

HILLBILLY ARMOR

Richard Mark Glover

AFTER EMAILING MY wife to tell her I wasn't dead, I walk back to the Quonset hut and lay down on my bunk. I don't even try to sleep. Diesel stinks up my fatigues and the crusty blood on my skin powders against the Dacron of the sleeping bag. I take a swig from a Coke, push play on the iPod, and light up a Marlboro. Alone in the dark, all I can think about is the smoke curling in my lungs.

Earlier in the day our Humvee had been hit. We were on reconnaissance in Sadr City, the poor-town of Baghdad. Filmore drove and I rode bitch. Jackson sucked a Kool in the back prepping bullets for the fifty-caliber turret gun and Menard squatted looking for 5-Ds on the road ahead through the red, white and black images of the thermal scope.

A 5-D is any Muslim who makes roadside bombs or IEDs as we call them. It's a five-part team: a digger, a dropper, a detonator, a deceiver, and death. The digger is usually a farmer or peasant who's paid to dig a hole in a strategic location, like a road. The dropper, sometimes a kid, drops the small bomb frame in the hole and keeps walking. The detonator man comes at night and sets the charge and covers it up. The deceiver is the guy with the big smile for all us Americans. When our vehicles get close, the deceiver loses his smile and signals death. Death makes the call that triggers the bomb.

We had left the green zone and wheeled our Humvee toward Airport Road. They say it's the most dangerous avenue in the world. Concrete barriers on both sides and scorched marks to remind you: never go uncovered on this route.

An Abrams M1A1 tank came slinking by. We all watched the hard beige lines cut through the hot air, black smoking, big steel on concrete.

"Seventy-two tons of pissed-off metal," Jackson said. Smoke streamed out of his nostrils as he pushed the ammo box through the hatch.

The early model Humvee, like the one we were patrolling in, are known as cardboard coffins. Compared to an Abrams it's a skinny dick. They shipped'em across with-

out factory armor, and no firepower.

At the bone yard, the week before, we had stripped metal from a few choice carcasses. Filmore and Menard, both welders from Alabama, fused our doors with a mishmash of anything metal, canon bars, trailer struts, even a ten-lug wheel from a smoked tanker—hillbilly armor, we call it. They forged a bird house in the back too, for the big gun we lifted out of a dead Stryker. But we couldn't prep enough steel in time to line the belly.

Jackson's Zippo had quit. He shook it but it wouldn't flame. I don't think I can remember him without a cigarette. He poked it in my fire and rolled his black eyes up at me as he sucked in fresh nicotine. "Sarge," he said. "Whatchu living for?"

Female vocals croon through the headphones and I get to thinking about my wife. We've got a son, 18 months old. She brought him over to her mother's a month ago and hasn't been back. Says she's taking care of her grandmother in Tallahassee, but I know her ex-boyfriend lives there too.

I take another drag of the Marlboro and blow rings into the dark. The smoke inside the Humvee was thick, black, sulfurous. The explosion lifted us up and we bounced down hard on our side and rolled. The diesel ignited and orange heat sprayed through the cockpit. Shrapnel clusters tore through the rear of the vehicle piercing Jackson's body with chards from the floorboard, the axle and wire from the Goodyears. I heard the low pitch of his last word, "God." He couldn't even finish. It was some kind of prayer. Jackson was always praying. He started'em off with God, never Lord or Jesus or Hail Mary, just God, like he was about to cuss.

I look over at the cell phone on my locker. I could call her. Say hello to my son. Of course, they wouldn't be together.

"Who's this?" A man answers her phone.

"Gina's husband. Who the fuck is this?"

"Hello," Gina says.

"Who was that?" I ask.

She tells me it's the nurse for her grandma. Then admits it's Larry, her ex-boyfriend.

"We're just friends," she says.

"Friends? I'm killing the enemy and you're fucking your friends."

She says nothing.

"It's over," I say.

"It might be the right thing to do, Michael," she says.

Holy shit. I didn't mean it. I thought she'd reason with me. I wanted her to say, "I'm so glad you're alive. I can't wait until you get back home."

But it's done and deep down, I know it's over, it's been over. It was over the moment I waved from the tarmac in the good ole U.S.A.

