurried into a stall so Red wouldn't see me getting teary-eyed over pink tile, soap dispensers and hand dryers. Even though I made a point of never sitting on a public toilet seat, my legs were shaking too hard to hover. The seat felt warmer than my frozen skin. In the stall next to mine, the heels of her white sneakers bounced rapidly, making a faint

drumming sound that kept time with the jittering feeling in my stomach. The air around me had the heavy, still feeling of being in an abandoned place, like the library on a Saturday at midnight.

“You alive over there?”

Even though I knew the two of us were alone, it didn't feel right to talk. I envisioned a Drill Sergeant standing outside the bathroom with his ear pressed to the door, hoping to catch us breaking our vows of silence. One thing I'd learned back at the Military Entrance Processing Station from those squinty-eyed nurses was that in the Military you didn't speak, ever, unless you were asked a direct question. To be fair, the redhead had asked a direct question, but she was just a recruit like me.

“I think they've all gone home,” she said

The toilet paper dispenser rattled on her side and then she flushed. I zipped up my jeans, moving as slowly as I dared. The bathroom was so warm and I was like molasses that someone had put in the refrigerator. Her bright blue eyes watched me in the mirror as I came out of the stall. She had a jaw that protruded like a girder jutting off an unfinished building. I could hear my mother's voice, admonishing me for always seeing the flaws first. She could find something beautiful in an eighty year old crack whore, even if it was just the cottony softness of her few remained clumps of hair. Flushed with staring, I bent my head over the sink. The pink soap smelled like dead flowers, but the red knob on the skin produced hot water and I would have willingly spent the rest of the night lathering the dead flower soap on my hands just to keep my fingers warm.

Red was taking her time at the sink too, chaffing her hands under the hot water. I didn't want to get in trouble my first night of basic training and I wasn't sure exactly how much power April Walker had over us, if she could punish us herself or if she was the kind of person who'd rat us out to the Drill Sergeants. "Walker told us to hurry," I said.

She gave me a look that dared me to move first. "You want to go back out there?"

"Of course not," I said. We been gone about ten minutes and now that Red had opened up the possibility, there'd be other women wanting to use the latrine.

Red looked at her watch and sighed. "Fine, let's go," she said, sounding a little annoyed, and elbowed the bathroom door open. I had to walk fast to keep up with her long strides. I wasn't short; it was just that she was nearly six feet tall.

We emerged from the office building into the brightness of an artificially lit night. A huge American flag waved and snapped in the middle of the large concrete square, illuminated by a cluster of spotlights at its base. It was like a perverse imitation of a college quad where everything green had been uprooted and paved over. The empty spot Red and I had left in the middle of the line of shivering women stood out like a missing tooth and we slipped back in. The wind sucked the bathroom warmth right out through the holes in my tennis shoes. At least with the tall red head in front of me I had something of a windbreak. Everyday miracles, my mother would have said.

A miracle would have been the Drill Sergeant coming back and telling us to go inside. I wouldn't have cared if he made us watch the stupid introductory video on

all night long. The tape was starting to lose its color and the narrator's voice sounded like he was speaking into a garbage can, but right now it seemed like fine entertainment compared to the prospect of studying a braid of hair for another three or four hours.

After the video the Drill Sergeant had lined us up with our bags and we went one by one through a small room with two doors and a slot in the wall. My bag hung slack against my knees, nearly empty except for the things on the packing list the recruiter had given me: underwear, bras, socks, toiletries, shower shoes. I also had a supply of pens and paper and my mother had laminated a card for me at the library where she worked that had the addresses and phone numbers of the few people that mattered: Mom, Dad, Patrick, and the recruiter. Inside the little room, a chart on the wall displayed contraband items. Weapons, drugs and pornography were prohibited, of course, but also cell phones, food, books— except religious ones— vitamins and contact lenses. The stuff had to go through the hole in the wall, so no one could come behind you and pluck your brass knuckles out of the trash for themselves. I had an unopened roll of strawberry Mentos, my favorite candy, which Patrick had given me for the trip, but I'd been too queasy from the driver's swerving to eat them. I thought about tearing it open and shoving a few of them in my mouth. It would be over two months before I could have strawberry Mentos again, but I was too scared that I'd get caught and threw the whole package away.

The wind blew hard and I started shivering again, the last of the bathroom warmth leaving me. I tried to think about Florida, about heat. And that made me think about Patrick. He was only my sometimes boyfriend. Sometimes I thought I

loved him; sometimes we fought so much that it wasn't even worth the great sex that got us through the smaller dramas. I'd never been in love before, so I couldn't say for sure what it was we had when we were together, love or want.

When Patrick had pulled into the parking lot of the Military Processing Station this morning— no, yesterday, since the clock had rolled past midnight— and shut the car off, the air was instantly stifling. The windows fogged up well before he strained across the center console to kiss me goodbye. My sweaty hands slipped from his at the end, when a man in uniform stepped out of the Station and called all the recruits to line up. I hadn't even looked back when I walked away. I wanted to hold on to the feeling of moving forward. I knew if I saw him get in the car and drive off that I'd feel left behind and then I'd second guess this whole thing. Since there was no way out at this point, that meant I'd spend the next ten weeks tearing myself up with doubt. I needed complete confidence in my choice to see me through.

As I walked towards the double glass doors, I noticed that the families were crying more than the recruits, who, like me, seemed to sense that tears were a trap. I marched straight up to the man in uniform sitting behind the front desk, signed his clipboard and took my nametag sticker: Jones, Sylvia A. Army National Guard.

The smell of simmering grease floated out of the chow hall and my stomach crumpled up and groaned with hunger. The red head in front of me giggled under her breath. The sun was coming up, but the watery pink light didn't give off any heat. From behind us, came the tromp of feet marching out of step and some other women appeared, rumped with sleep. They looked miserable, shivering in their jeans and coats. But they didn't really know what it meant to be miserable; they'd spent the

night inside. I wondered how we looked to them, hunched and blue and broken down by the constant night wind.

“How come they get to stay in the barracks? It’s not fair,” whined a voice directly behind me, loud enough to make sure that everyone heard her. Other voices rose in agreement like the growls of dogs warning away unwanted guests. I wanted to turn and look at the source of the complaint, because I couldn’t remember what she looked like, even though I was sure I’d seen her coming back from the bathroom. She had a faintly Southern accent.

Walker moved up and down our line, holding us in check. “They probably got here earlier yesterday, is all,” she said. This time yesterday I’d already kissed Patrick goodbye. I’d been in the Army for over twenty-four hours now.

Heavier feet sounded on the concrete and a large group of guys marched up, cheeks flushed from hot showers or the winter air, I couldn’t tell. I looked over my shoulder to see if I could recognize any of them from last night, but even the faces I’d spent eight hours on the van with were a blur. They looked like any group of guys rounded up from a street corner, guys that I walked past every day and never noticed. All races, all sizes, some in Wranglers so tight I could see the outline of their nuts, others in baggy pants ready to fall off their hips. They still had their individual swagger in their walks, they had their hair. It hadn’t really started yet.

There was a noise at the front of the line and I thought it was a shout to signal that the doors to the DFAC were finally being opened. Peeking out from behind Red, I saw that another group had marched up from the opposite direction of the barracks and cut in front of us in line. Unlike us they wore grey sweat suits with “Army”

printed across the chest and down the legs. Some of them were limping, others were on crutches or had their arms in slings. They didn't look right or left, as if they'd seen all this before and none of it interested them. They looked worse than those of us who'd been standing out in the cold all night, which was probably why no one put up a huge fuss. That and they had uniforms, which somehow made them seem more important.

“Who're they?” Red asked Walker.

“Broke dicks,” Walker said, keeping her voice down. “You get hurt during Basic, they send you back here until you're better then start you all over again.”

“They don't even get to go home?” Red asked and Walker shook her head.

This was no place to get better. You could see from their faces how being here was grinding them down. Fear rose in me suddenly like a soap bubble as I imagined the thousands of ways a person could injure themselves in Basic Training. Nine weeks the recruiter said, ten if you counted the week we'd spend here at Reception. I could handle ten weeks, but the thought of being stuck in this limbo indefinitely was terrifying.

The doors to the DFAC opened just then and the fear floated away, replaced by hunger. As we filed inside, the smell of food engulfed me and my stomach tightened like a screw in the middle of my body, sending stabs of pain through me. The last time I'd eaten a full meal was two days ago, when mom had taken me to Olive Garden for my last supper. I was grateful that she didn't take offense to the fact that I'd rather eat mass produced lasagna than anything she attempted to cook.

A male Drill Sergeant walked into our midst and everything went silent. I couldn't tell if he was the one from last night, the sameness of the haircuts and camouflage uniforms made it hard to tell the difference. He roamed around the inside of the cafeteria, occasionally shouting at people to shut up and eat, sometimes pacing up and down the length of our line as it inched forward. Any moment I knew he'd turn into a rabid dog and tear some recruit apart, but he never got much worse than a hall monitor.

The DFAC proved a good place to look around. Because of the way the line snaked, I could see a lot of people without turning my head very much. Last night I'd been too overwhelmed to pay attention to the other recruits, other than to notice how young most of them were. Eighty percent looked eighteen and not long out of high school. I was especially curious to get another look at the guys, if for no other reason than I'd been surrounded by girls all night. My college roommate, Alise, had rented Officer and a Gentleman my last night at school and invited all our friends to cram into our dorm to watch. From the brief glimpse I'd seen of the guys, there weren't any young Richard Gere's in the bunch.

"I could eat pound of eggs," Red muttered.

I thought she was talking to me, but wasn't sure. "I could eat a whole pig," I said. The smell of bacon was all around us.

"I bet they don't have soy bacon here," she said. Then added, "I'm vegetarian."

The Drill Sergeant wandered back towards us, cutting off the conversation. I wondered if there were any other vegetarians in our group. Seemed the type of

people who couldn't stand to see an animal slaughtered for food certainly wouldn't be able to stomach the idea of killing humans for politics. When I enlisted in April of 2001, the recruiter assured me that the most action the unit had ever seen was during Hurricane Andrew. I could picture myself handing out food and water to distraught but grateful citizens. December 4, 2001, a month before I left for Basic Training, the news reported the first three casualties of the War on Terror. They were killed by a US bomb. At least something useful came out of the animal carcasses. I was close enough now to the food that I could actually see the steaming piles of sausage links. Thinking about the three dead soldiers hadn't dulled my appetite.

“You will be fed three meals a day,” the sudden boom of the Drill Sergeant's voice made me jump. He sounded like he was shouting in my ear, but he was in the middle of the room, laying down the ten commandments of the DFAC. “You will not take food from this dining facility. If you find that you are hungry between meals, that means you need to eat more at meal time. If you are talking, then you are done eating.”

I was used to nibbling my way through the day. A cup of yogurt in the morning, coffee during my morning class, ramen noodles for lunch, banana during my afternoon class, salad and a pint of ice cream for dinner, a diet coke to wash it all down. I hadn't eaten three square meals a day since middle school. My stomach sent a terrifying pang of hunger through me at the thought of not having immediate access to food, at the thought of no refrigerator, only this serving line three times a day for the next ten weeks. I'd survived many summer camps where we weren't allowed food in our cabins because of the ants and roaches, but this felt more like prison.

Still, I couldn't help but feel relief when it was my turn to grab a damp tray and have it heaped high with eggs, bacon, a biscuit with some sort of unfamiliar white gravy and oatmeal. At the end of the line there were individual boxes of cereal, cartons of milk and juice, dishes of sliced melon, whole apples and oranges and a basket full of Nutrigrain bars. It was more variety than I'd expected. Patrick's dad, an ex-Marine, had told me horror stories about the mystery gruel they used to feed him and I'd been prepared for the worst.

Turning towards the rows of tables, I stopped short. I remembered the first day of college orientation when Alise had walked right up to a group of Freshmen to introduce herself. If she hadn't dragged me with her, I probably would have stood on the fringes of the room all day, watching. I walked to the nearest empty table and sat down, afraid that if I stood still too long I'd draw attention from the Drill Sergeants. A moment later Red sat across from me without asking, which relieved the awkward feeling of being alone in a new place.

"What's your name?" She asked.

"Sylvia," I said. Then, remembering that soldiers went by their last names added, "Jones."

"After Plath?"

"Yeah," I said. "My mom really loves her poetry. I guess she wasn't thinking about the fact that the woman stuck her head in an oven." That was one of the few funny lines I kept on hand. Since meeting new people was unavoidable, I'd discovered that having a little arsenal of pre-packaged phrases helped me not to stutter and stumble like a retard.

Red laughed. “Rachel Woods,” she said between mouthfuls of scrambled eggs, even though I’d forgotten to ask.

“I thought you looked like an Anne. You know, like Anne of Green Gables?”

Woods turned her eyes up and sighed and I regretted saying anything because that comparison had clearly been made a thousand times and she was sick of it.

These kinds of mistakes tended to happen when I deviated from my script. “Just don’t call me ‘Carrots’ or I’ll have to break my slate over your head,” she said, and smiled, which made everything all right again.

“At ease the noise!” The Drill Sergeant shouted.

Woods and I blinked at each other and grinned at the odd phrase. I vaguely understood that “at ease” was one of those positions you stood at, like “attention” or “parade rest.”

“Uncross your legs!” The Drill Sergeant was closer now. Not yelling at me, but I uncrossed my legs anyways. “Put both feet on the floor. You’re not a lady, you’re a female soldier.”

Without being told to, I chewed and swallowed with a sense of urgency, worried that at any moment the Drill Sergeant might tell us that breakfast was over. Woods had nearly cleaned her tray, except for two Nutrigrain bars in bright green foil packages. She winked at me, and slipped one of them under the table.

“You want the other one?” My heart thumped faster and I shook my head silently at her and glanced over at the big sign on the wall that said in red letters, “Do Not Remove Food from the Dining Facility.” She looked at the sign too and then made a face like she had in the bathroom, when I said that we should leave. The

second package disappeared under the table. “I’ll hold onto it for you. You’re going to want it later.” She got up and took her tray to the conveyor belt and I held my breath, but she walked right by the Drill Sergeant and he never said a thing.

The day was very long and we spent all of it in a large auditorium, which they called a Chapel. There were no crosses or stained glass. Instead, hanging on the walls were the flags of each state, most of which I didn’t recognize. While the Drill Sergeants laid down some rules of conduct— no food or drink, no sleeping, no talking— I searched for Florida’s flag, but couldn’t find it.

I finally had all the opportunity I wanted to look at the people I’d cast my lot with, but I found that after five minutes in the warm, recycled air that I had to focus all my effort on staying awake. As we signed form after form my pen would sometimes run right off the edge of the paper and leave a black line on the surface of the little desk sprouting out of the armrest of my chair. I didn’t bother to read beyond the title of each form, blindly scanning down for the blank signature line.

I couldn’t sit by Rachel Woods because they made us sit alphabetically which placed me next to the whining girl, who’d managed to end up behind me in last night’s line, but was actually one step ahead of me in the alphabet. Her name was Stephanie Jones. S. Jones, just like me. Only I was too tired to take much interest in the fact, other than to peek at one of her forms and learn that she came from Louisiana, hence the accent.

Whenever too many heads started to nod, which was about every five minutes or so, one of the Drill Sergeants, of which there were two now, both male, would

make us stand up and clap our arms up and down above our heads. Despite looking ridiculous, by the time I got to about fifty I could hardly believe I'd grown such monstrously heavy appendages.

That day I learned that we were no longer boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen; we were now males and females, like the subjects of a wildlife documentary. Up to then, I'd been aware that I was in a strange place, but for the first time I began to feel different, like a Private. Something about being called "female" made it harder to pretend that I was still the same Sylvia, harder to ignore the fact that I was now Private Jones. Private Jones who could not clap her hands over her head more than fifty times without breaking a sweat. But at least I was not the other Private Jones, Private Stephanie Jones who gave up every time at twenty five before her cheeks were even flushed.

We were let into the barracks for the first time at eight o'clock that night. The inside of the barracks reminded me grimly of the pictures I'd seen of concentration camps. A long, bare room with too many bunk beds placed too close together. The small windows were covered with metal mesh screens on the inside so we couldn't open them. Yet I'd never been more grateful to see a bed, even one that looked like it might be harboring small creatures with more than four legs. Woods managed to find me as we claimed bunks and smiled at me like an old friend.

"Want to share one?" She asked. I nodded. Knowing one stranger a little better than all the other strangers around us was a comfort at the end of a long day. Woods took the top and I unfolded the white sheets we'd been issued, which smelled

strongly of bleach. Both sheets were flat and I did an ugly job of tucking one in around the graying mattress. My mom had never forced me to make my bed. The pillow on the bed was flat as a book and when I slipped the case over it I could feel that there were real feathers inside, crushed by the weight of so many weary heads.

“One hour until lights out,” Walker called down the length of the room.

“Don’t even think about sneaking out to use the phones.”

There were three payphones just outside the door of the barracks. Walker had warned us about the phones on the way in, but one female had cussed Walker out and put some quarters into the phone anyway. The amount of swearing some of the other Privates used in casual conversation made me feel like I was part of a Jerry Springer casting call. I’d gone upstairs before I could see what happened, if the girl had managed to get a call off or if a Drill Sergeant had caught her.

A female Drill Sergeant, the first I’d seen, appeared after dinner to take us to the barracks. She was a thin with skin the color of coffee beans and her eyes were always jumping around like she couldn’t wait for someone to screw up. She kept us in silence while we got our blankets and sheets issued, which took more than an hour. Everything here seemed to go at half normal speed.

She had promised that we’d get a five minute phone call in our first seventy-two hours here. I didn’t mind waiting for the call. Between signing my names on dozens of forms and fighting sleep I’d thought a little about who I’d call first, but I still hadn’t decided. Patrick was the obvious choice, since he could let both my parents know he’d heard from me. But he’d never been comfortable around my parents, even before the divorce. And since I’d told Patrick that my dad was gay he

couldn't even speak to him without stammering and turning red. If I called mom's house I could trust Mike, my ten year old brother, to make the obligatory call to dad. I hated to put him between my parents; he was always the one in the middle, since I was away at college. When I tried to talk to him about the divorce he turned up his headphones or the television and if I persisted he went to his room and locked the door. My dad kept saying he'd "come around," but I wasn't sure at all. Divorce was one thing, barely any of Mike's friends had parents that were still married. But gay to a ten year old boy was synonymous with all things lame and reprehensible. I wasn't sure that Mike, at ten, could separate the meaning he'd learned from his friends from our dad's sexual orientation. Or maybe he was just upset enough that he didn't want to.

"You alright?" Woods said, touching my shoulder.

I realized that I'd been sitting on my half-made bunk, staring at the row of bunks across from me. "Fine, just tired."

"Bed time snack?" Woods patted the pocket of her jacket. I could just make out the sound of crinkling foil wrappers. Even though we'd eaten dinner just two hours ago, the thought of a snack made the saliva pool under my tongue. I nodded agreement.

We gathered our shower stuff and headed for the bathroom. Inside, it smelled like mold and perfumed body wash. The cement floor was painted milk chocolate and the tiles on the walls were dirty white edged in mildew greens and grays. The toilet stalls were hung with shower curtains instead of doors. The showers were in one large room with shower heads protruding from the wall. Already the air was

steamy and a swarm of voices echoed from the shower room, complete strangers chatting each other up despite their nakedness. We hadn't been allowed to speak all day.

I went into one toilet stall, taking care to lay a double layer of toilet paper down over the seat. Before I could even sit down to pee, a hand thrust itself under the wall, green foil glinting in the dim light. The shower curtain doors left wide gaps on the sides, but no one was looking. I took the cereal bar. The foil made about the same noise as peeling open a tampon. Next to me, I heard Woods unwrapping hers and then eating with soft sounds of delight. I downed mine in three bites, balled up the wrapper in some toilet paper and shoved it into the sanitary napkin disposal box. Woods was right. My stomach would have kept me up all night without the snack. It was a little bit disconcerting to find someone so close to my own age who, like my mom, seemed to know what I was going to need long before I did.

Through the gap in the shower curtain I saw Woods move into the changing area and strip. I took my clothes off inside the bathroom stall and emerged wrapped in the fluffy pink bath sheet I'd brought from home, which reached down past my knees. It was awkward, waiting for the shower, surrounded by women in various states of undress. There was no safe place to put your eyes except the floor. Woods didn't seem bothered in the slightest, looking around at everyone, her eyes bright as a bird's.

“So what do you do back home?” She asked me.

“I'm a college student.”

“What's your major?”

“Art history,” I said and waited for her to make a face that said I was a huge dork. It had been fine art, at first, until my Professor convinced me that I was pretty talentless. When I told my mom half way through the first semester that I was changing majors she told me not to give up on my dreams at the first set-back. My dad said I was making a sensible choice, that too many artists ended up as waitresses, but with Art History I could be a college professor or a museum curator, practical, steady jobs. Woods didn’t react at all, like Art History was a perfectly normal thing to study. “What about you?” I asked.

“I just graduated from law school,” she said.

Stunned, I felt my mouth working on empty air. “What the heck are you doing here?” I couldn’t imagine why someone with law school under her belt would pass up a lawyer’s salary to join the Army. It made me like her more, knowing that she was highly educated. It also made me feel less self-conscious about being surrounded by a bunch of women, who, as far as I could tell from the way they talked and what they talked about, probably hadn’t progressed beyond high school.

She shrugged. “Lots of reasons. I went into law but I was also really interested in medicine. So this way I can be a medic for a couple years. I mean, it’s not the same as being a doctor, but it’s something. And in the mean time the Army will pay back my student loans, so when I get out I won’t have to pick my firm based on income. I’d like to be a public defender.”

I just nodded, unable to think with her voice buzzing in my ears. Her answer sounded so well reasoned, so logical. I hoped she didn’t ask me why I was here; I wasn’t sure what I’d say. Now that I knew she was a lawyer I was afraid she’d

question to death the pat money-for-college explanation that I'd worked up to avoid telling people the ugly story of how things had fallen out with my father.

Some space cleared out in the shower and we moved in. I faced the wall and fumbled with the knobs until the water shot out in three thin, hot steams. There were two females in between us, but that didn't keep Woods from shouting over their conversation at me. Stephanie Jones, one of the two, shot Woods a dirty look as her Southern accent got swallowed up by Woods' louder voice, which leapt right over the tops of their heads.

"What's your MOS?" It was one of the first army acronyms I'd learned at the recruiter's office. Military occupational specialty. What you wanted to be when you grew up in the Army.

"Intelligence Analyst," I said as I washed two days worth of sweat from my underarms. It didn't feel right to wash anywhere intimate while exchanging casual banter.

"Awesome, so you're going to be a spy?"

It got suddenly quiet in the shower room as the other women waited for my answer. Two distinct sounds filled the void left by their voices, water hitting skin and water landing on tile. And even though I was still facing the wall I could feel them looking at me. "Um, not really," I said, and they went back to their own discussions.

I'd thought that too at first, that I'd get to be a spy. When the recruiter mentioned that there was an opening in the unit in Sarasota for an intelligence analyst, I saw visions of meetings in smoky third world bars, tense men huddled over instrument panels in underground bunkers and elegant fountain pens that actually

contained recording devices. The video he played for me about being an intelligence analyst showed people drawing strange symbols on maps, studying complex diagrams, giving briefings, working on computers. It was nothing like I thought, but it was better than his other offerings: mechanic, cook, clerk-typist and chaplain's assistant. My dad would have been thrilled if I'd picked chaplain's assistant, all those years of Sunday school finally paying off.

“Well, at least it sounds cool,” Woods said.

I turned my head towards her to ask how many weeks long her medic school would be, but I looked at her without meaning to and trailed off into embarrassed silence. She stood facing the center of the room, her head thrown back as she lathered her hair. Her nipples were tiny and pink at the tips of her full breasts. Her pubic hair was shaved into a red arrowhead pointing down towards her groin. Once I saw her, my eyes went to the next girl, Stephanie Jones. She was shorter than me and chunky with the kind of smallish, pointy breasts and luminous white skin that made me think of Eighteenth Century odalisques. The rest of the room was split between women hovering as close as they dared to the slimy wall, like me, and those who didn't care. Of the ones facing out I noticed that most of them had shaved off all their pubic hair. Patrick said it made it easier to go down on me when I shaved, but here it just seemed excessive, obscene. I ran the washcloth over my own beasts, suddenly aware that I had the flattest chest of those I could see. But then I was thinner too, and the lack of jiggling cellulite on my thighs gave me some small reassurance.

The next moment I felt bad for thinking that way. I wanted to believe my Mom, who believed I could and should find beauty in all women. But there were

moments when I caught another girl flirting with Patrick and automatically began to make a silent list of her flaws. Maybe the other girls in the shower were doing the same thing. Noticing my boyish hips, the way my veins showed through my pale skin, my large nose, the puckered mouth that always made me look a little displeased.

Feeling their eyes on me, I quickly washed the last of the soap from my face and turned the water off. The cold hit me as soon as I stepped out of the shower and not even the generous length of my bath sheet could keep it off. The chill of water evaporating from my hair made my scalp crawl. I wished for a hair dryer, but it had been on the contraband items list, so I hadn't packed one. A girl with long black hair bent her head under the hand dryer, but it only gave out a weak steam of tepid air that barely rustled her wet curls. I wrapped my head in a hand-towel and hoped I wouldn't catch a cold. The heat in the building didn't seem to be working well enough to maintain a comfortable temperature.

It was past lights out, but I managed to find my way to my bunk by the light filtering in from the bathroom. Groping in the dark, I pulled my pajamas from my bag. A dull ache throbbed through my body as I fell into bed. I'd never in my life been so tired that it hurt. The mattress was worn and lumpy and the one thin sheet between me and the green wool blanket I'd been issued did little to keep it from scratching the back of my neck. Still, it was a relief to be curled on my side, the blanket cocooned around me. I felt limp and wrung out, hollow. The darkness became populated as I lay there, filled with the sounds of bed springs creaking, the hiss of the showers, the sound of twenty women trying to find sleep.

The enormity of what I'd done crashed over me all at once. I'd always known that this wasn't really just a matter of giving up ten weeks, but I hadn't felt any sense of loss until now. Even saying my goodbyes I'd managed to put off thinking about the family dinners I'd miss, the stories my college friends would tell that I'd never be a part of, the songs that would be old by the time I first heard them. Mike would grow taller, graduate from elementary school. My classmates would start and finish another semester and eventually graduate ahead of me, leaving no one to celebrate my last weeks of college with.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the light of the moon shining through the barred windows. Behind my clenched eyelids, I saw my signature on my enlistment contract flowing from the pen in my hand like an unbreakable chain. I was bound to this place, this moment that would stretch on for the next ten weeks while outside the gates of Fort Jackson people wore and ate what they wanted, went to bed when they wanted. Loneliness crawled up my throat, swelled in my mouth and I hugged my knees to my chest. The night noises broke over me like cold waves. I was drowning in a sea of strangers, of strangeness.

I heard Woods rifling through her duffle bag as I hung on the edge of panic.

“Was I right?” She asked. “About the snack?”

It took a moment for her words to reach me, like sunlight filtering through murky water. I surfaced and drew a shuddering breath. “Yes, thank you.”

She looked down at me and in the dim light her eyes shone like twin light houses. “You're welcome.”

She climbed into the bunk above me. The old springs over my head creaked and a few flakes of rust fell gently on my face. Her weight, her presence, washed over me like a night light and despair receded until I could breathe again. Beyond our bunk, I could hear the muffled sobs of another lost woman crying into her pillow while I found sleep.

Shipping Out

When we woke up on the seventh day of Reception and were told to pack up our things, we knew that this was it. Shipping out. Woods hummed as she divided her things between the green Army duffle bag we'd been issued and the black bag she'd brought from home. My fingers felt like brittle twigs and I dropped half the things I picked up. Because our hair couldn't hang down past our collars, Woods now coiled her long red braid into a bun, which looked pretty enough to wear to a wedding. My attempt at a bun looked like a squirrel's nest and every time I passed the female Drill Sergeant she yelled at me to fix my hair.

"I can't wait for a good smoking," Woods said. "I think I've gained five pounds this week, doing nothing but eating and waiting in lines." She had a way of speaking loudly to no one in particular and someone always responded.

"You're going to eat your words by the end of the day," Walker said, "when you hurt so bad you can't even sit down to pee."

"Anything is better than this," Woods said.

I might slit my wrists from boredom if I had to stay here another day, so I had to agree with Woods.

The morning was bright blue and the cold went through our new camouflage BDUs much faster than through the sweat suits we'd been wearing for the last week. The line for breakfast felt like wading through hip high water, which may have been due in part to the new, thick soled combat boots. Woods looked like her name, all green and brown with a splash of red hair sticking out from under her patrol cap. When I'd put mine on for the first time that morning I noticed that I'd been issued size medium, which hung off me like drapes. I had to cinch my belt so tight that the waist of my pants was ruffled all the way around. The woman who'd issued our BDUs stood behind a counter, looked me up and down, asked my height and then handed me a stack of clothes. I wondered if my blue winter coat had made me look big or if she knew something, like I'd need room to grow.

After breakfast, the Tiananmen Square between the horse shoe of barracks was bursting with recruits. The Drill Sergeants arranged us in huge formations, two male groups and one female. Our neat rows and columns made me think of a chess board. My dad had tried on several occasions to teach me chess so he'd have someone to play with, but I could never quite grasp the rules and always gave up about ten minutes into a game.

