

*Shake Feet and Trade Hares Already*

Ned controlled MQ-9 Reapers and Julia encouraged elderly couples to put down-payments on town houses in Fort Lauderdale. They were silent. But the external a/c unit, attached below the open window, whispered and clanked. Julia sat upright with her arms crossed over her spaghetti-strap shirt, tilting her head forward. The room smelt like sweaty feet from the pile of socks on the shag rug in front of the couch. Ned lay supine, head towards the wall underneath the window, one leg on the floor and the other close to his ass, and he wasn't wearing socks. They had met on the computer, at some rest-stop off the Internet. The couch had green cloth and holes which exposed yellow padding, cigarette burns, dark stains. Ned counted the mold spots on his ceiling but often forgot the number, and so he kept starting over.

“Can you explain this to me again?” Julia asked while staring forward, wearing flip flops which revealed her purple toenail polish, fading. She never wore makeup and kept her dark brown hair in a loose ponytail, had glasses, thin black frames, and these were all things Ned said he loved about her, before she moved here, yesterday.

“It's really just me. And I'm sorry. I really mean it.”

“Can you explain to me how you just all of a sudden change your mind? How now, after I've given up my life, left my family, left my mom—my mom has Alzheimer's, Ned. Ned! And you can't even sit up to tell me this. You can't even look me in the face.”

Ned smelt her Dove scentless deodorant and counted.

“This was a mistake and it's my fault, asking you to move out here and do this. I guess, it's just.” His thought climbed out the window.

Cargo trucks revved and idled around the box buildings on the flat base with sparse blue-eyed grass and Joshua trees.

Julia stood up, arms out, squinting her eyes and wondering if this asshole was the same person who made her simultaneously laugh and cry via Skype with his impressions of George W. Bush addressing graduating kindergarteners. If he was the same person who sent her unsolicited emails containing poetry that repeated her name in every line—i.e., Julia is like a chrysanthemum, or Julia is like chapstick—that she would read at her realty office and be too embarrassed to show her friends but think it sweet anyways, the poems, the effort.

And now Ned sat up, glanced at Julia, and then exhaled through his mouth. He stopped smiling because it wasn't funny, he knew. He put his elbows on his knees and hung his head, rubbing the back of his black hair, buzzed white.

“This isn't easy for me either, you know. I'm just. It's different. Things can't be like they were. It all feels so, overwhelming, in a way.” Ned talked with his hands over his mouth, staring at the peeling brown wall across from him, at the small TV on a wooden plank propped by cinder blocks. He then looked above the TV at the poster of Cove Beach, on Turtle Island in Fiji, white and blue everywhere, and he imagined himself wearing aviators with his feet dug into the hot sand. He had never been to Fiji, seen it only from the internet, photographs.

“Can't be like? Of course it can't! I'm a person and now I'm actually in front of you! We're going to get married! How... You're ridiculous. Fuck you. Fuck, you.” And her voice shook on that, and her flip flops flopped against her crusted heels as she slammed the door which

bounced back open, partly. Ned stared at the poster, hearing the banging above his ceiling, heavy steps from fellow compatriots.

Ned closed his eyes, sighing, remembering he was still the only colonel of the CIA's Special Activities Division without a spouse or family. Granted he was still the youngest, and thinnest, colonel of the CIA's Special Activities Division. Col. N. Dalfont, he was called around these parts. The only colonel who lived in the barracks, Col. N. Dalfont. He stood up, rubbing the sides of his head, breathing from his mouth.

He closed the door, and then stopped at the kitchen's sticky plastic counter top, smelling the dried soda, and he looked into the sink, rusted at the edges. The trash can to the right of the counter was over stuffed, spilling soda cans and plastic bags and empty strawberry jelly jars onto the linoleum tiles.

