

"The Catch-22 of the Iraq War." —Karl Marlantes

**BILLY
LYNN'S**

LONG

a novel

HALFTIME

WALK

Ben Fountain

AUTHOR OF BRIEF ENCOUNTERS WITH CHE GUEVARA

BILLY LYNN'S
LONG
HALFTIME
WALK

★ Ben Fountain ★



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Dedication

For my parents

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THE THING BEGINS

THE MEN OF BRAVO are not cold. It's a chilly and windwhipped Thanksgiving Day with sleet and freezing rain forecast for late afternoon, but Bravo is nicely blazed on Jack and Cokes thanks to the epic crawl of game-day traffic and the limo's minibar. Five drinks in forty minutes is probably pushing it, but Billy needs some refreshment after the hotel lobby, where overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampolined right down the middle of his hangover. There was one man in particular who attached himself to Billy, a pale, spongy Twinkie of a human being crammed into starched blue jeans and fancy cowboy boots. "Was never in the military myself," the man confided, swaying and gesturing with his giant Starbucks, "but my granddaddy was at Pearl, he told me all the stories," and the man embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain

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Thanks to asswipe luck Billy will have the aisle seat at Texas Stadium, which means he will bear the brunt of these encounters for most of the afternoon. His neck hurts. He slept but poorly last night. Each of those five Jack and Cokes puts him deeper in the hole, but the sight of the stretch limo pulling

up to the hotel aroused a bundle of nervous cravings in him, this boat of a snow-white Hummer with six doors to a side and black-tinted windows for maximum privacy. “What I’m talking a-bout!” cried Sergeant Dime as he pounced on the bar, everyone whooping over all the pimp finery, but after destroying all hopes for a quick recovery Billy subsides into a gnarled, secret funk.

“Billy,” says Dime, “you’re flaking on me.”

“No, Sergeant,” Billy says at once. “I’m just thinking about the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders.”

“Good man.” Dime raises his glass, then conversationally remarks to no one in particular, “Major Mac is gay.”

Holliday yelps. “Damn, Dime, the man sitting right here!”

And indeed, Major McLaurin is seated on the rear banquette, watching Dime with all the emotion of a flounder on ice.

“He can’t hear a damn word I say,” Dime laughs. He turns to Major Mac and slows down his rate of speech to moron speed. “MAY-JURH, MACK-LAAAUURIN, SIR! SAR-JINT, HOLLI-DAY, HERE I SAYS, YOU’RE, GAY.”

“Aw fuck,” Holliday moans, but the major’s eyes merely take on a needling glint, then he holds out his fist to show his wedding band. Everyone howls.

There are ten of them in the limo’s plush passenger bay, the eight remaining soldiers of Bravo squad, their PA escort Major Mac, and the movie producer Albert Ratner, who at the moment is hunkered down in BlackBerry position. Counting poor dead Shroom and the grievously wounded Lala there are two Silver Stars and eight Bronze among them, all ten of which defy coherent explanation. “What were you thinking during the battle?” the pretty TV reporter in Tulsa asked, and Billy tried. God knows he tried, he never *stops* trying, but it keeps slipping and sliding, corkscrewing away, the *thing* of it, the *it*, the ineffable whatever.

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “Mainly it was just this sort of road rage feeling. Everything was blowing up and they were shooting our guys and I just went for it, I really wasn’t thinking at all.”

His chief fear up to the moment the shooting started being that of fucking up. Life in the Army was miserable that way. You fuck up, they scream at you, you fuck up some more and they scream some more, but overlying all the small, petty, stupid, basically foreordained fuckups looms the ever-present prospect of the life-fucking fuckup, a fuckup so profound and all-encompassing as to crush all hope of redemption. A couple of days after the battle he was walking down the gravel path to chow and there was, this sense of reprieve or release, of a terrible burden eased, and all with no more effort on Billy’s part than the exhalation of a normal breath. This feeling of *ahhhhh*, like there was hope for him? Like maybe he wasn’t completely expendable. By then the Fox News footage was viraling through the culture and there were rumors that Bravo was going home, the kind of suicidally hopeful talk no soldier in his right mind would dare credit, and then, lo, they were QT’ed to Baghdad on two hours’ notice and thence across the ocean for their *Victory Tour*.

One nation, two weeks, eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo squad. They are Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo, but the Fox embed christened them Bravo squad and thus they were presented to the world. Now, here at the tour’s end, feeling soft, sated, bleary, under-rested and overproduced, Billy grows sad and nostalgic for the beginning. They were hustled onto a C-130 in the middle of night and took off from Baghdad in a hard spiraling scrooge. Shroom was with them, in a flag-draped coffin in the back. For the entire flight to Ramstein a couple of the Bravos were always sitting with him, but it’s the others who Billy thinks of now, the twenty or so civilians of various shades and accents who joined them for the ride. Not spooks—they were too plump for that, their smiles too heedless of the woes

the world, and as soon as the plane was airborne those guys were partying hard. Good whiskey, music blasting from a dozen boom boxes, a forest of Cuban cigars set ablaze—the fuselage quickly filled with a witches’ brew of smoke. It turned out that they were gourmet chefs. For who? The men just smiled. “The coalition.” They were French, Romanian, Swedish, German, Iranian, Greek, Spanish. Billy could discern no pattern or meaning in their nationalities, but to a man they were friendly and more than generous, eager to share their booze and smokes with soldiers. Evidently they’d made a lot of money in Iraq. One of the Swedes opened his calfskin attaché case and showed Billy the gold stars he’d acquired in Baghdad, several pounds’ worth of chains and ropes and coins, of such purity that they glowed more orange than gold. There amid the cigar smoke and rollicking laughs Billy had lifted one of the chains, testing it for heft. He was nineteen years old and had no idea that his war contained such things, and what a damn shame for him and the rest of Bravo that it has not been won in the two weeks since.

“Yes,” Albert is saying into his cell, which he bought special in Japan, which is two years ahead of everyone else in the race for cell phone superiority. “Tell her that, you can tell her this picture will maul. But it will also reward.” He’s silent for a moment. “Carl, what can I say? It’s a war picture—no everybody gets out alive.” Meanwhile Crack is reading aloud from the sports pages of the *Dallas Morning News*, reciting the odds from America’s Line so Holliday and A-bort can get their bets down. There are more than two hundred ways to bet on the game, including whether the coin toss will be heads or tails, which song Destiny’s Child will open with at halftime, and which quarter will the network broadcast make its first reference to President Bush.

Crack speaks as if reading from a recipe. “Drew Henson’s first pass of the game will be, complete minus two hundred; incomplete, plus a hundred and fifty; an interception, plus a thousand.”

“Incomplete,” says Holliday, making a note in his little book.

“Incomplete,” A-bort agrees, marking his little book.

“How about quarter where Beyoncé sits on my face,” Sykes says.

“Fucking never,” Holliday says, not missing a beat.

“In a million years,” A-bort adds, similarly deadpan. Sykes is saying hell yes he’ll take those odds as Albert snaps his cell phone shut.

“All right, guys, it looks like Hilary Swank is officially interested.”

Whanh, whoa, *who*? “Hilary Swank a *bitch*,” Lodis sputters. “Why she talking to us?”

“Bee-cause,” Albert answers, punching it, knowing the rise this will get from Bravo, “she wants to play *him*,” and he points at Billy. Bravo erupts in hoots and cheers.