I'd never realized how many of us there were. I thought the first day when we sat together in the big auditorium, that I was seeing the whole group. They must have had us filling out paperwork in at least two shifts. It made me feel suddenly small, like I might blow away on the next breeze and no one would notice. Counting the males, there were close to a thousand of us, all in camouflage, and we looked like an Army already.

Each of us had our duffle bag and our civilian bag on the ground in front of us. A couple Drills prowled up and down the line, making sure that when “undershirts, brown, eight” was called out, we held up our eight brown shirts. It dragged on for hours after breakfast, one girl had only been issued five pairs of socks, another one had already managed to lose one of her boots.

Marching back from lunch we saw the busses parked along the side of the barracks. Old white school busses with blue lines painted down the sides, the kind that they used for prisoner transport down in Florida. My stomach fell to the ground and flopped like a dying fish. It was finally starting. A flurry of whispers competed with Walker’s cadence calls and we all started to march out of step, straining to see if there were new Drill Sergeants waiting for us. Woods was behind me and I had to turn and look at her because once we got down to the busses I might never see her again. If I could just manage to hang onto her, then I was pretty sure I could make it through whatever was going to happen next. Woods was smiling. For once, her confidence didn’t make me feel better, it just made me feel like she didn’t care. Maybe she didn’t, we’d only known each other for a week. I just happened to be the girl that she’d started talking to first and maybe that was all there was to us.

“Hey, hey shark attack,” Walker changed to a new cadence.

“Hey, hey shark attack,” we echoed her.

“Drill Sergeants comin’ like a heart attack.”

“Dill Sergeants comin’ like a heart attack.”

Behind me, Woods broke the cadence and said what I was thinking. “What’s a shark attack?” She often voiced what I was curious about, which saved me from

wondering all day. I didn't like asking too many questions because it meant drawing attention to myself, which was dangerous, especially with the Drill Sergeants, who might drop you just for offering yourself up as a target. Woods never seemed worried, though.

"You'll find out soon enough," Walker said. Whenever she had the smallest nugget of information she would hold it over us like a Drill Sergeant. Information was our one comfort, knowing what we'd be doing the next day, even the next hour. Just then, a ship deck would have felt more stable than the concrete pitching under my boots.

"Whatever," Woods muttered, unshaken.

The female Drill Sergeant came out of the barracks and called out a long list of names. The names she called were those of the females had arrived the day before me. They lived in a different bay from the one that Walker was in charge of. There were two other groups who had arrived before our late night Monday crowd. Because we were divided by arrival time, Woods went with me when we were instructed to join a group of males going to Alpha Company and line our bags up behind theirs.

"Think we'll be together still?" I asked as she set her bag down next to mine in the Alpha Company line.

"Who knows," she said. I was a little stung that she didn't seem to care whether or not we ended up together. She was the closest thing to a friend I'd made here. It just confirmed my thought that maybe she'd just stuck with me out of convenience, rather than any real sense of kinship. My relief at having Woods next to

me suddenly turned to fear. It was scary enough wondering what was coming next, but worse worrying about having to face it alone.

“Listen for your name and move out to the bus when it is called,” The Drill Sergeant at the front of our line said. He called out the names in alphabetical order, males and female together, which felt odd after being segregated all week.

“Jones, Stephanie A.,” the Drill Sergeant called. When the other Jones ran by me I remembered how in the shower her hair had curled in front of her ears like Hasidic forelocks. Every time we were placed in alphabetical order I was behind her, or next to her, and I’d noticed that she grumbled under her breath a lot. Now, her hair was pulled neatly back and she didn’t say a word as she ran, her huge Army issue duffle bag bouncing on her back. In the last week we’d learned that running, or at least jogging, was the expected mode of movement whenever we weren’t marching. Unless we were indoors, in which case we were not allowed to run. The Army had a lot of rules, but I had a good memory.

“Jones, Sylvia A.,” the Drill Sergeant called. My heart was so big in my chest that it squeezed the breath from my lungs as I turned in the direction that the other Jones had gone. As I ran past Woods, she gave me a nod and mouthed something, I couldn’t tell if it was “good luck” or “goodbye,” and then she was out of my line of sight.

There were no Drill Sergeants waiting to ambush us near the busses, only one in the driver’s seat of the bus I boarded. He kept repeating the same instructions over and over in a flat voice. “Hurry up. Fill the bus from the back to the front. Be quiet. Get your bags out of the isle.”

The last one was the hardest to follow. I shoved my black civilian duffle bag onto the floor and had to put my feet on top of it as I slid in next to the other Jones. The Army duffle bag was in my lap, taking up all the room between my chest and the seat in front of me. I couldn't see the other Jones, but our arms were touching and I could feel her trembling. It seemed to take forever for the bus to fill up. Even though it was cold and the windows were open, it started to stink like rancid sweat. It was good to know I wasn't the only one scared. I tried to look around my bag, to see if Woods had made it on this bus or not, but there wasn't room to move.

"Put your heads down and keep your eyes shut," the Drill Sergeant driver said. "I don't want to see you move or hear a word from you." Even though I couldn't see him, I could imagine him looking in the mirror above his seat, the one that would let him see the whole length of the bus.

I put my head down and stared at the tightly woven fabric of my duffle bag. The floor shook as the engine turned over and the bus lurched forward. I kept my head down, but peeked out to the left, where I could see a little bit of the window just above the other Jones' ducked head. Even though I'd driven down this road the night I arrived at Fort Jackson, nothing looking the same.

It had been like that the first day of Kindergarten on the school bus. I'd wanted Mom to drive me, like she had for pre-school, but she worked full time at the library now and had to be there early. Even though I knew all the streets in my neighborhood, they looked strange, like some witch had cast a spell over them. If you turned your head just right you could see the evil web of magic clinging to the

windowsills and around the doorways. It was that first day of Kindergarten when I began to shrink, like a side-show freak, Sylvia the amazing shrinking girl.

I marked the end of my happy childhood at the first day of Kindergarten, specifically at the moment when a little blonde girl sat down next to me. Her hair was the color of uncooked spaghetti, only very fine and soft looking, which made me want to touch it. Dad had promised that I'd make lots of friends at pre-school, but I still liked coming home in the afternoons to mom better than playing with the other children. He'd promised that Kindergarten would be better. He talked about it so much that I began to want a friend, a little girl my own age.

"My name is Sylvia, what's your?" I asked her.

She moved her backpack into her lap. It had white unicorns with rainbow tails on the front and she had a matching lunch box. "Stop staring at me," she said. I was stung and immediately looked out the window. A second later I felt a sharp pinch on my arm and cried out, yanking my arm back against my chest. "You've got gorilla arms," the blond girl said.

My arms were pale with long, dark hairs. The only thing I'd ever noticed about them was that they looked like my mother's. "I do not," I said.

"Gimme a quarter," she said.

"I don't have a quarter."

"Then let me see your lunch box."

"Why?" My lunchbox was inside my backpack and I wasn't sure about taking it out for her. Besides the fact she wasn't exactly nice, my lunchbox wasn't like

hers. It was plain red, but Mom and I had decorated it with pictures of animals cut from magazines.

“Because friends share,” she said. Since I’d learned the importance of having friends from dad and the value of sharing from my mother, I took my lunchbox out. The blond girl ended up with my mom’s homemade chocolate chip cookie and I got her baggie of celery and carrots. “See, now you’re my friend,” she said when the exchange was done.

My mom couldn’t figure out why I cried every morning and clung to her legs when she tried to put me on the school bus. Or why I told her not to put any more cookies in my lunch. I tried sitting in seats that already had one person, but Amy would sit behind me and pull my hair and pinch my arms. My mom got the story out of me the morning I’d cried so hard that I puked up my Cheerios into the grass on the side of the road. She wanted to take me out of school. My dad said that it was only because I hadn’t been socialized sooner and made an appointment for me with the school guidance counselor.

When the teacher told me I’d have to miss recess for my appointment and led me out of the classroom, I felt a dozen eyes on the back of my neck. Most of all I felt Amy watching me and I felt like I was under a magnifying glass. I wanted to turn into a bird and fly out the window.

The guidance counselor offered me a box of puppets and told me to pick one to represent myself. I picked a squirrel with bright eyes and a bushy tail. “You know, Amy picked that same one,” he said. “You probably have more in common

than you think.” I immediately wanted to change my puppet, but I didn’t say so. If I’d kept my mouth shut about Amy, I wouldn’t have been there at all.

From then on, I always sat in the worst seat, the one right behind the bus driver and Amy didn’t sit near me anymore. I’d push myself up against the cool metal skin of the bus and lean my forehead against the window and count the cats sleeping on top of cars or dashing into bushes. I wanted to crawl under a car or a shrub, to melt away until I was nothing but a pair of bright eyes peeking out.

The Drill Sergeant bus driver yelled at someone to put their head down. I turned my eyes back to the fabric of my duffle bag. I wanted to crawl inside of it, to be surrounded by socks and underwear, by soft things that smelled fresh out of the package. Next to me the other Jones was shaking harder and might have been crying. I wished our arms weren’t touching, but there was no way to move. We drove for what felt like half an hour.

The bus stopped suddenly with a squeal of brakes.

“Get off the bus! Get off the bus! Get off the bus!”

The world exploded back into sound as soon as the doors flicked open. My head snapped up at the yelling, so fast that my vision whirled and my stomach lurched like I’d just gone over the first hill of a roller coaster. A tall white Drill Sergeant stood at the front of the bus, filling every inch of space. His Mountee-style hat was pulled so low that all I could see was his mouth moving below the brim. As Privates rushed past him, he snatched their bags from their hands and threw them out onto the pavement where they struggled to claim the right ones. We were towards the back of the bus so we had to wait, watching everyone else struggle out of their seats.

Out the window, I saw more Drill Sergeants, swarming over the recruits like sharks frenzied by chum.

Hey, hey, Shark attack, I sang silently, remembering Walker's cadence. There was shouting outside, but I couldn't make out what they were saying over the persistent booming of the Drill Sergeant on our bus.

It was down to three rows in front of us. Hauling hard on the shoulder straps of my duffle, I kicked from below with my knees and managed to get it loose, ready to run. Two rows in front of us. "You're moving like molasses!" He yelled. But the faster people tried to move the more they stumbled over their load of luggage. I saw one shaved head suddenly disappear from sight as he missed the last step off the bus and fell to the ground. Our row. I jumped up and ran down the aisle. My bags bumped the seats and thumped against my knees and I came flying off the bus. People were pouring off the other three busses, all running up a cement walkway that led into an open area below the building.

"Alphabetically! Its not brain surgery privates!" A woman's voice rose over the noise like a fire alarm.

The back and front of the line had already formed. It was the middle where people were scrambling back and forth, trying to find out where their letter was. I went half way up and started asking. "J? What's your last name?"

"Louis," the girl answered, frozen stiff in her parade rest.

I worked my way forward, but the letters kept shifting. A black female Drill Sergeant all of five feet tall dropped a six foot four Private for bumping into her. His arms were shaking so bad he could hardly do a single pushup.

“One, one, one,” she kept screaming at him.

If any of the Drill Sergeants said anything to me, I’d faint.

“Stop!” Someone bellowed. “All you Privates freeze.” And we did.

“Look at this soup sandwich,” another one yelled. Any other time “soup sandwich” would have made me giggle, but I was concentrating too hard to hide behind the people around me to find it funny.

They began to call our names off a roster and we fell in line. Organized, and once again behind the other Jones, I followed the line of Privates into the bleachers which were set up in the open space beneath the building. I heard Woods’ name called, saw her bright red hair in the crowd, falling in disarray from the bun that had been perfect last time I’d seen her. I raised a hand to touch my own hair, found it in danger of falling down, but was too scared that fixing it would draw attention.

I couldn’t concentrate on what the Drill Sergeants were saying, some introductory speech welcoming us to the Army. My eyes were all over. The barracks at Reception had a space on the bottom floor that was open on two sides like this, only not so large. Four sets of bleachers holding two hundred recruits fit comfortably under the roof, plus a good twenty feet between the bleachers and the closest Drill Sergeant.

The Drill Sergeants began to introduce themselves, each one stepping forward to say his name and the platoon he belonged to. There were ten men, two women. Both of the women were small, black and mean looking. I didn’t want either of the women. I’d heard female Drill Sergeants were vicious, though the one at Reception

had hardly been around enough to pass judgment on. There were two black men, one Hispanic and the rest were white.

“Drill Sergeant Lyons, First Platoon Cobras,” said the smallest male Drill Sergeant. He twitched constantly like a rabid squirrel just waiting for a hand to bite. I didn’t think I wanted to be in first platoon with him. Each Platoon had three Drill Sergeants.

“Drill Sergeant Adams, Senior Drill Sergeant, Second Platoon Bushmasters,” said a tall Drill Sergeant with the broad shoulders and narrow hips of a comic book super hero.

I wanted to giggle because “bushmaster” sounded like the name of a bad porno. Around me, people shifted uncomfortably in their seats, like they had the same idea. Someone lost it and snorted, but the Drill Sergeants talked on like they hadn’t heard.

When all of the Drill Sergeants were introduced, they divided us into Platoons. A through F were in first platoon. When I realized that we were going to be split alphabetically, I looked over at Woods, knowing there was no hope that J and W would end up together. I could see the side of her face, but she was looking at the fourth platoon Drill Sergeants, where she would be heading. Drill Sergeant Adams called G through Me for second platoon. I rose reluctantly with the other Jones and lined up behind second platoons’ Drill Sergeants. Mi through half the S’s went to third and the rest, including Woods and Walker went to fourth, which had one of the female Drill Sergeants.

The Drill Sergeants moved around us, counting, looking at their lists.

“We got fifteen females,” Called DS Lyons from first platoon. “How many you got there Drill Sergeant Hall?”

DS Hall, one of the two black males, was one of my Drill Sergeants. When he walked down the line, he left a trail of cocoa butter scent behind him. My mother applied cocoa butter lotion every morning after her shower and never wore perfume. DS Hall smelled like home.

“Fourteen here, Drill Sergeant,” DS Hall said. It seemed strange that they called each other “Drill Sergeant” but for all I knew it was just another of the Army’s rules.

“Fifteen for third,” shouted one of the female Drill Sergeants, the one with the fire alarm voice.

“We got sixteen in fourth,” said their female Drill Sergeant. “I’ll send one over to second.”

“Moving, Drill Sergeant,” Woods shouted, which was what we’d been instructed at Reception to say whenever summoned by a Drill Sergeant. Her voice was like a glass of cold water over my head. No one had instructed her to move. I held my breath as I heard her boots slap the concrete and expected the Drill Sergeants to roar her back into place. No one said anything to her and when I looked back I saw that she had safely made it to the end of my platoon’s line. She had a huge smile on her face and winked at me, as if she’d planned the whole thing. If it had been me I might have had the courage to raise my hand and with my luck I would have been told to do push-ups for moving my arm. Having Woods behind me in line was like having the warm sun shining on my back.

Then the Drill Sergeants closed on us like a thunder storm. Shouting, they herded us with all our luggage through a door and up a narrow set of stairs. It was nearly impossible not to run while being screamed at, but they told us to walk so that we didn't trip over each other and our bags and fall.

When we finally entered the bay it was a different world from the place we'd been living for the last week. It was the same rectangle, with bunks lining the long sides, but everything was brightly lit and clean. It smelled like ammonia and fake pine. There were bathrooms at one end of the room and a desk at the other. Behind the desk there was a door leading into an office with a large window looking out into the room.

"Toe the line!" Drill Sergeant Sanchez, our third Drill Sergeant, shouted as we poured out of the stairwell and into the barracks. I had no idea what he was talking about. "The line on the floor numbskulls!" There was a red line painted on the floor. DS Sanchez has a Spanish accent and was talking so fast that his words barely sounded like English. "Don't step across it. This side of the line is for Drill Sergeants only. Keep moving, all the way around the room."

The line actually formed a rectangle which took up most of the available floor space. The slender walkway between the foot of the bunks and the red line might as well have been the hands-breadth of a balance beam, as thrown off as we were by our bags, our surrounding and the Drill Sergeants. We weren't doing anything right, not moving fast enough, stepping over the line, bumping into each other. Once we were in place they instructed us to put our bags out of the way, back between the bunks. And then they smoked us.

Patrick's father, a former Marine, had first introduced me to that term. I thought it an odd description for physical punishment, but he explained that after a smoking you felt like a cigarette butt. We hadn't really been smoked at Reception. They'd made us do over-head arm presses, which looked suspiciously similar to "raising the roof," or overhead hand claps, which was like the YMCA without the letters.

We seemed to accept as a group what was going to happen as soon as they started us off with push-ups. Drill Sergeant Adams did the push-ups with us, right in the center of the floor, and he did them so fast that I could hardly keep up. After ten my arms were shaking. At twenty I was doing them at half his pace. The other two Drill Sergeants were walking around inside their rectangle, bending down to yell at people who had quit altogether. Beside me, the other Jones dropped flat onto the floor and Drill Sergeant Sanchez was on her in a second.

"This ain't Fort Living Room, Private, so get off your ass," he said.

The other Jones grunted and pushed away from the floor. She waited until he walked away, then muttered, "I was on my stomach, fucker." On her other side, someone snickered. I just thought she was being childish.

"Heads up, privates," Drill Sergeant Hall shouted. If it wasn't for the shouting, I thought he'd have a very soothing voice. I did my best to lift my head, which made the push-ups twice as hard.

Woods was on the other side of the room, a little to the right. She lifted her head as well. She wasn't smiling any more. There was something in her eyes I hadn't seen before, almost like anger. And I couldn't tell if she meant it for me or the

Drill Sergeants. I hoped it was them. I didn't want her to think that she would have been better off with bossy, know-it-all April Walker and Drill Sergeant Squirrel. She dropped her head again a moment later and it hung low between her shoulders like a beaten dog's tail. I dropped my head to relieve the pain in my shoulders and my hair fell around my face, the elastic holding it back finally giving up its grip.

Victory Tower

Standing on the third flight of stairs on Victory Tower, waiting my turn to rappel, I could see the whole of Second Battalion's building for the first time. The streets were straight as lines on a grid, dividing the landscape into rectangles. The building took up almost an entire rectangle by itself. The landscape stretched on in regulated blocks for half a mile in three directions until the roads disappeared into the trees. I couldn't see out the fourth side of the tower because it was made of solid wood planks which formed the rappelling surface.

"It's a lot bigger than I thought," I said.

Ahead of me on the stairs, the other Jones only grunted and refused to look anywhere but at her feet. "Don't remind me," she said.

"I was talking about the Battalion building," I said. I could tell by her near-silence that she was terrified and I felt a sort of satisfaction that something had finally gotten past her don't-give-a-shit attitude. For the last two days she'd been complaining about Victory Tower, dismissing rappelling as useless knowledge for a future Morris code operator. It particularly bothered her that our first aid class was scheduled for the day after we were going to take a leap from three stories up. I

didn't care if it was useful and I wasn't particularly worried about getting hurt; it sounded fun.

"Let's go, Privates, three jumps to the bottom," a voice above us said. Two voices shouted a reply. I could see through the slits between the boards, the dark outlines of the pair of males dangling on the face of the wall. Then, as if choreographed, the shadows disappeared. The tower shook as the first male landed ten feet below where he'd started, and immediately shook again as the second one landed a few feet below the first. The other Jones muttered something under her breath and wrapped her arms around her stomach like she was going to be sick. The wooden steps of the tower continued to shake under our feet as they worked their way down.

"Next," DS Hall called from the top of the tower.

"Moving, Drill Sergeant," the other Jones and I said at the same time and climbed the steps to the top of the tower. I wished I was paired with Woods, who didn't seem scared of anything and only complained when she sensed injustice. By virtue of the same last name, the two of us Joneses were fated to be stuck together, since the Drill Sergeants insisted on ordering us alphabetically.

I stepped up onto the platform on the top of the tower and the pale gray sky opened in every direction. After being closeted in a classroom eight hours a day for the last three days, I finally felt like I could breathe again. The instructor tugged at my harness, looked it over and pronounced me ready to rappel. He turned to the other Jones, who stood stiffly against the guard rail, eyeing him like he might throw her over the edge.

DS Hall motioned me away from the instructor to the one side of the tower without a railing. “Go on and get your L seat,” he said.

I did as I’d been taught on the small ten foot practice wall, put the heels of my boots on the edge of the platform and leaned back. I let out the brake line inch by inch until my legs stretched out in front of me, feet planted shoulder width apart on the wooden planks. It was like kicking back in an easy chair, only substituting the chair for an uncomfortably tight rope harness.

“Good,” DS Hall said. “Hold there for a second.” My eyes were level with the platform and I watched DS Hall’s boots move over to where the instructor and the other Jones were.

With my ass dangling above thirty feet of winter air, it struck me that only my skinny fingers clutching the brake rope were keeping me from falling to a quick death. Private McMentis was on belay, holding my safety rope down at the base of the rappelling tower, but I was trying not to think about him. I loved the feeling that my life was in no one’s hands but my own, after all, that was what had compelled me to enlist. Only I told people it was for the college money because that provoked fewer questions.

The money reason wasn’t a lie. It was true that my dad wouldn’t live up to the help he’d promised. First he’d left my mom, then he’d told me he couldn’t pay his half of my tuition any more. I was pretty sure the court order was the only thing that kept him paying child support for Mike. My little brother would have our dad, financially at least, for another eight years. But when that was up, Dad would leave him too.

I craned my neck up to see what was delaying the other Jones. The Instructor and DA Hall were moving around her fussing with her self-tied rope harness. She'd probably been complaining when she should have been listening to the lesson on what to do with the rope. The instructor had a black harness with wide straps that looked like some sadistic sex prop, the way it cut into his groin and made his crotch bulge out against the front of his green and brown camouflage pants. If Woods was there with me, we would have giggled about it.

They were pretty adamant about safety, judging from this one event. When we first arrived at the tower the Drill Sergeants sat us down in the metal bleachers, which were shaded by a corrugated tin roof, off of which hung a sign that said "Lightning Shelter." It was just another example of Army irony, like jumping off a thirty foot tower the day before you learned first aid. You could either laugh at it, like Woods and I, or piss on it, like Jones.

"Baby steps, Private," DS Hall said as he backed the other Jones up to the edge of the tower. "Stop. Good, now just ease up on that rope a little." He had a voice that would have melted frozen butter, only Jones' grip on the rope was more like frozen steel. The energy she was putting into not moving would have been more than enough to get her down the tower if she could have just changed the object of her determination. Change was one thing that Private Jones seemed set against, which made me wonder why she was here at all.

My fingers started to ache from holding the brake line and I wished they'd just let me go, I could be here for hours waiting for her fat ass to get up the courage. I wouldn't have known she was chubby if I hadn't seen her naked in the shower every

day since the first day of Reception. The uniforms made it hard to tell thick from thin, unless you were really busting at the seams. But there was no hiding the way she was bulging out around the rope harness, which cut into her like a pair of unflattering briefs two sizes too small. At least she had some padding. My harness bit into the tendons in my groin and chaffed my boney hips where my only protection was my skin and my uniform.

“I can’t do it,” Jones told DS Hall in a strained voice. “I’m scared of heights.”

“You’re fine, Private,” DS Hall said, with more patience than I could have managed. “Just sit back.”

What a stupid thing to be afraid of. Heights. It wasn’t like sharks, or spiders which could bite and kill you of their own volition without any provocation. A mountain or a tree might fall on you through dumb chance, or you might fall off of it through your own ineptitude, but height itself had no motivation to hurt you. I loved heights. If not for the cramp in my hand and the uncomfortable harness I would have gladly stayed up here all day.

There’d been a huge oak tree in the park near our house that I loved to climb and I’d spend hours in its branches while my mother sat on a bench with a book. Each time she turned a page she’d glance up at my progress. She never seemed concerned that I’d fall. On the few occasions my dad took me, he’d tried to come up after me when I climbed above his arm’s reach, shouting that I was going to hurt myself. Red-faced, I’d come back down because the other moms were staring at us. When I was young, my mom had been like the Drill Sergeants, minus the yelling and punishments, encouraging and watchful. My dad had been like the instructors,

obsessively monitoring and controlling every step that I took. But since I'd made the decision to enlist six months ago everything had changed. Mom started biting her nails. Dad gave his blessing without asking a single question.

It wasn't the reaction I'd been hoping for. I wanted Mom to give me an understanding hug and I wanted Dad to wake up in cold sweats, soaked through with worrying about me. Like the summer I was five, when we went out West to see the Grand Canyon. My mom and I had walked right up to the edge of a cliff, hand in hand, and peered over the edge. The wind tugged pieces of her hair free from her braid. I remember the sound of the pebbles shifting beneath her hiking sandals and skittering over the edge. It was higher than I'd ever been. The river at the bottom of the canyon looked like a green thread.

"I think I can see the edge of the earth," mom said, referring to a bedtime story she often told about a princess who took a ship over the waterfall at the edge of the earth. I looked hard at the orange horizon. It was sort of hazy and pale where it met the sky.

"I see it too!"

Then my dad caught up to us and snapped a quick picture before calling us back from the edge and admonishing my mother. "Are you crazy? What if she had slipped?"

"Stop ruining the moment, dear," my mom said and patted him on the cheek.

Dad had nightmares every night the whole week we were there. He'd cry out in his sleep that we were going to fall. At the time I'd thought he was a coward

compared to my mother. Now, when I doing something truly dangerous for the first time in my life I wish that I knew he cared that much.

“What if I fall?” The other Jones’ voice was high and strained as my father’s had been, seeing us leaning over the cliff.

“Don’t let go of the brake line and you won’t fall,” DS Hall said.

“Private Gillett there could hold ten of you,” DS Adams yelled up from the ground.

I looked down, which we’d been told not to do, but it didn’t bother me.

Gillett had the other Jones’ safety line looped through a carabineer attached to his harness. Even though he wasn’t much taller than me, he was twice as broad with a neck like a tree stump. He was pushing thirty, but I could still see the high school football star in him. McMentis was holding my line and even though he was as thin as a coke snorting supermodel I was sure he could easily catch my weight if my hand slipped. It shattered the illusion that my situation was in any way precarious. Made it less exciting, which made me more impatient.

“Come on, Jones, its not that bad,” I said.

The instructor blinked and looked down at me like he’d forgotten I was there. “You can go now. Remember, let go for a one-one thousand count. Three jumps, if you can. And bend you knees at each landing.” Standing on the ground, waiting my turn, I noticed that few people made it in three jumps. Most took a dozen or so little hops down the tower. Gillett had done it in two flying bounds and the Drill Sergeants and all of us on the ground cheered for him.

Suddenly my hand seemed locked in a fist, unwilling to release the rope. It was only that I'd been holding on so long that my fingers were stiff, I told myself. I bent my knees, pushed away from the wall and forced my fingers open. The rope rushed through my hand and I dropped so fast that my heart flew up and hit the back of my clenched teeth. Immediately, I clamped down on the brake line, my feet slamming against the tower hard. I'd only dropped five feet.

Jones' ass was now hanging above my face. Her knees were bent so much that she looked like she was crouching, only her back was facing the ground.

"Stop with the Spiderman stuff, Private. Get your legs straight," the instructor said to her, clearly getting a little pissed off at her inability to get an L seat.

I wanted to move my right arm because the muscles in my shoulder were starting to tremble with fatigue, but I had to keep my hand down by my hip to hold the brake line. Inside the special gloves they'd given us to protect from rope burn my palm was slick with sweat. I'd never fallen out of my climbing tree, but now I knew what it would have felt like the first instant my fingers and feet missed the branch. I no longer wanted skinny McMentis holding my line, I wanted Gillett's solid bulk anchoring me.

"Keep going, Private," the instructor called down to me, but I was too rattled by the feeling of falling to go again. Instead, I concentrated on the other Jones, who'd finally gotten her legs as straight as her shaking would allow.

"Come on, Jones, come down towards my voice," I said. She started to turn her head. "Don't look down!"

We both had to make it down the tower, so I didn't see that it mattered if I tried to rappel the rest of the way or helped Jones by walking down with her. My dad had always been big on the value of charity, my mom on kindness. But despite the way they'd raised me, it wasn't often that I really felt the urge to stick my neck out and help someone. Not because I didn't care, but because chances were that things would just get worse. Like the time I volunteered to partner with the weird girl in drama class who no body wanted to do a scene with and Henry Akin, the boy who got all the lead parts, called us lesbians. Maybe this sudden urge was just the previous three days of briefings— their word for indoctrination— finally taking effect. We'd spent most of the second day learning about the Army values. Loyalty was the first value.

Shuffling her feet along the vertical wall, the other Jones inched her way closer. Finally, she drew even with me. Her face was red and there was sweat running down the sides of her cheeks. When I saw how terrible she looked I felt a little bad for her. Maybe she'd had a climbing tree too, only she had fallen out of it.

"Let's go down together," I said. "Nice and slow." I eased up on the rope and took a step down the wall.

"Gimme a minute," Jones panted.

"If you keep moving you'll be on the ground faster," I said. The rope harness felt like it was getting tighter by the second and I really wanted to be off the wall. Now that I'd offered to help her, I couldn't leave her literally hanging there. Blue Falcon was the term for that. DS Hall, the first one to use that phrase, explained that the B and F used to stand for something else, but no one was allowed to swear

anymore at Basic Training. I didn't get it until the next time we were doing pushups and I heard McMentis call Lopez a buddy fucker for being late to formation and getting us smoked.

I took another step down just so I could move my aching hand. "Come on, Jones, don't stop now," I said.

"Just go." She raised her voice and her face twisted up like I was a fly she couldn't swat away.

