

The Bleach Keeper

Jane Hoppen

Before dusk that first night, Sergeant Diana Hunt was unable to fulfill one of her primary duties, she stood outside of the tent she was in charge of, stared. The sand land was table flat, caked, and cracked, and it moved on into forever, pushed past the bland horizon, hung and hovered just as time did, going nowhere. Sergeant Hunt had begun to feel like a sand mite, grit settling in her mouth, her saliva so thick she couldn't spit it out. Heat scratched her skin. There, everything, everyone crouched low to the ground as if Earth was somehow safe. The jigsaw puzzles there were made of body parts. Some nights, she could hear the soldiers calling through thin air from the roadside past the camp after a bombing. Or two or three. Open the door and throw out an IED—made up shit-bomb carving through the bodies.

Diana was a Signal Systems Analyst and a shooter for special missions stationed at Camp Anaconda in Balad, their own Hell Away from Home. The base décor consisted of bunkers and sandbags flanking each tent and facility. Every day, soldiers accessorized with a weapon and ammunition and despite the desert inferno, the ground a furnace beneath their feet, they wore flak vests and helmets, donned gas masks during code reds. Sweat evaporated even before it was mist on skin.

Diana had found an even more important mission within Operation Iraqi Freedom, though: filling buckets with bleach each night, the buckets carefully placed in the tent of the female soldiers under her command. She took that duty seriously. Each woman, like her, had left some kind of life behind. Private Penny Baker, a cocky nineteen-year-old from Chicago's south side, would stretch out on her cot

and describe in intimate detail the makings of a deep-dish pizza with the works, every woman present salivating with hungry discontent. Corporal Paula Lawson kept a bent and misshapen Gumby doll that belonged to her five-year-old son Bennett beneath her pillow. Sergeant Honey Kay Welk had a personal supply of canned Kim chi, claiming to have fallen disastrously in love with the volatile concoction after doing a tour in Korea. Every woman had a story.

Two old ladies lying in bed
One rolled over to the other and said
I want to be an airborne ranger
Living a life of war and danger
I want to go to old Baghdad
I want to kill a towel-head

Whenever Diana stretched out on her cot, that cadence call from basic training preyed on her mind—play, rewind, play—and she kept thinking: *I don't want a war. I'm in the wrong place. I've made a mistake. I'm not an old lady and I'm not lying in bed. I don't want to be a ranger of danger. Do I look like a ranger of danger?*

She didn't. Diana was thirty-seven, soft, with a Betty Crocker style. Her weak coffee brown hair fell even with her chin, an erratic mix of curls and frizz. Her eyes were the same color as her hair. She was medium in size, five feet five inches, with only a slight ripple of muscle veining along her arms and legs. She in no way resembled a ranger of danger. She was a single mother of two, Ariana, nine, and Tara, six.

Diana had joined the National Guard in 1999 after she and her husband divorced and he spent a year not spending money on child support. Diana felt she had no choice. Her six-to-two job as line chef at the Pancake Palace in Minnehaha, Wisconsin, didn't provide enough for the survival of three. She thought the decision was a safe one. The National Guard stayed stateside, on call for riots, domestic security, natural disasters. She served only one weekend a month, went away

for training two weeks each summer. That was what she wanted to be, needed to be—a weekend warrior, nothing more. She never thought she would go to war. But she did. And every day, every night her gut was a snake den of knots. And that song—every time her head hit the cot: *Two old ladies lying in bed.*

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Balad was under mortar attack each day. Mortars were the daily forecast, the explosions rattling through the base, rumbling Earth. Soldiers covered their ears, braced for the impact. They joked about it, sang the Burt Bacharach melody: Mortars keep falling on my head ...

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The brainwashing at basic training was evident from the beginning, that ride in the cattle car from the airport in St. Louis to the reception station on Fort Leonard Wood, an immediate erosion of ego, and within days, each day became a string of rote behavior—one, two, three, four: eat, pee, sit, shit, stand, march, run, shoot, shit. *Should I sit or should I shit?* Never think. Thought was the forbidden fruit, the enemy, to be broken down into shredded threads.

