

The Truth

Okay, he lied. He didn't do it on purpose, but he still did. He buried it so deep that it was just a recurring dream. How could he confess if he'd convinced himself it never happened?

He remembered it after she passed on. It was during the war. Of course somebody died in the story—it is a requirement for a war story.

He is on a mission. He can't remember whether it is day or night, the date, or what they are doing on the mission. He blocks so much that there are still certain parts lost forever.

He remembers when it happens. He and his friend are just walking along, as if they are just two guys strolling down Main Street. Except they are in Iraq, and they are carrying guns. That didn't happen on every Main Street.

He and his friend walk through the Ghazil Market. It looks like a petting zoo to him, with the goats scattered on the street. He's actually told his friend personal things about himself, some things that took his wife months of dating to discover. But war speeds up the process, and bonds are forged in seconds.

"Can you believe we're risking our lives for a group of people that have goat markets?" he asks.

"You have to risk your life for someone, right?"

"Yeah, but they're not even cows! At least you can have milk and hamburgers and steaks and shit with cows. What are you going to have with goats? Crappy cheese?"

"You can get a lot of Billys."

"That'd be great if I were into guys," he jokes. "Listen to them—they make ridiculous noises."

"Your wife said you make the same kind, but she keeps you around, anyway."

“There’s a difference—I only kick her away after I’m done,” he says.

He listens to the local people walk by, speaking a language he can’t recognize let alone begin to understand. The sounds and the smells are what stand out the most about the market.

“There has to be some sort of law about having these kinds of spices out in over 100 degree heat. I can barely breath without smelling rotting lamb or whatever the fuck they eat over here.”

“But you can open your mouth long enough to show how ignorant you are about other cultures.”

He notices a local boy coming running up to them, dribbling a soccer ball. The boy kicks the ball a bit too hard, and it hits him in the shins.

“No wonder why I hate this dumb sport,” he says. His friend and the boy laugh at his pain, and he stops rubbing his shins, not to give them the satisfaction of witnessing his pain.

He hears his friend’s equipment jiggle as his friend runs over to get the ball, and kicks it back to the boy. The boy’s expression changes, and the boy takes this as a game of passing the ball. The ball comes towards him, but he gets out of the way of the game. He hates soccer more than anything else. He cannot understand why soccer is the most popular sport in the world.

But that’s why he’s an American, where football is the nation’s sport. His friend doesn’t mind kicking the ball around a bit, though, and the boy keeps laughing.

His shin is struck by the ball again, and it brings him out of his daydream. He rubs his shin again as his friend and the boy’s laughter adds to the cacophony of the market.

“I’m glad you two find this so funny,” he snarls.

“Relax, we’re just having a little fun. I said he should do it. I acted it out for him, and he smiled.”

“So how come he and I can’t have a little fun and kick the ball at your shins for a while?” he asks his friend.

“Because the boy’s obviously a genius, and can tell you’re no good at soccer.”

“Oh yeah?” he says.

He kicks the worn ball as hard as he can at his friend with his toe. The ball veers off to the right as soon as he kicks it, and the ball strikes the boy right in the head. The soccer ball bounces off the boy’s head, and rolls a few feet away.

He watches the boy topple over, flailing on the ground. He can hear how the boy’s cries cancel out the echoing laughter. Before he can think of what to do, his friend runs over to the boy. He watches his friend try to comfort the boy, and he thinks how the sound of crying is the same in every language.

The local people in the market start to gather around in order to figure out what the American soldiers did to the boy. Even though he can’t understand what the whispers say, he knows that they mean a lot of trouble from his commanding officer.

“What’s wrong with you? You don’t think we get bad enough media coverage as it is you have to go and kick a little boy in the head with a soccer ball?”

“Maybe they’ll think it’s someone else, like the British,” he replies.

“You have an American Flag on your sleeve!”

“Oh yeah,” and he realizes he will need a new scapegoat to avoid the trouble this will cause.

His friend continues to talk to the boy. The language barrier makes the task a bit more challenging. He sees his friend hold the boy in his arms as the boy wails. The boy’s cries are a

bit muffled by his friend's chest. The crowd continues to build behind the three of them, and some of the people look anxious for a reason to fight the two American soldiers.