“Wait. Wait a second.” Billy is laughing along with everyone else, but he’s troubled too, already he senses the potential here for humiliation on a global scale. “If she’s a girl then I don’t see how—”

“Actually,” Albert says, “she’s floating the idea of playing Billy *and* Dime. We’d fold both parts into one role and she’d play that as the lead.”

More hoots, this time directed at Dime, who merely nods as if well satisfied. “I still don’t see . . .” Billy murmurs.

“Just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean she can’t do it,” Albert tells them. “Meg Ryan was the lead in that chopper flick, the one she did with Denzel a couple years ago. Or she could play it as a guy, hell, Hilary won a goddamn Oscar playing a guy. Well, playing a girl playing a guy, but whatever. The point is she’s not just another pretty face.”

Others who Albert is in talks with: Oliver Stone, Brian Grazer, Mark Wahlberg, George Clooney. This is a heroic tale, not without tragedy. A tale of heroism ennobled by tragedy. Movies about Iraq have “underperformed” at the box office, and that’s a problem, according to Albert, but not Bravo.

problem. The war might be up to its ass in moral ambiguity, but Bravo's triumph busts through that. ~~The Bravo story is a rescue story, with all the potent psychology of the rescue plot.~~ People respond deeply to such stories, Albert has told them. Everyone worries, everyone feels at least a little bit doomed basically all the time, even the richest, most successful, most secure among us live in perpetually anxious states of barely hanging on. Desperation's just part of being human, so when relief comes in whatever form, as knights in shining armor, say, or digitized eagles swooping down on the flaming slopes of Mordor, or the U.S. cavalry charging out of yonder blue, that's a powerful trigger for the human psyche. Validation, redemption, life snatched from the jaws of death, all very powerful stuff. Powerful. "What you guys did out there," Albert has assured them, "that's the happiest possible result of the human condition. It gives us hope, we're allowed to feel hopeful about our lives. There's not a person on the planet who wouldn't pay to see that movie."

Albert is in his late fifties, a big-boned, fleshy man with an unruly cloud of mostly gray hair and thick, wiry hedgerows of midlength sideburns. He wears black-frame glasses with round lenses. He chews gum. His hands are large and knuckly, and dark clumps of jungle growth sprout from his ears. Today he's wearing a white dress shirt with the collar open, a navy blazer with a lining of brilliant scarlet, a black cashmere overcoat and cashmere scarf, and sleek, dainty loafers that appear to be made of pliable chocolate bars. This crossfire of dishevelment and suavity provides no end of fascination for Billy, and from it he infers a worldliness that could eat Bravo for breakfast and swallow the bones. This is a man who direct-dials the likes of Al Gore and Tommy Lee Jones and whose movies have featured such money stars as Ben Affleck, Cameron Diaz, Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, two of the four Baldwin brothers and so on, all of whom unfortunately have prior commitments or aren't interested in a profile-leveling ensemble piece.

"We're gonna *Platoon* it," Albert says on his next phone call. "Ensemble plus star, hell yes it works. Hilary's extremely interested."

The Bravos listen for a minute. Ho'Wood talk. It is its own tribal dialect, rich in tonal permutations of put-down, bitch-slap, call-out, and gaff.

"No way. I'd rather sleep with Mother Teresa than make a movie with that guy."

Bravo smirks.

"Oh sure. Like having an enema when you've got a catheter shoved up your cock."

The Bravos' eyes bug out, they chortle snot through their noses.

"*Only* one battle? Larry, come on, *Black Hawk Down* was *only* one battle. Look, I know it's a war movie, but I need a director who can bring some human empathy to the story."

Pause.

"Enemas I can handle, it's the catheter I can't take."

More nasal chortles. Lodis would fall off his seat if he wasn't strapped in.

"Listen, Larry, we're talking two days. My boys ship out in two days and access becomes extremely problematic after that. Unless your lawyers feel like parachuting into a war zone."

"Hooo-kay," Crack resumes, rattling the paper. "Will Drew Henson throw an interception—yes, minus a hundred and twenty, versus no, plus a hundred and five."

"Yes," Holliday says.

"No," says A-bort.

"Will Beyoncé show me her tits while sitting on my face," Sykes offers, then starts singing in a screechy black-girl falsetto, *I need a soldjah, soldjah, need me a soldjah soldjah boy . . .*

"Quiet," Dime woofs, "Albert's on the phone," which the rest of the Bravos take as their cue to scream at Sykes. *Shut up, fuckhead, Albert's on the phone! Quiet, shitbag, Albert's trying to talk*

Meanwhile an SUV has drawn even in the next lane, and women, actual females, are hanging out the windows and yelling at the Hummer, college girls, maybe a couple of years older, and they are fine prime examples of that buxom talent pool of all-American booty that runs amok every night on reality TV.

“Hey,” they cry as traffic crawls along, “roll down your windows! Hey you, whoever you are, got any Grey Poupon? Woooo-hoooo, go Cowboys! Roll down your window!”

Oh Lord, beauties they are and amped as all fuck, bellowing, whipping their hair around like proud war banners, they are the girls gone wild of Bravo’s fondest dreams. Sykes and A-bort futz with the windows on that side and are roundly cursed for their incompetence, then they realize the damn things have been childproofed and everybody screams toward the front, finally the driver flips a switch and the windows go down and you can just see those girls deflate. Oh, soldiers. *Jarheads*, they’re probably thinking, because it’s all the same to them. Not rock stars, not highly paid professional athletes, nobody from the movies or the tabloid-worthy world, just grunts riding on some millionaire’s dime for some lame support-the-troops charity case. Bravo tries, but the girls are just being polite now. *We’re famous!* A-bort cries. *They’re gonna make a movie about us!* The girls smile, nod, look up and down the freeway as if scouting better prospects. Sykes flops his entire torso out the window and yells, “Hey yes I’m drunk baby and I’m married too! But I’ll still love you ugly in the morning!” This gets the girls laughing and for a moment there’s hope, but Billy can see the light already dimming in their eyes.

He sits back and pulls out his cell; they were probably never serious anyway. *Ten hut!* reads the text from his sister Kathryn,

keep it in yr holster kid

Then from Pete, his other sister’s roughneck husband,

Bang a cheerldr

Then this from Pastor Rick, who won’t leave him alone,

He who honors me, I will honor

And that’s it, no more texts, no calls, nothing. Fuck, doesn’t he know *anybody*? He is sort of famous after all, at least that’s what people keep telling him, so you would think. Traffic is moving and they’ve lost the wild girls, but now the stadium appears on the horizon, rising from the sweep of suburban prairie like an engorged and wart-spattered three-quarter moon. They are supposed to appear today on national TV, details pending, no one knows the actual drill. They might have lines to speak. They might be interviewed. There’s talk that they’ll take part in the halftime show, which raises hopes of personally meeting Destiny’s Child, but equally if not more plausible is the possibility that they’ll be coaxed, cajoled, steamrolled, or otherwise harassed into doing something incredibly embarrassing and lame. Local TV has already been bad enough—in Omaha there was footage of a very stiff Bravo “interacting” with the zoo’s new monkey habitat, and in Phoenix they were taken to a skateboard park where Mango did an ass-plant for the evening news. Humiliation always stalks the common man when he ventures onto the tube, and Billy is determined it won’t happen to him, not today, not on nationwide TV, no sir, thank you sir, I respectfully refuse to act like a moron, *sir!*