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Sergeant Hunt went to sick call one morning for medication for a migraine, and beside her sat a woman no older than eighteen, tired and distressed, her eyes gone dead. Diana wanted to console her, the misery molded on the woman's face, but she couldn't speak, the pounding in her head erasing all words. She said nothing. The woman stood and walked out into the scorching slant of sun. Diana learned later that day the woman had left sick call, returned to her tent, burned her bible, put a bullet in her head. Diana never knew her name. Two days, later she couldn't recall the face.

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Diana had eleven women to protect, including herself, and the first woman to go down was Private First Class Lucy Price. The second was Private Penny Baker. The attacks were well executed, coincided with the outgoing mortars, when no screams could be heard. Private Baker was raped as

she exited the port-a-pit. The soldier had grabbed her from behind, dragged her down, torn at her clothes with scaly hands, the weight of him pushing into her until her mouth opened, a silent cavern, the red of her blood soaking into the brittle brown dirt. Sergeant Hunt wasn't going to let a third fall. She thought of her own girls back home. *No way, Jose; not on my shift.*

The female soldiers reported the rapes. They were sent to the Army hospital in Baghdad where rape kits were available. The rapists reverted back to pure soldiers and returned to work, weapons in hand: War is war. After the rape of Penny Baker, the tent went quiet, each woman recollecting the ingredients of those deep-dish pizzas. *Did she say roasted peppers, or was that zucchini?* Diana went to the chain-of-command. She had faith. She had been told it was a chain of leaders.

She went to the sergeant and he sent her to the captain. She went to the captain and he sent her to the colonel. She went North, East, South, and West. She did her best. She reached out to a world no longer there, to a world only a presence in a newspaper, an image on a screen, a place on a separate plane. She walked another Earth.

Enter the colonel's office.

Attention.

Body straight and tall, hips level, stomach tucked in, chest lifted and arched with shoulders squared. Touch heels of boots together, feet at a 45-degree angle, body weight resting equally on heels and balls of feet, legs together and straight.

Salute.

Place arms straight at your sides along the seams of your pants, keeping thumbs pointing downward along the seam, curling the fingers loosely toward the palm. Look straight ahead with head up, focusing eyes directly in front, keeping face straight and relaxed. No smiling allowed.

Raise the right hand smartly until the tip of the forefinger touches the lower part of the headdress or forehead above

and slightly to the right of the right eye. Extend and join thumb and fingers, palm to the left, upper arm horizontal, forearm at a 45-degree angle, hand and wrist straight. Turn head toward the colonel. Complete the salute by dropping the arm to its normal position by the side in one motion, turning head and eyes front.

“Sergeant Hunt reporting, Colonel.”

“At ease, Sergeant.”

Clasp hands behind back, relax upper body, shoulders slack.

“You have a problem you want to discuss?”

“Yes, sir. My women are getting raped when they go to the bathroom at night.”

“I understand your concern, Sergeant. The matter has been brought to my attention. But it’s not yet been proven. Until then, my hands are tied.”

“There are allegations, sir.”

“It’s a matter for JAG.”

“And until then, Colonel?”

“Until then?”

“What will my women do, sir? How will I protect them?”

“Protect them from what?”

“My women are being raped, sir.”

“Those charges haven’t been proven, Sergeant. There is nothing I can do.”

“But it is the truth, sir. They won’t drink water anymore. Last week, four went on sick call for dehydration. They’re in the desert and they’re not drinking water. The port-a-pit is a pit of hell.”

“Well, you can’t lead horses to water. Can you, Sergeant? The issue will be dealt with. It’s a matter for JAG, Sergeant. Is there anything else?”

“No, sir; but ...”

“Dismissed.”

Salute. About face. Exit.

Diana stopped behind the mess hall after she left the colonel and scavenged two large white plastic condiment

buckets, and then she stopped by Supply and hustled two bottles of bleach from the Staff Sergeant on duty.

“What do you need it for?”

“My soldiers need to wash their undergarments. There are hygiene problems.”

“Like what?”

“Take a guess, Sergeant. You can’t even get us an adequate amount of menstrual supplies. We have to write letters home, ask people back home to send us tampons and pads.”

“Guess that’s why women shouldn’t go to war.”

“The bleach?”

He slammed two bottles down on the counter.

“Don’t come back.”

She signed for the bleach and grabbed the bottles.

“I’ll be back.”

