

MEPS

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GROWING UP, MY FATHER USED TO TELL ME about the day he took the bus down the long road to Vietnam. As I waited in the cold exam room for Dr. Trang to finish her paperwork, I tried imagining my old man getting hauled outta bed by some recruiter like I did earlier that morning. Even though dad grew up in Norfolk, Virginia, for whatever reason the Army had to drive him to Ft. Lee for initial MEPS processing. He always bitched about that. The drive took him an hour and a half. He took the ferry crossing over the James River before cutting west to Ft. Lee. My father always slowed down telling that part of the story. “The seagulls,” he would say, “flew up together from the docks over the river. Just after seeing the sunrise.” The old man turned to me. “It was so beautiful how they rose with the light.” He never talked about Vietnam so it was always strange when he told me that. And it was the most I ever got out of him about the war. But now that Iraq loomed on my horizon, I wanted desperately to know.

“Please take a seat.” Trang nodded at the chair in the exam room’s corner. “Forgot your blood work.”

Several medical instruments lay on the table, along with four empty blood vials. Trang wrapped my arm tight with a blue plastic band, causing the vein to jut out. “Ready?” She stuck the needle in the crook of my arm. I was too tired to wince. I watched the tube fill with blood slowly, struggling to stay awake. Not the best way to spend 6 a.m. on a Thursday especially after a hard night of drinking.

I shut my eyes and felt the sleep on them. Good time for that, I thought—another chance outta this shithole city slipping away. Dad had already kicked me from the house a few weeks earlier for blowing all my college money. I was cleaning my buddy Browning’s apartment for free rent. In return I got the couch. To make things worse, my boss, Mr. Santino, had just fired me. He

was always calling me up randomly throughout the day, checking on things, and then, just before the store closed, who'd pop in the back door? The old bastard in his finest suit. I guess he caught me playing Solitaire one too many times instead of pulling inventory. But I was better off. I hated renting tuxedos. And I hated even more that it paid only seven bucks an hour with a little commission sprinkled on top, making you realize how shitty life was. I'd thought about quitting more and more, but I needed the money—the bills never ended. Food and gas and car insurance and that fucking \$350-a-month car payment that never seemed to go away. I'd already sold back my college books for quick cash a week into the semester. And my girlfriend, Karen, wasn't too happy about that. Said I was pissing everything away, including us.

"Three more to go." Trang jerked the serum tube out of the needle in my arm. As she placed it on the metal table, my eyes opened, focusing on the glassy oblong container filled with blood. Lying on its side, it looked like a dark polluted river hovering in the air. Then she plugged a second tube into the needle, which hurt. Trang filled up that one, too, along with a third and fourth vial, and when the doctor finished drawing my blood, she ushered me outside—still in my underwear, clothes bundled in my arms—into a long, stark-white, rectangular waiting room. A single wooden bench stuck out from the opposite wall. Every three or four feet, a recruit sat shivering, stripped to his boxers, his clothes hanging from a hook on the wall behind him.

At the far end of the waiting area, a rigid, metal field desk that seemed right out of the front lines of World War II stood near the exit doorway. Its dark green paint was dusted in places with what looked like atomic bomb shadows, and large, blocky combinations of stenciled numbers ran across its surface, the fresher lines superimposed over the faded ones—Munson's little throne room. He walked out after me and nodded at an open spot on the bench. "Sit down and wait with the other FNGs."

Fucking-new-guys: I wanted to punch him but did like he said, mainly because they had threatened us when we first arrived earlier that morning.

Outside in the parking lot, as we were dropped off by our recruiters in twos and threes, a pair of muscled, bald-headed Army sergeants—the size of Mack trucks—herded us into four even lines in front of the MEPS. While one patrolled each row, straightening us out with his ape-like hands, the other, folding his arms, took a position between us and the red-bricked

fortress behind him. An American flag, flapping, towered over us. The wind swayed me a little. I was glad I'd brought my hoodie. Florida, despite its good name, wasn't always a vacation at the beach. It had dropped to 42 that morning.

