

A.I.P.

By T.C. McCarthy

It used to be that you could tell how long someone had been in from their uniform color, yellow-white meaning you were looking at an old timer, an other-worlder who'd seen beyond and squeezed through the eye. Not anymore. Now the colors lasted forever so you had to check their pockets for a ring, because nobody came here chewing tobacco but they all did by the time they left. Tobacco cans' sharp corners, over time, left faded rings in the fabric, a symbol that you'd given in, given up. That was Bagram -- the Bag. Land of nicotine and waste. Other options existed, and some took them, latched onto A-I-P slabs that they had bought for pennies off some raggedy in the valley and then hid in a footlocker to be picked at, cooked-up in those wee hours when nobody was looking or, if they were looking, they were too logged to care. Everyone got too logged to care, every day.

I rarely did A-I-P at first, didn't have to. I got my specials from the field hospital where I worked.

"I am so right," said Heather. There was that grin again -- all flying, like she wasn't there and could barely hear me. "So gone."

I grinned back at her. "You're hotter than hot. Eighteen hot, like a model."

"I know."

Man did we laugh at that, but it was true and I felt her tongue against mine as we sank into the haze and dust, a dilaudid kind of cotton shield around our brains since we had only shot up about ten minutes before, the thought barely registering that I was too lucky to be with her, lottery-lucky that Heather chose me instead of one of the operators or surgeons. Then again, I

knew what got her -- knew that our habits matched, that we both had a thing for flying underground and that I had access to magic that others didn't, exactly what she wanted. Needed.

"I got some new gear for tomorrow," I said. "Amazing stuff from the Brits."

"How?"

"Stole it. When I was touring their field hospital in the town of I-don't-remember-a-bad."

"You're naughty," she said, whispering into my ear, then just as quickly going cold. "I'm leaving tomorrow, for a convoy run into the valley. Won't be back until Sunday, two days. Save some for me?"

"That route is Indian."

"It's always Indian."

But something inside melted, annoyed me at the same time it made me shiver, ruined my high and turned the edges hard and crisp when they should have been warm and diffuse. "No, I mean it. We had a bunch of guys come back in wagons today. Ground beef."

She jumped from my cot and began pulling on her fatigues, bulky, so they hid those incredible thighs and everything else. When the shirt went on I lost the path, crashed into one of those awful realities where you were high and couldn't function right, but felt none of the good stuff.

"You're an asshole. I don't need to know it's Indian, I already know it's bad, this whole place sucks and it never gets any better unless we roll up in the bag and dig our way down. I'm tired."

And she left. Just like that. I shared a room on the airbase with another nurse, but he was gone for now and in the distance you heard the scream of jets as they cruised over the distant mountains, booming so the window glass rattled and nearly covered up the phut-phut-phut-pop

of flares. You never felt so alone. Part of me screamed that I needed to chase after her and hold on, just bury my head in that hair. But that part was small. The gorilla-me wanted more and so reached over to my footlocker and pulled out the false bottom, fishing for my rig again, tapping just enough into the spoon -- so -- and then cooking off.

When it hit me, I grinned again. Back on the path, I thought, and realized that Heather would be fine, that Indian Country could be nice in the fall especially if you had time to stop at the market and grab a bag of dates before hitting that long road into the valley. Something tapped on the window. The sun had just dipped into the mountains and when I stood to look outside it hit me that a dust storm had rolled in, a mile-high wall of dirt that came off the foothills to the south, making me giggle with the excitement of a kid about to see his first thunderstorm. I crawled into my bag and zipped up, listening to the shouts outside as people ran back and forth, stowing gear and doing their best to protect our war from little bits of dust.

'Stan was all juice and dates sometimes, swear to Christ.

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And sometimes Stan sucked it out of you.

"He's dead," the doc said to me, but I didn't hear it because my head still pounded from the night before, dehydration making it hard to concentrate. All I could do was mumble.

Funny thing about the dead: they made it hard to live. Once I got over the initial shock of seeing bodies, when that first truckload rolled in and one of the docs gave me tag duty so that I had to go in with the registration guys and mark the corpses, it just made me wonder. What did they see? Some of them had no faces, couldn't see anything, but there were others that stared into nowhere and you had to figure they saw something and when it got quiet I'd want to go with them, just to lock-on and take. Like the guy who lay there that morning. Operator. They'd

brought him in just after my shift started and he didn't say a word, just lay on the table and squirmed, did his best to hold his stomach in and you could tell he was an operator because he was wearing local clothes, smelled like human waste and bread. The guy had grabbed at me as he went down, the doc making more noise than anyone by shouting for more plasma, this and that. The dying guy hissed. I heard what he said. It was meant for me and when he said it the room stopped, time slowed and you could tell that someone on high had just arrived.