"Not unless you come down with me," I said. I was starting to get a little fed up at the lack of impact my help was having and I could hear it in my voice. The instructor and DS Hall were leaning over the top of the platform, watching. On the ground there were half a dozen pairs of eyes looking up. Gillett was shouting encouragement. DS Adams stood like a bronze god, his arms folded across his broad chest, just watching. DS Hall up at the top of the tower mirrored his pose, his skin like polished wood glowing dully in the overcast light. They were both younger and better looking than I'd expected for Drill Sergeants. I hoped that they didn't think less of me for not rappelling, I hoped they recognized that I was trying to help Jones. Even though I'd become an adult three years ago, by law, I felt like a little girl at that moment, hoping that my parents were watching and smiling with approval.

The other Jones started moving again. I kept time with her shuffling paces, looking down every now and then to see if the ground was any closer yet. The whole time I kept up a steam of encouragement, not giving half a thought to what I was saying. I was too busy wondering whether the guys on the ground, stuck staring up at

our asses for the last ten minutes, were disgusted at the way the ropes made them bulge in odd places.

“Almost there. Just five feet left,” I said. Unable to stand the pressure of the harness anymore, I let go of the brake and dropped the last five feet. I stopped paying attention to Jones as one of the instructors on the ground took charge of me and told me to place my hands on my head and walk backwards. The extra length of the rope made a zipping sound as it snaked through the metal carabineer on my harness and came free.

“Hooah, Private Jones! That’s the Loyalty in LDRSHIP,” DS Adams shouted at me.

“Hooah, Drill Sergeant,” I said, because to not respond to a Drill Sergeant was as bad as back-talk. Hooah was a safe reply in almost every case, since it seemed to mean anything but “no.”

I wondered if the Army had picked the acronym LDRSHIP first and then thought up motivational words to fill in the letters. The Drill Sergeants had been stretching pretty far to point out how every little deed we did was an example of an Army value. Yesterday, DS Hall had commended Woods for embodying the S of Selfless Service because she offered to help me carry two crates full of orange cones out to the PT field.

“Hey, Jones,” Gillett said to me. “You’re like one of those cops who talks people down from buildings and bridges.” He smiled at me and his teeth were very white against his tan. With hair, his features would have looked ordinary as a block of Wisconsin cheddar, but without it, the broad planes of his face were attractive.

I stood there, trying to think of a reply that wasn't "Hooah." He kept smiling at me, much longer than was necessary to accompany a simple pat on the back. I almost wished he would put his hand on my back, but they'd been pretty clear in the sexual harassment briefing that unnecessary physical contact between the sexes—contact that was not required as part of the training— was just a harassment complaint waiting to happen. To touch Gillett, even to pluck a stray thread from his uniform, I was supposed to ask his permission first.

Before I could form a reply, the other Jones came up glaring, like the Army issue glasses we were both wearing could intensify her stare into death rays. "Thanks for making a spectacle out of me."

I looked around, but if a lot of people had stopped to watch us on the tower they'd now gone back to whatever they were supposed to be doing.

"Spotlighter," she hissed.

"I was trying to help you." I'd wanted the Drill Sergeants to notice that I was doing something good. But the other Jones was accusing me of doing something good only because the Drill Sergeants were watching, that was what it meant to be a spotlighter.

"Next time, don't bother," she said as she struggled to get free of the rope still attached to her harness.

A thank you would have been in order, but it was my luck to get a slap in the face instead. I wondered if my attempts to navigate the social world would ever end in something other than a head-on collision.

"Jones, get back up here!" DS Hall yelled from the top of the tower.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant,” we shouted at the same time. The other Jones turned the color of wet plaster. I wanted a chance to fly down the tower like Kelvey, who came down in three big bounds as we watched.

“Which Jones?” DS Adams shouted back when neither of us moved right away.

“Jones, S... um, S...” I knew he was struggling to remember our middle initials. I was Jones S.E. and she was Jones, S.A. They refused to use first names, which would have made everything a lot easier. “The little one,” he finally said.

The other Jones was two inches shorter but I weighed at least twenty pounds less. If I had to pick which one of us was little, I would have picked me. “Which one?” DS Adams shouted again.

“You know, the good one,” DS Hall said.

The other Jones looked at me, her face slack with relief. “Definitely you.”

“Of course it’s me,” I said, just to rub it in. But she was over her scare now and back to her usual attitude, so she shrugged off my barb. Then, I wished that it was her going back up so everyone could see her struggle through the tower again, without my help this time.

“Send the good Jones up and put the bad one on belay,” DS Hall said.

I looked at the other Jones, and wasn’t so sure that she’d hold my safety rope if I slipped. She just rolled her eyes and turned away so that another instructor could attach her to the safety line.

It was nothing new to be the good one, I’d come to expect that sort of thing by now. “Why can’t you be good like your sister was at your age?” My dad always

asked Mike. On my report cards my teachers always gave me an E for Excellent under Good Behavior. I'd been grounded only twice growing up, and both times I'd told my parents I thought it was the punishment I deserved. Even at New College, where no one cared what I did, I never smoked pot or even drank enough to throw up. Actually, I was getting a little sick of being good, but it was like some strange programming that I didn't know how to override. And if being bad meant being like the other Jones, a complete waste of oxygen, then I'd take good.

"You going to stand there all day, Good Jones?" DS Adams said from behind me. He had that edge in his voice that Drill Sergeants got right before they punished you. "Moving, Drill Sergeant," I said.

"Good luck, Jones," Gillett said and punched me on the shoulder so hard it almost hurt. I stumbled forward, then kept running and took the steps of the tower two at a time. My arm tingled. A light touch on the shoulder blade would have been better, but I'd settle for a punch.

"I liked how you helped your buddy out," DS Hall said when I got to the top. "I'm giving you another chance so you can have some fun with this."

"Hooah, Drill Sergeant," I said, because they didn't like us to thank them and would always come back with some smart remark when we did. Flushed still from Gillett's compliment, fighting with Jones and running up the stairs, I was glad that I couldn't get any redder.

"Down in three jumps, right?" DS Hall said. "Don't embarrass me now."

"I won't, Drill Sergeant." The instructor checked my harness for the second time and I could hardly feel him tugging at the ropes. Even though DS Hall was

attractive on his own, I kept imagining his voice coming from Gillett's lips. My heart started beating faster and it had nothing to do with rappelling.

This is what I imagined it felt like when cocaine hit the brain, maybe why I couldn't seem to break the habit of being good: I was an addict. By the time I got down into the L seat again, I didn't care that the other Jones would probably laugh as I fell to my death. She dissolved and floated away. DS Hall was leaning over me, below DS Adams and Gillett were watching. I was in the park, at the very top of my climbing tree. My mom lifted her eyes from reading and smiled. I couldn't see him, but I knew that somewhere beneath the canopy of the tree Dad was waiting, his thighs tense, his arms open and ready to catch me. I bent my knees and leapt out into open air.

Bedtime Stories

That night, after Victory Tower, Drill Sergeant Hall gave us a class on how to polish our boots. First, the polish was applied to the boot with the small brush, then buffed with the large brush and finally rubbed to perfection with spit and the soft white sham. His voice dipped and rolled and built towards the climactic moment where he revealed the mirror-smooth toe of the boot. I looked down at my own two pairs of boots, which were about as reflective as a Hershey's bar and sighed. The pair I'd worn today on Victor Tower were all covered with red-brown dust and bits of grass, even though we'd only marched a couple blocks up the road and mostly stood around waiting between learning to rappel and actually rappelling.

"Twenty hundred is lights out," DS Hall said. "We'll be inspecting your boots tomorrow." Then he turned and left. We watched him walk away and disappear into the Drill Sergeant's office. One by one, the other platoon Drill Sergeants, finished giving the boot shining class to their respective platoons and went into the office too. I looked around, expecting to see a Drill Sergeant standing behind one of the bleachers, silently watching, but it was just us recruits and the buzzing florescent lights. We were awake and unsupervised for the first time since we'd arrived at Basic four days ago.

I shivered from the cold, though somehow I'd managed not to notice when DS Hall was talking. The roof over our heads didn't seem to be good for trapping heat, it only amplified the swish-swish sound of the boot brushes. The assembly area only had walls on two sides and the other two sides opened to the sidewalk that circled the building and the green lawn which we weren't supposed to walk on. Our company had one half of the open space beneath the barracks and Bravo Company had the other half. Even though the walkway that led out to the PT field was all that separated us, we never spoke to anyone from Bravo Company. Bravo Company's bleachers were set up two on a side, facing each other like a high school gym. Our bleachers were set up in a horseshoe, which I liked better, though I wasn't sure why. Maybe this was how brainwashing started, with the small things, preferring the shape of the bleachers on the home court to the other team's set-up.

"I don't think he's coming back," Woods said in a voice just over a whisper. It was so quiet in the assembly area that people in the other platoon's bleachers looked at her. I bent my head over my boot and concentrated on making sure I had an even coating of polish. The moment I opened my mouth would be the moment DS Hall burst out of the office. Around us, the sound of boot polishing began to mix with whispered conversations.

"I was kind of hoping that Victory Tower would be taller," Woods said. "It wasn't a very long ride down."

"You keep it up and you're going to get us smoked," the other Jones hissed. "I don't know about you, but I don't want a repeat of day one."

“I wouldn’t mind,” McMentis said. “It felt good to finally get smoked after all that standing around at reception.” The whites of his eyes glowed in the twin caves of darkness that surrounded them. He looked like he was permanently ready to have his mug shot taken.

“I’m up for round two,” Gillett said. “Go big or go home.” He flexed his arms, but his muscles were hidden beneath the grey sweat shirt wore. We wore our camouflage BDUs during the day, but were allowed to change into the PT uniform during personal time.

If we got smoked again I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to do a single push-up. I was still sore from the first smoking, and that soreness had rolled on into the second day, when they’d given us a PT test, then the third day we started PT in earnest. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were running days. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays were muscle failure. That’s when we went out to the field across the street with our foam PT mats and the Drill Sergeant would make us do sit-ups and pushups and sprints until it was all you could do to hold your head up. I felt like my body was one tender green bruise from head to toe. This morning, I could hardly lift my hands over my head to put my hair up.

“Wasn’t that was a lot of training for just one jump?” Woods asked.

“Some of us go to do more than one,” Gillett said and looked at me. I couldn’t tell if he was jealous that I’d gone twice or just making a comment.

“I didn’t ask for it,” I said.

The other Jones rolled her eyes, but I pretended not to notice. “Will you guys shut up about the stupid tower already?” She scrubbed at her boot wither brush like

she was scouring a dirty bathtub. Then she glared briefly at me as if the topic of conversation was somehow my fault.

“Or what? You’ll cry again?” McMentis snorted.

Jones turned red and chucked her boot brush at McMentis’ head. He ducked and it sailed past him and hit Gramps in the chest. Gramps—the oldest Private in our Platoon at thirty-four—jumped and dropped his boot brush and his can of polish on the floor, then lifted his hands in a bewildered shrug of surrender.

“What’d I do?” He asked.

“Nothing,” Jones said. She didn’t even apologize, which made me like her less than I already did.

No one said anything. I spit on the toe of my boot, but since I didn’t spit very often it came out as a messy spray rather than one big glop. No one noticed. As I rubbed my boot with the soft white cloth from the cleaning kit I’d been issued, I looked around. The twelve members of our squad occupied one end of the Platoon bleachers, but we’d sub-divided into smaller groups. The black males and females in the squad were sitting up on the top two tiers. There was Lewis and Jackson, A., two black females, and Jackson, R., the male Jackson, along with Johnson and Hampton. Below them, Lopez and Hernandez sat side-by side, talking softly in Spanish. Lopez had come from Puerto Rico and it seemed no one had warned him that Basic Training would be conducted in English. Instead of tissues, he carried around one of the issued brown washcloths in his pocket for a handkerchief, which by the end of the day was wet and limp with snot. I’d heard two females from first squad giggling

about Hernandez, who was dark-eyed with cut-glass cheek bones and spoke with a faint Castilian lisp.

Our group was all white. Gramps sat two rows above us, but he was still closer to sitting with us than anyone else. The large freckles on his scalp looked like age spots and his blonde hair was buzzed so close to his head that it could have passed for white. Even so, he'd beat out all the younger guys on our first PT test with the fastest run time.

Kelvey sat on the bottom row, also close enough to be counted, but not really part of the conversation. Her head was bent over her boots, her brown, pixie cut hair shading her serious blue eyes. She looked like a ten year old boy, like my brother Mike, when he was concentrating hard on his Game Boy. The most she ever spoke was at night, when she knelt at the side of her bed and whispered her bedtime prayers. If you were standing close enough you could hear her asking God to look out for her Mother and her Father and someone named Mathew. If it was a husband I thought she would have named him before her parents, so I was betting on brother. But I hadn't asked her because I didn't want her to know I eavesdropped on her prayers.

Woods was looking around too with a puzzled expression. "Notice how everyone kind of voluntarily segregated themselves by race?" Being from the South I wasn't as surprised as she was. My high school bussed in black kids from the other side of town for the sake of racial diversity. But in the lunch room, they sat in their one quarter and the white kids of various cliques took up the other three quarters and no one ever went across the self-drawn lines.

“Its just human nature, man,” McMentis said without looking up from his boots.

“No, its upbringing, there’s a difference,” Woods said, raising her voice a little. I could tell it was the lawyer in her, the public defender, eager to root out prejudice.

McMentis pointed the toe of his boot at the word “ARMY” printed in black letters on the chest of her sweatshirt. “What would you have to talk about with them anyways? You speak Spanish? You grow up in the hood?”

Woods rolled her eyes at McMentis. “You must work hard at being so ignorant.” They exchanged a long look and I knew they were going to get along about as well as the other Jones and me.

“So what do you think of our Drill Sergeants?” Gillett said, throwing himself into the conversation like he was falling on a live grenade to save the rest of us.

“We definitely got the best bunch, from what I can tell,” the other Jones said. It was perhaps the first time she’d said anything positive and I couldn’t tell if she was just trying to help Gillett change the topic or if she was sincere.

“No female Drill Sergeants, thank God,” I said. I looked quickly at the door to the Drill Sergeant office, but it didn’t pop open like Pandora’s Box when I spoke.

“No shit,” McMentis said and Woods gave him a sharp look that failed to shut him up. “They’re bitches,” he concluded. Not even Woods could defend their behavior.

The female Drill Sergeants had turned out to be just as bad as I’d heard. They hated female Privates and screamed at us over everything, the smallest strand of hair

out of place and they'd have you on the floor. It was bad enough that they came into our barracks every night and inspected us, looking especially at our feet in our shower shoes, checking for I don't know what. I couldn't imagine their eyes crawling over me all day long.

"Drill Sergeant Sanchez gives me the wilies," Woods said. "There's something about that guy." I hadn't noticed anything about him that was strange, other than he never smiled except when he was punishing us.

"Yeah, it's called being a dick," McMentis said.

"Well, two out of three isn't bad," Gillett said. "Most of the other platoons only have one cool Drill."

"And we've got the two hottest Drill Sergeants," the other Jones said. "That Drill Sergeant Hall is one fine black man."

"Why does he have to be a fine *black* man? Why can't he just be a fine man?" Woods said.

"Well, he is black, isn't he?" McMentis said.

I glanced at Gillett to see if he would step in again, but his attention was on the toe of his boot, which reflected his face like a limousine's tinted window. He caught me watching him and then glanced down at my boot, which looked darker, though hardly more shiny, than when I'd started.

"Guess you don't have the magic touch," he said and grinned. At that moment I decided that Gillett was more attractive than Drill Sergeant Hall. Every time he smiled at me it was like a big neon red sign began flashing over his head, "I want you." I knew it wasn't just for me, that the sign probably winked at every

woman he so much as glanced at, but it didn't matter. It also didn't matter because I had my boyfriend Patrick back home and nothing was going to happen here. When Patrick smiled, the caption that lit up above his head was "You want me." But with half of Florida, all of Georgia and at least a hundred miles of South Carolina between us, I was already starting to forget the cut of his shaggy red-blond hair and whether it fell across his right eyes or his left.

"You can have Drill Sergeant Hall and I'll take Drill Sergeant Adams," Woods said.

"Jesus Christ, have either of you looked in a mirror since you got here?" McMentis said. He stuck his finger down his throat and fake-gagged and Gillett laughed so hard he nearly fell off the bleachers. The red letters over Gillett's head flickered and went dark. Maybe the other females were right to keep their fantasies confined to the Drill Sergeants; no hope of success meant no risk of disappointment.

Even though McMentis had been talking to the other Jones and Woods, I knew better than to hope that I wasn't included in his assessment. I'd looked in the mirror every morning and night and knew exactly how my appearance had changed for the worse since I'd put on a uniform. With my brown hair pulled tightly back in a bun and the huge, plastic tortoise shell glasses I'd been issued, I looked like a forty year old librarian. The kind whose vagina was probably dustier than the books she cared for. From the looks on the males' faces, I guessed the sign posted over me said something like, "Disaster area."

The other Jones just laughed. "Come on, you don't think my BCGs are hot?" She pulled her glasses down to the tip of her nose and batted her eyelashes over the

tops of the frames. BCGs stood for Birth Control Glasses, because the things were so ugly you'd never get laid wearing them. We all laughed, except Kelvey, who silently gathered her boots and went up the stairs. I couldn't even hear her footsteps on the metal bleachers over the noise that had sprung up like summer weeds. It seemed like everyone was talking, laughing, enjoying their first taste of normal, human interaction. I wondered if I should cut myself loose too. It was getting loud, which meant trouble.

“You look better with them on,” McMentis said. “They hide your face.” I started to laugh, but held it in to see if the other Jones took it as a joke or an insult. I didn't want her to yell at me again like she had this morning. If she could get mad at me for trying to talk her through her fear of heights, I didn't know what she'd do if I laughed at her expense.

A bang like a shotgun blast split the air. The door to the Drill Sergeant office flew open and Drill Sergeants poured out like a kicked ant pile. My stomach shriveled up like a raisin and my first instinct was to crawl under the bleachers and hide.

“At ease!” Someone shouted, but at the sight of the Drill Sergeants we'd all dropped our boots, brushes and cloths and stood at attention.

“Front leaning rest position, move!” Drill Sergeant Hall shouted. Even though I knew we deserved to be punished, I was shaking with anger. Anger at myself because I'd knew this would happen and I'd stayed anyway. But I was angry at Drill Sergeant Hall too. For a moment I'd almost been able to forget where I was and then he'd ruined it.

“They were testing us,” Woods said as we scrambled to find open space on the concrete floor to do our pushups.

“More like trapping us,” McMentis said.

“Get big or go home, hooah!” Gillett shouted cheerfully and got a chorus of grumbles in response.

“Shut up, Privates!” DS Hall bellowed.

“Fuck off,” the other Jones muttered at DS Hall or Gillett or maybe both.

DS Hall got down with us and to shame us even more, he called out such an impossible cadence that most of us managed one pushup for every two of his. My arms shook like tree limbs in a winter storm and the muscles between my shoulders burned like white coals. I wished I’d gone upstairs with Kelvey. She was probably done with her shower by now, her body a little less sore after the hot water. Her hair would be damp and smell of shampoo as she tucked her knees under her bunk and bent her head over her clasped hands. Through the windows, I knew she could hear our ragged voices, counting out the pushups completed. My mouth was open, but I was too busy panting to do more than shape my lips around the numbers. I wondered if she felt bad, like she deserved to be down here, or if she was grateful she’d escaped sharing our punishment. As we continued to count and push, I made up a prayer for mercy from the wrath of Drill Sergeants, a prayer for weary shoulders and triceps and biceps, a push-up prayer. I didn’t believe that God was listening. But it made me feel better to think that Kelvey, kneeling with her eyes closed two stories up, could hear us.

A Conversation in Three Parts

The lines to my left and right were moving faster than the one I was standing in, all of us inching closer to the gleaming bank of silver pay phones. I knew it was almost impossible for the other lines to move faster, because no one used less than their allotted five minutes of phone time. Unless you couldn't get anyone on the outside to pick up the phone. Which was a horrible feeling, like being cut adrift in a sea of two hundred camouflaged recruits who— for all the camaraderie we'd developed in our first week and a half here— couldn't really claim to know or care about you yet.

Patrick, you better pick up the damn phone. I'd just talked to Patrick on Sunday. Sunday was not only the day that the Lord made and therefore the day that the Drill Sergeants went easy on us, but the day when anyone could use the phone. I'd meant to save my once-weekly Platoon phone time for my parents, but I had to tell Patrick about the bump. I'd have to remember to speak softly. Even though there were silver dividers between the phones you could still hear the closest conversations if the people were talking too loudly and most of them did.

“Fucking barber shop cut up my head again. I can't believe they take money out of our paychecks for this crap.”

“How’s Isabella? Is she walking yet?”

“I told you to take the car out once a week. Well, I don’t know, just call a tow truck.”

“All yours,” Woods said as she clicked the receiver and handed me the phone. Instead of circling to the back of the line to make another call, she went back our Platoon’s bleacher to shine her boots. My fingertips felt colder than usual clenched around the warm receiver as I dialed Patrick’s cell. When he picked up I could hear a blaring television commercial in the background; he was at his job at the TV station, cuing the commercials between the public access shows. The receiver feel like a lead brick in my hand. It would have been easier to talk to him if he was alone in his car. But it was better than catching him in the dorms. On Sunday he’d passed the phone off to all our friends and I’d barely had a chance to hear his voice before my five minutes was up.

“Two calls in one week,” he said, sounding surprised and happy. His dad, an ex-marine, had warned Patrick not to take it personally if he didn’t hear from me much. “How’d the rappelling go?”

Sweat tricked down from my armpits and was caught by my sports bra even though it was cold enough to see my breath. “It was fine, pretty cool actually. I got to do it twice.” I didn’t want to talk about what I’d been doing, but Patrick rushed on.

“What’s the next big thing?”

“Started bayonet training today and we’ll do more tomorrow and the Gas Chamber on Saturday,” I said. As if I wasn’t scared enough, just saying the words “gas chamber” put a kink in my large intestines. Before he could lead me on with

more questions, I leaned as far as I could into the corner of the privacy wall, cupped my hand around my mouth. “I have to tell you something.”

“All ears,” he said and I could tell that he hadn’t registered the trepidation in my voice.

“I’ve got a bump,” I said “Down there.”

“A bump?”

On either side of me, the two people talking on the phone seemed unusually quiet. Heat crawled up my neck into my face. “And it itches.”

“So go to the doctor.” From the tone of his voice I knew his nose and upper lip were crinkled up, the way they did whenever we came across something dead in the road.

“But what if it *is* something and it goes in my medical record?” I bet bored Army medics sat around their offices going through people’s medical records, chuckling at a history of bedwetting or uncontrollable flatulence. The lasagna I’d eaten for dinner tumbled around in my stomach like a pair of sneakers in a dryer. I didn’t know how to say the next part without pissing him off. “I think you should go get some tests done. The health department can do them cheap.”

“Why? There’s nothing wrong with me,” his pitch was getting higher and tighter, like someone had taken a ratchet to his vocal chords.

“Just to be safe.” I was starting to think that maybe I’d make it through this conversation without crying.

“So who’d you get it from? That scuzzy hippy I saw you with at the grocery store?” This was why he was only my sometimes boyfriend. He had a way of pointing fingers that could put out an eye. Or a heart.

There was a tap on my shoulder and I looked down at my watch. I swallowed the hiccupping sound threatening to break my voice. “My time’s up. I’ll call you back in just a bit, please pick up.” He didn’t assure me he would.

The wind slapped my cheeks as I walked to the end of the line. The pay phones were in the breezeway, just next to the brown door that led to the Drill Sergeant’s office. The door was cracked so the Drill Sergeant on duty could keep an ear out for trouble and the yellow light inside looked warm. The breezeways were probably great in summer, providing a little air and some shade to take the edge off the damp South Carolina heat. But whoever had thought to design the barracks like a brick beach house on concrete silts, hadn’t considered what all this open air would mean in the winter.

I pressed my hands, like two blocks of ice, to my face and felt the red in my skin, hoping everyone thought it was just the cold. Three people ahead of me, plus the one on the phone meant another twenty minutes for Patrick to brood. The other platoons, the ones without phone privileges tonight, sat on their respective bleachers polishing their boots and eyeing the phones like they were wondering if we’d rat them out for jumping in line with us. We definitely would.

The bump stung and I wanted to press my thighs together, but that would have meant breaking from Parade Rest, which everyone else was standing in, motionless unless they had to step forward. We’d learned by the end of Reception week that the

feet shoulder width apart, hands behind the back, head straight forward posture of Parade Rest was the one the Drills wanted us in when we were doing any sort of waiting. Just because the other Privates' heads were facing front, didn't mean that their eyes weren't wandering, that they wouldn't noticed my squirming. Luckily, I was at the end of the line and only had to worry about the people on my left and right. Gramps, on my left, had fallen asleep behind his thick glasses. Langley, on my right, was wide awake. I had to be careful of her, she was gossipy, eighteen, a Hawaiian girl who thought she was prettier than she really was and who treated Basic Training like an extended field trip.

She was the kind of girl who would have flirted with Patrick right in front of me, knowing he was my boyfriend. Those girls, with their quick laughter and dark eyeliner, bothered me more whenever Patrick and I were broken up, which had happened three times, the first two lasting about a week, the third time for a month. When we were together I had the guy that girls wanted to steal, and the fact that they tried, and never got past the flirting part, was a great boost to my ego. Our last separation hadn't been angry; we both agreed we needed to consider our options, especially since I'd be off at Basic for the whole next semester. Turned out that Patrick had a lot more options than I did. Even though we'd reconciled with plenty of time to spare before my departure, the fact that we'd now fucked other people sat between us like a reeking bag of garbage that neither of us wanted to touch.

The scuzzy hippy was supposed to be a one night stand, but he hung around for a week afterwards, which was when we stumbled into Patrick buying beer at Publix. That was the only reason Patrick knew about him. The other two I kept to

myself. Three guys in a month sounded like a lot and I didn't want him to not take me back on account of me having slept around. I hadn't told him about the hockey-playing used car dealer who made me feel sexy until I discovered he was high on ecstasy every time we went out. Or the used car dealer's best friend, who was probably high too when I slept with him out of spite. It could have been any of them or none.

It could have come from one of the girls Patrick had dated. He'd screwed at least one of them. I'd seen him coming out of her dorm room one morning, far too early to have just stopped by for breakfast. I never asked him directly, he'd tell me the truth about her and anyone else and I couldn't handle knowing. He'd never made it a secret when he had a new date. I don't think he did it to be mean, but because he didn't understand jealousy. His ability to fully embrace the emotion of the moment, for as long as that moment lasted, and let it go completely in the next instant was the reason why he landed most of the lead roles in the theater department's productions. The night before we'd decided to see other people he said he'd love me forever and his seeing other girls the very next week didn't make that any less true for him.

Ahead of me, Lopez was shouting Spanish into the receiver, his noise interrupting my ability to think. I guess no one in Puerto Rico warned him that Basic Training was conducted in English. Most of the time he just followed along, watching and copying. But Sometimes, DS Sanchez had to take him aside and explain what, exactly, was going on. Especially for things like jumping off a thirty foot tower or adding a bayonet, even a dulled one, to your rifle and taking practice swings at your buddy.

I gave him an extra thirty seconds while I swallowed the taste of stomach acid rising in my mouth. Patrick would be even angrier now that he'd had time for our conversation to gnaw its way from his ear to his brain. When I took the phone from Lopez it smelled like Old Spice and toothpaste.

Patrick picked up on the first ring. "Yeah," he said.

"You know guys can pass stuff and never know they had anything."

"You're the one with the bump."

"I just don't see why you can't acknowledge that we're both responsible here."

"Because I'm clean."

"And that makes me dirty?" He didn't say anything and I stretched my mouth, rolled my jaw around, trying to loosen my throat so that he wouldn't hear the pain in my voice. He argued like he was playing a game of darts, always had, and that had definitely been a bull's eye. I hated games where you had to keep score. "Fine, I guess I'll have to tell my Drill Sergeants what the problem is so I can take time off training for a doctor's appointment." I had no intention of going to an Army doctor, I just wanted him to see how ridiculous he was acting.

"Like I said from the start." I heard him change the tapes, stabbing the buttons with staccato pops. "And tell me if they find anything."

"Are you kidding?" I knew I was getting loud, but couldn't seem to help it.

"Hold on." The buzzer to the door of the station was ringing persistently. Lots of times I'd been the one ringing it, sneaking into the studio, bringing Patrick a late night snack. He would set the timer on his cell phone so that it would remind

him to stop making out with me and change the tapes over. I couldn't hear him anymore so he must have left the phone in the control room. The muffled voice of an older woman talking about the health benefits of tai-chi for seniors came through the receiver. Flexibility, balance, concentration, stress relief. I wonder if Chinese soldiers gathered in the pink dawn, row after row in flip flops and thin white socks, to practice tai-chi.

"I've got to go," Patrick said. Someone laughed a girlish laugh that definitely didn't belong to the woman on the television. "Call me back in a few minutes."

"But I've got two minutes left." I glanced at my watch; it was getting dangerously close to lights out. "If you hang up I don't know if I'll be able to call back."

"Then just call me whenever," he said and hung up.

The lines were shorter now, only two people between me and the phone, so I went to the end again. Lopez had also gotten back in line along with some new people from the platoon who had made the safer choice of polishing their boots before making calls. My two pairs of boots were upstairs in the female barracks, under my bunk, lined up neatly with my shower shoes. I hadn't even bothered to brush the grass off of them before coming down. The pain of knowing about the bump and needing to tell Patrick outweighed the pain of whatever punishment I'd suffer tomorrow on account of my dirty boots.