After the big gorilla'd set us right, he joined his buddy out front. They stared us up and down for a few minutes without saying a word.

"This is a formation." King Kong's voice bellowed over the wind. "You will learn to stand in these correctly in due time. Welcome to the Tampa MEPS. I am Sergeant First Class Dixon," he pointed to himself, "and this is Staff Sergeant Jorgen. While you are here, you will be polite and respectful. You will say, 'yes, sir' and 'yes, ma'am' whenever you are addressed. We understand that you do not know the proper military courtesies yet, so these will do for now. If you are wearing hats, take them off and put them away. If you are wearing earrings, take them off and throw them out!"

Staff Sergeant Jorgen bulked up suddenly. "Stop moving, you."

This tall dude next to me in the row tensed. His black hair, copiously gelled, shivered.

"Do you see that?" Jorgen raised his voice. "That's what we mean when we say, don't be disrespectful. Moving around, jerking off in formation, is gonna piss me off!" He threw his camouflaged soft cap on the black asphalt, flexing his enormous shoulder muscles, and then gave the meanest stare I'd ever seen.

"You recruits need to treat this morning like a job interview," Dixon yelled, unfolding his arms and planting them on his hips, which naturally widened out his massive chest. "Every staff member inside that building," he jerked his thumb back at the MEPS, "will be treated as a superior, with respect." He took two steps forward at us and pointed. "Especially any females. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" we shouted immediately.

"If anyone inside even hints that one of you has treated them otherwise, me and Staff Sergeant Jorgen will show you out the door, and you can repeat this entire process all over again in a month."

That had been an hour before Dr. Trang.

"Hurry up," Munson barked. He took a seat in his rattling, metallic chair, a condescending smirk on his face.

I moved barefoot across the cold, white floor toward an open spot on the bench near the tall guy in line from earlier that morning. I sized him up as

I got closer. At a little over six feet, he looked funny hunched over in his black boxer briefs, the shiny waistband labeled in big white lettering *Emporio-Armani*. A thin gold chain hung from his neck, weighted by a tiny crucifix. His body had a lean swimmer's build. Little jet curls covered his forearms and chest. And his small eyes, sunk behind a large, well-defined nose—the crooked mountain separating them from his mouth—made him look tired. As I sat next to him, he smiled at me, wide and seemingly genuine, causing his eyes to squint.

“You hear this motherfucker?” he said with a thick Jersey accent. “Talking like a general or some shit.”

I nodded back. “Pretty big uniform he's got on there.”

“Yeah, full of air.” A battleship gray medical folder lay beside him, his name clearly labeled at the top: Alessandri, David, 23, male. He looked around for a second and then whispered, “You know what's next?”

“More waiting,” I said. “How it is.”

Munson turned from the laptop on his desk. “Keep talking, Harper, and you'll be doing this again tomorrow.”

We quickly sat with our backs against the wall like obedient little recruits. Alessandri scowled. The door across from us opened and Trang came out with a clipboard. She adjusted her glasses. “Specialist Munson,” she said, scribbling paperwork, “would you mind spacing out the recruits, please?”

Munson jumped up from his desk. “On your feet,” he said, trying to be stern. “I want you each to find an X and stand up straight on it.” The medic motioned at these little X's made of colored tape on the floor. “Go on, spread yourselves out. Get in the position of attention.”

I picked red. Alessandri stood on yellow.

“What are we, in kindergarten?” I said under my breath.

Trang looked up from her clipboard. “Stand straight, Mr. Harper. No slouching.” She moved through us, circling one recruit after another, intently observing each individual's posture for a moment. “Okay, relax. We are going to do a series of exercises to ensure your joint flexibility meets the military standard.”

Munson stood beside her like a loyal bitch.

Trang smiled at him. “My assistant will demonstrate each exercise for you. Copy his form, please.”