"It had nothing to do with the big stuff." Guy whispered it. You would have missed it if you hadn't been standing where I was, right next to his mouth. The words ran through my head, over and over, and gathered speed so that I knew -- felt -- everything start to crumble.

"HE'S DEAD," the doc repeated.

"The guy said something about 'big stuff.'"

Doc flipped a sheet over the face and then wrote something on a clipboard. "Jerkoff was missing part of his brain, would probably say anything. Come on, lemme show you something." And before I could react he grabbed my arm and pulled me into his office, a tiny room off the corner of the main triage area, and shut the door.

"You're not one of them, right?" he asked. I didn't know what he meant, but suspected I couldn't have been one of them, so I nodded.

"Thank Christ."

"I've never been one," I added. "Ever. For my entire life, I think."

The doc pulled a bottle from his drawer along with two mugs, offered me one after he poured and I took it -- downed it. "More, please." I almost added that the "big stuff" was sure to get me if I didn't get whacked soon, off kilter, but I kept my mouth shut because even I knew that it would sound too crazy. But it was out there. The dead guy's words still echoed in my

thoughts, getting louder by the second until I had to clamp my hand over my mouth for fear that I'd scream them out loud.

"He was a spook," the doc said, filling my glass again. "Never know, I thought you might be one too."

"I thought he was an operator."

"Nah. Most operators don't wear underwear and that guy had Calvin Klein briefs, no operator would wear Calvin Klein briefs. Let alone purple ones."

"That's not true, sir." I told him about one, a crazy guy, Delta, who had slept in a tent near the end of the runway because it was the only place he felt safe, the only place where he could see anyone coming from hundreds of yards away, had a clear field of fire. "That guy wore leopard print skivvies and nobody knows where he disappeared to. Sir."

"See..." the doc leaned over then, waving his mug in my face as he got into the discussion and I could tell that he was a good one, one I could trust, and so I did my best to read the name on his tag, but my eyes wouldn't focus. Couldn't. So I listened. "Leopard print is OK, that's the kind of shit you'd expect to see on an operator -- either that or commando so your Johnson will dry -- quick and easy. But not purple. Not Calvin Klein."

I thought about it and decided he was right. "I don't think I've ever seen a spook. What was he here for?"

"Who knows? Most of 'em fly into Kabul so they can get a couple of pictures to hang on their wall at home. 'Look at me honey, that's a real M-16, and those are real insurgents, all of them dead.' Course he wouldn't have bothered to tell her the whole truth, that he had nothing to do with killing them, that operators had done all the work and he'd just shown up to rifle through a bunch of empty pockets. 'Collecting,' they call it."

"Spooks." It was the last thing said. We spent the rest of my shift in his office, sitting there, looking at the wall and swatting flies as we drained first one bottle and then another, never saying a damn thing because nothing else needed to be said. We'd had our quota for the day, an army of one. One dead. That's the way it worked, on some days you'd be standing for twelve hours up to your elbows in blood and shouting, but on most it was quiet and the best you could do was find someone to hang with, just to keep from being alone with thoughts that chewed into your brain like whirling butcher knives.

It hit me at the end of my shift. "Christ, doc, you're a genius!" When I stood I almost fell, had to grab the desk just to hold myself steady.

"What?"

"That dead spook cast some kind of spell on me, I thought I'd lose it, couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said. Hell. Now I can't even remember what he said."

I shook his hand before leaving, genuinely grateful and he knew it too. Slapped me on the shoulder. By then it was too dark to read his nametag though, and it would have been rude to ask him straight out for his name, especially when I'd been working with him for two months already.

Bagram rules. They weren't written down, but you followed them, and I'd go on pretending I knew who he was just to avoid hurting his feelings. Someday he might have to cut into me and I didn't want him pissed.