Ned kept a Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm, all black, on the counter with the clip, a Plus Two, next to the gun. With the Plus Two clip the gun held 17 bullets with an additional round in the chamber. He had a clipdraw attached to the barrel's stock, so he could carry it on his waist without a holster. Ned had never shot the gun. He took the gun in his hand and chambered it, tightening his palm against the cold grip, and he flipped the decocking lever up and down. The Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm has no safety. With the decocking lever up, the gun turns double action, meaning 10 pounds of force is needed to pull the first round, which is 6 pounds more than when the lever is down.

It was June. The four burger patties with Kraft cheese slices and tomato soup and two bowls of Cheerios he'd had for lunch had his stomach shaking. There was a George Forman grill to the left of the sink, beneath the crooked cupboard with a slanted door.

He went to his television, which didn't have cable, used solely for games, an Xbox and PS4 and Wii on the plank with it. And beside the right cinder block were stacks of video games, all the same height, sorted alphabetically and by console. Ned tapped his fingers on the counter, clicking the decocking lever. Next to the games there was one controller for each console, and every controller pointed the same way, towards the door.

He missed Julia already and wished she was still here because he'd gotten over the smile thing he did when he was nervous about making a mistake. He wanted to tell her, straight face, sunken eyes, that he was capital S sorry. His dell laptop was next to his TV. He set the gun down and took the laptop to the couch, slouched back, and scanned through pictures of them, from when they met every three or six months, for one or two weeks.

Pictures at the beach in Fort Lauderdale. Pictures of her wearing his fatigues and him wearing her glasses. Pictures of them with their fingers held like guns next to an F/A-18 Hornet on the runway. When he told her he loved her he meant it. She was the first one he'd ever told his dad about, who responded by rolling his eyes and smirking.

Scanning pictures, Ned thought about last night, the first night they'd spent together in months, remembering when they tried to cuddle in his twin bed, her head over his shoulder and arm, and he had lost circulation, tingling, from the pressure of her body, and so they tried spooning, but her hair got in his mouth, and she didn't like him breathing on her neck, and after

about thirty minutes they took opposite sides of the bed and he gave her the covers. There had not been any I Need You Sex, like when he visited Florida. Ned closed the laptop.

There was more banging upstairs, laughter. His room was hot and his cool sweat soaked the stiff fatigues. Ned looked out the window at lavender mountains shadowed by creeping clouds, blurred from the blue sky's mist, the barbed wire around the base. He sniffed, clearing his throat, swallowing phlegm. He wasn't going to cry. Didn't do that. Ever.

Some two hours earlier he had executed a very successful attack over the Tappi village, 33.22° N. latitude and 69.22° E. longitude, using a MQ-9 Reaper. The unofficial casualties were somewhere around 20. And after the missile had hit, he hi-fived Tony, a bald colonel who lived in a house with his wife and three kids off Post, in front of a jungle gym.

Ned's bed sheets weren't made, and he wondered if it smelt like her, the bed, but he decided to sleep on the couch for a while, if he slept. Ned rubbed his upper arm, rubbed the tattoo. He trudged to the kitchen and took a Mountain Dew from the yellowed refrigerator and then turned on the TV, blue screen, and put Grand Theft Auto 5 in the Xbox, took a controller and sat on the couch.

Julia had brought him GTA5 yesterday.

He'd read on IGN that GTA5, in comparison to past Grand Theft Autos, was better because of the story line, meaning the game's narrative was somewhat intelligible compared to earlier versions.

With the Xbox controller in his hands Ned quickly tried to put together a narrative of Julia, of what he knew about her. She was born in Florida, or Nebraska. She got her real estate

license after something happened with her dad. She said she loved him. She liked carnivals, but hated clowns, maybe vice versa. And...

The game's jazzy theme music played and he selected story mode, setting his elbows on knees. Ned watched his character stand still on the screen, waiting on a sidewalk amidst glitzy cars and passerbys. He wondered what his mom would say about him ending it with Julia. He wondered what his dad would say. Ned dropped the controller down on the pile of socks and shut off the Xbox, leaving the screen blue. The TV whined.