The possibilities set off a whinge in his gut like air escaping through a pinhole wound. He wants to be on TV, and he doesn’t. He wants to be on TV as long as he doesn’t screw up and it might help g

him laid, but watching the stadium swell outside his window to Death Star proportions he wonders he's truly up to the day. Self-confidence has been a struggle these past two weeks, this sense of treading water way over his head. He's too young. He doesn't know enough. Not counting the small time drag races his father used to emcee, he's never been to a professional sporting event. In fact he managed to grow up in Stovall, a mere eighty miles west, without ever setting eyes on fabled Texas Stadium save through the expurgating medium of TV, and this first sighting feels historic, or at least strives to be. Billy studies it at length, with real care and attention, taking the measure of its size and lack of humor, its stark and irremediable ugliness. Years and years of carefully posed TV shots have imbued the place with intimations of mystery and romance, dollops of state and national pride, hints of pharaonic afterlife such as always inhere in large-scale public architecture, all of which render the stadium of Billy's mind as the conduit or portal, a direct tap-in, to a ready-made species of magical transcendence, and so the real-life shabbiness is a nasty comedown. Give bigness all its due, sure, but the place looks like a half-assed backyard job. The roof is a homely quilting of mismatched tiles. There's a slumpiness, a middle-aged sag to the thing that suggests soft paunches and mushy prostate gravity-slugged masses of beached whaleness. Billy tries to imagine how it looked brand-new, in its fresh gleam and promise back in the day—thirty years ago? Forty? The past is always a shabby proposition for him, but there's a backdoor link between the way he feels now, looking at the stadium and the feelings he gets when he thinks about his family. That same heaviness, the same torpor and melancholy, a kind of sickly-sweet emo funk that's almost pleasurable, in the sense that it hints at something real. As if sorrow is the true reality? Without ever exactly putting his mind to it, he's come to believe that loss is the standard trajectory. Something new appears in the world—a baby, say, or a car or a house, or an individual shows some special talent—with luck and huge expenditures of soul and effort you might keep the project stoked for a while, but eventually, ultimately, it's going down. This is a truth so brutally self-evident that he can't fathom why it's not more widely perceived, hence his contempt for the usual public shock and outrage when a particular situation goes to hell. The war is fucked? Well, duh. Nine-eleven? Slow train coming. They hate our freedoms? Yo, they hate our actual guts! Billy suspects his fellow Americans secretly know better, but something in the land is stuck on teenage drama, on extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence and soothing mud wallows of self-justifying pity.

“Shit,” someone murmurs, a speed bump in the silence—their first burst of enthusiasm on sighting the stadium has flatlined into verbal arrest. Maybe it's the weather that brings them down, all that early-winter gloom, or maybe performance anxiety or just plain weariness, the burden of knowing much will be required of them today. Bravo doesn't do so well with silence anyway. Guff and bullshit are more their working style, but the spell of introspective dread concludes with the appearance of a large, carefully rendered homemade sign affixed to a roadside utility pole. STOP ANAL RAPE IN IRAQ! the sign reads, below which someone has scrawled, *heavens to betsey*. Bravo howls.



A PRIVATE IN THE INFANTRY

THEY ARRIVE TWO HOURS before kickoff and no one seems to know what to do with them, so they park in their seats for the time being, forty-yard line, home side, seventh row. Sykes and Lodis immediately start debating the retail value of such totally sick seats and how much they would bring on eBay, \$400, \$600, up and up they go, their analysis based on nothing more than air and wishful thinking. It's a fuckwit conversation and Billy tries not to listen. He's got the aisle seat with Mango on his left, and they talk a little bit about last night and how awesome it is to be here instead of spitting sand out their ears at FOB Viper. Hebert known as A-bort is sitting to Mango's left, then Holliday known as Day, then Lodis a.k.a. Cum Load, Pant Load, or just plain Load, then Sykes who will never be anything other than Sucks, then Koch as in coke which makes him Crack and *Crack kills* especially when he squats and shows a slice of his ass, then Sergeant Dime, then Albert's empty seat then that infinite enigma known as Major Mac. Everyone says it's cold, but Billy doesn't feel it. The forecast calls for sleet and freezing rain by late afternoon, and through the stadium's open dome they can watch the weather going to hell, the cloud deck bristling like a giant Brillo pad. The half-empty stands—it's early yet—give off the low hum of a floor buffer or oscillating fan.

"Load!" barks Sergeant Dime. "How long is a football field?"

Lodis snorts; too *easy*. At least ten times a day he has to prove that certitude is the hallmark of the true moron.

"A hunrud yards, Sergeant."

"Wrong, dumbshit. Billy, how long is a football field?"

"A hundred twenty yards," Billy answers, trying to keep it low-key, but Dime leads the rest of Bravos in whooping applause.

Hooah, Billy, get some. He's leery of this roll Dime's on for singling him out for favors and praise and doing it in so frontal a manner, as if daring the other Bravos to call him on it. It's like punishment, whose Billy hasn't figured out, but instructional aggression is a specialty of Dime's. Now he's bellowing now at Sykes, who's begging permission to place a couple of small bets. Ever since he maxed out his credit cards on porn, Dime has had him on a vicious budget.

"Sergeant, just fifty bucks."

"No."

"I've been saving up—"

"No."

"I'll send every penny to my wife—"

"Damn right you will, but you aren't betting."

"Please, Sergeant—"

“Sucks, have you not had your morning glass of shut up?” With that Dime is stepping over the se below and sidling down the vacant row at Bravo’s front. “Gentlemen, what it do?” he says on reachin the end of the row.

“Just chillin’,” says Mango.

“You get any chiller, we’re gonna put you on a stick and sell mango Blow Pops. Lodis still says th football field’s a hundred yards long.”

“Is!” Lodis calls from down the row. “Since when anybody count the end zone, yo.”

“Sergeant,” Sykes wails, “just please this once—”

“Shut!” Dime barks, the stalk of his neck twisting around as if he means to pop his head off by sel induced torque, then his eyes alight on Billy and there it is, The Look, the fixed fire of Dime’s ga bearing down on Billy’s humble self. This has happened a lot lately and it’s freaking Billy out, th concentrated calm of Dime’s gray eyes with that sense of mad energy swirling at the edges, lik finding yourself at the center of a hurricane.

“Billy.”

“Sergeant.”

“Your thoughts on the Hilary Swank deal.”

“I don’t know, Sergeant. It seems sort of weird, having a girl play a guy.”

“But Billy, haven’t you heard, weird is the new normal.” Dime is buzzing with game-day energ arms swinging, hips juking little half-feints and slants. “But maybe she’d play it as a girl, you hea Albert. They’d turn you into a chick, how about that? So for the rest of your life people’ll be lik ‘Look, there goes ol’ Billy Lynn. He let them turn him into a girl for that movie they made.’ ”

“She wants to play you too, Sergeant. Would you do it?”

Dime gives a lippy sort of laugh. “I tell you what, maybe. If she’d let me be her boyfriend for couple of weeks, I could be persuaded.”

