

## Travel

A man in light camouflage stood watch on the crest of a dusty cliff, a gun held close to the chest and pointing at the ground. A jeep jostled along the dirt road behind him. Both subjects were dwarfed by the scale of the shot, obviously the news crew had not been able to get as close as they wanted. The military-green tent city behind them did not bustle as much as you would expect for a front-of-the-line outpost in one of the bloodier conflicts humanity had seen in recent decades. They would almost look like toys, the mid-day sun shown directly on top of the subjects, making their shadows minuscule and the whole scene appeared flat and fake, except that the soldier kept an extremely awkward looking position, one foot standing on a rock, and the fact that the soldier reached up to dig his finger into his nose. The camera cut away to a gorgeous woman in full makeup and hairspray explaining just how violent recent fights had gotten on this front of the war, as she did eight times a day on the hour, just in case anyone had missed what was going on the past couple years.

“I want to go on a vacation soon.” Mary piped up from Latif’s right hand side. Like him, she was staring at the twenty-four inch television affixed to the opposite wall from the register they both stood behind, reading the white-on-black subtitles, as work-safe music radio blasted around the shop. The TV was at an angle, you wouldn’t notice it unless you were Latif who had repaired it last month with the shoddiest duct-tape and plywood job even you would probably ever have seen. Latif had done it at Mary’s behest, thinking it was a temporary repair and that she would replace it the next day, as she had been promising to do even before it broke, but Mary did not pay attention to the coffee shop, despite ostensibly being the manager.

“That sounds fun, it’s a good time of year for it, when was your last vacation?”

Mary had never wanted to work here for so long —35 years— She talked about that often. But she had a family, friends, pastimes, and all the other bits and pieces of a life that made such a job a tangential concern. She made enough money to survive as she said.

“Hmm, you know I can’t remember. We visited my husband’s cousin out in Nebraska about seven years ago. I feel like we went somewhere else between then and now.”

“Where do you want to go?” The white fans made gray by dust and neglect rotated slowly overhead, one every 15 feet. The ceiling was tiled with the noise-dampening foam squares meant to hide the air ducts and wires crisscrossing overhead. Each tile had its own unique imperfection. Broken at the corners, riddled with holes, molding, glued back together, either surreptitiously from above or garishly from below with gobs of fast-setting wood glue hanging down mid-drip after someone decided it wasn’t worth it to stand on a ladder and sand down the imperfections. No one looks up anyway.

“Somewhere with sun. I’ve only ever been out of the country once. Maybe Mexico!” A customer walked in, ordered a latte and a sandwich. Mary and Latif got to work, over-serving their first customer in 40 minutes. They banged out the order, careful to hide the many concessions made behind the counter concerning food safety or quality of the product with the efficiency of professionals trained in the craft. Bare hands, unsanitized knives and barely washed cups, things a health inspector might get on their ass about, but only because it was their job. The coffee shop staff joked that it made their products feel more homemade. “But it’s a lot of work to leave the U.S. How ‘bout you?”

“I’m not traveling any time soon.” Latif’s future plans revolved around a videogame he had just bought and the fact that he was buying weed and beer tonight, it was going to be a blast, and for the time being that was the most vacation Latif would ever need. Latif wiped down the counter, resetting the customer-facing display to zero. Every time a little piece would fall away from the veneer of the factory-new faux-marble and chrome display. Maybe a stain would stick, ground into the micro-lacerations made every time something too heavy or too sharp slid across the top and successfully tucked out of the way of Latif’s blast of cleaning fluid followed by a wipe of a dirty rag.

“I’m going to stay in the states I think, maybe me and Mark could take a road trip down south, leave my kids at Sally’s for a week or two.” The television cut away from a firefight to show the dolled-up anchor again. She said a few more words about how the situation continues to develop (didn’t all of them?) and bowed her head slightly as a way to sign-off. The scene switched to a man at a desk done up in almost much makeup and hairspray as the female anchor halfway across the world, but in a way that made him appear normal, pristine, but only because his natural ethos and talent had somehow cleansed his body of pores, wrinkles, and oil. The man confidently explained to the viewer just how good the stock markets were doing. Latif did not own any stock. Mary might have had some retirement plan wrapped up in the stock market but Latif wasn’t even sure about that, Mary never thought too far ahead. They watched the broadcast anyway.

“My family and I used to go down to Florida every year or two when I was a kid. That was always a lot of fun.” Somehow Latif wasn’t too interested in the conversation and wished to go back to reading subtitles on the television under news stories that had nothing to do with him.

“Yeah, I never got to travel much as a kid. I really just want to go to the beach. We’re only about five or six hours away from Rehoboth Beach. We could probably do that for a week.” Their viewing of a broadcast about a foreign leader disavowing the actions of another one was brought to a rude halt by the lunch rush. Half the money the store made that day was exchanged from about 2 dozen sandwiches and twice as many coffees in an hour and a half. Latif chatted with the friendlier regulars and Mary maintained a conversation with her mother’s friend Susanne for the entire rush as she rang up customers, paying minimal mind to her surroundings.

And then it was over.

“Susy’s grandkid is doing charity work in- uh, Bolivia?” Mary informed Latif who responded with a cordial “Oh? That sounds interesting. What was it like?”

“Susy said she didn’t enjoy it. Her grandkid will be back soon though.” That figured, Mary and Susy usually only talked about what was going on in the world between their houses and their work.

“Well, I’m going to finish cleaning up and then head out.” Latif informed Mary. He did just that as Mary watched the news run a story about new harsh regulations on crime passed in a state about 800 miles away. Latif finished his job in record time, clocked out and waved goodbye to Mary.

Latif moved towards the large glass double-doors of the shop flanked by two enormous windows. It was bright and hot outside and Latif’s house had no air conditioning. Better than working though. Latif was almost at the doors when Mary screamed from the register “WAIT!” Latif whipped around to see her pointing at the television screen.

Finally some local news played. On-screen was the president of the United States addressing the nation. A meteor, the size of - what? No way that’s right.

Undetected as it had approached from deep space and from the direction of the sun.

It was hurtling towards planet earth. They had minutes to respond, and the broadcast was on a delay.

The light outside grew brighter and brighter and everything in Latif and Mary’s hometown was vaporized.