He rubbed the top of his arm, the tattoo of the backwards American Flag. It had happened his first weekend at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, out with other cadets despite having BMT in the morning, and they'd drank Popov and he ended up with a backwards American flag bordered by puffy red skin on the top of his arm. Ned hadn't fired a pistol or semi-automatic assault rifle, or consumed alcohol, since BMT.

He walked back to the window and watched the trucks roll by, watched people in camouflage with pointed hats carrying clipboards, the smell of diesel exhaust. The two week leave that he'd planned to spend with Julia started tomorrow, and now he wondered if he'd stay here or go somewhere, anywhere. Even home. There was an alarm that sounded once a week at five, a test, which went off now, a honking noise. The mountains seemed far off and beautiful, he thought. He picked up his iPhone from the couch and called Julia, getting the automated voicemail. Ned decided not to leave a message, yet. There was more banging from upstairs. He watched a plume of dust whirlpool to a hot breeze while a crossed shadow from an unmanned aircraft sliced across the sun-bleached plains.

Going home was a possibility. It had been awhile. Ned didn't have much desire to go home ever since he returned from the academy and found his dad, Jeff, lying in bed, fully dressed, with a wool blanket pulled over his body and face, mumbling so the blanket creased around his mouth, dress shoes sticking out at the bottom, and then he, Ned, soon after finding his dad in such a state, discovered his mother's note, which related her decision to leave the family and move to Fiji with a bank teller she'd met. So now when he did go home, ten years after the incident, it was for his dad's sake, mostly. Neither Jeff nor Ned had heard from her since she left. He closed the window and took another sip of bitter soda.

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"We've been lighting up the place. I mean its daily. And I'm not just talking the actual strikes, but we have surveillance all around. I can't think of a time we've been more secure. I mean as a country. Late nineties, late eighties. *Maybe*. But the Reaper has its own satellite link, its own colored TV camera and even infrared sensors. We have these going twenty-four hours. In the villages in the mountains—what are they called... Anyways in these villages, right, we're flying over all these caves. Everything. The women all wearing those things. We can see all of this. I always joke to the guys. I'm like, 'Now *this* is reality TV,' Ha. And you know when you start thinking about World War 2. Roosevelt wanted them then, he'd started this research project to have bats carry bombs. I'm talking you know, little kerosene tubes, time release stuff. And he'd wanted them to get all these bats on the planes and just let them go over the target. Sure now this seems absurd. Bunch of bats on a plane, yeah right. But it led to this! Just look how we can protect ourselves now. Yeah, I'll have another one. Just leave it open. Here. But um, so yeah look at what we can do now, and from starting with bats on planes. That's progress. Imagine

what we'll be able to do in twenty years. Fifty years. From the satellite I can see their dogs fucking, dad. Think about that. I'm watching these people's mutts fuck and them sit around, their little dinner table, with no freaking idea. I'm like a ghost in the room. I'm there and I'm sitting in Creech at the same time. We're a whole squad of ghosts winning wars behind computer screens. ”

Finished speaking, Ned looked at his father, waiting, expecting a response. But his dad, former Private Jeff Dalfont, sat at the bar with his face close to his orange juice and vodka, a screwdriver, focused on the maplewooden counter's knots while fractured shards of sunlight tripped in from the soap spotted window to his right, Jeff's right, which showed the metallic frames of skyscrapers and beaten brick buildings and tinted glares of windows in Boston's west end, where Jeff lived, and where Ned listed as his hometown although he hadn't moved here until he was seventeen. Across from Ned and Jeff hung a plasma TV, showing footage of victims seizing from a chemical weapons attack in Syria, muted.

“Hey. Scuse me. But you aren't in the service, are you?” The bartender, a man with a shaved head and a single diamond earring, asked Ned. The bartender held up Ned's USAA Mastercard.

“Yeah...I am.” Ned gulped his beer.

“Well thanks. Thank you, for what you do and all.”