Now he laughs for real, cackling with the wicked innocence of the bright and easily bored. Sta Sergeant David Dime is a twenty-four-year-old college dropout from North Carolina who subscrib to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *Maxim*, *Wired*, *Harper’s*, *Fortune*, and *Dic Magazine*, all of which he reads in addition to three or four books a week, mostly used textbooks o history and politics that his insanely hot sister sends from Chapel Hill. There are stories that he we to college on a golf scholarship, which he denies. That he was a star quarterback in high school, whic he claims not to remember, though one day a football surfaced at FOB Viper, and Dime, caught up i the moment, perhaps, nostalgia triggering some long-dormant muscle memory, uncorked a sixty-ya spiral that sailed over Day’s head into the base motor pool. He has a Purple Heart and Bronze St from Afghanistan, and among the other company sergeants his tag is “Fuckin’ Liberal,” but what w extraordinary about Bravo, the miracle that only gradually became apparent to Billy, was the presenc in the squad of not one but two demonstrably superb warriors, neither of whom had any use for th prevailing orthodoxies. When Vice President Cheney made his morale-boosting stop at FOB Vipe Dime and Shroom had cheered with such sick abandon that even Captain Tripp registered the savag mockery of it. Woooo-wooh, yeah, Dick! Give ’em hell! Bring it *awn!* Woooo-wooh, let’s kic some raghead ass! The entire platoon snickering and giggling, about to piss their pants, finally th captain passed a note to Dime saying to “tone it the fuck down *now*,” though Cheney seemed w pleased with his reception. Standing there onstage in his L.L.Bean khakis, hands in his pockets, NAS windbreaker zipped to his neck, he complimented Viper on its fighting spirit and offered u encouraging news about the war. *There is no doubt*, he said. *The latest intelligence*, he said. *O commanders in the field*, he said, all in that modulated dial-tone Cheney voice that made everything

sound so fucking reasonable. So what was it he said? Oh, right. The insurgency was on its last legs, I said.

“Albert!” Dime calls out. “Billy thinks Hilary Swank is weird.”

“Wait. No.” Billy turns, and there’s Albert coming down the steps, smiling with a bemused sort of West Coast cool. “I just said I thought it’s weird she’d wanna play a guy.”

“Hilary’s all right,” Albert says mildly. “In fact she’s one of the nicest ladies in Hollywood. But you think about it, Billy”—the young soldier is always shocked when Albert calls him by name; Dude he wants to say, not necessary, you don’t have to remember my actual name—“that’s the supreme challenge for any actor, playing the opposite sex. I can see why she’d be interested.”

“He doesn’t want a chick playing him,” Dime says. “He’s scared people are going to think he’s a pussy.”

“Albert, don’t listen to anything he says.”

Albert chuckles, and for a second Billy thinks of Santa Claus, another jolly man of girth. “Stay loose, guys. We’ve got a long way to go before you have to worry about that.”

Albert’s target is a hundred thousand down for each Bravo’s life story, plus all manner of arcane fees, points, percentages, and other unintelligible stuff they will just have to trust him on. For the past two weeks he’s been jumping in and out of the *Victory Tour*, meeting up with Bravo in DC, then jetting out, another meeting in Denver, then jetting out, Phoenix and out, and now here at the tour’s end, Dallas. Two weeks ago he said they’d have a deal by Thanksgiving, and while it looks like everything’s under control Billy senses an inchoate diminishing of heat, a barely perceptible laboring on Albert’s part to keep it stoked. None of the other Bravos has said anything, so maybe Billy’s wrong. Probably he’s wrong. Dear God please let me be wrong. If he could come out of this just a little bit rich all monies would be devoted toward a most worthy cause. When Billy joined the platoon at Fort Hood, Dime and Shroom rode him 24/7 with taunts of punk, thug, delinquent, and not in a friendly way. For some reason they had it in for him, and with deployment looming, not to mention three and a half years left on his Army contract, he was screwed if he couldn’t get them off his back. So one day they come upon him lifting weights in the gym and there it is again, the whole shitbag punk-ass gangbanger line. Billy follows them out to the lobby and addresses them in his most formal manner. Sergeant Dime, Sergeant Breem, I’m not a delinquent or a punk or a gangbanger, so please stop calling me that. I’m just a guy busting his ass as hard as he can to be a credit to his platoon and his company.

No, Shroom said, you are a fucking delinquent punk. Only a punk would trash another man’s car.

The fuck, Billy thought, how’d they know about that? “Depends on whose car,” he said.

So whose?

My sister’s fiancé. Ex-fiancé.

This got their attention. What kind of car? Dime asked.

A Saab, Billy told them. Convertible five-speed with graphite-alloy rims, three months off the lot. By then they were ready to hear him out, so Billy told them about Kathryn, his middle sister and the star of the family, an extremely beautiful girl and gentle and smart who won a partial scholarship to TCU. So far so good. Majors in business, joins a sorority, makes dean’s list every term. All good. Becomes engaged to a guy three years her senior who’s getting his MBA, kind of a tight-ass pussy boy and far too impressed with himself, but it’s still good, mostly, sort of, even though Billy secretly hates the guy. Then one rainy May morning at the end of her sophomore year Kathryn’s driving to work, she has a job as receptionist and broker-trainee at the Blinn Insurance Agency, all good except she’s T-boned on Camp Bowie Boulevard by a hydroplaning Mercedes in a flat spin, this enormous da-

object windmilling her way and it's the sound she remembers more than anything, the *whoof whoof* of its rotary vortex like the flapping wings of the angel of death. Next thing she knows she's lying flat on her back and three grizzled Mexicans are standing over her, trying to shield her from the rain with a sheet of cardboard. Kathryn always cries when she gets to this part. She simply cannot talk about it without breaking down, describing the three men hovering there wide-eyed and scared, the soaked clothes, their whispered Spanish, the delicate way they held the cardboard like an offering of some sort.

Never even thanked them, Kathryn will say. I just laid there looking up at them, I couldn't talk. In fact all the doctors said she should have died. Fractured pelvis, fractured leg, ruptured spleen, collapsed lung, and massive internal bleeding, then the complicated lacework on her face and back. 170 stitches below the neck, 63 above. You're gonna be fine, the plastic surgeon tells her the day after. It may take a couple of years but we'll get you there, I do this all the time. But pussy boy can't handle it. Three weeks after the wreck he drives to Stovall and breaks off the engagement, whereupon the gentle Kathryn *thumps* the engagement ring in his face, thumps it as you'd thump a spider or slug you found crawling on your hand. But Billy felt called to a more active response. His sister, family honor, basic goddamn human decency, all these and more seemed crucially at stake. He drives to Fort Worth, locates the pussy-boy Saab outside the pussy-boy condo, and proceeds to reduce said vehicle to scrap and spare parts with the True Value crowbar he bought along the way. A sanctifying calm came over him as he mounted the roof and prepared for that first mighty swing at the windshield. He had a job to do, that was his sense of the moment, and after a frazzled adolescence marked by much conflict with authority and numerous self-inflicted fuckups, he was determined to get this right. He swung calmly, picking his spots with real care and deliberation. The work was pleasing. Even the shriek of the car alarm couldn't shake his concentration. The feeling had been building for quite some time that something drastic needed to happen, and now it was.

He was two weeks away from graduating. After several meetings and much official jerking around the school board decreed that Billy would receive his diploma, but only by mail. He would not get to "walk," i.e., do the traditional senior passage across the stage to receive his diploma. "You will not walk," the chairman of the school board announced in the darkest, direst tones of churchly reproach and Billy thought his throat would burst from holding in the laughs. Like he gave a flying fuck. Ooooo, I don't get to walk? Ooooo, my life is over! The lawyer who cut the deal with the school board had to work rather harder to keep him out of jail. The demo job on the Saab wasn't so much the problem as chasing p. boy across the parking lot. With the crowbar. "I wasn't gonna hurt him," Billy confessed to the lawyer. "I just wanted to see him run." In fact Billy had been laughing so hard that he could barely stand up, much less manage anything like a credible chase.