"What are we going to do?" he says quietly as he approaches them.

"We? You're the one that hit a kid in the head!"

"It was with a ball! Don't forget that—it makes it sound better."

He searches his friend's expression for a few seconds to find an answer, because neither know what the next course of action is. If it comes down to it, no one would believe this boy's word against his; he is a soldier for the United States of America, and this is just another towel-head, he thinks.

"Go get the ball."

"Haven't you had enough of this stupid sport for one day?" he asks.

"Get the ball!"

He runs over and picks up the ball. He carries the tattered, weather-beaten ball in his hand. He hands his friend the soccer ball.

His friend helps the boy to his feet, and the cries stop. He can still see traces of tears on the boy's cheeks. He worries as his friend gently places the ball on the ground in front of the boy.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

His friend makes some gesture to the boy, and the boy smiles to indicate that he understands.

"What's going on he..."

All of a sudden, the soccer ball strikes his dick. He keels over, his left foot slightly twitching, as the boy goes into hysterics at his pain. His breath is hard to draw, like when he

goes for a run the morning after a long night of boozing, and he thinks for a second that the ball hit a testicle and ruptured it.

“That was your plan?” he stutters out.

The crowd laughs a bit, and then slowly begin to disperse. The local people continue to go about their business as they once again walk through the market.

“I only...thought he’d kick...you in the shins again. Ha ha! I can’t believe we avoided an international incident because you got hit in the balls!”

He hears the boy ease up on the laughter, with the sounds turning into a grin. Then, he can tell the boy’s pain returns because the boy rubs the spot where the ball hit.

“You’re going to have to let him kick you one more time.”

“Are you crazy?” he says.

“Just one more time, and then we’ll move on. The boy will be so happy that he’ll forget all about the bump. Then we’ll patrol the other side of the market, okay?”

“Fine,” he says. “My dick better work after this is over.”

He rises slowly, taking a break after each new movement. He knows in a short amount of time the pain will return, this time with more fury than before, but there is nothing he can do.

He stands with his hands at his sides, almost as if he is about to be executed, trying his best to cover up what he considers the source of his manhood. He is one of the few soldiers who didn’t flinch in the line of duty, but this is different. He mentally prepares himself against the pint-sized firing squad that will kill his cock.

“Are you ready?”

“Of course I’m not ready,” he replies. He begs for the ball to hit him in the face—he thinks it will hurt less.

“Well, I think he is.”

“You got to be fucking kidding me. We got to have some kind of rule here!”

“Do you want to get in trouble or not?”

“No, but I also don’t want to lose a nut, either,” he says.

“Look, he’s like six or seven. How hard could he possibly kick?”

“He didn’t do too badly with that last one,” he says.

“Shut up, and let’s get it over with.”

He stares at a vendor in the market, focusing on the vendor’s face. The vendor consistently avoids maintaining eye contact for too long with him, shifting around in his booth. The vendor ignores a customer that comes over. The vendor is checking the same few objects over and over without ever really examining them, touching them briefly as they lay on the table.

He hears the contact of the ball. What he doesn’t hear or feel is the ball making contact with any part of his body.

He turns his gaze back to his friend and the boy. He expects to see the aftermath, to find a momentary lapse in his consciousness only to find himself looking up from the ground in agonizing pain. He expects he’ll hear his friend’s voice trying to coach him through the wound, telling him that everything will be okay, and his friend’s voice will sound faint, as if the voice is being transmitted from a broken speaker.

What he finds is the boy and his friend looking beyond him, following the ball as it continues to roll farther away from them.

“Looks like someone’s watching out for me!” he exclaims.

“Now he’s upset.”

“That’s not my fault!” he adds. “He should practice more. I’m not letting him try again.”

“Fine, but at least get the boy his ball.”

He jogs lightly towards the soccer ball, which is a quarter of a klick from the vendor. He grins the whole time, thanking whatever is protecting him from being hit again with the soccer ball. He thinks about how Marcel might have a point, and maybe there is such a thing as God. For whatever reason, maybe an omnipotent Being doesn’t want him to lose a testicle; that confirms that whatever the omnipotent Being is called, it’s a He.