Ned nodded and looked down. The bartender turned to the register.

The bar, McDougle's, off Garfield and Oxford, had become Jeff's favorite when he first moved to Boston because it was the first bar he'd tried. He liked the fish and chips and deals on



domestic beer, Miller on tap, like straight not the lite. McDougle's no longer served fish and chips, and didn't have Miller on tap, just the lite. Upbeat house music blared from speakers angled downward at the bar. Today was Ned's birthday, two days after the incident with Julia. Jeff hadn't told him happy birthday, which was fine, Ned thought, because it wasn't a big deal anyways and because Jeff hadn't wished him happy birthday since basically forever.

Ned had his Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm attached to his waist, with his shirt tucked over the gun, giving him a strange hip-node. He shifted his weight left and right on the stool, feeling the barrel poke against the bottom of his hip. It had been an inconvenience to check the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm with security at the airport, but he knew it was worth it. He wondered if his dad heard him. Ned followed his father and looked down, eyeing his beer's shadow which angled left on the counter.

Jeff brought his lips down to the drink, spreading his elbows further out and sloping his bony back forwards. The bartender said something indecipherable to Jeff, which Jeff responded to by nodding and holding up his index finger. The stools at the bar were short, and to the left, along the narrow walls, were lines of cherrywooden tables. The bartender was turned around, facing the American Flag next to the BOSTON STRONG sign above the mirror and glass bottles. People, all around and about Ned's age, thirty, sat at the tables and laughed and gasped but couldn't be heard. Besides Jeff and Ned, no one was stationed at the bar.

Ned drank his Bud Light, elbows on counter, and felt the carbonation spread through his sinuses. The bartender gave Jeff another screwdriver, changed the TV's channel to ESPN, turned up the volume, and then walked left, yelling and gesticulating. Ned looked at his father, who had deep wrinkles and no eyebrows, wispy hair combed to the right, visible liver spots on his scalp,

and a steep forehead which darkened his eyes. When Ned looked at Jeff, like now, he rubbed his own face, checking his reflection in the dusty mirror across from him. They had the same nose with wide pores and right angled chin.

But when Ned had looked at his father's features years ago, he wanted to be just like his dad. Wanted to be a military man. Wanted to make his father proud. Because Jeff hadn't been like Elena, Ned's mom, who had told him how proud she was when he remembered to do laundry, or take out the trash.

Ned couldn't remember his dad's age, but thought it over sixty, or around. While he watched Jeff sip from his screwdriver with a slurping sound, Ned decided he pitied his dad. Jeff wore a beige windbreaker over a white shirt with Arizona written on the front. He had served during peace times. When there was a war, Desert Storm, for example, Jeff had been hurt, had a broken ankle which circumstances were still gooey around. This was inconvenient for Ned. Because, as a kid, when he explained that his father was in the military to his grade school friends, told them his dad was a badass killer, they asked which war and he said none, and so they didn't believe Ned and thus pummeled him, every time. But Jeff claimed to have been in one battle of sorts, the invasion of Grenada, which he often recounted to Ned, when they were in the garage. Although when Ned cross-checked facts with his mother, like when he asked if it was true that Jeff was shot twice in the head but had still saved the hostages during said battle of sorts, his mom said That's not true. He missed that about his mother. And so Ned was forever suspect about his father's stories from the only battle of sorts he had claimed to be in. And Ned, now, knew his father, who wasn't in the marines or special forces, in fact couldn't have invaded Grenada, which meant all the kids that pummeled him for being a liar growing up were right.

“You know you’re the oldest guy in this place? Right? The fuck you still come here for? It’s changed dad.” Ned clenched the pint as the perspiration dribbled onto his hand, watching wrinkles on his father’s short neck and temples crease. His dad smelt like baby powder.