I tried not to think about who the laughing girl was. Maybe one of the office staff had just forgotten her wallet in her desk. Maybe I should just go to bed. Tomorrow we would run the bayonet assault course and I didn't want to trip up from

fatigue and stab myself in the eye. The bump itched and I wanted to scratch it. No one thought anything of it if one of the males scratched their balls, even the Drill Sergeants sometimes reached down to absently tug at their crotches in front of the whole Platoon. But it just wasn't the same for a female. Langley swore that one of the females from another platoon was fingering herself in the shower because she'd spent a second too long with a washcloth between her legs.

The bleachers had cleared out considerably and only a few stragglers remained, desperately trying to put a shine on their stubbornly dull boots. Boot polishing was an art, either you were gifted with it or you weren't. Like Gillett who was over on the bleachers still. He always knew just when to apply more polish, when to add some spit, when the rag and not the brush was needed. He could peer beneath the inky layers of Kiwi and draw his reflection out like an image springing to life in a magic mirror. Even though he'd showed me his method, I still couldn't get my boots to look better than frosted glass. He didn't use the phone much. He also didn't seem to carry around the same sense of having lost something that the rest of us had. Maybe he didn't have anyone on the outside.

I wondered if Basic would have been easier if Patrick and I had just stayed apart. Each time we'd broken up I never made it entirely out of Patrick's orbit. Maybe having a state between us would have helped put the thing to an end. The first two breakups happened when Patrick's high drama led to fights that went beyond our capacity to laugh them off. The first time it was because I changed my major from Fine Art to Art History and he felt that he couldn't be with someone who was "willing to suppress her creativity to the academic machine." I told him he was an

idiot; I was never very good at witty retorts. He said that the change was probably for the best, because I didn't have the strength of conviction necessary to become a successful artist.

The most recent break-up was decided without voices raised and with a good amount of rational discussion about why it was not to our advantage to attempt a long distance relationship while I was at Basic. It was so different from our usual way—him casting his darts, me just wanting the fight to end—that I thought it was final this time. I was sad, but relieved too. With two months until I left, I wanted to reclaim the time I usually spent on Patrick for myself.

But after a week of “me time” I couldn't stand being alone and started dating. The string of disappointments that followed and the onrushing reality of leaving for Basic had convinced me that I needed Patrick to see me through this. It had taken a little persuasion; Patrick was enjoying the variety, but he conceded that none of the other girls had my depth of character. I thought it was a sweet and noteworthy observation, but when I repeated it to Alise, she just raised her eyebrows and said, “Doesn't everyone have about the same depth of character?” Which made me think that Patrick had really come back because I was the only girl who swallowed his words like medicine, without questioning their authority. But I needed him more than I doubted him. I was scared of starting this new thing alone.

The wind was kicking up now, rustling the brittle green shrubs that bordered the open sides of the assembly area. Gillett picked up his boots and went alone through the door to the back stairs to the barracks, which were for the males only. I had to commend his daring, since being caught without a battle buddy was one sure

way to get your ass chewed. Females used the wider front stairs, which were open and left little possibility of being cornered and assaulted by a male, Private or Drill Sergeant. Woods was still on the bleachers, which meant I could safely go up with her when I was done.

Twelve minutes left until lights out and Lopez was still ahead of me in line and Iverson was just finishing up on the phone. I ran my tongue over my fuzzy teeth, which I hadn't bothered to brush before I came down. I hadn't even showered and I'd worked up a pretty good sweat earlier practicing with my bayonet tipped rifle: parry right thrust, parry left thrust, butt stroke to the head, butt stroke to the groin. The shower would have to wait until tomorrow night. Sneaking out of bed to brush your teeth after lights out was one thing, but if you took a shower the pipes squealed and some female, kept awake by the noise, would rat you out to a Drill Sergeant.

Besides, I'd discovered that some nights there were more important things than a shower, like sleep or a phone call. The kind of phone calls worth missing a shower for were the ones where my little brother Mike said, in his earnest ten year old voice, how he missed me and I felt like a ball of soft dough was rising inside me. Those were the calls that made me stop shivering, calls that made it possible to imagine warmth again.

Woods tapped me on the shoulder, looked at her watch and then looked at me with her red eyebrows raised up. "Don't worry," I said, but knew she would. "Go on upstairs, I'll be fine." There were still three other people downstairs with me, and one of them was April Walker, so no one could accuse me of being alone with the males.

Woods gave me one last look and bounded up the stairs on her own, taking them two at a time.

When exactly five minutes was up, Lopez hung up the phone. I had less than four minutes until lights out. Patrick didn't pick up until the fourth ring, when the answering machine usually cut in. "Sorry about that," he said and I could hear the residue of laughter in his voice.

"Who was at the door?"

"Just Shelby."

"Shelby?" Then I remembered that Shelby was one of the girls he'd dated, one of the girls he'd probably slept with. She didn't go New College, though, so I couldn't be sure. She bothered me more than the others because I'd gone to middle school with her. Not that I'd been friends with her, she was a grade behind me. Back then she'd been a gangly black girl with big glasses and hair that wouldn't stay neatly pulled back. So, basically a black version of me. I thought my looks had improved quite a lot since then and I was worried that hers had too. "What's she doing there?"

"Nothing. Just came by to say hi."

"At ten o'clock at night?"

"Are you jealous?" There was surprise in his voice and it made me want to reach through the phone and slap the little freckles off his boyish face.

Of course I was jealous. I was here and she was there, making him laugh, putting her hands on him. With a deep breath, I managed to keep my voice from shaking, if he could be calm then so could I. "I thought she took it pretty hard when we got back together."

“She got over it.” He said it a little too carelessly.

“Yeah, like the second I left.”

This morning, as Drill Sergeant Hall had marched us out to the PT field with blunted bayonets in our cargo pockets and our rifles on our shoulders, he called cadence like he was singing the blues.

Ain't no use in calling home

Jody's got your girl and gone

Ain't no use in feeling blue

Jody's got your sister too

Ain't no use in looking back

Jody's got your Cadillac

Patrick sighed and it sounded like he was holding his face away from the phone. “I love you, but you’re really being crazy right now.”

The tone of his voice made me stop. Every other time he said he loved me, I believed him. When he was angry, he wouldn’t say it, so I took that to mean that he was sincere the other times. Just now, “I love you” sounded a lot like “shut up already,” like he only wanted to go back to his pre-recorded commercials.

I gripped the phone tighter, as if I could hold onto Patrick by squeezing the hard black plastic. “You’re changing the subject—”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I spun around, ready to tell whoever it was to back the fuck off. It was Drill Sergeant Lyons, so short he was staring me in

the face, the brim of his felt hat nearly touching my forehead. I dropped the phone and went to parade rest. The receiver fell on its metal cord and clattered against the brick wall. The sound made me jump.

“Fuck,” I said. In the same instant I realized that I’d cursed and that I was the only one left downstairs. Two strikes. I should have known better than to think I could keep track of time while I was arguing with Patrick. I was so scared I almost swore again. “Sh— oot. I’m sorry, Drill Sergeant.”

Instead of yelling, DS Lyons cleared his throat. There was a look in his eyes, like he knew that cutting off our conversation now would make it worse the next time we spoke. It was an uncomfortable feeling, being forced to look at a Drill Sergeant’s face, which I never did voluntarily. I wondered how long he’d been listening. “Lights out, Private. Say goodnight.”

My hand found the dangling phone, out of which Patrick’s voice was squeaking questions. “Gotta go. We’re going to talk about this when I call on Sunday.”

I hung up the phone and fumbled, shoving my calling card back into the ID holder hanging around my neck. DS Lyons shook his head. He always had a teasing smile at the corners of his mouth, but for once it didn’t look amused. I could tell he was debating whether to punish me, but I thought if I could just get out of his sight before he made up his mind I’d be all right. “Moving, Drill Sergeant,” I said, as if he’d ordered me to go. And I bolted for the stairs to the female barracks, expecting any moment for him to tell me to stop and drop.

“You should have said goodnight, Private,” he called after me as my foot hit the first stair. “You’d sleep better.”

“Goodnight, Drill Sergeant,” I shouted back, even though I knew what he really meant.

His laughter followed me up the stairs, a sure sign of my parole. By the time I got to the third floor I was shaking so hard I had to lean against the wall for support. The bump burned like someone had just extinguished a cigarette butt on me. I looked around, just to make sure that DS Lyons hadn’t crept up the stairs behind me, before I scratched it, hissing with relief.

Lewis was sitting up on fireguard and glanced over at me as I came in, too sleepy to be curious, then bowed her head again. The blue hospital-like curtains that we drew across the front of the bay when we were changing— so male Drill Sergeants could stand on the other side and yell at us to hurry up without violating our privacy— were open. Everyone was in their bunks and all the lights were out except for the one in the foyer and the one in the bathroom. I looked at the clock on the wall, its second hand softly ticking, and saw that it was three minutes past lights out. I was still too angry at Patrick to think of being angry at the privates downstairs who had seen me on the phone and gone up to bed anyways, abandoning me to the Drill Sergeants.

The bay congealed around me into the now familiar sound of sixty females trying to find sleep. Fifteen bunks lined one side of the room and fifteen on the other, all the laundry bags hung the same way off the ends of the beds, all the shoes lined up

in the same order. Stepping into the bay felt like a coming home at end of a long semester.

Even though they were just green lumps of various sizes beneath the scratchy wool blankets, I already knew most of these females by name. I walked down the left side of the barracks towards my bed, careful not to step over the line of red tape that marked the rectangle in the middle of the floor where only the Drill Sergeants were allowed to walk. The first bunk was Ahfoon on the bottom— who would pluck your eyebrows using only a piece of thread for five dollars—and Bernhart on top. I touched the metal pole between the top and bottom bunk and I passed.

As I walked my thighs rubbed against each other and worked the itch out of the bump. My anger began to burn out, but I'd keep it smoldering like embers so that I could rekindle the feeling on Sunday when I called Patrick again.

The Cs were next: Chester, Coleman, Crosset and Culper. I touched each bunk and silently wished them goodnight. Then came Deshmukh the tiny Indian girl who, after weeks of subsisting on PB&J or grilled cheese sandwiches, which were the only vegetarian option, was driven by hunger to eat a hamburger made of sacred cow. She had cried until long after lights out that God and her parents would disown her, sharing her terrible secret to a room full of sixty strangers. She would never tell her family. I could never tell anyone here about the bump. I wanted to throw myself out the window at the thought of them knowing, but like Reception, there were metal grates on the windows here too. I touched Deshmukh's bunk as I passed it. Goodnight.

I slipped my running shoes off and lined them up next to my dirty boots beneath the bunk I shared with the other Jones. Sometimes she tossed in her sleep and protested her dreams, but tonight she snored softly, her mouth ajar, like she was practicing rolling a long string of Rs. The skin beneath her eyes was purple as a flower opening to the night, opening up to air out all the day's pain. Gripping the bars of the bunk, I pulled myself up as lightly as possible so as not to wake her. Goodnight Jones.

Bedtime Stories 2

The sides of my index fingers were cracked and the shoe polish had worked its way into the deep fissures like ink on an etching plate. Each night after our ritual boot polishing, after I'd showered and scrubbed my hands with soap and scalding water, I took out my nail clippers and dug around my nails with the pointed end of the file. Each night my nails looked a little less clean when I was done, like the boot polish was sediment slowly accumulating in my nail beds. Maybe it would never go away and one day some future archeologist would unearth my body and be able to tell that I'd spent exactly nine weeks polishing boots every night from the layers of crud ringed my fingernails.

Gillett dipped his rag into the can of shoe polish and rubbed the toe of his boot in tiny circles, the way Drill Sergeant Hall had shown us. "I've got a good one," he said. "So before I came here I was an orderly in a psychiatric facility."

"You were a nurse?" The other Jones snickered.

"Hell no. I don't do bedpans and I don't wipe asses."

I pictured Gillett's bulk stuffed into a short white nurse's dress, the kind they only wear in pornos, and giggled. No one paid any mind; they probably thought I was laughing at the piss and crap talk. Gillett didn't have the hands of a nurse; he had

palms like industrial sized spatulas. His fingernails were all black around the edges, like mine, which made me feel better about my own hands.

“So we had this one midget woman who loved to take things and hide them in her bra: crayons, napkins, her meds. After a while we couldn’t let her wear a bra anymore.”

Woods’ mouth was hanging open a bit and I could see her perfectly straight white teeth, the hallmark of a good childhood orthodontist. “You can’t do that, that’s inhumane.” She was starting to get a little red in the face. “Taking away a woman’s bra is a violation of basic civil liberties.”

“Isn’t forcing a woman to wear a bra the same thing?” I was thinking about angry feminists burning their underwire prisons. Everyone except Woods looked at me with stares as blank as a herd of grazing cows. I must show no fear, they can smell fear. Or was that horses? I bent my head back over my boot and was glad that I couldn’t see my reflection in its murky surface.

Woods grunted. “Either way, it’s wrong.”

“It’s patient safety.” Gillett rolled his eyes in McMentis’ direction, who nodded as if it was common knowledge. “So one day after lunch I’m inspecting the midget’s tray and notice that her spoon was missing. When I go to search her, she screams bloody murder and takes off running. She’s going under the tables and over the backs of couches and I’m chasing after her, trying not to run any of the other patients over.”

“Christ,” McMentis laughed and snorted at the same time. Kelvey twitched slightly, as if the taking of the Lord’s name in vain had physically pained her.

Gillett looked over us to make sure he had our attention. Lopez's eyes were jumping from his boots to Gillett and back again, which made me think he understood more English than he let on. Even Gramps, who generally sat a bit away from us, was leaning in. "I finally grab the midget by the back of her gown and she drops to the floor and all I've got is her shirt in my hand. So now she's running around with her midget boobs flopping all over the place." He put his boot down and flapped his hands in front of his chest to illustrate. Because of the size of his hands I imagined her breasts hanging from her chest like two massive slabs of deflated flesh tipped with nipples the dirty shade of shoe-polish-smudged skin.

I started laughing, then stopped and looked at the door to the Drill Sergeant's office, but it was closed, so I let myself laugh. We all laughed together, even Woods, who seemed to have forgotten that she was mad that the midget didn't have a bra.

"So I get her on the floor and she's screaming at me about touching her titties and I'm just trying to get her under control. The other patients are all hooting and hollering like its Saturday night mud wrestling. Then my buddy busts in and sees me straddling this topless midget and he looked like he didn't know whether to call for more help or take a picture."

We were laughing pretty loudly, but the door to the Drill Sergeant's office was still shut. Around us, the other platoons were sitting on their respective bleachers, polishing boots and talking too, sharing their own stories. McMentis asked Gillett if the midget had pepperoni nipples. Then, McMentis started telling a story about how he'd paid for a dance from this one stripper that he'd been eyeing for her huge boobs.

“She had nipples the size of jumbo pepperonis, biggest damn nipples you ever saw.” Woods and Kelvey and the other Jones made a disgusted sound and turned away as one. The other Jones started telling a story about Mardi Gras that I was pretty sure would just lead back to the subject of breasts. I turned half way, wanting to listen to McMentis, but not wanting the other girls to see I was interested in the stripper story, which I was betting had a better punch line than Jones’ story.

“She was super hot man, so I paid her some more to take off her bikini bottoms. And she starts untying them and she’s dancing all close. And she whips them off and—” he made a sound like a turkey gobbling and wiggled his fingers in front of his face. “She falls out of her damn panties like a roast beef sandwich.”

I snorted. It was the wrong place to make a sound in the other Jones’ story. She was still building up to the punch line, but the guys behind me were laughing and making puking sounds, so it was pretty obvious who I’d been paying attention to. The other Jones’ stopped talking and gave me a look like she’d just caught me eating boogers. I stared back at her. Surely I’d done something crazier than watch my drunk friend flash half of New Orleans. I’d gone white water rafting on the Colorado and bungee jumping in New Zealand. But that wasn’t the sort of thing that we were talking about tonight.

Once, I’d been ejaculated on by a seven foot tall paper mache penis at a Halloween party. The guy had rigged up some sort of pump system that fired streams of hand lotion twelve feet into the air. That was a pretty funny story. It was the kind of thing I thought the others would like to hear, but I’d been wrong before.

While I waited for Jones to finish her story so I could take my turn, I looked out of the open side of the assembly area, where the florescent light spilled out onto the sidewalk. There was a row of hedges that separated us from the sidewalk and on the other side of it two Privates marched by in BDUs, side-by-side, M-16s on their shoulders. They looked like prison guards, though we all had to take turns pulling perimeter security. The Drills claimed it was good practice, that the bases overseas kept roving guards, but I bet overseas they didn't send their guards out with unloaded M-16s. A rifle without bullets was little more than a fancy Billy club. I wondered if the real reason for the night patrols was to make Privates think twice about running away. There was a rumor that across the way in Bravo Company a female had made it as far as the Super 8 outside the main gate before the Drill Sergeants hunted her down.

The patrol passed out of view. I was about to turn back when I saw a face catch the light, then disappear behind the hedge. Terrorist, I thought, my throat closing up. I stared at the hedge, trying to convince myself that I'd imagined the face, that no terrorist would make it onto Fort Jackson, and if he did, he'd certainly find a better target than a bunch of barely trained Privates. The face flashed into the light again, but this time I recognized crazy DS Lyons from first platoon. He looked around the assembly area and then straight at me and put his finger to his lips, then dropped out of sight behind the hedge. He could have run out screaming at us and I wondered if it had something to do with the phone call he'd overheard. Maybe he liked me, or felt sorry for me.

Either way, a Drill Sergeant spying could only mean that he was looking for a reason to smoke us. And I didn't intend to be around when it happened. The other Jones was still talking. I tried to catch Woods' attention, but she was holding her boot up to the light to check if it was shiny enough. Each second I stayed down there was a waste of the get out of jail free card that DS Lyons had handed me.

"Guys," I whispered, trying to turn away so that he wouldn't see me talking.

Other Jones kept right on talking like she hadn't even heard me.

"Guys," I hissed.

Kelvey held her boot up to the light, checking the shine. Woods was staring at Jones, her eyes fixed and unblinking, more asleep than awake. The guys were engrossed in their own story. I couldn't go back to the barracks without a buddy. Just a few seconds ahead of me Langley and Howell had started back.

"I'm heading upstairs. You guys want to come?" I asked.

No one responded. I began to feel like DS Lyons was the only one who could see me. I grabbed my boots and ran after the two females who were already at the foot of the stairs. No one even called after me. Howell gave me a nod and Langley frowned, but they silently accepted my company. We only had two flights of stairs to climb. With each step I expected to hear DS Lyons squeaky little voice as he burst out from his hiding spot and smoked everyone.

Maybe the other Jones was right when she called me a blue falcon after Victory Tower, maybe she'd read it in my face like tea leaves. I'd even left Woods behind, the only person who I cared about. In one instant I'd violated just about every army value I could think of. Loyalty, duty, respect. No, no and no. Selfless

service was more like selfish-service in my case. Certainly no honor or integrity to be found here. As for personal courage, I was now the biggest coward I knew.

Gas Chamber

When the seal on my pro-mask failed inside the gas chamber I thought, for the first time since arriving at Fort Jackson, *I've made a terrible mistake*. Not that I hadn't been wrong before, turned right when the Drill Sergeant called left face. Jacked up, they said, but I was not jacked up.

Ten months ago, when I was thinking about joining, I spent a swampy Saturday in March shadowing two female soldiers around the Sarasota armory. We were sitting outside in the motor pool with a camouflage poncho spread between us. The female soldiers across from me had taken off their BDU jackets and were sweating through their brown undershirts. On the towel between us were two disassembled gas masks, which they were showing me how to clean. I picked up one of the clear plastic lens covers and wiped it with an alcohol pad.

"What's the worst part about basic training?" I asked. They had just finished telling me how easy it was, but I thought the recruiter had told them to say that.

"The rules," said one.

"The gas chamber," said another. "They're going to serve you chili-mac before you go in. Don't eat it."

I followed her advice and tried to warn Woods and the rest of my squad as they scarfed down the meat and pasta mixture, which smelled extra spicy today. They all should have been suspicious when the Drills encouraged us to go for second helpings. They called the dirt road behind the gas chamber Chili-Mac Lane for a reason. I picked at a salad, took a couple bites out of a mushy red apple and drank my mandatory cup of victory punch. That the other recruits could have any appetite at all amazed me. I'd been living with a sour taste in the back of my throat all week, knowing the gas chamber was coming. I could remember news footage from the Gulf War showing soldiers in the gas masks with sirens wailing in the background. It didn't scare me when I was in fourth grade and I couldn't say why exactly I was terrified now. I hadn't suddenly become claustrophobic or developed a fear of suffocating; putting on the mask didn't make me break into a panic. It was the gas.

Lunch over, we formed up and marched down the dirt road to the tear gas chamber. Each step brought the squat cinderblock building closer and as we approached it, the pine trees seemed to make the light turn grey and flat. On a trip to Dachau, I had walked into a similarly unassuming brick structure with the rest of my high school choir, not pausing to read the sign, eager to move on to some cheerier tourist attraction, and found myself staring into the empty arches of the crematory ovens. I hadn't been able to eat the rest of the day.

When our squad was called to line up in front of the door, I began to regret even the salad and the apple. Woods was standing in front of me and her skin was the color of glue beneath her freckles. I checked and checked the mask on my face, cupping my shaking hand to the canister protruding like a metal tumor from the left

side of the mask, breathing in, feeling the reassuring lack of air, the collapse of the mask against my face. The mask was working properly, but that wouldn't keep the gas from getting to me. I knew they'd make us take our masks off inside, the Drill Sergeants had been talking about it all week, how we'd gag and cry. I was so busy testing myself that I didn't notice the instructor coming down the line, doing the same thing. I didn't know he was standing in front of me until he took hold of the air filter and yanked my head around towards him.

“Inhale,” he barked.

And I almost could. Just barely, around my cheeks I felt the tingle of fresh air. Worse still, I heard the unmistakable hiss of a leak. Something in the way he grabbed the mask had thrown it off, allowed a strand of hair or a bit of dirt to come between the rubber seal and my skin. That was all it took, the instructor warned us in class earlier, glaring around at those of us females whose hair refused to stay tamely pulled back. I wanted to take the mask off, to refit it, but it was too late. The front of the line was moving and I was only three back.

“All set?” The instructor at the door asked me, like I was just heading out for a day at the beach.

“My mask leaks,” I said. My voice sounded far away and muffled. “It was fine, but just now it started leaking.” It was no use saying it was the Drill Sergeant's fault. “You'll be fine,” the instructor said and thumped me on the back.

There was no time to argue. The shuffling line of recruits at my back forced me through the door into the swirling green dimness.

The smell hit me, sharp as rancid orange juice, as soon as I stepped inside the small room. I expected burning to follow, but it was just a smell. In the four hours of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare instruction we'd received that morning, the instructors had neglected to mention that the air filter wasn't a smell filter. Seemed like it would have been a good thing to know.

“Keep moving. All the way to the other door.”

“Pack it in tight. Shoulders against the wall.”

Even here we were surrounded by shouting voices. For three weeks now I'd been hounded by this pack of constantly barking dogs, so I no longer flinched when they started in on us.

I turned, following the wall. The exit door was straight ahead and for a minute I hoped they might march us right back out into the sunny Carolina winter and say it was all a joke. But we stopped and were ordered to right face. We turned in unison towards the center of the room. On a little field table a coffee can poured out smoke the color of pea soup like a perverse centerpiece. An instructor watched over it, fully outfitted in a real chemical protective suit, the type you see in the movies, only in olive drab instead of caution yellow. It looked much safer than our MOPP suits. MOPP meant Mission Oriented Protective Posture, but we decided it should stand for “Messy Old Piece of Poop.” It was just a one-piece jumpsuit filled with charcoal powder between layers of cloth. Mine left a fine black trail wherever I walked.

My neck began to tingle, right where my collar rubbed against my hairline. I resisted the urge to scratch my neck, knowing the gas and sweat mixture would only burn my fingers.

“Y’all lucky it ain’t summer,” Drill Sergeant Hall said earlier that morning. “Once you start sweating that gas’ll stick to your skin like stink on a stunk. That gas is no joke.” Of all the Drills, he was the least likely to exaggerate for the sake of scaring us. So when he started talking seriously about the effects of tear gas, I started to think of ways out. I could fake appendicitis so they’d send me to the hospital, but as soon as they figured out nothing was wrong with me, they’d send me to the gas chamber with another company. Every possibility of escape was a dead end that arrived back at this moment.

Inside the chamber, there were four or five masked, hooded people who were clearly not Privates because they were free to move around while we were stuck along the wall at attention. I hoped that DS Hall was behind one of those masks. If something went wrong, he was the one I trusted most to come to the rescue. I usually turned to Woods for help, but she was most useful in social situations. Now we were just two Privates at the mercy of the instructors, equally powerless.

Even though we had rehearsed the steps of the gas chamber exercise before entering, one of the instructors explained again. “Listen up, Privates,” he said. He was a big man, at least six foot three, but his voice sounded pinched and small behind his mask. “When the instructor gives you the go, you will put your thumbs under the chin of your mask and lift bottom of the mask away from your face. Say your rank, full name, social security number and place of birth. Then, lower your mask, clear

your mask by breathing out, test your seal and breathe normally.” He had the bored sound of a flight attendant repeating the safety instructions on the fourth take-off of the day.

I found it difficult to breathe at all. The air filter was letting in too little air and it felt like I was slowly suffocating. Two instructors started at opposite ends of the room. Lewis, standing on the other side of Woods, spoke so fast that her Alabama accent slurred into one long banjo twang and the instructor made her say it again, slowly. My heart was beating so hard that I was sure the left breast of my MOPP suit was jumping like there was a frog in my pocket.

“Private Rachel Margaret Woods,” Woods said as calmly as if she were introducing herself to a stranger. She said her social, each number counting down to my turn. I stepped back, felt the hard concrete wall against my shoulder blades and wanted to melt into it. The MOPP suits were olive drab, good for hiding in the forest, no help in a cinder block gas chamber.

The instructor side-stepped and stood in front of me. It was the tall one and I stared straight ahead at the middle of his chest. He reached out and tapped my shoulders. “Go,” he said.

I took the deepest breath my lungs could hold, remembering the shrill voice of the children’s choir director at church, breathing from the diaphragm. I squeezed my eyes shut, slipped my thumbs under the chin of my mask and lifted it about an inch away from my face. I didn’t feel anything except air on my face. “Private Sylvia Elizabeth Jones,” I said. As soon as I opened my mouth and let the gas in, I could feel it on my tongue like a bad after taste. I began to salivate profusely and I could

feel myself spitting as I recited my social security number. By the time I got to place of birth, I was running out of breath. My face began to tingle, like the first hint of a bad sunburn.

“Done,” he said.

Eyes still closed, I lowered my mask and exhaled with all the air I had left to clear the gas. I pressed my hand over the air filter and inhaled, just a little, sipping the air. The gas hissed in around my face. It was on my tongue and in my nose and I fought the violent urge to cough. I tried to clear the mask again, bending forward to squeeze another breath out of my lungs, but there just wasn't any air left in me. The gas clotted in the back of my throat in a mass of burning phlegm. I coughed, sucking the gas down and once I started I couldn't stop. The Drill Sergeants hadn't said anything about dieing from tear gas, but at that moment I thought I was going to be the first. Unable to speak, bent double, I waved my arm in front of my face, the pre-determined distress signal. A short instructor appeared in front of me, just a blur to my tearing eyes. I couldn't tell her what was wrong, but she knew.

“I'm going to try to seal your mask for you,” she said, her voice calm.

“Breathe out.” She pulled the hood of my mask forward, so that it hung over my face and blinded me, but by that point it was too painful to keep my eyes open. I felt her finger pry between my mask and my forehead, searching for an offending strand of hair. She swept along my cheeks. I tried my best to keep still, even as my chest muscles convulsed with the need to cough. She put my hood back into place, and clasped her hand over the canister.

“Breathe in,” she said. I got another lungful of gas. It felt like it was eating away at the soft tissues of my throat. My eyes watered, my nose ran, I could feel drool and snot pooling up in the chin of my mask.

“Your mask won’t seal,” the woman shouted over my hacking. No shit, I wanted to scream at her, even though she sounded genuinely sorry. “You’ll have to start over if you run out, so just hang in there another thirty seconds.”

I didn’t know if I could do this for another thirty seconds. The door was three people in front of me, just three running steps to freedom. And then right back in line for the gas chamber. Or I could keep running, find a way to get home and get discharged, go back to school. My family and friends would welcome me back with a big party. But long after they’d forgotten about the three weeks I’d spent in the Army, I’d remember this moment.

There was nothing else to do, so I threw a temper tantrum. I jumped up and down and stomped my feet. I screeched behind my useless mask. My arms, now beyond my control, flopped at the elbows like the wings of a wounded bird. I knew everyone was looking at me and for once I didn’t care.

It lasted for about ten seconds until a Drill Sergeant came over and grabbed me by the shoulders. “Calm down, private, or I’ll let you out last.”

It was the only thing that could have made me stop.

“Alright,” the tall instructor said, “by groups of five, remove your mask, open your eyes and take a deep breath. First group, go.”

If I’d been down towards the end of the line I wouldn’t have made it. I yanked off my Kevlar, then my mask.

“Open your eyes, private,” a voice shouted in my face.

