

The Infinity of the Moment

The lieutenant was dead.

A minute before the world went blank, Corporal Zambardino, an anxious Italian from the Bronx, was wrestling the steering wheel with his twitchy hands, maneuvering the Humvee along the rocky dirt road toward Kandahar. A minute ago, Zambardino had launched his usual tirade of complaints.

“Fucking disgusting!” He meant the local Afghan food. Rubbery kabob and rice, each grain with its own little black weevil.

“Fucking cardboard MREs!” He meant the gloopy-tasting army field rations in their plastic envelopes.

“Fucking colonels!” He meant the battalion commander, whom they’d been dispatched to fetch, and who inexplicably couldn’t have his own driver bring him.

Zambardino punched the steering wheel of the Humvee and railed on. The desert froze them, then broiled them. The bitter air sucked the moisture out of them, cracking their lips, their hands, their faces. Then the wind blew grit into the cracks. Women were either black-bagged terrorists or army dykes. He was gonna blow this popsicle stand, no matter what. His Bronx determination made them all laugh, even if they could barely understand his accent.

Lieutenant Jones always let him rant just enough to de-pressurize him. Like managing a volcano.

A minute ago, Lieutenant Jones had consulted a scrap of paper that he then stowed in his BDU jacket pocket. Twisting himself round from the front seat, he grabbed the handset of the radio on the back floorboard, authenticated the day's code word, and gave an ETA to the battalion commander's adjutant.

A minute ago, Garcia, the sloe-eyed Puerto Rican sergeant who sat behind the driver, had reached forward and slapped the back of Zambardino's helmet randomly, just to watch him spin around and protest, spittle flying. Garcia was the only one of them with a right shoulder patch; this was not his first war. The LT let him get away with anything.

A minute before the blast, Private Henry Knopf, radio operator and basic infantryman, had sat facing backwards, feet dangling off the back cargo area and M-16 slung across his lap, ready to cover their six. Resting his head against the steel frame, he'd been gazing out at the bleak Afghan moonscape. Burned-out shells of vehicles lay scattered about, providing the only enemy cover this side of the distant jagged red hills. Blush-colored dust clouds puffed a dry fog behind the heavy-treaded tires.

He'd been trying to remember home, forcing his memory to fabricate the dense Wisconsin forests and his skin to feel the cool moist pricking of autumn. His mind sketched his family in like dolls, the town like a scene in a jigsaw puzzle. No matter how tightly he tried to hold onto the thoughts, the incessant bumping of the truck as it lumbered up the rocky path kept wiping the slate clean until he gave up.

Instead, what filled his memory in stark detail was the television coverage of the Twin Towers bombing, the identical squared columns white and window-checked against the bright morning sky. Then the jet ramming the first tower silently, again and again as the television

replayed it. Smoke poured from the wound, and then the second tower collapsed toy-like against the first. It stung him even now to think of it.

Henry and his best friend Mike had signed up at the recruiter's the very next day, under the condition that they serve together. That was a year ago. The army found their condition inconvenient. Private Knopf learned that if the army had wanted him to have a best friend, it would have issued him one.

Then the world went white, whiter than the sun, whiter than snow, and Private Knopf's ears burned deep inside with a tone so loud he couldn't hear it. He felt himself flying, and woke up face down. Reflexively, he spanned his arms to retrieve his rifle, rolled over and spat a mouthful of dirt.

The lieutenant was dead. Anyone could tell from the way his head hung upside down across the back of the seat, chin pointed at the sky, blood leaking from his eyes onto his black forehead, struggling across his bushy eyebrows, then disappearing into his helmet.

The front of the car twisted into a ghastly metal sculpture atop the engine block. The dashboard was gone, and so was Corporal Zambardino.

Sergeant Garcia turned backward to wedge himself between the front and back seats, grabbed the radio handset, keyed the button, and yelled into the receiver. With his free hand he lofted his rifle and signaled to Private Knopf.

Mind and ears ringing, Private Knopf felt his body rise to obey the order. He crawled the few yards to the back of the Humvee and shouldered his rifle. His eyes and front sight tracked together, sweeping in arcs across the surrounding hills for snipers. He leaned against the back

wheel for support and let his legs splay in front of him like a puppet's. Deaf and flash-blinded, the two soldiers waited an infinity of moments, or maybe just a single distended one.

Years later, back home in Wisconsin, huddled on a wooden pew with his wife and toddler during a rambling sermon, Henry Knopf would recall that moment and assign it a name: the time that passeth all understanding. The other congregants might have wondered why Henry shook and sat bolt upright while they themselves fought to stay awake as the doddering old minister stood blank-faced, having yet again lost his train of thought.

The medics arrived. Head lolling to the side, Private Knopf observed them prod the perforations of his body. Later, gift-wrapped and lying on the gurney, he slipped a sticky trembling hand into his shirt pocket and let the smooth dinosaur bone that had been exhumed from his grandfather's land play across his fingers. Henry was a country boy who had no truck with charms and talismans as the other soldiers did. He knew the bone had not spared him, although his grandfather had meant for it to. Henry carried it to remind himself that he was not of this place, any more than he was of the moon. He would never trust any soil other than his own to lie still and behave itself. Once back home, he swore, he would never leave again.