

Please Take Me with You

“Good God, it REEKS!” The shrill voice cut through the silence which permeated the cramped quarters of our Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle.

“Smells like money to me, Doc,” the reply floated down to us through the roof-mounted turret. “I’m in the wrong business!”

“I can’t believe they let you have a gun, McCloud,” Sergeant Strauss snapped, removing her glasses to wipe watery eyes with the edge of a worn, digital-patterned sleeve.

It *did* reek. The sour, pungent smell of marijuana poured through the open turret and sliced through the familiar stink of sweat-soaked leather and motor oil, assaulting our noses. We’d been on the road for over an hour, heading to a small combat outpost on the outskirts of the Arghandab River Valley district of Kandahar Province to drop supplies or provide security or clear the roads—I don’t remember the ‘whys’ now; I’m not sure I ever knew them in the first place—I only remember the ‘whos.’

The banter continued, a distant buzz while I squinted through inches of foggy, ballistic glass at the world outside. This was my first time leaving the outpost, my first glimpse of Afghanistan that wasn’t skewed by barbed wire or distanced by the bird’s eye view from a guard tower. It didn’t look like the Afghanistan I’d seen on CNN at all. *It’s so green*, I thought to myself, remembering the footage I’d seen of a UH-6 Black Hawk helicopter flying over Kandahar, the city a maze of muddy walls and more shades of brown than I’d ever known existed.

“It’s so *green*,” I said out loud. There was a brief pause before sudden laughter bellowed through the vehicle’s interior, shattering the silence and causing me to shrink into the shell of my body armor.

“I can see it now,” McCloud spat down through fits of laughter, “breaking news from the front lines of the War on Terror.” At this, his voice deepened as it shifted into the smooth, artificial rhythm of a television news anchor. “According to our combat camera specialist on the ground out of Fort Carson, Colorado, Afghanistan is actually quite *greeeeeeeeen*.” He drew the last word out, the ‘eeeeee’ in ‘green’ rising into a high-pitched whine which he flung into the sky, a hearty cackle chasing after it.

We’d spent the last hour in an uncomfortable silence. Before this mission, Doc and the boys were only familiar faces I’d seen in formation back on Fort Carson—stock characters wrapped in matching digital camouflage, cranking out the same complaints and the same jokes day-in and day-out. They reminded me of a Chatty Cathy doll—like the broken one my mum had in her closet that would only chant one phrase on repeat—and half the time, without its string being pulled:

“Please take me with you.”

But Doc and the boys never took me with them. They’d spent months training together, learning each other’s strengths and weaknesses, meeting each other’s partners and children. They were a team. I was alone. Strauss had asked me if I was *actually* a Soldier the first time I was sent to cover the pre-deployment medical training she was leading on Fort Carson.

“I mean, did you actually go through Basic Training and everything?”

That was when I knew just how far apart I was from my fellow Soldiers.

“Yup. A real-live Soldier,” I drawled. “Even learned to shoot a real gun and everything.”

She looked up from the medical bag she was unpacking, one red eyebrow cocked in a skeptical upside-down check mark. She told me she didn't know the Army had jobs like that, then asked what I do on deployment, take pictures of the landscape or what? She'd tried to hide the amusement from her face, but that blasted eyebrow twitched, ever so slightly.

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"Please take me with you," Chatty Cathy's voice taunted from somewhere underneath the memory – a monotonous echo that repeated itself over and over as it slithered after McCloud's cackle. Strauss, the boys called her "Doc" for short, was strapped into the bucket seat to the right of me, her medical bags scattered on the hard platform between our seats, where they framed McCloud's dirty, size 14 Danner combat boots. His long legs, like the thick trunks of giant Redwoods, stretched up into the turret and disappeared into the circle of blue above us.

Strauss bent over to peek at me from between the trunks.

"Not the landscape you were expecting, huh?"

She chuckled, cocked eyebrow blazing through the shadow McCloud's legs cast across her face. There was something different about her expression, the way her eyes danced in the shadow as she asked the question. As if to say "Like each other or not, we're in this together now."

I grinned back, letting the moment hang between us, just long enough to make sure it was a real thing. Familiar enough, I finally conceded, though not at all what I was expecting.

McCloud lowered his head through the hatch, shot off something about how none of us would have joined the Army if we could spend our days driving through pot fields with plants the size of trees.

Smiling up at him, I raised my fingers to my lips, holding an imaginary joint between stiff fingers. I inhaled and blew a phantom stream of smoke at his face, which made him cross his eyes and stick his tongue out in mock ecstasy. From the other side of him, I could hear Strauss laughing.

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I heard my mom's voice floating down the hallway from the living room, slightly off-beat and terribly off pitch. It slid underneath my door, heavy with the smoke it rode in on. I coughed and grabbed a neatly-folded towel off of my Sunkist Oranges bookshelf. Holding the towel by one edge, I shook the folds out of it and shoved it unceremoniously into the crack between the bottom of the door and the threadbare shag carpet of my bedroom floor. *I fucking hate that smell*, I thought, stomping over to open the door of the bathroom which connected my big brother's room to mine. I knocked softly, hoping he was still awake.