The DA agreed to drop the felony charge down to criminal mischief if Billy joined the Army, which seemed as good a place as any to be sloughed off, better than jail and being raped every night by guys with names like Preacher and Hawg. Thus he came to be a soldier at the age of eighteen, a private in the infantry, the lowest of the low.

So how's your sister? Shroom asked when the story was done.

She's better, Billy said. They say she's gonna be okay.

You're still a fucking delinquent, Dime said, but after that they didn't ride him so hard.



IT IS MOSTLY IN YOUR HEAD BUT WE HAVE CURES FOR THAT

BILLY HOPES JOSH BRINGS some Advil soon. The five Jack and Cokes made his hangover worse, but now that he's stopped drinking it hurts worse still. Dime and Albert are standing in the aisle and Dime is telling him about Shroom's funeral yesterday, how what should have been the most solemn service ever, a tribute to the spirituality of the man with readings from the Tao, Allen Ginsberg's "Wichitan Vortex Sutra," and prayers from an elder of the local Crow tribe, had instead turned into a freak show of Christian wingnuts, a little group standing outside the church with signs like GOD HATES YOU 2 THESE 1:8 and U.S. SOLDIERS ARE GOING TO HELL, screaming chants about abortion and dead babies and God's curse on America.

Crazy, Albert says. Disgusting. Outrageous.

"Hey, Albert," Crack calls, "make sure you get that in the movie."

Albert shakes his head. "Nobody would believe it."

The Goodyear Blimp is making labored passes overhead, bucking like a clipper ship in a storm. The Jumbotron is airing a video tribute to the late, great "Bullet" Bob Hayes, and displayed along the right side of the upper loge are the names and numbers of the Cowboys "Ring of Honor." Staubach. Meredith. Dorsett. Lilly. This is the undeniable big-time, there is no greater sports event in the world today and Bravo is smack in the frothy middle of it. In two days they will redeploy for Iraq and the remaining eleven months of their extended tour, but for now they are deep within the sheltering womb of all things American—football, Thanksgiving, television, about eight different kinds of police and security personnel, plus three hundred million well-wishing fellow citizens. Or, as one trembly old guy in Cleveland put it, "Yew ARE America."

Billy always thanks people for these sentiments, though he has no idea what they mean. Right now he's thinking maybe if he pukes he'll feel better. He tells Mango he's going for a piss, and Mango glances around to see if Dime's watching, then murmurs, "Wanna get some beers?"

Hell yeah.

They take the steps two at a time. A few people call out greetings from the stands, and Billy waves but won't look up. He's working hard. He's climbing for his life, in fact, fighting the pull of all the huge hollow empty stadium space, which is trying to suck him backward like an undertow. In the past two weeks he's found himself unnerved by immensities—water towers, skyscrapers, suspension bridges and the like. Just driving by the Washington Monument made him weak in the knees, the way that structure drew a high-pitched keening from all the soulless sky around it. So Billy keeps his head down and concentrates on moving forward, and once they reach the concourse he feels better. The

find the head—he pees, forgoes the puke—then buy beers at Papa John’s. Technically they aren’t supposed to drink while in uniform, but what’s the Army gonna do, *send us to Iraq?* The Bravos do, however, ask for their beers in Coca-Cola cups, but before taking a drink Billy hands his to Mango and rips off fifty push-ups right there on the concourse. He can’t stand how soft he’s gotten. For the past two weeks it’s been all planes and cars and hotel rooms, no time for working out, no way to stay sharp. The pussification of Bravo, that’s what the past two weeks have been, so now they’ll return to the war, all stale and crusty with a corresponding falloff of effectiveness.

His head is pounding when he stands, but the rest of him feels better. “Push-ups, beer chaser,” Mango says.

“You got it.”

“Think they water the beer down?”

“Dude, just taste it.”

“They say they don’t but you can tell they do. It’s just not the same.”

Billy nods. “But we’re still drinking.”

“We’re still drinking.”

They stand against the wall and drink their beers, content for the moment to watch the crowd moving past. With all the varieties on display it’s like a migration scene from a nature documentary, all shapes, ages, sizes, colors, and income indicators, although well-fed Anglo is the dominant demographic. Having served on their behalf as a frontline soldier, Billy finds himself constantly wondering about them. What are they thinking? What do they want? Do they know they’re alive? As prolonged and intimate exposure to death is what’s required to fully inhabit one’s present life.

“What do you think they’re thinking about?”

Mango hesitates, then smiles his long-lipped coyote smile. “Heavy stuff. You know, like God and Philosophy. The meaning of life.” They laugh. “Nah, dawg, just look at ’em. They’re thinking about the game, whether their boys gonna cover the spread or not. Where they’re sitting, is it gonna rain on their ass. What they’re gonna eat, how long is it till next payday. Shit like that.”

Billy nods. That sounds about right. He doesn’t blame them for such pedestrian thoughts, and yet and yet . . . the war makes him wish for a little more than the loose jaw and dull stare of the well-fed ruminant. Oh my people, my fellow Americans! See the world with prophet’s eyes! Virtually everyone is wearing Cowboys gear of one kind or another, parkas and caps stamped with the blue star logo, oversized jerseys, hoodies, scarves of silver and blue, dangly earrings or other forms of team bling, some have little Cowboys helmets painted on their cheeks. Billy finds this touching, how earnestly they show devotion to their team. The women display more aptitude for game-day style than the men, who lumber around with Cowboys jerseys hanging past their coattails and their pants bagged around the heels of their boots, a fatal foreshortening of vertical line that makes them look like a bunch of hulking twelve-year-olds.

Oh my people. The soldiers finish their beers with the air of a job well done, and going back to the seats Billy aims his gaze firmly on the aisle steps and away from all that nullity clawing at his face. It freaks him, the monstrous void of it dangling there, the vast empty center creates a vacuum of sorts, and all the gravity seems to flow in a reverse-flush action toward that huge gaping blowhole at the top. Billy reaches his seat in an actual sweat. Some of the Bravos are texting, others staring at the field, still others chewing gum or spitting dip into cups. Then Mango gets careless and rips a seismic burp that might as well scream *Beer!*, and Dime swings about like a shark smelling blood.

“Where’s Major Mac?” Billy alertly asks. A crude diversion, but it works. Dime frowns, looks left and right.

“Where’s Major Mac?” he woofs at the squad. Bravo does a collective bobble-head waggle, then bursts out laughing. Braaaaah! Major Mac has disappeared!

“Billy! Mango! Go find Major Mac.”

Up the stairs again, Billy hunching his shoulders against all that horrible space. The stadium is huge. It is deformed. It is a deformation of the human mind. They head straight to Papa John’s and buy two more beers. This time a small crowd gathers as Billy does his push-ups; they count off and give him a cheer when he’s done. “Do it again!” someone cries, but Billy hoists his beer in salute, and drinks. Billy and Mango start walking.

“This should be easy.”

“Right. Only, what, like eighty thousand people here?”

“If you were Major Mac, where would you go, and when would you go there?”

“Dude, maybe he’s back at the mother ship.”