My eyes were gummed shut with sticky stuff and I had to use my fingers to pull my eyelids apart. A rectangle of light opened in front of me and I bolted forward half a step, running into Wood’s back. If she’d been smaller than me I might have kept right on going, but the collision kept my in my place. The instructor waited just long enough to make sure every one of us was wracked with coughing before he said, “First group, walk, do not run, through the door. Go.” I didn’t care about not running, I shoved past Woods and burst out into the air.

“Flap! Flap your arms to get the gas off,” someone said.

“Good Jones, you look freakin’ ugly.” The voice belonged to DS Sanchez, but it was all I could do to slit my eyes open just long enough to make out a dark shape sitting on the top rail of a fence. “You going to puke, Good Jones?”

“No, Drill Sergeant.” I forced a reply, even though talking brought me closer to gagging. Not to reply would have given him an excuse to smoke me for disrespect. I coughed and brought up a big ball of burning phlegm, which dribbled off my lower lip.

He laughed as I flapped past him down Chili-Mac Lane. My throat felt as if it had been scoured with steel wool and there was the chemical taste of the gas in my mouth. My face was wet with tears, which etched two burning trails into my cheeks. A continuous rope of bright yellow snot dangled from my upper lip, swinging lower with each step. It reached my knees before it fell onto the dirt road.

At the end of the lane there was a loop in the road. We swung around it like vultures circling. Once the effects wore off, the other recruits got back into platoon

formation. I was still flapping, trying to air myself out, when the first squad of Fourth Platoon came fumbling and choking out of the chamber. I could see a little by then and I watched April Walker bend over the fence next to DS Sanchez and lose her lunch. Any other day I would have been happy to see bossy, Drill-Sergeants'-favorite Private Walker brought low, but now I only thought how much that chili-mac would hurt coming up a gas-burnt throat. DS Sanchez laughed so hard he nearly fell backwards off the fence.

“Hey, fall in down there,” DS Sanchez shouted at the few of us still shuffling around the circle. We had to yield our holding pattern to the Fourth Platoon soldiers fresh out of the chamber, but I felt like I needed another hour to just move through the fresh air.

I looked over the Platoon as I fell in at the end of my squad, but no one was looking back and I was pretty sure that they had been too caught up in their own fear inside the gas chamber to wonder about the identity of the Private who had freaked out. Woods knew, of course, but that was all right. She took charge of me like a parent tending a sick child. I was still coughing too much to help myself. Woods unhooked my mask carrier from around my waist and handed it over to Gillett, who put it back in my rucksack. Then, she helped me out of my MOPP suit and packed it away too. I was so grateful that I began to cry, but crying was indistinguishable from my post-gas chamber state, so no one noticed.

“Pull it together, Privates,” he said as he walked up to us. Even though he addressed the whole Platoon, he meant me, because I was the only one still sniffing and clearing my throat. It was one thing to lose it inside the gas chamber, but it was

another thing to come apart in front of the whole Platoon. Everyone snapped to attention, but I could feel their eyes on me, the ones standing in front of me too. We were supposed to keep our gaze straight ahead at attention, but we'd already learned to look without moving our eyes. Around us, the light through the pines was flat and gray and I wanted to fade out to match. I tried not to cough, not to move. I felt like a rag doll held together with fraying thread.

“Right face,” DS Sanchez called. In the little pause between “right” and “face” the Platoon’s attention shifted suddenly. I felt it swing away from me with a signal silently communicated, like a flock of birds changing course mid-air. There was a field of patchy grass in front of us, and beyond that a paved road and a little ways up the road a white school bus waiting to take us back to the barracks, where there were showers and fresh uniforms. They were thinking of the clean smell of soap. They marched forward and I followed, the gas scent still drifting off of them sharp in my nose, their draft cool on my singed face. I felt relief from the weight of their attention, from the threat of humiliation; my seams had been tested and would hold.

Dear Dad,

We did the gas chamber today. I put in a postcard with the letter that shows some pictures of what it was like. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. My mask leaked and I breathed a lot of the tear gas. They said the effects would go away in an hour, but here I am on fire guard at three AM and my throat and nose and eyes are still burning from it. They lie about a lot of stuff here. It's definitely no summer camp.

When you compared my training to your experience in the corporate world, it made me think I haven't been clear about what I'm doing here. Yesterday, we had bayonet training. Imagine standing five feet across from your buddy, taking a swing with your bayonet tipped rifle and knowing that if you were two feet closer there'd be intestines on the ground. All the while the Drills are screaming, "What makes the green grass grow?" And you're screaming back, "Blood, blood, bright red blood!" It's a different kind of cut throat from middle management in the advertising industry.

Please don't write back and say that I'm letting the situation dictate my reaction, like it's something I can control. I know you mean well, but your marketing philosophy isn't going to help. A male in one of the other companies drank pine oil, the stuff we use to mop the floors, last week. He almost died, whether he meant to or not. So, you see it isn't just me, everyone is feeling the strain and rightfully so. I'm not trying to be dramatic, I'm just trying to make you understand what it's like here. Because you write things like I need to call Blue Cross between the hours of eight and

five on a weekday to select a primary care physician. If I ask my Drill Sergeants for day time phone privileges, they'll probably laugh and smoke me for thinking that I'm special, then revoke my weekly phone call just for asking. That's what it's like here.

Anyway, I have to go. I spent more time on this letter than I planned and I still need to write to Mom and Mike.

Sleep well,

Private Jones

Dear Mom,

We did the gas chamber today. My mask leaked while I was in there, so I got a taste of the gas, but I made it through alive. Tell Mike I had a big rope of snot hanging down almost to my knees afterwards, bright green like that gak stuff he plays with. I'm glad it's done with, my stomach was in knots all week thinking about it and I could hardly eat. You know it takes a lot to make me miss a meal!

*Next week should be better since it's the end of the Phase One, three weeks down already. After the Phase One tests we're doing a one night bivouac, which is what the Army calls sleeping in the woods. Remember the time we went camping in Myakka and some wild boar came snuffling around at two in the morning and you told Mike that they were the three little pigs from the story *The Three Little Pigs* and the Big Bad Wolf? We were probably lucky we didn't get gored or something. No pigs up here to worry about, just the other Jones, who snores like one.*

Sorry this letter is so short, but I'll call on Sunday hopefully. Almost everyone goes to church on Sunday, but Woods told me that if you don't go they let you use the phone as long as you want.

Hugs and kisses,

Syl

A Girl and Her Gun

I wasn't surprised by the weight of my M-16 the first time the armorer handed it to me. Every time we went out on a road march or practiced for the Drill and Ceremony competition we went up to the arms rooms door, one by one, and received a rifle made of hard molded plastic which weighed just about the same. We called the fake ones "rubber duckies," but I wouldn't have let go of it in the deep end of a pool.

We took our new, real rifles up to the barracks where we learned the names and functions of its pieces as we took them apart and assembled them again. Putting the parts of the rifle back together was easy. The day after Christmas my dad and I always opened a big one thousand piece puzzle and spread the pieces over the formal dining room table, which I never remembered using except for that purpose. The puzzle would last us at least until Easter. My dad worked the outside first, looking for the bits with the straight edges. I worked slower because I grouped the pieces by the pictures on them, all the grass in one pile, all the sky in another.

The next part, learning how to correctly hold the rifle in the prone was much more difficult. The barracks floor was hard tile and we had to lie on our stomachs, our entire upper body propped on our elbows, rifle tucked securely against the

shoulder. A few minutes of this position made my elbows feel like they were being ground into glue. Even though we were supposed to be practicing muzzle awareness— meaning don't point your weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot— there were too many people in the room to help it. Looking through the closest sight, which was a tiny pin hole, I lined the farthest sight, the stick, up on the closest target: Woods. She had her nose jammed up against the charging handle, just like we'd been shown; only my arms were too short or the weapon was too long. She was taking aim at McPherson and Iverson, who were talking about deer hunting. I was pretty sure that Woods was imagining redneck hunting. Her finger was steady on the trigger until they mentioned "buck" or "deer" or "doe" and then she'd squeeze one and I could see her rifle jump just a little, which it was not supposed to do. A sign of squeezing the trigger too hard or too suddenly, rather than pulling back gently, as the Drill Sergeants had explained.

The two deer hunters had obviously been transitioned from toy guns to real ones shortly after they could walk. They looked as comfortable on their elbows as if they were kicked back on the couch and their rifles rested easy in their hands. My mother had forbidden me to have toy weapons of any kind. I was eight before she allowed me to have a water gun, and only because they'd come out with a new line that resembled the laser weapons out of a bad sci-fi movie, rather than real pistols. And then only because I was going to a birthday party where the kids had been told to bring water guns so we could play water tag. I had to beg her. She wanted to send me with a plastic shopping bag full of water balloons and didn't seem to understand why the other kids would laugh at that.

Drill Sergeant Hall was working with McMentis, who had his rifle cocked to the side like a gangster with a one-handed hold on a .40.

“C’mon now, Private, you ain’t on the block in Philly,” DS Hall said.

I lined up the front sight stick in the middle of the rear sight circle right on McMentis’ trigger finger. His inner city tough attitude didn’t strike me as a front. I was betting he had shot a gun at someone before, but the real question was whether he’d aimed for the middle of their body, or for an arm or a leg. In other words, did he shoot to kill?

“Shoot to kill” was a phrase the Drill Sergeants used when they wanted us to perform a task with intent. You could be facing a six foot wall on an obstacle course and hear them shout “Shoot to kill, Private.” Now, sighting down the barrel of a rifle at my platoon members it had a new meaning. I shifted to the right, my elbows screaming in protest, and got the other Jones in my aim, and placed the tip of the stick on her rib cage. Center mass was what we’d been instructed to aim for in the black silhouettes we’d be firing at when we got out to the range. I breathed out, waited until the pause between breaths, and pulled slowly back on the trigger. The other Jones dropped flat on the floor and my rifle gave a click that I felt more than heard.

DS Adams spotted her lying down the second her chest touched the ground. “Get up, Private. You think Al-Qaeda is taking a nap right now?” The other Jones said something about her elbows, which I couldn’t hear above the noise. “You think the Taliban is going to leave off killing our soldiers because their elbows are sore?” No one stopped talking about their rifles to pay attention because we were already aware that Al-Qaeda marched faster than us, through the mountains, in the snow, with

no shoes on their feet. They were more resourceful, better disciplined and they believed, without question, in their cause. The Drill Sergeants said this kind of stuff because they meant to motivate us to push ourselves harder. Given the fact that about half of us were here for college money or some reason other than the urge to fight a war of convictions, I had the feeling we'd be screwed if not for our superior technology. UAVs, bunker busting bombs, satellite guided missiles, they all made killing so impersonal and easy, palatable for us non-jihadists.

Turning just slightly to the right, I had DS Adam's leg in my sights. I imagined being huddled in thin clothing high in the mountains of Afghanistan. Of course, I was a man, otherwise I'd have trouble aiming my soviet made AK-47 rifle through the fabric screen of a *burka*. A lone American soldier appeared on the hill below me. At this moment, would I hesitate and have to goad myself to action by remembering the man who trained me with this rifle? Who told me that the Americans would not rest until I was wiped from the face of the earth? Or upon seeing the desert colored camouflage would I simply let out my breath and pull the trigger with a steady finger?

"Good form," DS Adams said, looking straight at me. "But you can knock out twenty for pointing your weapon at me."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant." Fuck you, I thought.

If they didn't want us aiming at people, they should have arranged us in a circle facing the outside of the room. All it would have taken was a simple command. Instead, they were too lazy to organize us, but punished us anyway.

We weren't allowed to let our rifles touch the ground, so I had to do my pushups with my rifle laid across the tops of my hands, the weight of it pressing into the small bones. "One, Drill Sergeant," I counted out loud. There were no bullets in my magazine, but I wished that there were so I could have shot DS Adams. I didn't care that he was one of the good Drill Sergeants or that he was attractive, at that moment, the injustice of my punishment outweighed all that. He hadn't killed my father or interrogated my brother or raped my sister, none of the atrocities of war. He made me do twenty push-ups and I was ready to pronounce a death sentence.

Back in the mountains, I released the breath I'd been holding and fired.

The Best Story

“It’s too fucking early,” Jones muttered as we left the barracks and started down the stairs side by side, our breath leaving twin vapor trails in the freezing pre-dawn air. When we walked in pairs we always walked side by side, because the Drill Sergeants told us that was how to walk in pairs.

“We have to get to KP early if we want to get on the serving line,” I said.

“I don’t care what they put us on. I would have rather had the extra fifteen minutes sleep.”

I would have rather had kitchen patrol with any other female in our platoon. If we got stuck on some shitty duty she’d bitch all day about how we should have got up earlier. If we got a good job she’d probably keep whining about sleep.

We came out of the stairwell into the breezeway where the wind tried to throw us backwards. The other Jones tucked her chin down into her chest, making the collar of her camouflage blouse swallow her neck like a turtle’s shell. Neither of us had worn long underwear, knowing we’d be in the warm kitchen all day.

Without meaning to, I matched the other Jones’ shorter strides, my right foot hitting the ground in time with hers. Our boot-falls echoed in the empty breezeway and we sounded liked a squad of ten, rather than just two. The building was silent

and heavy around us. Everyone else was still upstairs in the barracks, sleeping on top of their green wool blankets so they wouldn't have to make their beds when they rolled out of them at ten till five for physical training.

Jones opened the glass door with its blocky gold letters that read DFAC. I wasn't sure what it stood for and didn't understand why they couldn't just call it a chow hall, or a cafeteria. We passed through the vestibule, with its metal bars that formed three separate lines, like a fast food joint. Here, we divided between Active Duty, National Guard and Reserves before every meal, shouted out the last four digits of our social security number and signed our names before each meal. I had a vague idea that this procedure had something to do with which organization was paying for our meals, but the Drill Sergeants had never actually explained this ritual. After being here a month I'd learned it was better not to ask unnecessary questions. We went through a second glass door and walked past the darkened, empty food line. The long plastic sneeze guards hovered like ghosts, reflecting the lights from the dining area.

Mr. Williams, the old civilian who ran the DFAC, was already sitting at his usual table, just outside the hip-high metal divider that separated the Drill Sergeant's eating area from the Privates. He had his newspaper in one crabbed hand, coffee in the other—both contraband items for privates—his Vietnam Veteran's cap pushed back on his age-spotted forehead. Only one pair of males had arrived ahead of us, but when I pointed that out Jones only grunted and rubbed her eyes. We signed in on the clipboard on Mr. William's table, name, last four, A Company, Second Platoon and time of arrival.

The floor to ceiling windows that looked out on the unlit breezeway made a dark backdrop for the bright orange tables and unpadded booths. I was facing the windows and the other Jones sat across from me, strands of her light brown hair had escaped her sloppy bun and floated like clouds around her moon-round face, which was cratered by a deep dimple in her chin. Even though the Drills called us Good Jones and Bad Jones and treated us like twins, beneath the glasses and the uniform we looked nothing alike. And when she was quiet, like she was now, it was harder to see her as a negative image of myself. I just saw the other Jones, a girl from Louisiana who, after a month of training together, I couldn't claim to know much about beyond the obvious facts that she was ten pounds heavier, two inches shorter and a whole lot more unhappy with the experience of Basic Training.

“Morning, ladies.” Gillett slipped into the booth next to me. Even in February he was tan and looked fresh despite the pre-dawn hour. McMentis sat down with the other Jones, the dark circles around his eyes blacker than usual, so that the white of his eyes shone like headlights. He looked like an extra that had stumbled off the lot of a zombie movie.

“Morning,” I said.

McMentis snorted. “It’s still the middle of the fucking night.” He always had something smartass to say. Maybe he and the other Jones could gripe together and I could have Gillett to myself again, like I had earlier in the week.

This past Monday was Presidents Day, a training holiday. The Drills rolled a TV out into the assembly area and the whole Company sat in the bleachers and watch war movies all day. During *Saving Private Ryan* Gillett sat next to me and we played

hangman. When he asked me about Patrick, I was surprised that he remembered my boyfriend's name. Between games I told him how Patrick was complaining that being apart from me was so hard on him, that it was causing him stress. Of course, I didn't mention the bump, which had gone away on its own a week later, but was still causing friction between us. The third hangman phrase I solved was, "Your boyfriend is a pussy." It was sweet, in a strange way.

The smell of coffee brewing made my stomach tighten and grumble. Behind me, I heard Mr. Williams over by the coffee percolator greet the Drill Sergeant. There was always a Drill Sergeant on KP with us. If anyone got out of hand they didn't want the civilians who worked in the kitchen to have to deal with us.

"It's Drill Sergeant Sanchez," McMentis said, glancing over enviously at the coffee pots within the Drill Sergeant's corral. The coffee was only for the Drill Sergeants and the DFAC workers.

"Good," I said. He had a mean streak, but as long as you slipped beneath his notice you'd be left alone.

There were more soldiers coming in now and DS Sanchez told us to go ahead and roll up our sleeves and unblouse our pant legs, which helped us stay cool while we worked around the hot food and ovens and steamy dish room. Gillett turned towards me with his arms out and I rolled his sleeves for him, since it was almost impossible to do it right— so that you ended with the camouflage pattern facing out— with just one hand. I liked the way his skin was soft, but the muscle was solid just beneath.

Even though I'd persuaded Patrick to go to the gym with me as I prepared for Basic, he never seemed to put any muscle on his lanky six foot frame. When we were having sex and I grabbed his wrists, I could feel the bones shift beneath my fingers. The two boys I'd dated in high school had been delicate and skinny, respectively. It might be nice to feel a heavy, muscular body crushing me into the bed for a change.

As I rolled Gillett's sleeves, I was suddenly aware of my ragged nails and torn cuticles, the grubby look of permanent dirt that highlighted every pore and line. My face felt naked without makeup to hide my pimples and eye bags and I felt ridiculous. This place was meant to shape our bodies into objects of utility, not fit to feel anything besides pain, certainly not meant to feel desire.

"I'll do yours," Gillett offered. There was no way to decline without seeming weird, but I didn't want him to roll back my cuffs and see my arms. In kindergarten, once Amy started calling me gorilla arms and four eyes, all the boys followed her lead. There were other four eyes in the class, but only one gorilla girl. When his fingers brushed the long, dark hairs on my arms I wished that I'd shaved them.

"Assignments!" Mr. Williams shouted and everyone got quiet fast. "Hot food servers." He called the two males that had beat Jones and me, then he called our names.

"Excellent," Jones said and smiled, which didn't happen often.

"Aren't you glad we got up early?" I asked.

"Yeah, thanks for dragging my dead ass out of bed." It was the first time she'd thanked me for anything. It almost made up for Victory Tower, when she

should have thanked me for talking her down the thirty foot rappelling wall, but had yelled at me instead. The day might not be so bad after all.

McMentis and Gillett got the salad bar, which was easy, but tempting because you also had to refresh the spread of Mrs. Smith's pies and cakes when dessert started to run low. And you were more closely watched because the Drill Sergeants always hung around the desserts and soft serve machines at lunch and dinner. They'd never given me any trouble about dessert, but after the first PT test DS Sanchez stopped the other Jones and told her to think twice about putting that piece of cake on her plate. She'd failed all three events: push-ups, sit-ups and the two mile run. She took a slice of carrot cake anyways and topped it with vanilla ice cream. I didn't blame her for defying DS Sanchez, at least not that first day. He was barely taller than me with arms and legs like sticks and a small, hard beer gut, hardly the picture of fitness. If DS Adams, or DS Hall, who looked like the impossibly broad-shouldered heroes of a comic book, had given the warning it would have meant something. That was before I realized that it didn't matter who told Jones not to take a dessert. If she wanted it, she was going to get it. Her attitude annoyed me, but I admired her a little too. When DS Sanchez told me to finish my chili-mac because I was too skinny, I finished it, even though I could tell the meat was recycled from yesterday's hamburgers.

We had to eat our breakfast in a hurry before everyone else got back from PT. Then we put on our plastic aprons, tucked our hair up under our hats, put on latex gloves and waited behind the sneeze guard, presiding over gleaming silver trays of steaming food.

“I don’t get grits,” I said. Jones was in charge of grits and oatmeal. I had the eggs, hard boiled and scrambled.

“What’s not to get?” She asked. This morning I’d noticed that she dotted her grits with Tabasco sauce. We couldn’t exactly talk with only seven minutes to stuff a meal in our mouths, so between bites I watched what other people ate. Gillett got boiled eggs, like me, but he sprinkled them with pepper instead of salt.

Jones stirred the grits around with a long-handled metal spoon and they made a sound like wet paint. They were white and grainy, but looked better than the oatmeal this morning, which was gray and clumpy.

“I don’t know. They just look gross.”

“So then say that,” she said, sounding annoyed. “What’s so hard about saying ‘I think grits are fucking disgusting.’?”

Our conversation was cut short as soldiers filed into the entry room, shouted their last four and fell silent as they entered the chow hall, single file, and took their trays. They were wearing gray sweat suits, ARMY printed across the chest and down the sides of their legs. Their faces were red and some of the big males were still sweating. It was Monday, which meant they’d been running. I recognized some of the females, who were members of first platoon. The males were strangers to me, since I never saw them except as a sea of faces when we had Company formations and I certainly never spoke to them, having no business with anyone outside my own Platoon.

“Good morning. Would you like some eggs?” I asked the first Private through the line.

“Scrambled eggs, please,” he said.

I cut into the rubbery scrambled eggs with the side of my spoon and heaped them into the big space on the pre-molded tray. The scrambled eggs were always either runny or rubbery, and I suspected they came out of a box, which was why I only ate the boiled ones.

Walker was the second one through the line. Lately, she and some of the other black females had been holding nightly courts on her bunk and if you pissed them off you’d end up with the worst shift when Walker made up the fire guard roster. “Eggs?” I asked her.

“Scrambled eggs, hooah!” She shouted with what could only be false enthusiasm this early in the morning. She was always putting on a show. If there was an illustrated dictionary of military slang, her picture would appear next to the entry for “spotlighter.”

I gave her slightly less than a full spoon of eggs. She eyed me like she was going to say something, but DS Sanchez walked by and she moved on to the other Jones.

“Grits or oatmeal?” The other Jones asked.

“Grits,” Walker said, leaving out the fanfare this time.

“Grits, hooah!” Jones shouted back at her in a perfect Walker impersonation.

Walker was so startled that she dropped her tray onto the trio of silver bars on her side of the sneeze guard. Eggs and grits went flying, splattering her sweats and the poor kid next to her, who yelped as he caught some grits in the eye. The third guy in line started laughing a big gut-rumbling laugh and DS Sanchez charged over to see

what the noise was about. Everyone around them froze, their eyes on their trays or fastened straight ahead because if you showed too much interest in people being punished you were likely to end up joining them. Once he hustled Walker, grits-in-the-eye and the laughter out into the breezeway, the serving line started moving again. Being on the serving line, I had a good view out the big window-wall and watched with secret pleasure as DS Sanchez yelled at Walker over the poor form of her push-ups.

“You know you’re going to have second shift on fire guard for the next week,” I said to the other Jones. Second shift was the worst because there was hardly enough time to fall asleep before you had duty and so you lost half a night of sleep.

Jones was smiling and shook her head. “It’ll be worth it.”

Out in the breezeway the two males’ arms were shaking and Walker had gone to her knees. Jones was so absorbed in watching the punishment that she poured grits on top of one guy’s scrambled eggs and didn’t even notice. I suddenly felt bad for the two males. They hadn’t done anything wrong other than having the poor luck to being in line behind Walker. Out in the hallway DS Sanchez finished yelling at them and sent them to the back of the line.

“I feel bad for those two males,” I said between scoops of eggs.

“Casualties of war,” Jones said as she flung a sticky pile of oatmeal onto a tray. “Besides, I saw you grinning too.” But I knew I shouldn’t have. That was the difference between us; we both did bad things sometimes, but I was the only one who felt guilty afterwards.

We served all of Alpha and Bravo companies, about five hundred people total. Then we had to clean up, using graying rags to pull the hot serving trays out of the counter and taking them back to pots and pans for washing. Once we'd wiped everything down and swept and mopped the floors, we picked our tables and just hung out.

This was the secret thing I'd learned about the Army. That neat formation of soldiers running somewhere like the security of the nation depended on their swift arrival was going to get wherever they're going and then stand around for about an hour until someone figured out who was in charge. We called it "hurry up and wait." We'd cleaned the serving line as fast as we could to sit around for the next four hours and until we served lunch.

We were supposed to be reading our Smart Books— our how-to-be-a-soldier manual— the only book besides a bible or Koran or Wiccan Guide to Witchcraft that we were allowed to have in our possession. But since it was DS Sanchez on duty, he didn't care if we talked, so long as he could hear whoever was on the other end of his cell phone.

"Maria, you're so paranoid," he was saying into the phone. He started talking loudly in rapid Spanish. Even though I'd taken three years of Spanish in high school I couldn't pick out a single word.

No one had any paper to play tic-tac-toe or hangman and we were pretty desperate to keep talking because silence meant falling asleep. And falling asleep was a sure way to end up out in the breezeway doing pushups.

"Twenty questions?" I ventured.

“That’s gay,” Jones yawned.

“You’re gay,” McMentis said.

“Your mom’s gay,” the other Jones shot back and they laughed.

It was a stupid joke that went around the platoon, where insults got turned back on the insulter’s mother. But we could only do it out of shot of the Drill Sergeants because they didn’t like us talking trash about moms, even when we were playing. And they really, really didn’t like us saying “gay.” Even if someone just complained that an inanimate object was gay— like the hand grenade simulators which only made an unimpressive popping sound and let out a little puff of smoke— that person would have to do pushups for their language. And “fag” uttered within their earshot was by far the worse of the two “F” words.

“Where you from anyways, Jones?” Gillett said, looking across the table at her. I tried to judge his interest, but the expression on his face was just polite and I decided he was only trying to make conversation.

“Shreveport, Louisiana,” she said. “It’s up in the northwest corner, not too far from the Texas border. It’s probably eighty degrees down there right now.”

“You miss home?” I asked, thinking I’d heard a hint of longing in her voice.

“I miss the weather,” she said.

“Not your mom and dad?” I missed Florida’s warm winters, but not more than I missed my family or Patrick, or my friends at college.

“We don’t call him Dad, we call him Sir.” She shrugged and looked around the table with an empty face, as if purposely displaying how little she cared that she

had a Sir instead of a Dad. I wondered if the letters from Sir were filled with the same proud platitudes that mine wrote. Maybe he didn't write to her at all.

“So why the Army? Really.” McMentis looked at Jones from beneath almost closed eyes and leaned back in the booth like he was tipping back a chair, though the booth was bolted to the ground. During our first Drill Sergeant's time we'd gone around the room, introduced ourselves, said where we were from and why we joined the Army. The answers were all the same, either, “I did it because of 9/11” or some patriotic variance or “I did it for the college money.” I picked the college money, Jones had picked the patriotic answer.

“My grandpa was an Army pilot before the Air Force was made,” she said, “and he sent his three sons into the Air Force. And all their sons went into the Air Force.”

“But you're a daughter,” I said.

“Does it matter anymore?” She asked.

McMentis snorted, but kept his mouth shut. I'd heard him gripe about having to train with females when he thought we weren't listening.

“I guess not,” I said. If Woods were with us she'd be red as her hair and would've launched into a diatribe about how a female truck driver could die just as quickly in Afghanistan as an infantry soldier on patrol.

“So why aren't you in the Air Force, if that's the family tradition?” McMentis asked. I was curious too, but there was something in Jones' expression, a tightness in her jaw that made me think it was a sensitive topic.

“Because the Army is where the action is,” Gillett said. I wasn’t sure if he realized that he was saving Jones or if his enthusiasm had prompted him to barge in. “Can’t be on the ground, doing real battle in the Air Force. I want to lead guys into combat for a couple years, get out, go private sector.”

“Good plan,” McMentis said, “If you don’t want to worry about a long life.”

“Besides, if you want to lead you’ve got to be an officer, otherwise you’re just a grunt,” the other Jones said. I suspected that Sir demanded his title, even from his children, because he was an officer and that he was not impressed my his daughter’s decision to be a grunt.

Gillett shrugged her off. “You going to be an officer Jones? You seem like the type,” he said to me. My heart beat faster all of a sudden at the thought of standing up in front of a bunch of soldiers, giving orders. It made me want to throw up, but it was exciting too, knowing that Gillett thought I could do it.

“Yeah, I could see you being a paper pusher,” McMentis said.

The other Jones nodded in agreement. “You’re so organized.”

“Oh,” I said, the thrill going out of me like air from a punctured balloon. “I think I’ll just do my six enlisted and get out. I just joined for college money and I didn’t want to have a big debt hanging over me, you know?” This was the same practiced line that had worked on all my college friends, had even made me a bit of a hero among them. I was the first one of them to do something other than take out loan after loan.

“Time in service is a pretty big fucking debt,” McMentis said.

The way he spit out the words with so much bitterness made me look at him, really look. His rolled up sleeves showed the old track marks on his arms that I saw him scratching when he thought no one was watching. I would have assumed they were chicken pox scars if I hadn't overheard him telling one of the other guys about how much heroine he used to shoot. "What about you?" I asked him.

"Me?" He took the straw out of mouth and stuck it back in his cup of water. "If I hadn't come here I would've ended up in jail. I thought this would be better."

We were all silent. We hadn't expected him to tell the truth.

"Is it?" I asked after a while. "Better?"

"How the fuck should I know, I'm here, aren't I?"