The door opened and Dustin's warm smile greeted me. "Let me guess, you want incense?" He opened his door and turned back into his room, silently inviting me to follow. I stepped through the door and felt the anger rush out of me as the soft glow of lamp light lit up the room and the familiar, earthy smell of Nag Champa chased the skunk out of my nose.

I always felt like I was walking into an alternate reality when I entered Dustin's space. His room, twice the size of mine, was covered in colorful tapestries, their clashing colors and

patterns stretched up the walls and across the ceiling, where they were tacked in pin-cushion-like billows that made the space feel like the inside of a cloud.

“God, one look at this place and anyone would think *you’re* the pot-head,” I teased him.

“It’s not so bad, Sis. At least she’s in a good mood,” he muttered, grabbing the box of Nag Champa off his nightstand.

“Of course she’s in a good mood,” I fired back, grabbing the red, white and blue box from him with one hand, and tilting it vertically to let a few of the powdery, brown sticks fall into the other. “She’s higher than kite.”

He ignored my comment, instead holding his hand out for the box, smile dropping a little as his eyes met mine. *He’s got the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen*, I thought, moving past the outstretched hand and standing on my tip toes to wrap my arms around his sun-browned neck.

“We’re going to get out of here someday,” I whispered fiercely against his neck, “we’re going to go far far away from here.”

“That’s you, Sis,” he replied, stepping out of my hug and patting my shoulder. “I’m never leaving Vernal.”

He always said he was going to stay in Vernal. Like he couldn’t get enough of the high-desert grime that wormed through every crack in the house and coated everything we owned. Like he would miss the choking smell of marijuana leaking under his door. Like the tumbleweeds and sagebrush that piled up outside our trailer was the most beautiful sight he’d ever lay eyes on.

Utah was beautiful, sure. And our little canyon that stretched into the high Uintas was probably among the most breath-taking places in the state. But I couldn’t help but wonder how he wasn’t dying to see what life was like on the other side of Split Mountain or Dinosaur

National Monument; what the water felt like somewhere other than Ashley Creek or the Green River.

How could he want to stay in this little trailer, with the sounds of battle coming from the the rooms on the other side of his bathroom door in all the moments between the ones that “weren’t so bad?”

“I’ll never understand you, Bubbah.” It was a whisper—all the strength I could pull out of my rapidly constricting throat. It hung there between us, between the resignation I could see in in the depths of his brown eyes and the anger squeezing my throat shut.

We had never talked like this. For years, we followed the same script, said the same things out loud, secretly wondering what the other really thought in our shared moments of silence. No need to pull the string tonight. Despite his claims, his eyes said it all.

“Please take me with you.”

Somewhere in the distance, the sharp report of a rifle shot bounced off the walls of Dry Fork Canyon, a monotonous echo repeating itself over and over as it bellowed its way past sagebrush and juniper, then through the windows of Dustin’s room, where it ripped the moment away from us.

“Old Mackay is really after it tonight,” he said, moving to the window, where he pulled back the corner of a tapestry to peer into the blackness outside.

I watched him study the darkness, then turned quietly and walked out of his room, closing the door softly behind me.

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“Doc! Get up! They need your ass at the clinic, *NOW!*”

The voice thundered through the door of our tent, waking all its occupants at once. Disgruntled mumbles came from all corners of the darkness before the voice cut in again.

“Pye, you’d better get over there too.”

Strauss rolled out of the bunk next to mine and started putting her kit together, pausing long enough to catch my eye and shake her head before reaching down to tug on her combat boots. The distinct cracking bursts of small-arms-fire slowly came into focus, freezing Strauss’ fingers in place halfway through her lacing. I walked over and sat on the bunk next to her, putting my arm across her shoulders until she continued with shaky hands. The cracking was all around us now--familiar enough to me, but not at all what I was expecting before I’d even had breakfast.

It didn’t take long Strauss and the boys to figure out what exactly I *do* on deployment. Three months in, we’d already lost ten men. After each death, I packed my camera equipment up and headed out to the helipad to fly out to wherever their improvised memorial ceremonies were being held. Then, one-by-one, I made my way to Kandahar Airfield to take photos of their final “dignified transfer” home. Red, white and blue draped caskets looked like Nag Champa boxes stacked against the cold steel walls of the Lockheed’s’ cavernous belly. I had started to crave the mountains and deserts of home, and envied my brother that little white trailer he still lived in.

The nervous laughter which had marked that first patrol shifted over the months. My fellow Soldiers all saw the dirt and rust-colored stains on my boots when I came back to Camp Nathan Smith from days and weeks of embed at remote infantry outposts—they didn’t joke about me photographing landscapes anymore.

“C’mon, Strauss, we gotta go.”

I moved toward the entrance to our tent, slinging my M4 rifle over my right shoulder, across my body, and my Nikon over the left, camera strap pinning the rifle to my chest. *Why do they make me carry this thing when I can only shoot one thing at a time?* I asked myself for the millionth time. Reaching the tent, I pushed the wood-framed inner door open and stepped into the dark space between inner and outer doors. Behind me, I heard Strauss hiss at me to wait for her, voice betraying her nervousness.