Ned put his hands under the counter but felt dried gum and then brought them back up, resting his elbows, rubbing the sides of his head. He shifted in his seat. There were white foam slices in his pint from where the beer receded. Ned wore Aisic running shoes which he always double knotted and a grey t-shirt with Army written on the breast. Ned checked his iPhone to see if Julia had texted him back, which she hadn’t, and then he quickly stopped at Twitter and zoomed over to Instagram before putting the phone back in his tight pocket. He shifted his weight on the stool. Ned had suggested to Julia via email that they reestablish their long distance relationship until he was ready to try living together again. Julia hadn’t responded, yet.

“Can-You-Hear-Me?” Ned said, leaning forward. Jeff took another sip from his screwdriver, tilting it barely off the table with his chapped lips wrapped around the rim.

Ned knew that his dad, the meter man, was jealous of him, jealous of his success. The bar’s door opened and then closed. Ned looked past his dad, seeing the edge of the bar drop off and the shadowed chairs speckled with light below the window, the cars and people and food vendors and umbrella salesman outside.

“I can hear you fine,” Jeff said. The yellowish ice cubes in the glass Jeff had just finished still had their form. “I like this place. People are nice. More than I can say for some people. Why the fuck do I care if they’re younger than my kid.” Jeff drank and rolled his eyes.

On the other side of the counter, where the bartender would usually pour drinks, shot glasses and pints were arranged in stacks, recently washed, and Ned scanned over their glares.

“What is it then? What did I ever do to you? Huh? You can’t even live your own life just because mom left years, years ago. And so it’s my fault? Is that why you’re jealous of me? Everything I’ve done that you never could?” Ned watched himself say this in the mirror, saw all the dollar bills signed with sharpie that were taped to the wall behind him, taped behind the bottles across from him at the bar, and he saw Jeff drink with a smile.

The ceiling had pipes twisting and turning, humming, with bulbs which were currently off.

“You don’t feel it now... You’ll probably never feel it.” Jeff stared in the mirror too, smiling, sliding onto the stool which had previously been empty between him and his son. “But you sit there, behind your little computer screen and think you’re doing man’s work. Doing the type of stuff I did back in the day. But if you knew what it really looked like. Knew the difference between pushing a stupid little button and pulling a trigger and having your shoulder nearly fall off, alright. If you had to look one of those people in the face. See what you’d done. Seen a real man’s work up close. You wouldn’t be talking like that. No way no how. You said, Reality TV. ‘It’s like reality TV dad.’ Fuck that ain’t TV. This here’s TV. What you’re doing, it’s all scripted bullshit. They have you playing God with a keyboard, fucking pathetic. And you think I’m jealous? Of you? I pity you. My son the soldier. My son, the extension of some computer thingy.”

Ned smelt the orange juice and sweet Vodka coming off his father, and he watched Jeff remove his windbreaker. Ned stared at his father's vascular forearm, where he had a faded green American flag tattoo. Jeff took his glass, smiled in the mirror, and then emptied the yellow liquid, smacking his lips and chewing ice. He left crumpled bills on the bar as he wobbled off the stool and made for the door, wrapping the windbreaker around his waist. Ned watched Jeff turn left, lost in the mouth of people, and then finished his beer. Liquid fell from his lips, exploding on the woodwork.

His dad didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. Didn't know shit. A man's work. He pressed a key and erased half a mountain. That was man's work. A smart, guiltless man. The future's man.

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They didn't give peanuts on the red-eye flight but Ned drank two beers, mid-air, on his way back to Nevada. One night and half a day in Boston with his father had been enough.

He'd tried to call Julia from Logan airport. Had blocked his number and called. And then he created a Facebook account for one Ted Soltant from Fort Lauderdale and sent her a friend request. Had left voicemails on her work number as potential customers.

When he landed in Las Vegas, he picked up his checked bag and then the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm from security, which had only 5 unloaded rounds with it, TSA policy.

He drove his Jeep back to base and when he'd grabbed his camo bag from the trunk the night was a viscous black with a jittery breeze. In the brick barracks some bedroom lights were on. He grinded his teeth together as he slammed his door shut, kicked it all the way closed, and

then threw his bag on the floor. The room smelt like he'd left it, soda and feet. He'd been stuck on what his father said.