Hey, I never loved her. What's love anyway—hormones? It's like war, get all juiced up and live or die. Some die sooner. Some throw-up. And the Earth keeps spinning. But what a butt—goddamn, finest ass in Florida.

"Gina?"

I throw the Motorola across the room and light another Marlboro.

When I get back, if I get back, I'll rescue my son, Marlon. Raise him to be a good boy. Teach him Arabic, how to bend a note on a harmonica, and write poems about birds and the full moon. I'll raise him far away from her and my Uncle Henry, the soldier of our family, the one I wanted to be like. My dad used to pat my head but Uncle Henry brought me toy guns and army helmets. Dad would push his glasses up in the Daytona sand and lecture about seagulls but Uncle Henry would go out in the woods with me and we'd hide and shoot it up. Then I began to notice girls and cool mornings and I knew I wanted to be just like Uncle Henry, buff, uniformed, lit-up. My dad would watch me from a distance but Uncle Henry was who I wanted to be.

LIEUTENANT HAMLET WALKS into the Quonset hut. He wants me to take a shower and clean the blood and diesel off. He says, "It'll make you feel better." I tell'em I feel fine and very good about everything. I like to smoke in bed in the dark and smell my day's labor. Then I tell'em about my wife. Pray for her to be reasonable, he says. And I say, no I'm a soldier in Iraq, I'll pray for her to be unreasonable.

"We'll all receive a medal for today," he says.

I watch his shadow against the wall. He wasn't with us today so I'm trying to piece together the "we" business.

"Lieutenant," I say, "Can you tell me one thing?"

"Go ahead."

"Why the fuck we over here anyway?"

He looks at me with his blue eyes and spreads his arms like he's about to prophesize and says in the quiet of the

hut, "Because God requires righteousness."

I joined the Army when I turned eighteen. At the time, the chance of combat was slim. Then Bush gets elected, then 9/11 and all of a sudden I'm a sergeant.

"Lieutenant," I say. "You're a dumb motherfucker."

His eyes narrow and he raises his chin and says, "Get some rest, Weinert. You've been through a lot today. I'm going to forget you said that."

OUTSIDE THE GLOW of dawn finally melts the night. The wind blows and sand smacks across the thin hut walls. There's a noise in my head and it won't go away: qua-qua, qua-qua. Menard hobbles in on crutches. He's all banged up.

"Hey, man, what the fuck?" I say.

"What the fuck, over," he says. He leans down in his bed and drops the crutches. They bounce on the floor. "Pull the shade, will you? Sleep, man that's all I want."

I close the blinds and turn to look at him. He's already out. I walk out into the new day toward mess to get some smokes. A beige tanker pumps diesel as the sun low in the eastern sky bulges over the endless sand. My legs feel heavy and everything I think about has orange in it. Like all my thoughts are wordless blobs of melting orange. And the head noise: qua-qua, qua-qua.

The lieutenant sees me from his hut and yells out at me. "Weinert, take a shower, change your fatigues and go to the medic. I want you checked out. And I need to know by 1200 Saturday if you're re-upping for another tour."

He's all pumped this morning, different, like maybe he's pissed off at me and wants to change the relationship. "Yes sir," I say and salute the motherfucker.

Inside the medic tells me to put out the cigarette and take off my glasses. He wiggles his light into my eye and then the other. "How do you feel?" he asks.

"I feel great, doc. I'd like to kill a bunch of motherfuckers today."

He looks at me. Then says "Are you having any visions?"

"What do you mean, visions?"

"Hallucinations, blurred eyesight, irregular coloration."

"No, sir. I want to report back to duty."

I walk across the camp and stop at the port-o-shitter. The piss level reaches halfway up the funnel. Terds float just under the rim. In the next booth over I hear some guy spanking his monkey. "Hey shut-up," I yell, trying to concentrate over the thumping meter.

Two plastic beige doors open simultaneously. He's got three stripes and a diamond. Trumped, I keep walking and stop at the lieutenant's office.

"Lieutenant, I've been RTD'd and wish to re-organize

my squad.”

“Get some rest, Weinert. Two replacements come Friday.”

“Friday? There’s some 5-Ds out there that have fucked up my men. And killed Jackson. I can’t wait that long.”

“You’ll do as I say, Weinert.”