They laugh. Major Mac rarely speaks, hardly ever eats or drinks, and has never been seen to relieve himself, prompting speculation among the Bravos that their PA escort might be a new kind of human being, one that consumes and voids through the pores of his skin. Thanks to mysterious back channel intel, Sergeant Dime discovered that on the major’s very first day at the war he was blown up not just once but twice, resulting in profound but as-yet-to-be-determined hearing loss. For now he’s been parked in public affairs while the Army figures out what to do with him. The major is a chiseled, cleft-chinned, iron-spined specimen, he looks every inch the ideal Joe, which might explain why he’s hung on this long, because in truth the man is deaf as a post, not to mention prone to spells of extreme dissociation. As in, checked out. Stroked. Spaced. Peed on the fire and called in the dogs, everybody gone. Dime calls it the major’s thousand-yard Prozac stare.

The search for Major Mac is one of the million pointless tasks that make the Army what it is, but Billy is happier doing this than sitting on his ass, plus he feels all right with Mango at his side, not just for the street cred of having a Latino best buddy but for the calm, companionable vibe his friend exudes. Mango is rock-steady in both war and peace. Tough as hell, never complains, can carry major pounds on a stocky five-foot-eight-inch frame and has photographic recall of stats and timelines and oriented facts, such as, for instance, he can rattle off the names of not just the U.S. presidents but the vice presidents as well, which tends to put a quick stop to any illegal-alien talk. The one time Billy ever saw his buddy break down wasn’t in a firefight, nor any of the times they were mortared or rocketed, sniped at, or roadside-bombed, not even the time he was blown out of the Humvee’s turret and asked, “Is anything sticking out of my head?” Rock-steady, except for the day a car bomb blew up the Third Platoon’s checkpoint, and Bravo was tasked to pull security in the aftermath. A bad day by any standard, but it was only when they fanned out to search for the correct number of severed limbs that Mango sank to his knees in a blubbering heap.

But now they’re walking, and how fine it would be if they could out-walk the war by sheer force of will. Billy checks his cell and there’s a text from Kathryn, his sister with the divot in her cheek. *Where u* she wants to know, and he texts *stadium*. Then it’s *mom worried ur cold* and he answers *kid smokin*, and she sends back the smile sign. He and Mango grunt whenever a good-looking female passes, though everyone’s so bundled up there’s only so much you can see.

“Can you believe those girls last night?”

“Ridiculous,” Billy agrees. “Everybody says Dallas has the best strip clubs.”

“No shit. Like sensory overload, dawg, where do they all come from? That place we were, not the last place, the one before that, the one with the cage dancers—”

“Vegas Starz.”

“—Vegas Starz, I’m like, damn, girl, why you workin’ here? Any one a those girls could be model I mean like real models, not just stripper hos.”

Mango seems truly distressed, as if confronted by a tragedy in progress, one he could prevent.

“Dunno,” Billy says, “maybe talent is cheap. Too many hot girls out there.”

“You know that ain’t right.”

Billy laughs, but he’s struck by a broader notion about young lively bodies and the human marketplace and supposedly inexorable laws of supply and demand. Society may not need you, strictly speaking, but some sort of use can usually be found.

“Maybe they’re there because they wanna be,” Billy says, but he’s just talking now. “So they can meet fine young men such as ourselves.”

Mango laughs. “That must be it. It’s not the money, dawg. They were really into us.”

Which is what Sykes said on returning from his private dance in back. *She was really into me. It wasn’t about the money.* Still in shock from Shroom’s funeral that afternoon, Bravo changed into civvies at the hotel and emerged forthwith to get extremely drunk, and at one point or another in the course of the evening they all got blown. *She was into me* became the big joke of the night, but today the memory just makes Billy depressed. It is its own hangover, a scum around his psyche like a bathtub ring, and he decides blow jobs suck, just by themselves. Well, sometimes they’re all right. Okay, usually they’re awesome as far as they go, but lately he feels the definite need for something more in his life. It’s not so much that he’s nineteen and still technically a virgin as it is this famished feeling deep in his chest, this liposucked void where his best part should be. He needs a woman. Not just a woman, he needs a *girlfriend*, he needs someone to mash into body and soul and he’s been waiting for it. In the time that has happened these entire two weeks, the girlfriend, the mashing, *two weeks* he’s been traveling this generation of ours so you would think that after all the miles and cities and positive press coverage, all the love and goodwill, all those smiling cheering crowds, he would have found someone by now.

So either America’s fucked up, or he is. Billy walks the concourse with his aching heart and a growing awareness that time is running out. They report to Fort Hood at 2200 tonight, tomorrow will be PACED, YOUR SHIT day, and the day after will commence their twenty-seven hours of flying time and the resumption of their combat tour. It seems to Billy a flat-out miracle that any of them are still alive. Since they’ve lost Shroom and Lake, *only two* a numbers man might say, but given that each Bravo has narrowly missed death by a margin of inches, the casualty rate could just as easily be 100 percent. The freakin’ *randomness* is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace on the way to chow, choosing the third shitter in line instead of the fourth, turning your head to the left instead of the right. Random. How that shit does twist your mind. Billy sensed the true mindfucking potential of it on their first trip outside the wire, when Shroom advised him to place his feet one in front of the other instead of side by side, that way if an IED blew low through the Humvee Billy might lose only one foot instead of two. After a couple of weeks of aligning his feet just so, tucking his hands inside his body armor, always wearing eye pro and all the rest, he went to Shroom and asked how do you keep from going crazy? Shroom nodded like that was an eminently reasonable question to ask, then told him of an Inuit shaman he’d read about somewhere, how this man could supposedly look at you and know to the day when you were going to die. He wouldn’t tell you, though; he considered that impolite, an intrusion into matters that were none of his business. But talk about freaky, huh? Shroom chuckled. Looking that old man in the eye and knowing he knows.

“I don’t ever wanna meet that guy,” Billy said, but Shroom’s point was made. If a bullet’s going to get you, it’s already been fired.

Billy realizes that Mango hasn't spoken for the past five minutes, so he knows his friend is all ~~thinking about the war. He's tempted to raise the subject, but really, what can you say short of everything?~~ As if once you opened your mouth would you even be able to stop, though in the end it amounts to one and the same thing, how the hell are they going to get through eleven more months of it.

"You've been lucky so far, right?"

This was Kathryn, talking to Billy over backyard beers.

I guess I have, he answered.

"So keep on being lucky."

Sometimes it feels as easy as that, just remembering to be lucky. Billy thinks about this as he eyes the fast food outlets that line the stadium concourse, your Taco Bells, your Subways, your Pizza Huts and Papa John's, clouds of hot meaty gases waft from these places and surely it speaks to the genius of American cooking that they all smell pretty much the same. It dawns on him that Texas Stadium is basically a shithole. It's cold, gritty, drafty, dirty, in general possessed of all the charm of an industrial warehouse where people pee in the corners. Urine, the faint reek of it, pervades the place.

"Fierce," Mango says in hushed tones of wonder.

"What?"

"All these thousands of gringos, and not a single Major Mac."

Billy snorts. "You know we're never gonna find that mofo. He's a grown man anyway, like why are we even looking for him."

"He knows where he is."

"You would think."

They look at each other and laugh.

"Let's go back," Billy says.

"Let's go back," Mango agrees.