Munson snapped to the position of attention like a metal dick-spring, stuck his arms out, and said, "We're gonna swing our arms forward in big circles, like this."

We did that for thirty seconds.

"Backward now." Munson switched direction.

The recruits followed.

"Now extend your arms to the ceiling," Trang said. "Lower sharply to the side of the body without slapping your skin."

Some pimply ginger at the far end slapped himself. Everyone heard it.

The doctor moved over to him. "Please repeat that, sir."

The redhead looked nervous. He raised his hands and then brought them down again but didn't make a sound the second time.

"Very good," she said. "Time for duck walk. Squat down and take five steps forward, one foot at a time—heel-toe, heel-toe, like Specialist Munson."

The move was uncomfortable. Hands behind my head, I duck-walked across the freezing room as best I could. I looked over and saw Alessandri from the corner of my eye. He reminded me of a dog hunched over shitting still trying to walk.

Next we moved briskly around the rectangular room like a stick was shoved up our asses. Then we put our palms out face down, flipped them up, and wiggled our fingertips. We flexed our elbows and touched our shoulders with our thumbs after that. We put our hands together as if praying, throwing them forcefully to the rear while standing on our toes. We lifted our arms and our eyes overhead to the thrumming fluorescent lights, bowing our heads forward, touching the floor with our fingers. We fell down, hitting the ground with both knees at the same time, and crawled on them before we stopped.

We did these things because we were told to.

During the exercises, Trang scribbled on her notepad and moved quietly throughout the room, observing us as we completed each movement. She paused in front of me once or twice but said nothing. Finally, when Munson had finished the other joint tests, the old lady opened a bathroom door on the other side of the waiting room while he wheeled a small, metal table near it. A dozen plastic specimen cups lay in neat rows on top.

Dammit, I thought. Knew this was coming but what could a guy do? I'd spent Saturday night rolling again—one last Molly for old time's sake—and

this bean-weasel selling E there told me it'd be out of my system in three days. That was five ago.

Trang called Alessandri first. I was second.

"I need big sample, Mr. Harper!" Trang reached through the little bathroom door and handed me the cup. "When you all finished, put cap on tight, raise high overhead, and exit, okay?" She left the door cracked. Her shadow did not leave.

I went to the sink and watered the sleep from my eyes. Then I stood over the toilet and pulled out my jimmy—it was shriveled from the cold. I hated that. So I flopped it around a few times and gave it a tug, then did the same to my balls. It'd help fill the briefs out more when I went back into the waiting room. They always looked bigger after. The other guys, and especially Trang, wouldn't think so bad of me. When I'd stretched them good, I untwisted the cup's lid and looked in it. "Seventy-two hours. It's been more than 72 hours." I laid my dick inside. The warm urine splashed my knuckles as I closed my eyes.

I wondered about Karen, why she hadn't called. Maybe she guessed what I'd done Saturday night. I'd gotten a late text from her that I never answered. "I can't believe you" was all it said. Nobody from the party would've known her. I was careful about that. But she wasn't exactly dumb, and I usually answered her calls. Didn't that night. Wanted to, though—when you're blowing up on that second wave all you can think about is a fine pair of curves sliding up your lap. And Karen could do that—goddamn, French-Vietnamese women were beautiful.

"All finished, Mr. Harper?" Trang had opened the door.

My piss already topped the cup's fill line. "Almost." I stopped the flow, wiggled my junk out and pointed it at the toilet, then finished firing.

She didn't bat an eye. The doctor reached in and took the cup from me, capping it with the lid. "Proceed to audio," she said, handing over my bomber green folder. "When the others finish and catch up to you, the Army will test your hearing."

I turned and walked out past her, crossing the white room. Alessandri had already left. As I passed Munson, his forehead creased and he stared harder at his laptop screen.

"Hope you're not gonna walk around like that," he said.

I was still in my underwear. "Nobody said to get dressed."

"That's the spirit."