“Lieutenant, I need to take care of business.”

“This war is not a one-man show.”

I light up a Marlboro and look at him.

“What college did you go to, Lieutenant?”

His skin is pale, reddish in places, like mine.

“South Carolina State. What about it, Weinert?”

“You ever killed anybody?”

“No,” he says. “I never killed anybody.”

Jackson is dead. Me, Menard, Filmore, and the lieutenant live to see another day.

THEY ISSUE ANOTHER Humvee, the latest model with factory armor and a 7.62 turret gun. Filmore drives. Menard is back in the hospital, indefinitely. The two new guys, Paige and Gonzalez, ride with us. They’ve been on the ground twelve hours. We’re looking for Muslims with cell phones.

Dark sweaty men in greasy white tunics groan face down on the earth floor. Their women wail in the corner of the mud house, watching. I swing my shotgun out of the small of a back and aim at the women. “Shut the fuck up,” I yell.

Paige, one of the new guys asks, “Sarge, what do you want me to do with them?” He stands over the wailing women with his rifle pointed at the ground.

“Speak Arabic. Didn’t they teach you to speak Arabic? Ask them to politely refrain from crying.”

The two-room hut smells like piss and smoke. Candles flicker. Orange creeps.

These could be 5-Ds. The world would be a better place without them, at least my world. I swing my shotgun away from the screaming women and butt-pop the head of one of the men. I have my finger on the trigger and think: Boom boom boom. No more bombs for them.

“Sarge, I didn’t learn Arabic.”

“Paige,” I say. “Can you sing like a seagull?”

The kid is green. I could use a good man like Jackson, right now, but he’s dead, gone forever. Except that I saw him last night. His blue lips whispered out of the desert floor, “Whatcha living for, Sarge?” I wedged myself between the particles of sand and thought about his question. God’s brain lit up before me as I watched the circuits dial death, and then Jackson appeared leaning against what might have been all the answers in the world with a pack of Kool rolled up in his T-shirt sleeve. I wanted to hold him and feel his breathe, his skin, his wounds.

“Do you want them dead, Paige?”

“What, sir? You mean kill them? Right here and now?”

“Yes, I mean kill them dead. Make the decision, Paige. It’s your entrance exam.”

“No, sir, we should take them prisoner. In accordance with the convention.”

“Think again, Paige.”

I strap my shotgun and pull out the Beretta. Pistols are more efficient. The mess a shotgun makes is really nasty. I wrap my finger around the trigger and slide the short barrel into the thin hairs of the first man’s head.

One of the women shrieks.

Paige strikes her between the eyes with the butt of his M-16. She drops to the floor. I nod at Paige. Finally I see signs of his training.

A candle falls in the corner, and a naked baby crawls across the floor. Paige swings his weapon.

“Easy,” I shout.

I pick up the boy and hold him in my arms with the pistol still clenched in my fist. He giggles and I rub his head. He wraps his arms around my neck and squeezes. The women sob. One steps forward with her veil drooping below her dark wet cheeks and holds out her arms.

I hand her the baby.

“Let’s go, Paige.”

“But, Sergeant . . .”

“Move it.” I turn to the Muslims in the dim lit room. “Ma’ Al-Salama,” I say and walk out.

I climb into the Humvee. “Come on, Paige” I yell. “Get your ass in here.”

I pop a Gatorade while a dead song from Metallica leaks out of Filmore’s head set as we motor slowly down the hill, the knobby tires clicking against the cobble-stone road, echoing against the gouged-earth buildings. It’s curfew and there’s no lights. Each corner is blind. Each rattle, each zing—every little microscopic pop is a new chance at death. My head hurts. I want to wrap a bandage around it, tight, and cover my head so I can’t hear or see or know anything.

Back in the zone, I crawl up into my bunk and lay there. I’m out of smokes but too tired to get up. In six hours the U.S. Army wants to know if I’m up for re-up, another twelve months of war. Got my whole life ahead of me. And an ex-wife. And a son.

In the distance I hear sniper fire ping and thud against endless targets. Incoming mail rattles the walls.

“Jackson, is that you?”

Seagulls, I hear them, qua-qua. They’re flying over the sand and the man with the glasses stands and waves and gets smaller and smaller.