First they stop at Sbarro and get a couple of slices of pizza, then stand there munching off paper plates, content for the moment not to be recognized. Being a Bravo means inhabiting a state of semi-celebrity that occasionally flattens you with praise and adulation. At staged rallies, for instance, or appearances at malls, or whenever TV or radio is present, you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude, then other times it's like you're invisible, people just see right through you, nothing registers. Billy and Mango stand there eating scalding hot pizza and know that their fame is not their own. Mainly it's another thing to laugh about this huge floating hologram of context and cue that leads everyone around by the nose, Bravos included, but Bravo can laugh and feel somewhat superior because they know they're being used. Of course they do, manipulation is their air and element, for what is a soldier's job but to be the pawn of a higher?

Wear this, say that, go there, shoot them, then of course there's the final and ultimate, *be killed*. Every Bravo is a PhD in the art and science of duress. Billy and Mango finish their pizza and start walking. With some food in their bellies they're feeling stoked, and on a whim they wander into Cowboys Select, the highest-end of all the on-site establishments offering Cowboys apparel and brand merchandise for sale. The dizzying scent of fine leathers meets them at the door, along with a bright neon lit Texas Lottery machine. Flat-screen TVs mounted in the walls are playing a highlights reel from the Aikman years. Billy and Mango are a little bit punchy coming in, they're primed for an ironic retail experience, and in seconds the place has them laughing out loud. It's not just the racks and racks of upscale clothing, the fine jewelry, the framed and certified collector memorabilia, no, you had

admire the determination, the sheer marketing *balls* of stamping the Cowboys brand on chess sets, ~~toaster ovens, high-capacity ice makers, personal oxygen bars, and laser-guided pool cues.~~ Dude, check it out! An entire line of Cowboys kitchenware. The two Bravos grow so rowdy that other customers start to give them some space. As far as Billy and Mango are concerned, the store is a museum, these are all things to look at but nothing a Bravo could buy, and the humiliation of it makes them a little wild. His 'n' hers cotton terry-cloth robes, like, four hundred dollars. Authentic game jerseys, a hundred fifty-nine ninety-five. Cashmere pullovers, cut-crystal Christmas ornaments, Tomi Lama limited-edition boots. As their shame and sense of insult mount the two Bravos become rough with each other. Dude, check it out, sick bomber jacket. Only six hundred seventy-nine bucks, dawg.

Is it leather?

The fuck you mean, hell yeah it's leather!

'Cause, dawg, I don't think so. I think that's pleather.

The fuck it's pleather!

Unh-unh, dumbshit. It's just you're so fucking ghetto you don't know from pleather—

Suddenly they're grappling, they've hooked arms in a fierce shoulder clench and lumber about like a couple of barroom drunks, grunting, cursing each other and butting heads, laughing so hard they can hardly stand up. Their berets go flying as they tear at their ears. It hurts and they laugh harder, they're gasping now, *bitch, shitbag, cum-slut, faggot*, Mango jabs at Billy with stinging uppercuts, Billy crams a fist into Mango's armpit and off they go on a left-tilting axis, pottery wheel and pot rolling loose across the floor. *Can I help you!* someone is shouting, jumping in and out of the way. *Gentlemen! Fellas, guys, can I help you? Whoa there!*

Billy and Mango separate, come up flushed and laughing. The salesman—store manager? a middle-aged white guy with thinning hair—he, too, is laughing, but it's clearly a situation for him, what with two obvious lunatics on his hands. Everyone else, staff, customers—the few who haven't fled—standing well back.

“Is this leather?” Billy asks, lifting a sleeve from the rack of bomber jackets. “ 'Cause moron here trying to tell me it's pleather.”

“Oh no sir,” says the manager, “that's genuine leather.” He's chuckling, he knows they're putting him on, but in the manner of straight men since the beginning of time whose job it is to bring order to a sick and comical world, he launches into a fruity description of this full-grain aniline lamb's-leather jacket, the special tanning and dyeing processes and so forth, not to mention the coat's superior construction qualities. Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh, the Bravos hear him out with the rapt expressions of cavemen watching popcorn pop.

“See, dumbfuck”—Billy cuffs Mango's shoulder—“I told you it was leather.”

“Like you know so much about fashion. I bet you ain't even wearing underwear—”

They swat at each other, start to grapple, but the manager's gulpy *Whoa!* calls them off.

“So, hunh. You sell a lot of these?” Billy asks, fingering one of the jackets.

“Five or six a game. When we're winning we might do better than that.”

“Damn. Your peeps got some juicy cash flow, huh.”

The manager smiles. “I guess that's one way to put it.”

The Bravos thank the manager and leave. “Dawg,” Mango says once they're outside. “Six hundred seventy-nine dollars,” he says. “Billy,” he says, then, “Shit.” And that's all they say about it.



THE HUMAN RESPONSE

“FIFTEEN MILLION,” ALBERT IS saying as Billy and Mango resume their seats. “Fifteen cash against fifteen percent of gross, a star can do that when they’re running hot. And Hilary’s running very hot these days. Her agent won’t let her read without a guarantee.”

“Read what?” Sykes asks. Albert’s eyes slowly track that way, followed by his head.

“The script, Kenneth.”

“But I thought you said we don’t have a script.”

“We don’t, but we’ve got a treatment and we’ve got a writer. And now that Hilary’s interested, we can slant it in a way that really speaks to her.”

“I love it when he talks like that,” says Dime.

“Look, the script’s not the problem, just telling your story’s gonna make a compelling script. The hard part’s getting the damn thing in her hands.”

“You said you know her,” Crack points out.

“Hell yes I know her! We got bombed off our ass a couple of months ago at Jane Fonda’s house! But this is business, guys, everything she reads has to go through her agent, and he won’t let her so much as touch a script unless it comes with a firm offer from a studio. That way she knows if she says yes the studio’s on the hook. She can’t get turned down.”

“Uh, so, do we have a studio?” Crack asks. He knows he should know this, but everything about the deal seems so abstract.

“Robert, we do not. There’s tons of interest out there, but nobody wants to commit until a studio commits.”

“But Swank won’t commit until they do.”

Albert smiles. “Precisely.” The Bravos emit an appreciative *ahhhhh*. The paradox is so perfect, so completely circular in the modern way, that everyone can identify.

“That’s kind of fucked,” says Crack.

“It is,” Albert agrees. “It’s totally fucked.”

“So how do you make it happen?” asks A-bort.

“By making it inevitable. By making it a goddamn force of nature. By scaring these guys so bad that somebody else is gonna buy it that they have to commit or their heads’ll explode.”

“People,” Dime announces, “I think I just figured out what Albert does.”

Billy and Mango are sitting at the end of the row, then it’s Crack, Albert, Dime, Day, A-bort, Sykes, and Lodis, then an empty seat for Major Mac. Billy has noticed that Albert is never far from Dime. Not that Bravo needed proof of how special their sergeant is, but it arrived anyway in the form of Albert and his instant fascination with the Bravo leader. Billy has decided that Albert is gay for Dime.

in a nonsexual sense. Dime interests him, Dime the person and Dime the soldier, the entire phenomenon of Dime-ness loosed upon a square and unsuspecting world. In the pantheon of Albert's attentions, Dime comes first and Holliday a distant second, and even that seems more of a proximate sort of interest, conditional, complementary, a function of Day's black yin yoked to Dime's honk yang. Day deigns not to notice his secondary status, like now, for instance, as Albert and Dime huddle in intense conversation while Day perches on his seat back surveying the field like an African king high on his throne, looking down on all his little subject bitches. And as for the rest of Bravo, they might as well be so many shares of corporate stock that happen to talk and walk and drink a lot of beer. "Dime the *property*," as Day muttered to Billy last night, in a rare drunken moment of resentful candor. "The rest a you just the *produck*."