No one said anything. Gillett took out his Smart Book and read about infantry tactics. McMentis stared at the ceiling and Jones stared at her hands. I took a paper napkin out of the dispenser on the table, intending to doodle on it. Disturbed by the movement of the dispenser, a baby cockroach no bigger than my pinky fingernail crawled out from underneath it and into the middle of our table. Its stubby antennae waving a greeting. The other Jones shrieked and jumped in her seat. McMentis picked up with silver napkin dispenser and crushed it with one crunching blow. The noise made DS Sanchez look over.

"Just a roach, Drill Sergeant," McMentis called as he wiped up the gooey yellow and brown remains with a napkin and took it to the trash.

DS Sanchez started singing, "*La cucaracha, la cucaracha, la cucaracha* in your lunch, *la cucaracha, la cucaracha*, gives your salad a nice crunch." Jones turned pale and covered her mouth and DS Sanchez laughed and got up for another

cup of coffee. DS Sanchez was never in a good mood unless someone had fallen down or thrown up.

“Did I tell you guys the story about the roach?” Gillett asked.

“I don’t think I want to hear it,” Jones said. When she wrinkled her nose she bore an unfortunate resemblance to a pig, especially as pale and waxy as she looked right now.

Gillett told it anyways. “So I got stuck back on pots and pans, with Lopez and some girls from first platoon. We’re back there sweating our asses off because they’d just sprayed for bugs so every pot in the whole place had to be washed. And I feel something on the back of my knee and I just thought it was some sweat. But then I feel it move up.”

“Oh God,” Jones said and covered her mouth again. It seemed so fake that I thought there must be a school of bad acting in Louisiana that taught young girls that gesture. Then, she made a wet choking sound and I suddenly wondered if I could vault into the booth behind me fast enough to avoid getting puked on. She managed to swallow it down.

“So I jump and start shaking my leg and a freakin’ cockroach falls out of my pants. It was this big, I swear,” he said, holding up his thumb. “A big fat mama cockroach in my pants.”

“Sick man.” McMentis said, a skeletal grin stretching his face.

“I’m jumping around and cussing and the girls see it and start screaming and the Drill Sergeant runs back and screams at us for making all this noise. And Lopez is trying to explain to him in his Spanglish about the roach while I’m still wiggling out

and looking down my pants to see if there's more of them in there. So we all ended up outside, getting the shit smoked out of us." That was how most of our stories ended, with someone getting punished.

While the others were laughing, I was imagining Gillett with his BDU shirt off, his brown t-shirt tight against his chest, his tanned skin glowing in the steam from the sinks. In reality he would have been wearing one of those cheesy plastic aprons and his t-shirt would have been soaked through and stale with sweat, but in my imagination I left that part out.

"You think that's funny?" McMentis said and told us about how he was getting it on with his underage girlfriend when they heard a car in the driveway and she'd made him climb out her window. Only the window was two stories up and he fell off the roof and broke his arm. Her dad had to drive him to the hospital and the whole time McMentis had a boner that wouldn't die.

When we were done laughing, McMentic looked at me and cocked an eyebrow, daring me to take up the torch. This was one of our amusements, trading funny stories, though we usually did it at night when the whole platoon gathered in the bleachers to shine boots. I mostly listened, though, and commented on other people's stories, too scared that I'd stumble trying to tell one of my own. It wasn't that I didn't have stories to tell. I thought the one about getting separated from our guide and stuck in a canyon full of goats in Jordan was funny, but I didn't want them to think I was being pretentious. They didn't seem like the kind of people who grew up taking summer vacations abroad.

Jones was smirking a little, her eyes rolling towards McMentis to say *this should be lame* and even Gillett looked away, like he knew there was no help for it. I realized that the whole time I'd been trying not to make a fool of myself, I'd been earning a reputation for being boring. Worse than boring even, a flat line like the dying beep of a EKG machine. I was interesting, though, and had stories to tell. Woods would have stood up for me, but she wasn't there, so I had to do it myself.

"Here's one," I started. "I was in a gay bar."

"What?" Jones shot back in her seat like she was trying to push away from the table, only the booth was bolted to the floor. I immediately knew I'd started too far in, though I certainly had their attention now.

"Are you a dyke?" McMentis asked.

"You can't ask that," the other Jones said.

"But I think she told it first, right?"

"I'm not a dyke," I hissed, angry that I'd lost control of the story one line in. "Let me back up. It was Coming Out week at my college."

"What's that?" Jones asked.

"It's a gay thing, for students who're in the closet to come out to their friends and family. They give away t-shirts, have lectures on queer issues and at the end of the week there's Homo-Coming. You know, like homecoming?"

McMentis made a face like he'd just swallowed a wad of dip. "What kind of freak school do you go to anyways?"

I'd asked myself the same question on the first day of orientation when a bunch of naked, unshaved hippies streaked through our group of bug-eyed freshmen.

Our orientation leader had just shrugged and mentioned that there was an active nudist club on campus. “It’s really liberal. They celebrate things like National Marijuana Week and have a Fetish Festival.” It was also the state honors college and ninety percent of the grads got accepted into graduate school.

“Anyways, it was Friday night and my friend Alex rushed into my dorm room, all excited from having just come out to her family.”

“Was she a bull dyke or a porno lesbian?” McMentis asked.

Beside me, Gillett turned back to the conversation. “Um, a dyke.” I had trouble shaping my mouth around that word, even though that was how Alex described herself.

“Were you surprised?” Jones asked.

“No, she always dressed kind of boy-ish.” They were so hung up on the first part of the story, which was just the set up, that at this rate I wouldn’t finish telling it before we had to serve dinner. “So,” I hurried on. “My roommate, Alise, and I wanted to take Alex out to celebrate. She suggested we go to this gay bar called Therapy.” Actually, I had suggested that we go to Therapy. My parents lived on that side of town so I’d seen the place before. Before it was a gay bar, it had been Mr. Wong’s Chinese Restaurant, with the best almond cookies I’d ever tasted. My family had gone there every Sunday after church. I didn’t want to spend the time explaining to the others why I knew the location of the local gay bar.

“So get to the part where you make out with the lesbian,” Gillett said.

My stomach flopped over like I'd just taken a nose dive over the first hill of a roller coaster. I was going down fast and groped for a way to regain control. "I don't make out with anyone in this story."

"That's a shame," Gillett said.

The emergency brake was in my hand, but Gillett's eager expression made my palms sweaty. I could tell the story the males wanted to hear, maybe say that I'd made out with Alise, since I didn't want to be known as a dyke-kisser. But the way the other Jones was looking at me, I could easily wind up in the Drill Sergeant's office if she repeated that kind of story to them. I pulled the brake. "It's not that kind of story."

"So get on with it." Jones' lips were pressed together and the skin around them was white. I couldn't tell if she was angry at the guys' sudden interest or uncomfortable with the subject.

I skipped over us getting ready and the drive. But just thinking about it made the inside of my nose tingle. We took my little Mitsubishi coupe with the windows down and there was red tide in the bay, so the whole car smelled like dead fish. It was October and still eighty degrees and the air conditioning was broken.

"We got to the club and all the windows were blacked out and we couldn't see what it was like inside, but we went in anyways." We stood outside for about ten minutes before a man in cowboy boots came out of the club for a smoke and informed us that ladies' night was last night. Alex was disappointed, but Alise and I felt better knowing that we wouldn't be fending off flat-chested lesbians in flannel.

“Was it perv city inside?” McMentis asked, leaning forward in his seat like someone straining to get a better view of a car wreck.

“It was like any other club, except we were the only girls there.” I’d only been to a real, pay-to-get-in club a few other times. And it really wasn’t like the other clubs at all because no one even looked at us. I expected the assessing gazes of men to crawl over me as soon as I entered one of these meat markets. As we moved through the crowd I thought I spotted another woman, but when the strobe light flickered, his stubble showed through the thick layer of makeup on his face.

McMentis snorted. “Gives new meaning to the term ‘sausage fest.’”

“So we start drinking and dancing and we’re having a pretty good time.” We only drank soda, since Alise’s low cut top hadn’t persuaded the eye liner wearing doorman to give us neon orange over-twenty-one wristbands. The majority of the crowd was over thirty-five and could have been a random collection of men rounded up at the Mall. In fact, many of them— the ones hanging back by the walls particularly— had that anxious look husbands and fathers get standing outside of the women’s dressing room surrounded by racks of floral, silk and lace. I felt like one of them right now, trying to tell this story to these people. Gillett made a rolling motion with his hand to indicate that I should keep going and I felt like a talking doll whose string had just been pulled.

“Suddenly, Alise grabs my arm. So I turn and look where she’s pointing, but I don’t see anything. Her eyes are popping out and she’s shouting something, so I look again.” This was the moment of shock and awe, the big reveal. Looking into their faces, they looked like three starving dogs with one bone between them.

“And?” The other Jones said.

“And there, standing against the wall not twenty feet away from me, is Alise’s father.” Only it had been my dad we’d seen at the club. But I was a coward and couldn’t tell them the truth.

Gillett, McMentis and Jones opened their mouths all at once and their voices surrounded me so that I could hardly make out what any one of them was saying. I’d been worried for a moment that it wouldn’t have the same impact, switching the fathers, putting the story at one remove, but they were just as dismayed as my college friends had been when I told them the truth.

“Man, bet she never saw that coming,” McMentis howled. At least it sounded like howling to me, but none of the other recruits were paying us any attention, so we couldn’t have been making that much noise.

“When Alise’s parents spilt up the year before her mom warned her that she thought her dad had ‘tendencies.’ She laughed about it and told us that explained why her dad was always the one who took her shopping. We all thought her mom was just bitter about the divorce.”

“She was,” McMentis said. “Bitter that he wanted to stick it in a dude instead of her.” I didn’t want to think of my dad that way and fought to keep my imagination from forming pictures.

Jones elbowed him hard. “Don’t be disgusting,” she said. I’d never felt grateful to her for anything before that moment. My teeth seemed to have clamped shut against the half-formed, angry words that were struggling to make it out of my mouth.

Gillett rushed in to fill the sudden silence. “So what happened then?”

The sound of his voice unlocked my lips and I took a deep, steady breath. If they saw that I was upset they might suspect. “She was freaking out and she kept saying ‘Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.’ He was between us and the door so we couldn’t sneak out. She just stood there for like five minutes saying ‘Oh my god’ like a skipping record until we made her go talk to him.”

It was Alex who suggested, with a sympathetic expression, that I should talk to my dad. In the spirit of Coming Out week. I wanted to smack her face and claw away that understanding look. She did not understand. Coming Out week was for people like Alex to get up the guts to sit their parents down and tell them the truth and then they’d all cry and hug. It was not about outing your dad at a gay bar. But before I could find the words to tell her any of that, she turned me in my dad’s direction and gave me a little push. Once my feet started that way it was like I was on one of those moving walkways at the airport, hurtling towards him at twice the normal speed.

“So she walked up to her dad and what do you think the first fucking thing that came out of her mouth was?” McMentis was about to say something that I was sure would piss me off again, so went straight to the punch line. “She looked him in the face and said, ‘Guess mom was right when she told me you had tendencies.’”

The moment he saw me I wished I’d gone out the emergency exit. Sirens screamed less than his look. I’d never seen my dad scared before. Despite his six foot four inch frame and his crackling electric blue shirt, I could feel him shrinking. He backed up into the wall, though he couldn’t get more than a couple inches from me, not only because of the wall but because of the noise.

“No way,” McMentis said.

“What did he do?” the other Jones asked.

“He said, ‘There’s all kinds of people here.’ And she said, ‘Yeah, all kinds of gay

people.’” It occurred to me later that night, after we’d left the club, that my dad might have thought I was trying to tell him that I was gay too. I’d been too much in shock to explain that I was that on account of Alex.

“You’re lying,” McMentis snorted, swallowing his laughter. Gillett was doubled over the orange top of the booth, stamping his boots on the floor and making the salt and pepper shakers rattle. The other Jones was red up to her ears and had her face buried in her hands. I couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed by the story or if she was trying to hold in her laughter.

My dad said he was just leaving, even though he had a full bottle of beer in his hand. He said that he’d come in without knowing what kind of place this was. He chucked his beer in the trash and made for the door as fast as he could without running. I was shaking so hard that I could barely keep on my feet as I walked straight past my friends to the bar and ordered vodka on the rocks. When the bartender saw that I didn’t have a wristband I explained that I’d just seen my father in the bar. And the bartender smiled and said, “Congratulations.” Like I’d won the lottery or something. Congratulations.

McMentis was laughing so hard that tears were leaking from the corners of his shadowed eyes. The noise attracted attention and the other recruits were aiming dirty looks at our table. Pretty soon DS Sanchez would notice too.

“Shh! Keep it down or we’ll get smoked,” I whispered. I remembered how miserable Walker had looked out there earlier and I didn’t want to repeat that scene.

“That’s great, absolutely incredible. I can’t wait to tell the other guys,” McMentis whispered. My face suddenly got hot at the thought of him sitting around the barracks at night, re-telling the story, forgetting pieces, but getting a huge roar of laughter anyways. He’d say “fag” and “queer” whenever I had said “gay.” He’d call Alex a dyke and sneer when he said it. I suddenly wanted to tell him that I’d made it up, to swallow the words back out of the air. It was my story to tell and only I could tell it right.

“That’s the best story I’ve ever heard,” Gillett said and swayed so that his arm nudged mine. “I still think it would’ve been better if you’d made out with a girl, though.” The quality of the heat in my face changed and I felt like a ten year old watching a love scene in a movie, somehow enjoying it even as it made me squirm in my seat. My shoulder tingled from his brief touch. If I said that I’d made it up all that warmth would go away, both the heat that came from embarrassment and the better kind.

“Mom said you had tendencies,” the other Jones repeated and they lost it all over again. I laughed with them because I didn’t know what else to do. Because it was so absurd that all I could do was make a joke of it. Besides, it was Alise’s dad I’d outted, not mine.

“And I thought I had freaks for friends,” McMentis said.

“I think your new name should be Freaky Jones,” Gillett said.

My chest opened up like the big breath you take just before you start crying, only I didn't cry. I was used to being Good Jones and I even liked it a little. The Drill Sergeants treated me noticeably better than Bad Jones. I looked over at the other Jones, because it wasn't just my name, it was ours. She shook her head no. I understood her disapproval; if I became Freaky Jones, then Bad Jones ceased to have the same meaning. Our nicknames were one of the only constants we could depend on here.

"Man," McMentis said, drawing us back. His expression was far off and I could tell he was still thinking about the story. "I bet that fag never saw it coming."

I cringed. "Stop saying that word. It's not nice."

"Well, it's what he is, right? Fag, queer, queen, homo, gay. It's all the same."

I wished I hadn't left my story out, like a crumpled napkin on the table. Our Smart Books taught us to never leave anything behind, not the smallest scrap of trash, to tell the enemy where we had been. Anger sat on the back of my tongue like a bad taste. The situation was supposed to be the joke, the surreal sitcom way that things had unfolded. I hadn't meant to offer up my father as the punch line. I felt like Gillett's bulk was pressing me towards the wall. Jones and McMentis leaned across the table, taking up more space than they should have and I was trapped in the little booth in the middle of them.

The same way I'd been trapped the day my dad came out to me, two weeks after the incident in the bar. The booth where my dad and I were eating lunch was big enough for six, but not big enough for the two of us and the awkward, unspoken things that lay between us. He finally told me that the only reason he'd wasted away

in years of marriage to my mother was to see that I didn't grow up in a broken home. He said he'd waited until I left for college so it wouldn't be so hard on me. I guess he thought that was supposed to make me feel better, but it made me feel terrible and somehow responsible. My brother was only ten. I guess he wasn't worth waiting around for another eight years. I didn't have the balls to say any of that to him.

Gillett and McMentis were still laughing sporadically as they quoted snippets of the story back to each other and drifted off into gay jokes. The other Jones was watching me, with a look that was neither sympathetic nor gloating. My cheeks grew hot and I felt like a picked scab. When I was little I'd taken secret satisfaction in lifting the corner of a crusty brown scab to see if there was blood or new, pink skin underneath. This time it was blood.

Gillett slapped me on the back. "Very good story, Jones." His touch made me reverberate like a hollow drum.

"Yeah, good one," Jones said with the smile of a gracious loser. She'd expected my story to fall flat and I'd proved her wrong, but there was no victory in it. Her knowing eyes stared at me from behind her glasses— glasses identical to mine— and did not share the smile on her lips, but congratulated me all the same.

Good Jones, Bad Jones

Last night at the Phase Change ceremony, the Drill Sergeants replaced our white Platoon flags with blue ones, marking the beginning of our last three weeks of Basic Training. We celebrated by exercising our new privilege to use the Gatorade vending machines, tauntingly off limits but in plain view for the last six weeks. This morning, we marched ourselves to chow unsupervised for the first time and it felt like we'd been handed the keys to our first car.

After breakfast, a short bus ride brought us to the day's training site, which looked like most of the others, a non-descript spot surrounded by pine trees. As we marched up the dirt road, we belted our cadences and the faces around me were as bright as the whitewashed March sky. I could almost picture graduation. We arrived at a clearing where there was a sand pit half the size of an Olympic pool and were told to spread out along the edge. While Drill Sergeant Hall demonstrated how to low crawl, I tried to imagine what I would say to Patrick, whether it would be a romantic reunion or an awkward one.

Everyone else must have been distracted too, because when the Drills put us in the sand pit to try to replicate the way DS Hall had slithered through the sand, none of us could do it. The trick with low crawling was to spread your legs and turn your

feet out in opposite directions so that your entire leg, from boot to hip maintained contact with the ground. In addition, you had to keep your head turned to the side, cheek to the sand, because a raised head was a bigger target. It made moving forward a process of blind, laborious inches. It was such an unnatural movement that just when I mastered keeping my heels pressed to the ground, I'd realize my ass was in the air, and all around me no one was doing any better. The Drill Sergeants' voices were escalating and I could hear the aggravation building.

“Left foot and right hand, right foot and left hand,” DS Adams shouted.

“Your other left hand, numbskull!”

I picked my head up to see if he was yelling at me and DS Sanchez rapped his knuckles on the back of my Kevlar helmet. “Bang, you're dead!” He shouted in my ear. Like a frightened ostrich, I buried my face in the sand. Low crawling was stupid. If I was crawling across an open expanse of sand while someone was shooting at me, I was probably going to end up dead whether or not I lifted my head a few inches.

The exercise disintegrated until suddenly we were back at day one, the Drill Sergeants screaming at us, running from one Private to another in a frenzy. The more they yelled the more we seemed to get it wrong.

“You, start over,” DS Adams yelled. He came down the line thumping people on the Kevlar. “Back, back, back.” I scrambled forward, hoping to avoid him, but he kicked the sole of my boot. “You too.” More than half of us had to start over. The second time I moved more slowly, but was very careful to do it right.

A solid kick thumped me on the Kevlar and I thought for a moment I was being sent to the start a third time. I picked up my head and quickly realized that my path had veered off on a diagonal and I'd run into Woods, who I recognized only by the knot of red hair sticking out from under her helmet. I thought I heard her say sorry, but she wasn't willing to pick up her head to see who she'd kicked and I didn't blame her. Correcting my course, I headed for the log that marked the far end of the sand pit.

There was a time when everyone here would have squealed with delight to see such a huge expanse of sand waiting to be played in. I never would have imagined that a sand box could be an instrument of torture. Each time I pushed myself forward, sand got into my sleeves and my elbows felt like they were rubbing against the fine side of a cheese grater.

The fine grit of kicked-up sand got in my nose and in my gasping mouth and settled in my lungs, which were already rattling inside my chest. A cold had worked its way from bunk to bunk in the female barracks, starting at first platoon and arriving at our end this week. First the other Jones had caught it, then passed it to me and I'd given it to Woods. But those two were already over it, whereas I only seemed to be getting worse. Being sick was dangerous. If you were sick enough they'd send you to the hospital, and if you missed too much training they'd recycle you. Just last week the male Jackson had gone to sick call with a fever and never came back.

"Keep moving or start over," DS Adams shouted over us. I picked up the pace. Up at the top of my field of vision a small boot, too small to be a male's, came

into view. It wasn't moving. I inched my way up the body, noticing the thickness around the middle. It was my unfortunate other, Bad Jones.

"Come on, Jones," I said, encouraging myself as much as her. On Victory Tower she'd yelled at me for trying to help her, but there was none of that fire in her now. Her eyes belonged to a dead fish, dry and vacant. Strands of sweat-dampened hair had escaped her bun and spread across the sand like seaweed. "Move it," I said and nudged her shoulder with the muzzle of my rifle.

"I can't," she groaned. Her body trembled all over and her arms and legs began to twitch in a semblance of a crawling motion that did nothing but move a little sand around. If I was standing up I thought it might have looked like she was trying to make a sand angel. Perhaps, like me, she hadn't recovered from her cold at all. Or more likely she'd just given up.

"Who is that? Who the frick is that?" DS Adams' way of non-cursing would have been funny if he weren't roaring towards us like a tsunami. The force of his boots pounding the sand echoed in my body like a second heart beat.

"Come on," I grunted and kicked forward. Despite the burning in my legs, I threw myself forward in clumsy strokes, like a freshly hatched turtle striking out for safety, but the other Jones didn't follow.

DS Adams descended on us before I could get far enough away, but he wasn't interested in me. "Keep moving, Jones," he said to me. "She doesn't want your help. She's a quitter."

I knew things were going to be really terrible for the other Jones when DS Adams didn't use our nicknames. I never called the other Jones "bad" to her face,

though she applied it to herself frequently. It was almost like she enjoyed the title, like it justified her bitching every time she broke a sweat. Maybe I could have excused her if she'd just made an effort, but she never did. She was like that one fat kid in PE class that stood on the sidelines and refused to participate. Me, I was the one who was always scrambling to stay directly behind the best player, knowing there was never a chance the ball would get by him. Here, I guess that was enough to make me "good." I didn't feel like a fraud; we all had our survival techniques. Woods meditated and Kelvey prayed and McMentis cracked jokes. I aimed for perfection where I knew I could achieve it, and avoided notice otherwise.

A male brushed past me, already on his way back to the starting point. His face was turned away from me and there was no visible hair to identify him. Too tired to swerve, we crawled along each other. I thought of the enormous bodies of whales slowly rubbing slides, and then he nearly caught me in the face with the butt of his rifle. He smelled like ammonia and after shave and I hurried up to get away from his stink.

"You're weak, Jones," DS Adams shouted. For a moment I thought he meant me and then I remembered that the other Jones was probably still lying lifeless in the sand somewhere behind me. "You going to cry now, Jones, are you?"

To my dismay, she started to cry loudly. It wasn't the crying itself that startled me, most of the females cried at one point or another, but rather the fact that she was doing it in front of everyone. I'd cried after the gas chamber, and not just because of the tear gas, but no one had noticed because the effects of the gas were the same as a good brawl. The sound reacted with my skin, making it hard. I could hear it

doing the same to everyone else, making us all crackle like dry leaves as we crawled. Her weakness was humiliating and it was a good thing there weren't any other platoons around to see her. Our blue flag had a ribbon hanging from it for winning the Drill and Ceremony competition and another for winning the Bayonet Assault Course. We were pretty confident that we'd win a third for best PT average. The public spectacle that Jones' was putting on would ruin our reputation as the tough Platoon.

I tried not to think about her crying, not to hear it. With my left ear, the one that was pressed to the ground, I listened to the rough sound of the sand sliding beneath my body. I marked my progress by watching the grains slip past the end of my nose. The sand was no different from the sand on the playground of my elementary school. I had made a very close study of that sand over the six years I went there. It started on the second day of Kindergarten with a stomach too full of orange juice. I crawled under the farthest, darkest tower of the wooden fort that occupied the middle of the playground. There were things written and scratched into the wood down there, but the only words I could read were "mom" and "love." Tucked between the two wooden walls that anchored the tower, I thought I was safe from observation. Luckily I was wearing a skirt so all I had to do was pull my underpants aside to pee. I had plenty of practice because my dad hated driving even a mile off the highway on road trips to look for a McDonalds or a Burger King.

The stream of urine darkened the sand between my sneakers and made a small crater, which widened into a lake. Where the pee splattered, the droplets made beads

of sand, perfectly round. I thought pearl my dad had brought back from the Philippines for me. He said it had grown out of a single grain of sand.

The muzzle of my rifle slammed into the log that marked the far end of the pit, but it was an out and back trip so I was only half done. I turned slowly while keeping every part of me plastered to the ground, which was much harder than crawling in a straight line. My whole body felt like it had been worked over with sand paper. Pausing to catch my breath, I lifted my head for a quick peek and saw that more than half the platoon was ahead of me and the more of them who finished, the fewer of us remained for the Drill Sergeants to single out. The other Jones hadn't moved and DS Adams was still hovering over her. His shadow fell across her back and the heaviness of it against the white sand seemed enough to pin down someone twice her size.

It was the teacher's shadow that kept me from asking her where the bathroom was. Usually I had no problem talking to adults; it was the other children who made me feel shy. But this teacher was far away and folded up on herself like a paper airplane. The sun rising over the roof of the school behind her made her shadow stretch almost all the way across the playground, thin as a needle. I skipped past her once, trying to get up the courage to ask, but she seemed to frown harder when I got close.

Woods, her head turned away from me, was wandering off on a diagonal across my path. I shifted to the left, then a little more and I realized she was inadvertently pushing me towards a collision with the other Jones and DS Adams. Turning sharply left, I changed course to head behind DS Adams, where I was less

likely to get caught in his sphere of rage. If you came too close to an angry Drill Sergeant, you risked being punished by proximity.

The other Jones' crying steadily increased in volume, like she was trying to drown out DS Adams yelling. As I drew even with her, she lifted her head to say something. Her face was red and wet and a big round teardrop perched on the end of her nose, and then fell. I wondered if it would make a pearl when it hit the sand.

"I've got all day, Jones," DS Adams said. "You going to move some time before noon?"

"I can't," she wailed.

DS Adams stepped back and I thought for a moment he was done with her, but he lurched forward. His hand flew down and smacked the back of her Kelvar with an audible crack from his huge college ring. All six foot two of him was behind the swing and Jones' head slammed into the ground so hard that I thought he'd knocked her out. Only the upturned brim of her Kelvar saved her nose from bursting. I forgot to keep crawling. Through a little valley in the sand I could see the shadowy corner of her right eye and she slowly blinked.

DS Adams picked up her head by the back of the helmet gently, as if to apologize, and placed it in the correct position, left cheek to the ground. Now, I was looking the other Jones in the face through the frame of DS Adams' spread legs. I could just make out her eyes behind the sand-spattered glasses, or maybe the sand was really on my own glasses. She'd stopped crying, but her expression was laid open, like a dissected cadaver. Her heart looked ready to burst from her lips, her humiliation was splashed across her cheeks and her damp forehead was lined with

self-loathing. I wanted to drop my weapons and reach out and touch her shoulder. I felt like I was looking at my five year old self and I wanted to let her know that it was going to be all right.

I remember the feeling of shock when a sharp rap on the wood above my head startled me so much I stopped peeing. Amy's bright blue eyes peered at me through the slats, huge as an egg. She took a deep breath, preparing to scream.

"Don't tell," I begged. I quickly shoved some fresh sand over the wet, but she'd already seen what I was doing.

She held her breath for a moment, considering. "What'll you give me?" Two days in a row she'd traded my chocolate chip cookies for her vegetables while we sat next to each other on the bus, so I offered to bring her more cookies. When she said that wasn't good enough I told her about all my toys and books. What she really wanted was a Peaches and Cream Barbie, but mom didn't approve of me playing with them. Desperate, I told Amy about the pearl. The next day, we crawled under the tower, to the scene of my crime and I produced the pearl in its purple velvet bag. She held it up to the yellow light slanting through the slats. Then she put it between her teeth, like I'd seen people do with gold coins in movies.

"Don't bite it," I said, afraid she'd crack the pearl in two.

The pearl disappeared into her mouth, making a tiny bulge where she tucked it into her cheek. "its mine, I can do what I want with it now," she said. I could hear her rolling it against her teeth.

"Please spit it out." The thought of her swallowing the pearl like a twenty five cent gumball made my eyes water. Amy took a big gulp and I cried out, but she just

laughed and spit the pearl back out into her hand. The next day at recess she told the teacher anyways. After the teacher brought me back from the Principal's office none of the other kids would even look at me and I felt like somewhere between being pulled from recess and returning to class I'd died. I almost wanted one of them to tease me, just so I felt like I was still there.

"I hope your twin isn't rubbing off on you, Private Jones" DS Adams said. I picked my head up and saw that he was twisted around at the waist, looking down at me, a dark shape against the brilliant sky. My head felt like empty as a soap bubble despite the weight of my helmet. When he moved I cringed, thinking he was going to hit me too. He must have seen it because he frowned and folded his arms across his chest. "Get on out of here," he said, like I was a stray dog. "Get."

I dropped my head, expecting to find the other Jones' eyes, but I was looking at her shoulder. In the momentary diversion I'd caused, she'd found the strength to crawl forward a few inches. I wanted to stay, to cheer her on, but DS Adams continued to glare down at me and I was afraid that if I lingered too long he'd start in on me like he had with the other Jones. Tail between my legs, belly on the ground, I crawled away.

We were the last two left in the sand pit by then. As I neared the start line again, I heard the murmuring voices of the rest of the platoon. They were talking about Bad Jones, how she was worthless, a sandbagger, a shitbird. No one said anything about me, whether it was because they had nothing to say or because I was within earshot, I couldn't tell.

