

Blue Men in
Grommet (which you can't see)

Green Men Location
(snipers behind)



PLASTIC SOLDIERS

My boss, Eleanor, says I need to make a sale this week. It won't be easy. Three blues are holed up in the grommet in the upper left corner of my desk. Limited ammunitions; food; surrounded. If it were possible to retreat it would be an optimal position. A pencil container sits on one side, a tissue box, the other. To be killed or captured the green soldiers (the enemy) have to either file through a narrow crevice between the two or climb on top of the tissue box. Both options have fatal drawbacks. Only one soldier can fit through the space between the tissue box and pencil holder. However, if the green soldiers scale the tissue box they have no cover once they approach the edge to hurl a grenade or fire down. Each side waits.

I'm in quite a predicament.

I don't know how the blue soldiers became blue. My best guess is I painted them when I was a kid. I suppose I thought if you're going to have a war you need to know who's on who's side. This was before the incident with Mike Trigalopolis (my brother's friend) who everyone called Trig, except me when I wanted to piss my brother off. I would say during dinner, "James, I forgot to tell you Mike called about an hour ago." Or I'd ask Mom, "Did James asked Mike to

join us to see Star Wars.” But James got me back when he hid the Playboys that Mike gave him under my bed. Not that he wanted Mom to find them. But she did and I had to lie that I found them on top of someone’s garbage can. I couldn’t watch TV for a week.

I hated Trig. He had dirty-blond hair like the cool teenagers on TV and wore rock t-shirts. Me and James's had dark curly hair that we couldn’t figure out how to style but mine was especially frizzy and Trig always told me I should wear a hat.

I don't know why I agreed to let them play army soldiers with me and I don’t know how Trig convinced me to bring down my model airplanes. I first said, "No." But Trig said we could set them up near the tree like a real army hangar. He started picking pieces of evergreen for camouflage and said, “We won’t play with them. They’ll be props.” So I got them off my dresser. Three separate, careful trips. I think that was when Trig and James set up the firecrackers.

The siege began on my second day. I directed the blues to oust the greens from their occupation of the letter trays. We had solid intelligence: the greens occupied both levels, there was a sheer cliff to the north and filing cabinet to the east. If they fled to the cabinet there would be no cover. Of course, the greens could also choose to engage the blues in the center of the desk. But the blues had the clear advantage. They were well covered behind my laptop, especially during the day when the lid was up.

Another possible escape route, probably the best, was fleeing along the back edge. They would have cover in the outcroppings of scattered papers, a stapler, and a bin of paperclips. If they fled at night and made it to the other side of the desk, with proper equipment, they could rappel down to the floor and escape. Since this was the most likely scenario the blues planned

for one unit to engage the greens with machine guns from the center of the desk while the other squadron took up positions along the escape route. Both would inch forward so if the greens decided to hunker down the blues would either force them to surrender or retreat.

At the end of my fifth day, right before leaving, Eleanor points and says, “What are these?”

“Mementos,” I answer. “One for each brother I lost.”

She stops mid-reach.

The plan might have worked if the blues stuck to it. The first unit took up their initial position behind the laptop and engaged the enemy while the second group picked their way forward. They made steady progress over the course of two days. I admit it was difficult overseeing them. I spent one afternoon on cold calls. The following day I had to meet with Eleanor to review my sales pitches. Consequently, the second unit lost focus. They decided to storm the compound. But when they attempted to bolt the last five inches they were picked off by snipers hiding in the grommet next to the paper tray. Ironically, the three blues least eager “to storm” survived as a result of their hesitancy. They hid behind a crumpled tissue until nightfall, then retreated to the grommet, their current position.

The first unit fared worse. They followed the second unit’s attack but when the snipers started shooting they were caught not close enough to the paper trays and much too far from the laptop. Panic split them. No one survived.