Which made Shroom what? Shroom and Lake, were they *produck* too? Bravo's talk these days is so much about money, *moneymoneymoney* like a bug on the brain or a hamster spinning his squeaky wheel, a conversation going nowhere at tremendous speed. Billy would just as soon move on to other subjects, but he won't call his fellow Bravos on it. The way they obsess, it's as if a big payday involved more than mere buying power, as if x amount of dollars cooling in the bank could bring you ass safely through the war. He intuits the spiritual logic of it, but for him the equation works in reverse: The day the money comes through, the actual day his check clears, that will be the very day he gets smoked.

So he attunes to the movie talk with pronounced conflictedness. Bravo peppers Albert with questions. What about Clooney? What's going on with Oliver Stone? How about the guy who said he could get Robert Downey Jr.? Then the distinguished-looking gentleman seated behind Albert leans over and asks if he's in the movie business.

Albert freezes, head cocked to the side as if he's heard the call of some rare and wonderful bird. "Why, yes," he answers sweetly. "Yes I am in the film industry."

"Director? Writer?"

"Producer," Albert allows.

"L.A.?"

"L.A.," Albert confirms.

"Listen," says the man, "I'm a lawyer. I do white-collar criminal defense and I've got a great idea for a legal thriller-type script. Care to hear it?"

Albert says he'd be delighted, as long as the lawyer can describe it in twenty seconds or less. Meanwhile a couple of dozen Cowboys players have taken the field and begin warming up. This isn't the real warm-up, explains Crack, who played a year of college ball at Southeast Alabama State, but the pre-warm-up warm-up for the guys who need some extra loosening up. Billy's attention is soon drawn to the Cowboys punter, a slope-shouldered, moon-faced, paunchy fellow with hardly any hair, the kind of guy you'd normally find behind your supermarket meat counter, except this guy can kick football to oblivion and back. *Foom*, the soggy thump of each kick resounds in Billy's gut as the ball rockets off on a steep trajectory, up, up, onward and upward still, your eye falters at the spot where the ball should level off and yet it climbs higher still as if some unseen booster charge has fired and sent it straight for the bottomless dome it goes. Billy tries to mark the absolute highest point, that instant of neutral buoyancy where the ball hangs or dangles, actually pauses for a moment as if measuring the fall that even now begins as the nose rolls over with a languid elegance, and there's an aspect of surrender, of grateful relinquishment as it yields to the gravitational fate. After seven or eight kicks Billy feels a kind of interior vaporization taking place, a dilution or relaxation of self-awareness. He feels calm. Watching the kicker is restful for his mind. The peak moments give him the most intense

pleasure, a bristling in his brain like tiny lightning strikes as the ball sniffs eternity's lower reaches strokes the soft underbelly of empty-headed bliss for as long as it lingers at the top of its arc. Billy can imagine that's where Shroom lives now, he is a citizen of the realms of neutral buoyancy. It's sort of childish and sentimental thought, but why not, if Shroom has to be somewhere then why not there. Bravo has long since been reduced to bestselling *product*, but even the long arm of marketing can't touch Shroom now.

It's a Zen thing, watching punts, as absorbing in its way as watching goldfish paddle around an ornamental pond. Billy would happily watch punts for the rest of the afternoon except the fans behind him start pounding his back, crying, Look! Look! Check out the Jumbotron! And there on the screen loom the eight operational Bravos literally bigger than life, plus Albert, who's smiling like a proud new papa. Small pockets of applause spark off here and there. The Bravos assume postures of masculine nonchalance. Mainly they're trying not to stare at themselves on the screen, but so pumped with the moment is Sykes that he starts mouthing off and flashing gangsta signs. To a man Bravo tells him to shut the fuck up, but after a moment the screen cuts to a flags-waving, bombs-bursting cartoon graphic against a background of starry outer space, and from within these inky depths enormous white letters suddenly zoom to the fore

AMERICA'S TEAM PROUDLY HONORS AMERICAN HEROES

which disappears, clearing the way for a second wave

THE DALLAS COWBOYS

WELCOME HEROS OF AL-ANSAKAR CANAL!!!!!!!

STAFF SGT. DAVID DIME

STAFF SGT. KELLUM HOLLIDAY

SPC. LODIS BECKWITH

SPC. BRIAN HEBERT

SPC. ROBERT EARL KOCH

SPC. WILLIAM LYNN

SPC. MARCELLINO MONTOYA

SPC. KENNETH SYKES

As if drawing down energy through the stadium's blowhole, the applause slowly gathers volume and heft. People moving in the aisle stop and turn their way. The fans behind Bravo come to their feet, then prompt for a slow-motion standing ovation that rolls through their section in a gravity-defying backward wave. Soon the Jumbotron cuts to a hyperactive ad for Chevy trucks, but too late, people are already heading Bravo's way and there is just no help for it and no escape. Billy rises and assumes the stance for such occasions, back straight, weight balanced center-mass, a reserved yet courteous expression on his youthful face. He came to the style more or less by instinct, this tense, stoic vein of male Americanism defined by multiple generations of movie and TV actors, which conveniently furnishes him a way of being without having to think about it too much. You say a few words, you smile occasionally. You let your eyes seem a little tired. You are unfailingly modest and gentle with women, firm of handshake and eye contact with men. Billy knows he looks good doing this. He must

because people totally eat it up, in fact they go a little out of their heads. They do! They mash in close, push and shove, grab at his arms and talk too loud, and sometimes they break wind, so propulsive their stress. After two solid weeks of public events Billy continues to be amazed at the public response, the raw wavering voices and frenzied speech patterns, the gibberish spilled from the mouths of seemingly well-adjusted citizens. *We appreciate*, they say, their voices throbbing like a lover's. Sometimes they come right out and say it, *We love you*. We are so grateful. We cherish and bless. We pray, hope, honor-respect-love-and-revere and they *do*, in the act of speaking they experience the mighty words, these verbal arabesques that spark and snap in Billy's ears like bugs impacting an electric bug zapper

terrRr
Eye-rack,
Eaaaar-rock,
Sod'm
freedoms

nina leven,
nina leven,
nina leven

hero
sacrifice,
soooh-preeeeme sacrifice

Bush

Osama
values
dih-mock-cruh-see

No one spits, no one calls him baby-killer. On the contrary, people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed, yet Billy finds these encounters weird and frightening all the same. There's something harsh in his fellow Americans, avid, ecstatic, a burning that comes of the deepest need. That's his sense of it, they all need something from him, this pack of half-rich lawyers, dentist soccer moms, and corporate VPs, they're all gnashing for a piece of a barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year. For these adult, affluent people he is mere petty cash in their personal accounting, yet they lose it when they enter his personal space. They tremble. They breathe in fitful, stinky huffs. Their eyes skitz and quiver with the force of the moment, because here, finally, up close and personal is the war made flesh, an actual point of contact after all the months and years of reading about the war, watching the war on TV, hearing the war flogged and flacked on talk radio. It's been hard times in America—how did we get this way? So scared all the time, and so shamed at being scared through the long dark nights of worry and dread, days of rumor and doubt, years of drift and slowly ossifying angst. You listened and read and watched and it was *just, so, obvious*, what had to be done, a mental tic of a mantra that became second nature as the war dragged on. *Why don't they just . . .* Send in mo

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