A man's work.

Ned walked over to his Xbox and threw it against the wall behind his couch. He did the same to his Playstation, and then the Wii, and then the laptop. He kicked the stacks of games, sending some into the sock pile. He punched the wall above the couch four times. Moonlight sifted through the vinyl blinds, turning his red hands silver. He saw the hooked outline of the far off mountains, thought them disgusting. Ned took a skip step and turned and kicked the TV to the opposite side of the room, falling onto the plank and causing it to splinter and crack. He stood back up and lifted a cinder block over his head and then brought it down, the chalky smell when it hit the floor. With his hands on his knees, he listened to the tall halogen lights stationed around the base, inhaling and exhaling from his mouth, squinting his eyes.

He kicked and tripped over diffuse articles as he went to his fridge. The cool air wrapped around his sweaty neck as he opened a Mountain Dew and threw his head back, inhaling through his nose and mouth. He crushed the can and threw it on the floor, hearing the slight tapping above him.

A man's work.

Ned pulled the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm from his waist, flicking the decocking lever up and down. He stared out the window across from him, seeing the lights cut shadows against the base and divide his living room floor into crushed stars and stripes. Ned wanted to look someone who he hated in the eyes and watch them melt away. He racked the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm,

catching the gold spark of the chambered bullet, hearing the flat click. He marched through the kitchen. Marched through his bedroom which still smelt like Julia's deodorant. Marched into his narrow bathroom.

He turned on the light, which flickered, and then cleared his throat and spit at his reflection in the mirror above the sink, lurching his whole body forward. Tendrils of saliva dragged down the tilted mirror. He flared his nostrils, stared. The shower curtain was pulled to one side behind him and he could see the Neutrogena Frizz Free shampoo on the shelf where Julia had left it.

Ned pushed the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm's barrel against his right temple, held his breath, digging the polymer into his skin, like he was saluting, like posing on his graduation and he watched his pupils dilate while standing on tippy-toes and punching the counter and smelling the rubber grip, and snot came out of his nose all over his wrist and he was blinking and remembering that only the tip of your finger went over the trigger, and he had left the decocking lever off which meant he was 4 pounds of force away from ending 150 pounds of a sorry shit of a life.

He thought about his life. He remembered wearing his dad's fatigues which smelt like moth balls and army crawling across the polyester couch in their living room. The way his mother put her cold hands on his ears when she kissed his forehead. He remembered being an only child and watching video game consoles change, graphics improve, but staying up with Mountain Dew on school nights to finish a game's story mode and then ace an exam the next morning. He remembered meeting cadets in BMT and thinking they were all laughing at him

while he slept on the top bunk. When he first met Julia, in person, she had cried at dinner while relating the loss of her twin sister, and had said she didn't care if he saw her cry.

Ned pulled the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm down and threw up in the sink, coughing, closing his eyes, dry heaving. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked at his red face in the mirror.

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Outside there was a hot rain and lightning over the mountains, grey clouds, and the plains darkened while the Joshua trees' leaves shook. He didn't pack his Jeep and left his apartment as it had been, left the George Foreman grill, left the Mountain Dew in the fridge, the game consoles, the sheets which smelt like her. He stood in the doorway now, looking out through the window, the lightning, the thunder. Ned had turned in his Christmas colored badges and medals, but left the fatigues on the floor. They told him to take the time to clear his head but he said he didn't need it. The cargo trucks eased through the mud and people yelled to each other over the rain. Ned rubbed his tattoo. He went to bed and woke up and hadn't decided differently. Going to Florida, to Fort Lauderdale, tell her Sorry, tell her he was ready. He looked at the Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm on the counter, next to the kitchen sink. The gun pointed towards the window, towards the mountains. Ned closed the door as he stepped into the rain, running towards the Jeep with his shoes double knotted.