My mom screamed at James. We stood in front of the staircase. Whenever we got in trouble, that was where she yelled at us. This sort of made sense because we usually got into fights in our shared bedroom upstairs but when our neighbor said we were throwing snowballs at cars and the one summer we tried to hold onto buses when we were on skateboards we got yelled at in front of the stairs as well. But this time only James was being yelled out. I stood next to him and cried.

On the tenth day, Eleanor mentions that there seems to be less soldiers on my desk. I tell her that's how it goes sometimes.

I scraped the soldiers from the earth in late spring. The snowfall and sporadic thaws had pulled them into the gravel driveway and bare patches of lawn. At first I thought it wouldn't be so bad having some with missing limbs, but some turned to most. The single pile of survivors didn't feel right. I created a second.

The model planes were another story. They were fragile to begin with and the flammable glue melted the plastic to blackness. Even if I found all the pieces I couldn't put them back together.

On the twentieth day, Eleanor asks to speak with me in her office. When I sit down she says, "I'll get right to it. There have been complaints of an odor." Then she asks if everything is OK. When I answer fine, she sighs, then looks down at her desk like she's forgotten something. "You smell," Eleanor says. "Or maybe it's your clothes." She makes a face reserved for children.

“I confess it’s me.” I try to make a joke and say I don’t want my clothes to take the fall. I explain it was a habit or rather lack of habit when I was deployed. “You run out of baby wipes and foot powder. To be honest, you stop noticing.” I stand to leave and tell her it won’t happen again. She says I should take the rest of the day off, but I don’t. I couldn’t. The green soldiers were attempting to engage the blues hourly, now.

On the twenty-third day, two green soldiers holler at the blues to surrender. The blues have not had food or water in three days nor a single bodily excretion between them.

On the same day, Eleanor tells me there is a training session for new salesmen on Friday and I can retake the class if I like or just sit in. She brings her hands together in a single silent clap after she says this, like my mom used to do after cleaning the bathroom or vacuuming. Then they retreat to her pockets.

I took dinner back to my bedroom. Mom didn’t make a fuss. She even managed a smile when I told her not to worry, I always eat on James’ bed. But that wasn’t true. I used his bed to lay my suit pants flat because I didn’t want the metal hangers to leave a crease.

James was in grad school and hadn’t been back for an extended stay in well over two years. Some of his stuff lingered. Like a picture of me, him, and Trig on his dresser. We’re all holding fish. We’re shirtless, so it must be summer. My army soldiers are scattered on the dresser next to it along with my ROTC award for best athlete, high school graduation picture, and purple heart medal. The medal is the only item I recall placing there.

Mom has told me twice we're going to get cable extended to my room but I haven't pushed. I'm fine watching sitcoms reruns or the news. Sometimes I stare off at the remnants. I'll settle on something from middle school like a mug I made and try to remember why I kept it.

I placed the firecrackers in the grommet. The only ones I could find were those little red ones but I stuffed as many as I could in between the three men. I figured this would do. But I wasn't exactly sure how to create an extra wick. The whole day I was at a loss. The greens kept asking for surrender. The blues didn't answer. I thought they would take them now. There didn't seem to be any honor in making them starve.

The next day, Eleanor invites me to lunch. She takes me to this diner and apologizes after she parks, "I know, but the food's good here."

I tell her I appreciate her being up front when she tells me I'm being terminated. She explains it has nothing to do with the body odor incident but the first month is probationary and I haven't made a single sale. "No one's ever not made a single sale in the first month, you understand." She interlaces her fingers and I listen to her tell me I will receive a month's severance pay and that she will provide a solid reference and that maybe a desk job isn't for me and all my personal belongings will be sent to the address they have on file. She even pulls out an index card to confirm. But all I can think about is those last three men and how no one's going to light the wick.

I think when they send them back I'm going to clean the dirt in their uniforms. It's bothered me for quite some time. Then I'll return them to the dresser, place them beneath my high school diploma, and next to the portrait they take after you finish basic training.

