

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

Kariss McNeal
Little Pieces

We were on patrol in the Paktika Province of Afghanistan. That place was like the Wild West. Seemed like every hour there were reports coming in about a squad getting ambushed. We'd been lucky up until that point. We hadn't lost anybody. Our mission that day was to gather intel from some villagers. We walked up on an old goat herder and his grandson. He didn't wanna talk at first. After some persuading, we finally got it out of the old man. The Taliban were making them store ammo and weapons. Gonzo must've been high off the fact that we'd finally gotten to do some real soldiering, 'cause as soon as the old man pointed toward the shack where all the contraband was he ran over and before any of us knew what was happening – *Boom!* He flew twenty feet.

He was always doing things like that; going off alone trying to prove his worth to the team. Sergeant Hill used to chew him out something awful for it, too. Gonzo was born somewhere in Central America, and I guess he felt like he had to work extra hard to show that he loved this country, or something. We bagged him up and carried him back to base. I kept the small American flag pendant he used to wear pinned to the inside of his helmet cover.

Four days later, it was Jackson. Command sent us to this mountainside to set up an observation camp. Damn, that place was far as fuck out there. We'd never been that far out and without any kind of air or ground support for miles to back us up if things got hot. So, there we were, on the side of this God-awful mountain, in the middle of nowhere. You've never seen terrain so rugged. I swear I was ready to tap out right then and there. We finally stopped to take a break then the ambush started. We dove for cover and returned fire.

That fire fight went on forever. After the dust settled all you could hear was guys calling out saying they were okay. No one noticed Jack at first. He was on point and was the first to walk into the shitstorm. He was gasping and shaking in a puddle of blood and dirt. He clutched the cheap tin cross we'd all been given when we first landed in country. I held his head in my lap and tried to reassure him that he'd be okay while the medic did his best to make it as painless as possible. I can still remember how his short prickly blonde hair felt in my hands. There he was: this six-foot-four, cornbread fed good ole boy looking at me with the bluest eyes I've ever seen, pleading with me to do something. Anything. All I could do was say it was gonna be alright. He and I both knew that was a lie.

After Jack, the Colonel thought we needed to grieve, so he had the chaplain come and talk to us. One by one, we sat with him, denying our feelings and putting on brave faces. That's another thing they don't tell you; how you're gonna want to scream and yell and kill up a bunch of people after one of your buddies gets killed. They don't tell you that you're gonna wish you could grab ahold of anyone who looks like the enemy and beat him to death with your bare hands. No one tells you how you'll think about doing things that would make decent people lock you up and throw away the key. Instead of facing those thoughts, you tear

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

them off and bury them somewhere deep and continue with the mission. You go on and hope you're not next.

Lieutenant Reid came into the bunker and hung this carved hand with an eye in the middle of it over the door. He said it was called The Hand of Miriam. Apparently, it was supposed to protect us, or something. The guys didn't really pay it any attention at first. But, soon we all began rubbing it before we went on patrols. None of us were really religious, but we all were superstitious as hell. That wooden hand became the platoon good luck charm. We collectively started to believe in its power to protect us.

On our last convoy, our truck rolled over an improvised explosive device buried on the roadside. Pettaway was in the passenger seat, there wasn't much left of him that could be identified besides a few soggy chunks of flesh and his helmet. Smitty sat behind him. I grabbed ahold of him and pulled. We both fell to the ground. This mangled mess from the waist down remained in the seat. I lay there holding his torso. That was nine days before we were due to head home.

After that, the mood in the platoon was palpable. Everyone was anxious and excited and scared shitless at the same time. We were all walking around holding our breath, hoping the next mission wouldn't come. I don't know how we did it, but the rest of us made it out alive and in one piece. I'm not saying we aren't completely screwed in our heads, but we aren't like some of the other guys who went home missing legs or arms, or burned and melted. Yeah, we were lucky. If that's even the right word to use. The scars most of us came back with aren't visible.

While it was happening, I thought it was frighteningly exhilarating. But looking back, that time I spent sleeping in a plywood bunker and trying to kill people before they killed me took its toll. The naïve, idealistic me that was ready to take on the world got left on a hillside a million miles away. Now I'm just this shell, carrying around the broken parts.