That’s when bleach became the essence of all existence. The white curved bottle with the blue label—Clorox. She was Diana Hunt’s goddess—Goddess of Staunch Acid. Take a whiff of acrid sweetness. That was their salvation—a bucket of bleach. And Diana was the gatherer, the keeper. She needed two buckets of bleach, two buckets of bleach each night, to keep her sister soldiers safe. Two buckets of bleach for serenity.

A convoy was hit with an IED one night on a road about fifteen kilometers away, and soldiers from Camp Anaconda were sent to clean up the mess. They were rushed to the site, ordered to scour the area, searching for body pieces of disintegrated soldiers. Hey, Sarge; I got someone’s hand. Can anyone tell me whose hand this is? It’s got a ring. Someone’s torso is over here. Each part found its way into a black bag—a mismatched menagerie.

Diana was able to hoard enough bleach initially for the first three months as the justice cogs of JAG barely budged. She had worked out a deal with the Supply Sergeant—a bartering of goods her soldiers received from home for

precious bottles of bleach. One week, the trade would consist of packages of beef jerky from Sergeant Woods' folks in Michigan and bags of red, white, and blue M&Ms from Specialist Carter's grandmother in San Francisco. Another week, it was orange marmalade from Private Martinez's aunt in Miami and canned bread from Private Wilson's mother in Vermont. Even Sergeant Welk donated much-coveted cans of Kim chi.

In that matter, the buckets of bleach remained full. The women relieved themselves in the tent from dusk to daylight, the buckets resting behind a dusty-gray olive-drab blanket. A growing ripple of unrest traveled through the camp, gathered, and spread like the silt of sand. Word of the slipping camp morale was a topic in formation.

Sergeant Hunt sensed the uneasiness and that morning after three months of peace at the port-a-pit, she went to supply, her rucksack packed with home goods, and her request was denied. The Supply Sergeant told her they had begun to question his requisitions. She returned to the tent empty-handed—no bottles of bleach to fill the buckets. The few women in the tent when she returned said nothing, and for a long, wordless time, they avoided one another's eyes.

Diana looked at her watch. Night had devolved into blackboard darkness: 20:00 hours. At home, it was 4:00 in the morning, and Ariana and Tara would be sleeping snugly, the night light glowing in the bathroom, their grandmother in her bedroom down the hall. Diana went back into the tent, knowing it would be a long night. She sat on the edge of her cot, tired but refusing sleep, not wanting to hear the song in her head: *Two old ladies* ... She never could stop thinking.

At 23:00 hours, Sergeant Hunt heard rustling in a corner of the tent and turned toward the sound—Private Martinez pulling on her boots. Diana watched as the private readied herself and headed to the tent entrance, hesitating, feet not progressing forward. Sergeant Hunt sat up on her cot,

whispered loudly, “Wait.” She had stretched out with her boots on, dangling over the edge of the cot: She was ready to roll. She joined Private Martinez, rested a hand on her shoulder.

“We’ll go together.”

“I drank too much water,” Private Martinez said apologetically. “It was so hot. I was arched. But I should’ve known ... I forgot.”

“We’ll go together,” Sergeant Hunt said again, pulling back the tent flap.

They heard muffled sounds then and both women turned around, the other soldiers in the tent shoving feet into boots. Not one woman muttered; no sighs escaped. They all realized they now had a new duty.

“If you go,” Sergeant Welk said as she approached Sergeant Hunt and Private Martinez, the other soldiers falling in around her, “we all go.”

The soldiers filed out of the tent—one, two, three, four—and they marched, formation proud, to the port-a-pit: *How did we end up in this war within a war?* Diana glanced at her watch. At home, it was 7:00 in the morning. The girls would be getting ready for school. Ariana would be donning a meticulously matched outfit that she had spent time preparing the night before even though she would be destined to tweak the outfit by morning time. Tara, on the other hand, preferred a disarray of rainbow colors that she both assembled and crawled into in seven minutes flat. Their grandmother would be making them breakfast—Ariana insisting on eggs over easy and toast, Tara calling out for Lucky Charms. Diana could see their faces clearly—Ariana’s oval green eyes and tightly pursed lips, Tara’s deep-set dimples. Diana gritted her teeth to hold back tears. At home, her girls were safe.