Please take me with you.

We made our way toward the clinic as quickly as we could, boots crunching against the thick layer of chunky, slate-colored rock which covered our entire combat outpost and slowed our movement considerably. The rock was the solution to the inches of fine-powdered dust it covered up, which would have slowed our movement even more.

Despite my initial awe of the greenness of the Arghandab River Valley, I had since discovered the Afghanistan of CNN's footage. Even more shades of brown than the screen showed—but no muddy anything. No rain at all, for that matter. I still wasn't entirely convinced this war wasn't being fought on the moon.

Ahead of us, the medical clinic was a scene of absolute chaos. Everywhere I looked there were Soldiers, swarming. They moved in a current into and out of the doors to the medical clinic, some carrying stretchers or medical supplies, others just swimming for the edges. *They look like Army ants.* The thought made me laugh. The laugh made Strauss look at me, eyebrows scrunched together in distaste.

"We're all a bunch of Army ants," I whispered toward the scrunched brows, following the whisper with the most charming grin I could muster on short notice. It worked. The eyebrows un-scrunched and cocked back into place. "Just breathe, Strauss. I'll meet you at the chow hall

tonight, if we have time.” With that, I watched her move toward the chaos, the current pulling her into the swarm and swallowing her instantly.

I shook the image away and took a look around, trying to get a feel for what was happening. To the left of the clinic, I could see several of the forest green trucks used by the Afghan National Police, parked haphazardly in the area meant to serve as the clinic’s emergency vehicle staging area. The swarm moved toward the trucks, pulling out body after body, then back to the doors of the clinic. *Jesus Christ, what the fuck happened?*

“What the fuck happened?” I plucked a digital-patterned sleeve out of the swarm—a Private—of course.

“ANP meeting,” the Private mumbled, looking back toward the chaos. “One of their own guys just opened fire. Fucking whole city’s a mess now.”

I let his arm go and watched him get sucked back into the current. A horn blared behind me, another ANP truck crawling toward the clinic. I stepped aside and watched the truck pass me, lifting up my camera to snap a photo of the driver as he passed. He didn’t even look at me.

I stepped back into the road, lifting my camera again to snap a photo of the truck with the clinic in the background.

Snap. The tailgate was down. I could see the familiar blue cotton of ANP uniforms, one piled on top of the other, some bits moving, some bits not.

Snap. There was a steady black stream pouring through the crack between the tailgate and the back of the truck. It left a dark, wet line on the rocks as the truck crept forward.

Snap. The truck stopped and several ANP officers jumped out of the cab and up into the back of the truck. They were stepping on blue cotton, stepping on their fellow comrades. I could see the wet stains of blood creeping up their pant legs.

Snap. They began sorting the men in the back of the truck – those moving from those not moving. The driver I'd seen earlier bent down and grabbed a brown jaw with his dirty fingers, squeezing the mouth open and yelling something in Pashtu. The mouth coughed blood all over the driver's hand. He patted the cheek and turned around to yell at our Soldiers:

“He's alive! Hurry up! This one's alive!”

Snap. The next jaw he grabbed didn't move. He picked the man up by his collar and shoved him over the side of the truck, head first, before turning back to his task. I heard the head hit the rocks with a sickening crunch, the heavy body flopping over the head and laying at an unnatural angle atop the gravel.

Snap. I closed my eyes and let my camera fall against the shell of my body armor. I opened them again and looked at the dead ANP officer's crumpled body, his blood painting the rocks in a rapidly-widening oval. I looked toward the clinic, the current of people moving fiercely toward the center of things. Almost involuntarily, I took a step backward, then another.

But there are no edges to swim toward in war. Through the crowd, I caught sight of Strauss's red hair, neatly tucked behind her ears as she moved to grab a corner of a newly-loaded stretcher, the constant swarm parting around her. She looked up, searching the crowd for a moment before her eyes settled on mine in the distance. She smiled, a grim thing, picked up the stretcher and moved through the gaping mouth of the clinic's entrance, disappearing into the heart of the eddy without looking back.

Please take me with you.

Somewhere behind me, a deep rumble shook the earth and I turned to see a wall of dirt and smoke rising in a distinct cloud over our camp's northern wall. Slate rocks rattled against the

souls of my boots and I stood there in the silence of my thoughts, watching the Army ants rushing toward the cloud in various stages of digital disarray.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, imagining myself back in the desert, surrounded by the red and brown sandstone walls of Dry Fork Canyon. I could almost see Dustin sitting on the edge of the culvert that allowed water to run under the long dirt drive to our trailer, legs swinging, a piece of snake-grass sticking out of his mouth, safe.

Concentrating on the image with all my strength while standing in the middle of a war-zone, I smelled Nag Champa and heard the distant sound of my brother's deep baritone, whispering to me that it's not so bad, beckoning me to join him, our pant legs rolled up, feet swishing through the current of Ashley Creek—home.

Author's note: The names "Strauss" and "McCloud" in this story are pseudonyms.