When I reached the edge of the pit, Woods helped me up and took my weapon. I let my shaking arms fall to my sides and sand poured out of my sleeves. It was down my shirt, between and beneath my breasts. It was inside my pants, chafing beneath my cinched belt and collecting where my pant legs were tucked into my boots. I reached up my sleeve and touched my right elbow; the skin felt like raw meat and my fingers came away bloody.

Woods fussed over me like a mother tidying up a messy child. She brushed the sand off the back of my uniform and poured water from her canteen so I could wash my hands and face. I took a gulp of the water, warm from riding in the canteen pouch at her hip, swished it around my mouth and spit out the grit. All the while, I watched as Jones made achingly slow progress towards the far end, but at least she was moving.

The platoon stood in a relaxed line, washing and dusting the sand off themselves. For the most part they'd stopped paying attention to Jones, like if they refused to look at her, she'd just disappear. Even DS Hall and DS Sanchez, standing on top of the log at the far end of the sand pit, were absorbed in their conversation with each other. I wondered if they even saw DS Adams raise his hand. Or maybe they saw and didn't care. DS Hall never smoked us much after the first day, preferring to make us stand in front of the Platoon and sing Millie Vanilli or do the Macarena as punishment. I'd taken that for softness in him, but now it just seemed like another kind of sadism.

“Maybe we should go back in with her,” I said, my voice seeming louder than I’d intended. Everyone at my end of the line turned and looked at me, as if I’d just suggested that haggis might be a nice change of pace from chili-mac.

Woods brushed more sand off my shoulder and then patted my back. “Don’t waste your energy. She wouldn’t go back in for you.”

“You’d go back in for me,” I said.

“I’m your battle.” She gave me a look like I was delirious.

Usually when someone fell out of a run, or couldn’t get to the top of an obstacle, their battle was the one who pushed, pulled or dragged the lagging soldier along. It was what we’d been taught here; never leave your buddy behind. Kelvey, Jones’ battle, stood half way down the line, picking sand out from under her nails. She was the least likely person to help in this situation, because diving back into the sand pit meant standing out, and she worked so hard to make herself invisible that the Drills couldn’t remember her name half the time.

“Jesus Christ,” someone down the line muttered. “If she keeps this up we’ll all be pushing.” Sometimes, to motivate a struggling soldier the Drill Sergeants would punish the rest of the group and use our anger as leverage. The wrath of three Drill Sergeants was terrible, but the rage of fifty soldiers being punished for a wrong they had no hand in was far more potent.

“Well, we could at least cheer her on or something,” I said.

“Don’t,” Woods warned as I opened my mouth.

But I didn’t even get the first shout out. The deep breath caught half way into my lungs and I doubled over, wracked by an unexpected coughing fit. I’d forgotten

that I was still sick. Woods pulled a lozenge out of her pocket and offered it to me, she ate them like candy. Pain flared in my side, a sharp stab between the ribs with each breath.

“Take a knee before you fall over, Jones,” DS Hall shouted across the sand.

He wasn't using nicknames today either, but everyone knew who he meant and I felt their gazes shift. I straightened up and tried to sip the air, because anything more than a shallow breath brought on that needling pain. DS Hall continued to eyeball me and raised his brows to say that sitting down wasn't a suggestion. My knees popped as I lowered to the ground. Sitting was a privilege mostly reserved for meal times or when instructions were being given. The rest of the platoon remained standing and their resentment prickled across the back of my neck.

“About damn time, Jones,” DS Adams said. He'd joined the other two Drill Sergeants standing on the log. The other Jones struggled to her knees at the far end of the pit, panting, her back turned to us. DS Adams lifted his hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve as if he was the one worn out. “I'm done with you, Jones. You've already made the platoon late for the next event,” he said. If we were really running behind, one of the other platoons would have showed up at the sand pit to wait their turn to low crawl, but no one else was there.

“That's bullshit,” McMentis said.

“I can't believe she got out of crawling back,” Woods said.

I couldn't believe she was agreeing with McMentis, who she always argued with. “You're being unfair. She really tried,” I said. They looked down at me.

McMentis snorted and looked away again. Woods put her hand on my forehead like she was checking for fever. I jerked away from her touch.

The day I'd been sent to the principal's my mom came to the school and picked me up early. She tucked me into bed without a word, as if I was sick. I stayed there, watching the light from my green curtained window shift across the ceiling. When my dad came home he opened my bedroom door, looked at the bed with a sad expression that made me feel like something was wrong with me that couldn't be fixed. My parents argued for hours while I slipped out of bed, crept into the hallway and sat listening and lingering like a ghost.

Jones came back across the sand pit, shuffling and kicking up sand. Woods offered me a hand up but I took my weapon from her instead and leaned on it like a cane, levering myself to my feet. The other Jones paused for a moment when she stepped out of the pit. She was closer to the front of the line than the back, but no one moved to make space for her to fall in. Even Kelvev, her battle, stood absolutely still. Jones turned and trudged towards the back, her eyes fixed two feet ahead of her, sand trailing from her sleeves.

I couldn't let her walk by. I touched her sleeve and stepped back, jostling McMentis, who swore at me, but I didn't care. Jones didn't look at me as she stepped into the space I made. I reached up to brush off her back and then stopped, my fingers hovering over her shoulder. It was like her skin was a magnet of the same polarity, pushing my hand away.

"Want some water?" I said instead.

She took my canteen and drank, water running out of the corners of her mouth, cutting white lines into the yellowish grit covering her face. When she was done, she handed it back. She didn't say anything, but she looked at me briefly and nodded, which was probably as much as she could manage, and more than enough acknowledgement for me. As we marched off to the next training event, I watched the grains of sand slough off the back of her neck and fall away from her uniform, each one the seed of a pearl that would never grow.

Falling Out

For the third day in a row I woke up feverish after having shivered through the night. I'd been fighting the same cold for almost two weeks now and it was steadily winning because I had no weapons except for a supply of cough drops. The medics wouldn't do anything for you unless you had a fever or some obvious physical injury, so I needed the fever to hang around long enough to get my temperature taken so they would finally give me some antibiotics or cough syrup. The last two days I'd tested out the fever and been disappointed, by the time we were back from PT and breakfast the fever would subside. Sick call wasn't until after breakfast, so I knew they'd turn me back empty-handed.

I'd gone to sick call for the first time two days after the sand pit with a stabbing pain in my side. Every breath I took made it feel like a sharp stick was poking my left lung and I thought I might have coughed so hard that I'd broken a rib. When my name was called, I had the bad luck to get the fat male medic that everyone complained about. Apparently, he thought the majority of the soldiers he evaluated were faking sick to get out of training. When I looked at the size of his gut I wondered if he could even do ten sit-ups. He took the thermometer out of my mouth,

clucked with his tongue as he wrote down “temperature normal, 98.5” on my release paper and offered me a metal pail filled with cough drops.

“You’d think you’d never had the sniffles before,” he said.

I wanted to break his clipboard over his head, but instead I filled my pockets with cough drops and went back to the barracks. They didn’t do much besides turn the phlegm I coughed up from green to red.

“You look terrible,” Woods said as we came down the stairs for first formation. “You should really go to sick call.” She’d wanted me to go yesterday, but I told her I wasn’t sick enough to try again. Besides, the Drill Sergeants looked down on you for going. When I’d come back with my discharge slip last time, DS Sanchez made me do twenty-five push-ups because he said I needed to toughen up.

“Maybe,” I said, without conviction.

If the fever broke before I could get my temperature taken, I might do permanent damage to my reputation as a high-speed, low-drag soldier. Even the other Jones had only been to sick call once and it didn’t seem right for me to go more often than her. I had to time my next visit to sick call just right because if I blew it and had to go again in couple days everyone would start to think I was a sandbagger, dead weight. Iverson stood up in front of the formation and after he got the morning accountability report he told the sick calls to fall out. No one else moved. I decided I should hold off another day. Woods elbowed me hard so that I felt a sudden pain in both sides as I inhaled, but I didn’t budge.

The four platoons reorganized into their run groups. A Group, the fastest male runners, marched off first. I usually ran in C Group, but today I fell out with D

Group, the slowest runners. Luckily, none of the Drill Sergeants noticed that I reassigned myself. We were allowed to move up a run group any time we wanted, but we weren't supposed to move down.

D Group was all females and we sang cadence as we ran in a strained alto like a music box winding down. Ahead of us and pulling away, C Group was a mixed choir. B Group was the faintest, a distant tenor. A Group was already too far away to hear, sprinting off somewhere with Spartan determination, probably chanting the one about "*blood, guts, sex and danger, that's the life of an Airborne Ranger.*" We were always getting worked up singing about Airborne Rangers, like they were some sort of Army celebrities and we were their groupies, but I'd never even seen one. All I knew about them was that they jumped out of planes and sometimes died doing it.

The run was short by my estimation, only two and a half miles. All the groups ran for the same amount of time, so D Group being the slowest, had the shortest runs. But even so, we were all gasping and groaning by the time we made it back. Usually they kept us out in the field to stretch out, but the moisture in the air changed suddenly from fine mist to rain in earnest and the Drill Sergeants didn't feel like getting wet.

As we marched into the assembly area beneath the building, the smell of bacon and hot griddle grease wafted out to welcome us back. No matter how much I ate at dinner I was always starving by the time I woke up. The Drill Sergeants sent a runner to the chow hall to see if breakfast could be ready early and decided we'd stretch afterwards. Iverson gave us ten minutes to change into BDUs and be back downstairs for chow.

The two flights of stairs up to the female barracks had me gasping and when I stepped inside the barracks, the room seemed to be wavering around me, as if the air were made of clear gelatin. I couldn't tell if it was hunger, or running or the fever that was making me light headed, but I was tempted to sit down on the floor. With the doors to the wall locker open they blocked me from view well enough that the other Jones, changing right next to me, couldn't even see me. But I knew if I tried to catch a minute's rest I might fall asleep and miss formation.

"I'm heading down," Woods called at me. I didn't even peek around my wall locker to acknowledge her because I busy trying to stay upright as I balanced on one foot and pulled my sock on the other. Sitting on our bunks after wake-up, even to put our shoes on, was strictly forbidden.

When I finally made it downstairs again I was the last one to fall into my squad. Iverson, doing his duty as Platoon Leader, took accountability like he did at every formation. Kelvey glanced down at our squad and reported us all present. The smell of breakfast assaulted me again and my head was swimming in thoughts of syrup.

It wasn't until we got into the chow hall and broke into our separate lines that I noticed Woods was missing. The moment I realized she wasn't there, I felt like I was falling, like I'd missed a step going down the stairs. There were few things more dangerous than being caught walking through the building without a buddy. I flagged down Iverson and whispered my discovery. He was just about to send me back with the other Jones to look for Woods when she came jogging up, her face as red as her hair.

“Thanks for fucking leaving me,” she said, looking at me, then Iverson.

Her anger was like an oven that opened right in front of my face, blasting me with waves of heat. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Not you, him,” she said and stabbed a finger at Iverson’s chest so hard he stepped back. “You’re the platoon leader. You’re supposed to have accountability,”

“Your squad leader reported all present, take it up with her.” Iverson shrugged and moved off. Woods fixed her stare on Kelvey, who stood in the line for Army Reserves, her eyes fixed straight ahead, her back rigid which made me think she’d heard Iverson and was bracing herself for Wood’s attack. I saw the furious words bubbling in Wood’s face but before she could say anything, the Drill Sergeant yelled at her to fall in and she stepped over to the end of the Active Duty line.

All through the food line I felt terrible. I was her battle buddy and I should have noticed that she was missing, but instead I’d left her to run after us on her own. She never would have overlooked the fact that I was missing. Woods was the last one through the food line and I could tell she was still hot when she sat across from me.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted with a mouthful of oatmeal.

“Shut up already. Eat your eggs.” It wasn’t exactly apology accepted, but it wasn’t an accusation either. And I was thrown off by her concern for my untouched hard boiled eggs. “I can’t believe the fucking team leader, squad leader and platoon leader didn’t notice I was gone.” She left me out of the equation, even though I should have been her first line of defense. I began to think she really was angry at me, but wasn’t saying it for some reason.

“Where were you?” I asked as I peeled one of my eggs.

“Laundry room. I came out and everyone was gone.” Woods was shoveling food in her mouth at an incredible pace. We always ate fast, mindful that our meals had a time limit, but she was swallowing so fast I was sure she’d choke. Between mouthfuls, her eyes darted all over the cafeteria, periodically coming back to rest on my tray. She was clearly looking for something, but I couldn’t tell what. “Hurry up,” she said.

I looked at my watch, it had only been two minutes since she sat down, which meant we had another five minutes left to eat. Since she was the last person in, our seven minute time limit started ticking when she sat down. I didn’t feel like arguing, so to make her happy I ate my second egg in two big bites. Woods was watching me and as soon as I had the second bite in my mouth she stood up.

“Last Bushmaster leaving, Drill Sergeant,” she shouted. That was the ritual statement of the last person in the platoon when they were done eating. No one ever called it before their seven minutes was up. Voices rose in protest as Woods walked to the dirty dish conveyor belt. Whenever the last person left everyone in the platoon had to leave too, done or not.

“She says she’s done, then you’re all done, get out!” DS Adams shouted at us.

I stared forlornly at the half eaten oatmeal and the pancakes untouched, glistening beneath their syrup. With only two eggs I’d be hungry again in an hour. I never would have thought of it, but it was the most effective way to punish the entire Platoon. There was nothing else to do but dump the uneaten food in the trash and go

out into the breezyway to do our mandatory post-meal push-ups. I got on the floor next to Woods and started counting them out, but had to go to my knees at three because I was still feeling unsteady.

“You’re a real buddy fucker, Woods,” the other Jones said beneath the cacophony of voices counting. She was further up the line of pushing soldiers, so she said it pretty loud to make sure Woods heard. Some people muttered in agreement.

“Fuck buddy fucker,” McMentis said. “You’re a straight up bitch.”

Then the other Jones called her a bitch too and it was picked up like a game of telephone, passed from mouth to mouth, bitch, bitch, bitch. I was caught between the urge to silently agree with the rest of them and the need to defend her, because if not for me she never would have felt the need to punish the Platoon. I didn’t say anything. If DS Adams hadn’t come out into the breezeway the whole thing would have blow up just then because Woods was rattling like a pressure cooker about to erupt. As I got to my feet and fell into formation, my stomach rumbled loud enough for the people around me to notice. I looked at Woods, but she just shrugged and looked away like she had nothing at all to do with my grumbling stomach.

“At east the noise,” DS Adams said. “Iverson, take the platoon to the barracks.”

Once we were settled in the barracks, DS Adams had us partner off for buddy stretching. There was a strange, prickly feeling in the air and I suspected that everyone was glad that I went with Woods because no one else wanted to. If she’d thought of a way to get back at us that was more funny than spiteful, it would have been different. But food was one of the few things we had to look forward to and

she'd taken it away from us. Even the Drill Sergeants didn't have the authority to keep us from our meals.

Woods and I sat facing each other, our legs spread in a V, soles of our feet touching. We clasped each other's hands and as she leaned towards me I pulled gently. She barely needed my help to get her nose on the floor. Any other day I would have commented on her flexibility, but I felt like talking to Woods would be seen by the Platoon as taking her side. We still had two weeks left and as much as I liked Woods, I knew I couldn't make it through two weeks bearing the weight of the Platoon's hatred. If we both kept quiet the whole thing would be forgotten in a day or two. Woods finished counting to ten and leaned back, pulling me forward. As she did the stabbing feeling in between my ribs flared up suddenly and I dug my fingers into hers before I could help myself.

"Shit, sorry, am I pulling too hard?" Woods asked and eased up.

"It's just that twinge coming back," I said. Unlike Woods, I couldn't get my face anywhere near the floor and the pain was making my eyes water. But with DS Adams prowling between us, I didn't dare sit up when I was supposed to be stretching.

"You really should have gone to sick call today"

"They just would have sent me back," I said.

"So then keep going until they take care of you."

We switched again and as I sat up, the pain easing enough to let me take a deep breath. "It doesn't work like that. You can't make them do anything." And there was still the problem of the Drill Sergeants, who couldn't prevent you from

going to sick call, but who could make you sorry for it if they thought you were faking ill.

“Sure you can, you just need to figure out how to get at them.”

She sat up and began to pull me forward, but the muscles in my side suddenly clenched and I stopped, our chins level and half a foot apart. “So I guess this morning you figured out how to get back at us,” I said. The words were out of my mouth before I could help it and I bent forward, despite the pain, afraid to keep looking Woods in the face because I expected the jab to make her mad.

“It worked, didn’t it?” She said and there was a little bit of pride in her voice. If her goal was to make everyone hate her, then it was a very effective tactic. “I was just going to sit down and stand up again, but I was worried about you being sick and I wanted you to eat something before I did it.” I almost wished she would have just been mad at me instead of overlooking my share of blame, like I was a child who couldn’t be held responsible.

“How thoughtful,” I said and I couldn’t keep the contempt out of my voice.

She blinked at me with a wide-eyed expression, like I’d just vomited on her. Then she shook her head and composed herself. “You should have gone to sick call,” she said and I could hear her writing off my comment as an effect of the fever.

“You owe the Platoon an apology,” I said. My words sounded like a shout, like a loud slap in a silent room, but everyone was still counting out their stretches, paying no attention to anything but the tightness in their hamstrings.

“They owe me an apology,” she hissed, her eyes darting accusingly around the room.

“I already apologized to you. You should have left it there.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said.

“Yes, it was.” I pulled my hands out of hers and we snapped back from each other like a broken rubber band. DS Adams was on the other side of the room and the people around us were listening to our conversation. Woods glared at them with all the righteous indignation of a martyr, utterly resolved to her choice. “Just admit you screwed up,” I said. She looked at me like I was the enemy, like I was some Taliban crazy trying to convince her of America’s evils. I knew I wasn’t winning any ground.

“On your feet,” DS Adams called. “Spread out.”

Woods stepped away from me so fast that she nearly tripped over herself getting up. I felt us pulling apart like two pieces of paper still wet with glue. For a moment I wanted to slide up next to her, quickly whisper that I was wrong and she was right. But I remained where I was and didn’t look at her. Woods made no attempt to hide the fact that she stepped away more than just the necessary arm’s reach and she slipped out of my line of sight. Alone, she stood against the rest of the Platoon, even as she was surrounded by us, and I had made my choice not to join her.

The next day I woke without a fever and even my cough seemed a little better. I was glad because I didn’t want to miss the Fit to Win obstacle course, which we had done one other time back in week five. The first time had simply been about making it through the obstacle course. This time we were racing in buddy teams for the best time. I knew that if I could have one of the fast males, like Shengal or Gramps, for my partner, we could win. But Woods, for all her long arms and legs, was terrible on

the cargo net and so I was pretty sure we had no chance. Besides that, she hadn't spoken to me since I'd told her to apologize. The only reason we even ended up as partners was because everyone else went with their usual buddy, which meant that we were left together.

I wanted to say something to her, as we waited in line to begin the obstacle course. Only three pairs could run it at a time and we were well back in the line. Woods' sudden interest in the back of Kelvey's head wasn't making things any easier. Standing in line was a dangerous place to talk about anything that you didn't want other people to hear. I drew a deep breath, not sure what I could say that wouldn't start another argument, and instead of words I coughed and made a noise at the pain in my side. Everyone was so used to my coughing that it was no longer a sound at all, no one turned to look, no one asked if I was alright, which was fine because I didn't want the attention.

"Enough already," Woods said after I'd been coughing for fifteen seconds or so. "Everyone knows your sick."

Suddenly, my coughing seemed very loud. I choked it down and straightened up. Kelvey and the other Jones were looking at me and so were Shengal and Gramps, just ahead of them in line. They faced front when I returned their stares. It seemed that Woods had made a u-turn from the maternal over-protectiveness that annoyed me so much yesterday. I didn't like this new, vindictive Woods any better. In the back of my head I could hear the other Jones calling Woods a bitch.

"Bet I can still beat you on the obstacle course," I said.

"Real mature," Woods said and rolled her eyes.

“You mean like starving out your Platoon mature?” The other Jones said over her shoulder. Woods flushed, but didn’t say anything. It felt so strange, the other Jones standing up for me against Woods.

“Man, I’m still trying to make up for that meal,” McMentis said from behind us.

“Next three groups,” DS Adams called.

Gramps and Shengal went to the path on the left, Kelvey and the other Jones went to the right and we were left with the middle, which no one wanted because the Drill Sergeants had warned us to watch out for some mud on that trail. When the whistle sounded I took off at a dead sprint and didn’t look back. I hit the first obstacle, a series of tall, thick logs placed like hurdles on a track field and vaulted over them one-handed. The obstacles were spaced apart by short stretches of dirt trail winding through the woods. On the trail next to me, Shengal and Gramps were running side by side and I was keeping pace.

The next obstacle was a backwards low crawl. I dove face forward into the dirt, flipped onto my back and began kicking my way through the ditch head first. Rusted barbed wire was strung six inches above my face, but I picked my head up enough to see Woods come running up, panting already, and crawl into the ditch after me. I kicked harder, not caring if I kicked dirt on her head. Sand worked its way down my collar, grated against my back and for a moment eclipsed the pain in my side. I scrambled free of the ditch.

“Wait,” Woods shouted after me. Her sleeve was caught on the barbed wire and she was struggling to free herself.

Instead of pulling her free, which might have shaved a second or two off our time, I ran ahead. At the entrance to a tunnel in the ground I dropped to all fours and crawled into the murky darkness. The wood beneath my hands was damp and soft and the air smelled like mold. Last time we'd done the obstacle course I'd put my hand down on something soft and that had squished under my palm and I screamed, thinking I'd touched a snake.

"Slow down!" Woods voice chased after me in the darkness. "I can't keep up with you." I guess she hadn't taken my bet seriously, but I was going to beat her across the finish line. It wasn't just a personal score to be settled, I was doing it for the whole Platoon, to prove her wrong. Trial by battle.

"You're not trying hard enough," I shouted back. It always pissed her off when the Drill Sergeants yelled at her to try harder, especially when she didn't have any more to give. Ahead of me a square of light appeared and the tunnel sloped upwards. As I scrambled out I could see Shengal and Gramps running well ahead now. On the other trail, Kelvey and the other Jones were just starting the tunnel.

The more obstacles I did the further back Woods fell. When I burst from the tree line into the clearing with the three cargo nets, but I couldn't go forward because Lopez and Hernandez, who'd left a good five minutes ahead of me, were still on the cargo net in my lane. Lopez was stuck at the top, looking about as firmly trapped on the cargo net as a fly in a spider web. At the bottom, DS Sanchez was yelling at him in Spanish. Whether he was berating him or trying to coax him down, I couldn't tell. I looked behind me, willing Lopez to hurry up. Seconds were ticking by, I was losing

ground and Woods was gaining. As I watched, Woods came stumbling out of the tree line into the clearing with the cargo nets.

“Why are you being such a bitch?” She puffed as she doubled over next to me.

“Why are you being so slow?”

At that moment Lopez lost hold of the cargo net and crashed into the thick foam mats below. I launched myself at the net and scrambled up, not caring about the three-points-of-contact rule. Below me, Woods swore and DS Sanchez yelled at her about her language, which seemed to give my flagging energy a boost. I got to the top, where the cargo net was draped over a wide wooden beam, swung myself across and started down the other side. Going down was much quicker than up and in a few seconds I was even with Woods, who’d only made it half way up.

“Blue falcon,” she yelled at me through the cargo net.

“You too!” I yelled back and scrambled down.

DS Sanchez made a sound like a spitting cat and started laughing. When I got to the bottom and rolled out of the safety mat, I was ready to run again, but DS Sanchez made me wait for Woods. She didn’t suck as much as last time. Maybe being angry helped her.

The cargo net was the half way point in the obstacle course. As soon as Woods got down I took off and left her again, shouting and chasing after me. I didn’t even slow down when I finally found the mud we’d been warned about and ran right through it, splattering myself to the knees and nearly falling on my face. The last obstacle was a wall of two by fours with a rope and once I pulled myself to the top I was surprised to see that Shengal and Gramps were just low crawling across the finish

line. I dropped down into the sand just as I heard Woods hit the wall behind me. This sand pit wasn't half as long as the one we'd low crawled on the first day of Blue Phase. I'd never felt angry and good at the same time before, even the throbbing in my arms and legs made me happy because I could imagine how much worse Woods was feeling.

DS Adams was waiting at the finish line with a stop watch. "Keep moving, Good Jones," he shouted. I pulled myself across the finish line and rolled to my feet, bouncing. "Get your buddy across the finish line in the next thirty seconds and you'll be the fastest female team," he said.

Woods appeared at the top of the wall, shaking, and slid down into the sand. I'd already beat her and proved my point, but I couldn't decide what I wanted more: to leave her struggling in the sand or to win the title. Even if we weren't the fastest team overall, the fastest female team was still an honorable mention.

"You just going to give up on your buddy?" DS Adams asked. Drill Sergeants had a way of asking a question that told you what they expected you to do. So I went over to where Woods was crawling and squatted next to her.

"Come on Woods, you can do it," I said, only because DS Adams was watching us. She was barely moving, each kick only inching her along.

"Shut up!" She shouted at me, spraying spit into the sand in front of her. She lurched forward. It seemed that she really did do better when she was mad.

"Fifteen seconds," DS Adams called out to us.

My heart was still thumping hard from running the course and I began to want that title more than I wanted to punish Woods. “Come on, we can be the fastest female team.”

“I don’t care!” Woods shouted and crawled forward with another burst of energy. I moved alongside her. We were only ten feet from the finish line.

“Move it, Woods!”

Woods picked her head up and looked at me. I think she realized that I was exploiting her anger and that my success depended entirely on her. For a moment I thought she was going to stop on purpose and let the clock run out, but instead she clawed forward with her long arms and made it across the finish line with two seconds to spare.

“Happy now?” Woods said as she got to her feet. I couldn’t tell if her effort was supposed to be a peace offering or if she was saying, *here’s your stupid victory and you couldn’t have done it without me*

My chest felt like a hollow drum and I wasn’t happy, not with Woods, not with beating her and not even with being declared the fastest female team. I searched her face, but it was like a boarded up store front, closed for business. When I didn’t say anything she walked away and sat by herself on a log. I almost called out and reminded her that the Drill Sergeants didn’t like us sitting on logs. Too often there were snakes or spiders under them. But that was something one battle would say to another and she wasn’t my battle any more.

The Final Test

You start basic training thinking, *I can do anything for nine weeks*. And then you begin to count down: anything for eight weeks, seven weeks, six. The first day of Blue Phase, when the Drill Sergeants went mad like rabid dogs and had us low crawling in the sand pit, I thought, *I can do anything for just one day, they won't break me*. But sooner or later everyone arrived at a point during Basic when they lost the will to go on. Maybe not relentless robots like Woods who could stand up to anything, even the anger of the whole Platoon, but the rest of us humans had a breaking point. For the other Jones it was that day in the sand pit. For me it was the morning of our final PT test.

We'd already finished push-ups and sit-ups. I'd maxed out both events and all I needed to do was run two miles in fifteen minutes and thirty six seconds to score a perfect three hundred. I wanted that three hundred more than anything else. As long as I'd been able to hold a ball I'd sucked at sports. This was my one chance, the one thing that I could point to as proof that I wasn't a complete athletic failure. A perfect score also came with a patch that was supposed to be worn on the PT uniform, but I wasn't sure I'd sew mine on. I didn't want to raise any expectations that I couldn't keep up once I left and went to my unit back home.

Patrick thought I was crazy for caring so much. I reminded him how it bothered me a little that New College didn't give grades, which meant I couldn't maintain the 4.0 I'd carried over from high school. This was just another kind of grading system. Really it was the only test that mattered here, since all the Phase tests were pass or fail, and no one failed.

Our entire company was bunched together at the starting line on the track. My heart was pumping hard, even though it had been at least half an hour since we finished with the sit-ups. Just ahead of me were Gillett and McMentis, who weren't fast for guys and usually squeaked by their required time of fifteen minutes and thirty six seconds with ten or twenty seconds to spare. If I could keep pace with them I'd max for sure. I wondered if whoever determined the run times had made the male minimums the same as the female maximums on purpose. As if to say, surely the least a man can do must be the best a woman can do. Not that I wanted equality when it came to the PT test. I just wanted a perfect score.

"Let's get this done already," McMentis said.

"Once we cross that finish line its all down hill to graduation," Gillett said, bouncing on the balls of her feet to keep his legs loose.

"I can't wait, man. As soon as I see my girl I'm gonna find a port-o-let and jump her first thing," McMentis said. The Drill Sergeants had already warned us that there'd be no hanky-panky when our families and friends arrived, no drinking, no smoking, no sex.

"I'll take my wife right there on the parade field. Here's your salute, General," Gillett said and grabbed his crotch.

“On your mark,” A Drill Sergeant called.

He never told me he had a wife. Everyone around me crouched down, suddenly silent and tense. I couldn't bend my knees, I felt like I'd become part of the asphalt under my feet. When the whistle sounded the people behind me would run right over me without even knowing I was there.

“Just picture her across the finish line and you'll be flying through the run,” McMentis said. “My girl's waiting for me at the end of every run.”

“Get set.”

People were jostling me as they strained forward, ready to be off, ready to clear the final hurdle between them and graduation. I was trying to picture Gillett's wife, but she was just a dark shape in a skirt across the finish line.

“Go!”

Everyone leapt forward at once and carried me with them. They always started off too fast and had nothing left for the final push at the end. Gillett and McMentis pulled away. I wasn't concerned; I'd catch up with them as I picked up the pace.