He gets to the soccer ball and happily picks it up. The ball has remnants of the shiny material that covers it—the whole cover hasn’t been ripped apart. There are still some spots where the ball remains like it originally was.

He is still holding onto the ball, but he is on the ground, and he doesn’t hear any sounds. When he tries to stand he stumbles, the world teeters, near his feet a charred chunk of flesh. Behind him, another, and another. Chunks of the boy. His friend.

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He lies in a hospital room. The doctors and nurse examine him to make sure he is fine. They examine all the wrong parts: arms, body, face, legs. The doctors diagnose him as “one lucky son of a bitch,” and an attractive nurse with blue eyes winks at him. He’s talked to her a bit a few times on the forward operating base. But now he remains silent when she’s examining him.

Everyone comes to visit him; there is a party planned to celebrate Francini’s birthday. The unit passes out beer, while he sits in his bed. He listens to random bits, but hears nothing.

There is a thump caused by a beer being placed on his table near his bed, but he ignores the sound. If he is lucky then his friend was unlucky. If he is alive then his friend is dead.

He doesn't notice when they leave him to spend the night in the hospital. The medical staff wants to make sure everything is okay before he can go out and kill more people—they are very thorough that way.

That attractive nurse comes by again late in the evening. Everyone else in the hospital is either sleeping or dying. Out of the corner of his left eye, he sees her smile as she approaches his bed, checking him. She checks the wrong places again: his covers, pillows, vitals.

“Do you want something for the pain?”

He knows she is looking at him, and feels her pat him on the head.

“Let me know if you need anything.”

She goes to continue her rounds. He watches her strut over to the bed next to him, and wonders if she knows where his gaze is. She finishes the remaining two beds, and starts to walk towards her station across from his bed.

He slowly gets out of his bed, and walks over towards her station. He meets her outside of her station, and can tell she is astonished to see so much energy from any of her patients.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

He pushes her against the wall, and holds on for the ride. Her lips crush his, and she wraps her right leg around him. He can feel her chest heave with the anticipation.

She pushes him into her station and onto a chair. She slowly walks in after him. The light gives him a good view of her clothes clinging to her chest.

He is amused by none of it.

He gets up out of the chair, and grabs her and drags her over by the desk. He starts gnawing at her flesh, sucking at her throat and working his way down to her breasts. She undoes his hospital gown as a thank you. He doesn't want to be outdone in terms of courtesy, so he rips off her dress. He has her in her under-garments while he stands there naked. She takes off the rest of her clothes for him.

He spins her around and bends her over, and she places her hands on the desk.

It feels different when he starts. He isn't used to the way it feels, and for a moment he is ready to end the whole thing. He thinks she senses this, and she turns her eyes to face him. Her eyes dare him.

He has nothing left. He looks into her eyes and sees life in the irises. He is fighting for this woman, women like her, people like her, and he becomes enraged. How can she be spared the horrors and he isn't? How come his friend wasn't?

He takes everything he feels out on her. He defiles, debases, destroys. He lets everything out.

He has no true feelings for her, and even lust is forced upon him by her. He starts to think about his wife, and how he made a mistake. Then he thinks about how the only reason he made the mistake is because he is lucky and his friend is unlucky. Is it worth agonizing over why he is spared and his friend wasn't? He thinks those bastards don't deserve to have another life added to the death toll.

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Several days later, he feels something new.

His second war injury is syphilis, contracted from the nurse. She is there with the doctor to diagnose his illness. He notices that she looks at him with her head down, staring up at him

under her eye-brows. He is fighting for her freedom to spread sexually transmitted diseases, and she doesn't have the courage to suggest a dose of penicillin.

At that moment, his rage comes back; he doesn't take it out on her again. Stephen Tucker focuses all his hatred towards the towel-heads, who killed his friend, Norman Martin.

For a while, Stephen Tucker thought about writing a book in memory of his friend's mission. He knew that wouldn't happen because he hated writing even more than books. Even more than he hated soccer. He didn't know what to do in order to honor Norman.

But if he could find the ball, the goddam soccer ball—hadn't he had it in his hands when they'd brought him to the medical tent—wouldn't that be a way? What happened to that fucking ball?