How did a man go for almost two months without mentioning he was married? Maybe she was ugly. Maybe she'd become better looking to him after weeks of being around females who'd been rendered nearly sexless except for the knot of hair on the backs of their heads.

My lungs hurt and I'd only gone a lap and had seven more to go. I could do anything for seven more laps. Ahead of me, Gillett's calves looked like hunks of stone, tireless, like he could run forever. I tried to put on some speed, to make up

some of the distance between us, but the gap wouldn't close. His claws probably looked hard like that when he was driving his wife through the mattress.

My throat tightened, making it even harder to breath. The less than adequate pace I'd been keeping faltered as I rolled my head around, trying to loosen up my neck. I never used the timer on my watch to pace myself, since it always seemed to jinx me. But now I wish I had because there was no way to tell if Gillett and McMentis were running much faster than usual or if I was running too slow. I kicked it up, my feet hitting the track fasquickerter as I sang fragments of cadences in my head.

One mile, no sweat

Two miles, better yet

Three miles, I can take it

Four miles, I can make it

I imagined they'd been married a couple years at least, long enough for the glow to wear off. Long enough to have kids. My stomach gave a sudden lurch and I tasted vomit in the back of my mouth. As the nausea passed, I knew what Woods had felt the other day on the obstacle course, that anger that made you not care how much you were hurting. I ran faster. Gillett was half a lap ahead of me now and it took me another whole lap to make up the distance.

When I finally drew even with him, he glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes and said, "Good job, Jones." He was breathing hard and I could tell even those few words had cost him an effort. It was an effort he made as one soldier encouraging another, perhaps as a friend, but nothing more.

I decided I was being stupid, that it wasn't a big deal. I had Patrick and he had a wife and neither of us had crossed any lines. All we'd done was exchange a couple looks, some jokes and we'd only even touched when training required it. Gillett was nice to think about when Patrick and I had been fighting. Sometimes I thought about leaving here, hooking up with Gillett on the outside, but it was just dreaming. I couldn't understand why I felt like my balance was thrown off, like I was running on a slightly tilted plane and couldn't get my footing.

If Gillett's wife was waiting across the finish line for him, then Patrick was waiting for me. And Gillett's wife was pretending not to look at Patrick. Patrick was cheering for me, and he didn't care that I was red as a fresh strawberry or that my shirt was soaked through with sweat. He was looking at my arms pumping at my sides and thinking about all the times I'd held our naked bodies together.

"Last lap!" A Drill Sergeant shouted as we crossed the finish line for the seventh time.

I could feel the bile rising in my stomach and every breath was a burst of fire in my lungs. But I could do anything for one lap. Gillett went into his final push, barreling into the last half like a locomotive. I tried to keep up but I'd already pushed too hard and it was all I could do to keep my pace from flagging.

"Fifteen ten," A Drill Sergeant shouted.

Now. I had to sprint right now to make it. I grunted and leaned forward, gathering speed. Gillett rounded the corner ahead of me into the final straight. McMentis was already over the finish line.

“Push it, man, go! Do it for your wife!” McMentis was shouting. Somehow I heard his voice above all the others. Gillett ran even faster, right across the finish line and into the arms of his wife. The thought of them hugging made Patrick fade.

“Fifteen twenty,” the Drill Sergeant called.

I entered the final straight and had the finish line in sight. Patrick was gone. Woods wasn't there because she was at least two laps behind. No one was cheering for me. The finish line was too far away to keep sprinting and I had nothing left. I veered towards the side of the track and puked a mouthful of slobbery yellowish liquid. It tasted like rotten orange juice even though I'd only had water to drink since I'd woken up.

“Fifteen thirty six,” The Drill Sergeant called.

Maybe if I'd been angry at Gillett I would have made it, like Woods raging her way through the obstacle course. Instead, I felt a growing sense of relief as the seconds ticked on. Maybe that was why Bad Jones gave up so often, to absolve herself from failure. Because you couldn't really think of yourself as defeated if you made a conscious decision to stop trying.

Drill Sergeant Hall came over to check on me, bending down so he could get a look at my face. “You were so close, what the heck happened, Good Jones?” I just shook my head in response, still too out of breath to form words. “You better get back on that track and finish strong.” I know he meant to motivate me, but it wasn't working.

I wiped my mouth on my shirt sleeve and walked towards the finish line. Ten seconds or thirty seconds over didn't matter now, so there was no reason to give any appearance of trying.

“Good Jones, I know you aren't walking on my track,” Drill Sergeant Adams shouted. The sound of his voice almost made me break into a jog, because I was so used to obeying. The rules only said that walking was “strongly discouraged” so I kept on walking. At sixteen minutes, five seconds I crossed the finish line and fell onto my back on the damp grass on the inside of the track.

Above me the sky was a chalky, even sheet of pale blue. Drill Sergeant Hall yelled for someone to get me on my feet. Gillett appeared above me, so far away that it seemed I'd fallen into a deep hole. He grabbed my wrists and pulled me up like he was tossing around a child. The sudden motion nearly made me throw up again and I shook him off.

“Get away from me,” I said. The place where his fingers had circled my wrists tingled and I rubbed my skin to get the feeling off.

“What'd I do?” As if he didn't know. I looked at him hard and saw that he really didn't.

For a moment, I thought about just turning away, letting him walk off. That's what I usually would have done. Instead, I said, “You're married.”

“And you've got a boyfriend.”

“But you knew I had a boyfriend,” I said.

Gillett backed off a step and shook his head like he'd just run into some crazy bag lady on the street who claimed to know him. “What's the difference, Jones?”

A wife changed everything. I couldn't imagine him stealing me away from Patrick if it meant that we were committing adultery. The way he was inching away from me, like I was some delusional patient at the mental hospital where he used to work told me that those thoughts had been mine alone. An unseen hand flipped the light switch and I saw that this whole time I'd been making out in the dark with a blow up doll with Gillett's picture taped over the face. And Gillett saw it too.

I wanted to let all the air out of him. But I didn't have any darts to throw, not even a needle to prick him with. There was nothing I could say to hurt him, because I didn't even know who he was. Just some male soldier. This whole time I thought I'd been holding my own in our little social circle, making friends with Woods, flirting with Gillett, but after all this time I'd found out they were still strangers.

"Anyway, I'm sorry you didn't max," he said.

I wanted to think that he felt a little bit responsible, that he knew that his wife made the difference between a perfect score and a good one. His face and his voice were as flat as the sky. No, I thought, he doesn't have any idea at all. He just thinks he's changing the subject.

Victory Forge

Even though we'd finished out final PT test, a final three day exercise still stood between us and graduation. I approached it with more terror than elation because the Drill Sergeants constantly laughed about how they were going to gas us in our sleep. The thought of waking up with the gas already in my throat gave me nightmares and I'd wake up in the middle of the night choking on my own tongue.

Without a word of notice, Woods convinced Kelvey to be her battle buddy. That left me with the other Jones, who didn't seem to care that the girl who'd been her battle for eight weeks had dropped her at the first chance. Whether Kelvey was sick of the other Jones or just wanted to help Woods out, I couldn't tell because she was the only female in the Platoon who talked less than I did. Even though I was a little relieved that I wouldn't have to spend three silent, awkward days sharing a tent with Woods, I was a little ticked off that she was the one who'd dumped me.

The Drill Sergeants gave us a five minute warning and the other Jones helped me into my rucksack. I could hardly lift the thing by myself. Twenty minutes ago I'd put all my gear on and weighed in at almost two hundred pounds including my rucksack, rifle, Kevlar helmet and load bearing vest with the pockets crammed full of lip balm, tissues and cough drops. That was seventy more than I'd weighed at the

final PT test, less than a week ago. I had to take it all off again because it was too much to stand around in. Across the male barracks I watched as Kelvey helped Woods tighten the straps on her rucksack.

“Doesn’t it piss you off that she just switched battles on you like that?” I asked.

“Whatever,” the other Jones said, “it’s not like I was planning to keep in touch with her when this is over.” When I bent over to get her ruck, the weight of my own nearly carried me face-first into the floor.

“Need help?” Gillett asked as he grabbed the back of my ruck to steady me.

“No, I’ve got it,” I said and he went away.

“Trouble in paradise,” the other Jones said. I ignored her and held out the straps of her rucksack.

All the Drill Sergeants had talked about for the last two weeks was Victory Forge. How scary the night live-fire exercise was going to be, how many people fell out on the nine mile ruck march from the bivouac site back to the barracks. I wasn’t sure I’d make it nine miles with the equivalent weight of my little brother strapped to my back. On Gillett and some of the bigger guys, the rucksacks looked like a first grader’s backpack. The other Jones’ rucksack covered her from head to ass like a monstrous growth.

“Look, I’m Quasimomo,” McMentis said, limping around with the hood of his poncho drawn up over his head, his rucksack underneath the flowing plastic made a pretty convincing hump. Everyone laughed but Woods.

“It’s Quasimodo, idiot,” she snapped.

There was a collective eye-roll in Woods' direction. She'd never taken my advice and apologized to the Platoon and in return, the Platoon made her an outcast. It didn't change her attitude at all, only she talked less because when she voiced comments to no one in particular, no one responded any more. Sometimes I missed her though, especially when McMentis crossed the line from funny to offensive and I couldn't find just the right words to make him shut up. Woods always knew what to say.

"It's time," Drill Sergeant Adams said, stepping out of the Drill Sergeant's office. He was also wearing a rucksack, but it looked a lot newer and more comfortable than the World War Two crap we'd been issued. "Don't run down the stairs," he warned as we headed out the door, "you'll be falling all over the place."

I could barely walk with all my gear on, let alone think about running. Once we were in formation and they'd taken accountability, we stood around waiting again. When they wanted to keep us on edge, like now, they wouldn't tell us what was going to happen next. I didn't particularly care, I'd prepared myself for three days of being stuck in the woods listening to the other Jones gripe about everything.

She tapped my shoulder, as if she knew I was thinking about her, but it was only to point out the sunrise. The sun was just breaking over the line of trees across the street and the sky was hot pink with yellow fingers shooting out from the sun. I'd seen the sun rise nearly every day for the last seven weeks. I used them to mark important events, like the yellow and grey one before our first ruck march or the morning of rifle qualification, when it was twenty degrees and the sky was clear as a prism. If I'd taken a picture of this sunrise it would look like a tacky postcard, but

seeing it happening, it was beautiful. And the fact that the other Jones had noticed it and thought it worth pointing out made my ruck weigh a little less heavily on my shoulders.

After taking a bus ride way out into the woods, we marched along a paved road for a couple miles until I felt like the bones in my feet had been beaten to a pulp. I'd never been so happy to be in the woods as when we finally left the asphalt and marched up a half mile dirt road into our bivouac site. The whole company circled up into one huge defensive perimeter; our platoon had twelve to three o'clock, twelve being the dirt road. Jones and I unslung our rucksacks and settled down behind them, rifles pointing out just as we'd been trained, and waited. I rested the brim of my Kevlar against the carrying handle of the weapon, which we'd been told repeatedly was never to be used for actually carrying the weapon. This was— I'd determined through a lot of trial and error— the most comfortable position one could assume while still giving the appearance of scanning the wood line for approaching enemy. The other Jones just rolled onto her side her head pillowed against her ruck and closed her eyes.

There was always a lot of waiting involved because the Drill Sergeants had to tell Iverson what they wanted and then he had to tell the squad leaders and eventually it would trickle down to us poor schleps. Or sometimes, a Drill Sergeant would wander by and ask us why we weren't working on our foxholes already and then we'd know then what we were supposed to be doing. This time it was DS Sanchez

who questioned why we were sitting around and pointed out the spot where he wanted us to dig.

My stomach was eating itself so the other Jones offered to dig first while I tore open the brown package of one of the three MREs I was carrying. I eyed the contents of the bag to see if I'd gotten anything good, but kept sneaking a look at the other Jones to make sure she was doing things right. If she skimmed on the size of the foxhole and the Drill Sergeants noticed they might make us fill it in and start a new one. She got out her entrenching tool, the little fold-up shovel that we'd each been issued, and measured two rifle-lengths long and one wide, the prescribed size of a foxhole. We'd had classes on how to make them and had even seen a proper one, but we'd never had to dig one out before. For the first time, I was glad that I had the other Jones for a battle because she was shorter than me and we only had to dig as deep as the shortest person's armpits. Even if she only saved me two inches of digging, it was something.

"Bet you the OPFOR don't have to dig any fucking foxholes," other Jones said.

The OPFOR were the bad guys and I'd really wanted to be picked, but none of the females in our Platoon had been selected. Stupid Walker had been tapped and bragged for the last three nights about how she was going to throw teargas into our tents at night. I seriously doubted the Drill Sergeants would let a Private, even the great Private Walker, handle the gas grenades.

"They're probably roasting marshmallows," I said, and took a bite of my pound cake. Everyone loved the various flavors of pound cake in the MREs. This

happened to be spiced pound cake and if I closed my eyes, I could pretend was a very stale piece of my grandmother's Thanksgiving pumpkin loaf.

"Fuckers," Jones said. She had scraped away all the leaves and branches from where we'd have to dig, but hadn't even broken ground yet. "You done, I'm starving?" I licked the crumbs from my fingers, not caring that there was dirt under my fingernails and I hadn't washing my hands since breakfast.

"You kidding? You haven't even done anything yet."

The other Jones looked like she was about to say something and then stuck her shovel into the ground. It crunched as it bit into rocks and hard earth. Drill Sergeant Sanchez had picked a terrible spot for us right between two pine trees where there was sure to be lots of roots to hack through.

I left the bean and rice burrito alone. It was disgusting unless you heated it up for a long time and even then it tasted like a burnt, week old burrito that some trainee at Taco Bell had messed up and thrown out. There was a package of crackers and a package of peanut butter. I hated peanut butter and almost always got it. Without something to wet the crackers it was like trying to chew flour stuck together with glue, so I left them alone. There was a "fruit filled bar" which was the exact same Nutrigrain bar that you could buy at the grocery only in a brown army package. The cereal bar would get crushed in my pocket so I ate it then, but pocketed a package of mixed fruit for later.

Satisfied that I'd gotten everything good out of the MRE, I looked over at the other Jones, who'd stopped digging to catch her breath. She'd started at the end of

the foxhole furthest from me and dug out a strip about as wide as the shovel and six inches deep.

“Wow, don’t break a sweat or anything,” I said as we switched places. I took her E-tool and attacked the ground.

“It’s all rocks and clay and shit under there,” She said, rubbing her hands. “You’ll see.”

I instantly realized she was right when my first effort made it about three inches into the dirt and hit something hard. By the time I’d finished digging out another strip the same size as Jones’ I had to stop and give my hands a rest. My palms were already hot and red and soon I’d have blisters.

“This sucks,” I panted.

“What, already out of motivation?” Jones said between popping Skittles in her mouth. She hadn’t even offered to share. You were always supposed to share when you got Skittles or M&Ms in an MRE. “Where’s your sense of duty, Private?”

“Up my ass,” I said.

“What?” Jones’ mouth hung open a second and I could see the red and green Skittles half-chewed inside. Then she laughed so hard she spit them out onto the layer of pine needles covering the ground. I laughed at the Christmas colored spit speckling her chin. “I think I’m rubbing off on you,” she said as she wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “You should be bitchy more often.”

“This foxhole isn’t going to be big enough for two bitches,” I said.

The other Jones snorted and popped another handful of skittles into her mouth. “Fine then, for the next three days you can be the bitch and I’ll be the one with the false motivation, hooah.”

“Its not false motivation,” I said between breaths as I worked on digging out the next strip of dirt. “I just want to do well at everything; it’s just how I am.”

“Even if you hate what you’re doing?” She asked.

A bead of sweat ran down the back of my neck and under the collar of my shirt. It tickled, but I didn’t break the rhythm of my digging to wipe it away.

“Especially if I hate what I’m doing. How else are you going to get through it?”

“By not caring,” she said. “The day after we graduate no one will remember who tried hard and who got by.”

“I will,” I said. “When I look back I want to know that I did my best.”

“I think you’re losing the bet already.”

Blisters were bubbling up on my palms and I stuck the shovel in the ground so hard that it stood up on its own. “It wasn’t a bet. Besides, what’s to bitch about when you’re sitting there eating?”

“Fine.” I could tell it was harder for her to swallow whatever else she wanted to say than to get down the big lump of candy in her mouth. She dug in silence and I picked up my rifle, pointed the muzzle out into the woods and waited for an attack that never came. To her credit, the other Jones held up her end of the bargain, even though I traded the shovel off to her regularly and didn’t let her get away with less than half the work. Our blisters broke open and bled. When the other Jones jumped

into the foxhole for the fifth time and the lip of it finally came up to her arm pits, I whooped for joy.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” She said.

“Oh excuse me. I suppose the proper response would be to question why we had to dig foxholes in the first place, right?”

“That’s more like it.” Down in the foxhole, the other Jones pushed her Kevlar back on her head and grinned like a parent whose child had just made a precocious observation. “You think our guys are digging foxholes in Afghanistan?”

“That sounded a lot like a gripe,” I said.

“No, just a cynical observation. Big difference.”

The clear weather held through that night and the temperature dropped again, so that every shiver made my muscles, sore from digging, knot tighter and tighter. When we were all getting ready to crawl into our tents The Drill Sergeants told us ruck up and prepare to march. We were going to do the Night Infiltration Course and Live Fire that very night. The other Jones just sighed, but I grumbled for both of us as we shoved everything but our tents and sleeping bags back into our rucksacks. Nothing— not even the prospect of crawling around while being shot at with real bullets, which that morning had seemed exciting— was more appealing than my sleeping bag just then. To my dismay, I found out that marching in the dark was far worse than marching by day because there was nothing to look at except for the dark shape of the person ahead of me and the white, ghostly glow of the moonlight on the dirt roads. The Drill Sergeants had green glow sticks attached to the fronts of their

uniforms so we could point them out, but it was pretty easy to tell who they were since they were the only ones allowed to walk in the middle of the road while us privates marched in parallel lines on the shoulders.

The Night Infiltration Course proved just to be another obstacle course, the only difference was that we did it as a squad, with rucks and rifles, and we did it at night. We were supposed to be stealthy, but I'm sure we were about as quiet as a herd of elephants trumpeting through the brush. Now and then a white flare would shoot up and hang in the sky, burning so brightly that it turned the world into black and white. We would all fall to the ground, motionless, and cover our eyes so as not to be night blinded once the flare wore off.

Once all the squads were through the course we had a long safety briefing before the live fire. There would be SAWs up in the towers at the far end of the sand pit, shooting live ammunition above our heads. Therefore, unless we had a death wish, we were not to stand up. Privates muttered nervously as we were herded down into a concrete ditch deeper than I was tall. I knew that the fire would be well over our heads, so far over that even if the tallest male in our platoon started jumping up and down that he wouldn't be hit. They had to make it that way, for safety sake, I told myself. Besides, we'd fired live rounds during the tactical buddy-team movement exercise, the only different was that we were doing the shooting and this time we were being shot at. Suddenly there was a long, high pitched whistle and someone screamed "incoming" and we all hit the ground. The mortar simulator boomed so loud that my insides vibrated. Then the SAWs started firing from the towers and the red tracers streaked over our heads like bloody cuts in the night sky.

Another flare went up, burning white and hung like the star of Bethlehem over the towers.

“Go, go, go,” the Drill Sergeants screamed and we all scrambled up over the lip of the ditch and onto a field of sand, barbed wire and concrete obstacles that looked like the beach of Normandy. At the far end the towers spewed bullets, which seemed to streak right over our heads. I could feel the air churning like boiling water.

“Holy shit!” The other Jones screamed next to me and buried her face in the sand. The whistle and boom of the mortars and the snare drum rapid-fire of the SAWs nearly drowned out her voice. I couldn’t even hear myself breathing. Grabbing the collar of her BDUs I tugged her forward because I didn’t want to crawl alone through the field. We low crawled as fast as we could, ducking beneath barbed-wire obstacles and slithering down concrete culverts. The sand went on forever. Each time we stopped, exhausted and gasping, I felt myself shaking. Every time I looked at the tall white towers, I imagined the gunner swinging the barrel of his rifle down and spraying the sand in front of me, little explosions going off as the shots edged closer.

And what was the use of this except to scare the shit out of us? There was no good cover to hide behind. If there was a big stretch of open sand between me and some Afghani with a gun I sure as hell wasn’t going to go crawling across it to get at him. That’s what grenades were for, or air support, or something other than a bunch of soldiers crawling relentlessly towards fortified enemy positions. “What the fuck are we doing?” I yelled at the other Jones.

“You hurt?” She shouted over the noise into my ear, clearly not able to hear what I was saying.

“They’re training us to die!”

“What?”

I leaned closer to her, my lips almost against her ear. The side of her face was coated with a fine grit of sand that had stuck to the sweat. “They’re training us to die!”

Jones slapped the back of my Kevlar. “What did you think they were doing the other eight weeks? Just keep moving.”

The sight of Jones crawling on ahead of me sent me chasing after her. I knew if I stayed too long alone out on the sand the fear of being shot would work its way into my arms and legs. Behind me, I heard Woods screaming, though I couldn’t make out the words. She was whiter than the sand, her eyes huge as the moon as she urged Kelvey along, who was moving like a wind-up toy that needed another crank. I willed Woods to look over at me, to see that she wouldn’t have had to drag me through the sand if she’d stayed my buddy. But she didn’t look.

On the other side of the wooden logs that marked the finish line, no one was cheering, they weren’t even watching those of us still struggling across the sand. There were no Drill Sergeants urging us on. I rolled over the logs, crawled a few paces into the wooded area behind the towers and flipped onto my back. Looking up, I saw that the towers were two stories high and the bullets were flying at least twenty feet above us, arcing up-up and landing somewhere far beyond the concrete ditch where we’d started. It didn’t make me feel any better that what I’d told myself about

the towers when I'd been at the starting line was true. It just made me angry because I was sick of being tricked.

The other Jones appeared over me and dropped something onto my chest. Too tired to lift my head, I held up the package to the floodlights on the towers. A half-eaten bag of Skittles.

"Great job out there." I thought she was sincere until a smirk twitched at the corner of her mouth.

"Fuck off," I sighed, even as I took the hand she offered and sat up.

"You too," she said, almost fondly as she sat down next to me. I poured the candy out into my hands and we shared it, the sweat cooling on our backs and the machine guns rolling on above our heads.

After the long march back to the bivouac site, I could barely stay on my feet and I'd never looked forward to the prospect of a sleeping bag so much. I slipped into the tent first, sitting down at the entrance to take off my boots so I wouldn't track dirt all over. Jones passed me our rifles and I laid them in the middle of the tent between our sleeping bags so the Drill Sergeants wouldn't be able to reach in from the sides and grab them. Once inside, I thumbed on my flashlight, illuminating the olive interior which was barely tall enough for me to sit upright. Jones came in and rummaged through her ruck. I took off my load bearing vest, unhooked the mask carrying case from around my waist and piled it all on top of my rucksack. Without undressing, I crawled into my sleeping bag, which felt clammy.

“You aren’t even going to wipe down?” The other Jones asked as she scrubbed her face with a baby wipe.

“Too tired,” I muttered and turned away from her. “I’ll do it in the morning.”

“Good thing I can’t smell you.” The Drill Sergeants assured us that we all stunk, but after the first week we could no longer smell ourselves or each other. It seemed that we were so immersed in our own smell that we’d become immune to it.

I ignored her and hoped to fall asleep right away, but sleep wouldn’t come. First, the noise of Jones’ washing up and settling into her sleeping bag bothered me. Then, after she was quiet, I kept hearing footsteps outside our tent. The perimeter was constantly guarded by roving patrols, so I knew it was probably just our own soldiers and not the OPFOR creeping up on us. But I kept imagining April Walker low crawling to our tent, gas grenade in hand and throwing it inside. Or DS Sanchez sneaking up, already in his mask, eager to gas us just to watch us run out screaming and half dressed. In a sudden panic, I fumbled in the dark for my gas mask. I found the strap of the carrying case and pulled it towards me, but my vest was on top and it clattered down onto the weapons.

Jones woke with a snort. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said. I opened the case, the sound of the Velcro on the flaps as loud as if someone were tearing open the fabric of our tent.

“Doesn’t sound like nothing,” Jones said.

I took the gas mask out and pressed it to my face, wondering if I’d be able to fall asleep with it on. But as soon as it sealed against my skin, I got that suffocating feeling like each breath was somehow less than I needed. Instead, I laid it next to my

head on the ground, so at least I'd be able to roll over and stick my face right into it at the first sign of gas.

“Will you quit fidgeting already?” Jones said and flicked her flashlight on. I shut my eyes and raised my hand against the sudden light. After a moment, when Jones didn't say anything, I cracked my eyes open and peered through my fingers. She didn't laugh at the sight of me sleeping with my mask like a child with a security blanket. Instead, she flicked her flashlight off. She'd found the light so fast I thought she might have been sleeping with it in her hand.

“Gas chamber really rattled you, huh?” She said in the darkness.

I swallowed against the hardness in my throat. “Scared the shit out of me,” I said.

Inside the tent, I listened to the other Jones shallow breathing. Outside the tent a twig cracked and I touched the gas mask. Just when I thought she'd fallen asleep again, she said, “I thought I was going to die that day in the sand pit.”

“You just hit muscle failure is all,” I said, trying to dismiss it.

“No,” she said quickly. “It wasn't that at all. I really froze up out there when Drill Sergeant Adams started screaming at me. I kept hearing my dad instead.”

I didn't know what to say to her. I wished Woods were here because she'd smooth things out, steer the conversation in a safer direction. Before I could think of how to respond, she continued.

“It was like Drill Sergeant Adams was saying all the things I know my dad thinks about me,” she said. Her voice was surprisingly calm, like she'd given it a lot of thought and had time to distance herself from the initial horror of the experience.

“And it wasn’t even what he was saying that made me freeze up, it was what I wanted to say back to him. You know?”

My pulse was loud in my ears and the only thing I could hear above it was Jones’ voice. “I know,” I said.

“It was a rhetorical question,” she said, slipping back towards her usual tone.

“No, really, I understand.” I rolled onto my back, very aware of her lying a foot away even though I couldn’t see her. The tent squeezed us together, but at the same time it felt like something was swelling inside my chest, pushing words out of me that I wasn’t sure I wanted to say. “Remember that story I told you about my friend’s dad, about him being gay?” My words moved slowly through the dark to Jones and she made an affirmative noise. At any moment I felt like I’d be crushed or I would burst. “It was my dad in the club,” I said, the words rushing out of me like air from a balloon.

The things neither of us had said to our fathers drifted in the negative space between us and settled slowly onto the cold earth, falling onto our rifles and the edges of our sleeping bags like melting snow. When she didn’t say anything, I thought perhaps I’d gone too far, revealed too much. I turned the conversation back to her father instead of mine. “What did your dad say to you when you joined?” I asked, half expecting her not to answer.

“That he was glad I’d found a service I was suited to,” she said, without hesitating, and I knew she’d said those same words to herself many times over.

Suddenly, I understood why Jones had been ready to give up from the moment she set foot at Basic, because she’d been defeated the moment she broken with family

tradition and enlisted in the Army. I shivered in the dark, feeling the pain of that terrible blow deep in my own stomach. It was a desolate feeling and it took me back to the moment when I was standing in the driveway of my parent's house, which had just become my mom's house because my dad's moving truck was pulling away with all his things. My mom had sent Mike to his best friend's house for the day and she was holed up in the bedroom and refused to come out. I'd actually helped my father load the truck, because he asked me to and I didn't know how to tell him that every piece of furniture, every box I carried out, felt like a betrayal of mom and Mike.

"What did you say to your dad after you found out he was gay?" The other Jones asked.

"Nothing," I said, which was pretty much true. I hadn't said anything that mattered, even though I was full to bursting with feelings. They just wouldn't form themselves into words and so I mostly sat there and listened to him talk. "We went to lunch and argued about splitting the tab. He wanted to pick up the bill. Like lunch could make everything right again."

Jones sighed and I knew she understood. "Is he going to be at graduation?"

"Yeah. What about Sir?"

"He wouldn't miss a chance to wear his dress uniform," she said.

A couple weeks ago we'd been fitted for our Class A uniforms, which we'd wear for graduation. The Drill Sergeants had made us put them on and fix our few decorations to the chest. Everyone had one rainbow striped ribbon that everyone got for being in the military and a rifle marksmanship badge. It wasn't much to show for everything we'd been through.

“Do you think it’ll be different when you see him again?”

“Of course,” Jones said. “Now I’ll have to salute him.”

We both laughed, even though I could feel the bitterness seeping from Jones, crawling across the ground like a cloud of poison gas. I didn’t grab for my mask. I was immune to it because it came from me too as I thought about seeing my family again. They hadn’t changed at all, as far as I could tell from their letters and their phone calls, and when I tried to picture myself standing next to them it was like trying to shove together pieces from two different puzzles.

The air creeping in through the worn canvas of our tent turned sharply colder, as it always did the hour before dawn. We’d talked away our precious sleep and soon we’d have to get up, don our MOPP suits and crawl into our foxholes. The Drill Sergeants and our Smart Books agreed that the enemy was most likely to attack at sunrise from the East. I didn’t understand why an enemy, seeing we were, would insist on sticking to one time of day, one avenue of approach. Or why our training couldn’t allow for the possibility of an enemy that might do something unexpected. Families were like that too, fighting each new battle with the same old tactics. At least now, when I saw them again, I knew that I was better armed, better trained and stood a fighting chance at making myself heard.