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I could tell from the smell when it would be a bad day. Bag had three kinds of odors. Mostly it was jet fuel, that seemed to ignore wind directions and just hung in the air no matter where you were, soaked into your clothes and stayed so that after a while you stopped smelling it

entirely. The second was crap. Human and animal. Hot days were worse than others and you rolled with them, waited for a strong breeze to take the smell away, just for a second so you could imagine you were somewhere else. That was the problem with smells. Smells shattered whatever fantasies you'd been working on, acted like an anchor to keep your soul attached to the dust, prevent it from getting its own breather in the lighter stuff of daydreams.

The last smell was death. You only caught it once in a while, near the morgue or outside the field hospital, but it happened, and triggered something so that I swore it meant bad times, close by, in ambush.

"You never bought from me before," the guy said. Seedy. Dealers were dealers, whether they wore a uniform or not, and this guy had that look: best friend when you had money, but most of the time just mean. "So what's up?"

I handed him the cash, took the slab, and tucked it into a pocket. "My source dried up."

"Pharmaceuticals. Nice when you can get them, but I heard they tightened things in the hospital, yeah? Changed the locks, that sort of crap?"

"Yeah. That sort of crap. So now I'm stuck with A-I-P, just like the rest of us."

He grinned, which is when I saw the cross around his neck, glinting in the sunlight and making me blink at the irony. "Just like the rest of us." His grin faded then and he pinched his nose. "You smell that?"

At first I didn't, but then caught it too, felt my stomach turn despite the fact that I should have been used to it by now. "Where is it coming from?"

"I don't know, but it's close." He let go of his nose and sniffed a couple of times, started wandering around the room and checking under things.

"It's probably from outside, the hospital isn't far from here."

"That shit isn't outside; you've got a dead one in here. Probably a mouse or a rat."

My spine went cold. I looked down at my uniform as soon as I remembered that I hadn't changed since yesterday, and checked it carefully. Nothing. He pointed at me, his nose twitching, and jaw working like he wanted to puke but instead just staring so that I knew he was thinking the same thing I was: the smell was on me. I yanked out the slab, felt stickiness on it and then looked inside my pocket. Something fell out onto the floor.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked.

"Part of a spook. We had one die yesterday and he must have gotten himself in my pocket, looks like a piece of guts." And then I threw up. It wasn't the smell or the fact that I had dead-guy in my pocket; I was way past caring about that, way past caring about decay; it was the fact that I knew what it all meant and suddenly recalled what the spook had said about it not having anything to do with the big stuff. The dealer booked it then, leaving me there, which was cool. After I changed my shirt I did something I never had in the past, not before going on shift.

The needle trembled on its way into my vein, and I had to hit it twice but there wasn't going to be an oh-well-never-mind-I-shouldn't-get-high-for-work moment anyway; I was going in. The smell had been a warning. It was part of a sign from Heaven, to get ready, the other part coming from the words He spoke the day before so that they combined into an uber message: get ready for the worst possible thing that could happen. It only took a second for the juice. I felt the shit hit, the right spots, and almost grinned because all the fear had melted and I was armor-clad, armor-all'd, armor-plated. Hit me, I thought, go ahead and give me the worst. You absentee fuck.

When I got to the hospital, I got it. The nameless doc waited for me and didn't say anything, just wrapped his arm around my shoulder and took me straight to the row of bodies

that they'd laid out early that morning. He unzipped a body bag -- making me wonder how he knew which one to go to -- and squeezed me closer.

"I'm sorry, son. The chaplain's on his way over, take the day off, get drunk, do whatever. Her convoy got hit this morning on the return trip."

It was way fucked up, but I smiled at the guy and squeezed him back even though I knew that as soon as I came down I'd need to go straight back up -- unless I wanted to put a bullet in my head. Heather had never looked more beautiful.

Like she dug the bag.

#

Winter came early. Stan had a special kind where you'd burn for months and then one morning step into the street and find that the puddles -- ones that had stunk all summer of urine and algae -- had frozen at the edges, their centers a kind of green that made you sick from just looking. It hurt. The cold soaked into anything exposed and turned it brittle so that each movement made you wince with the realization that something wasn't right, didn't belong. But that winter things had changed; I did belong. I moved through Kabul like a ghost and could tell from the looks in the old women's eyes that they knew. You'd have seen it too. The locals hated us, not even bothering to hide it whenever they saw a uniform or heard a New York accent, but something had been draped on me, a kind of heavy garment that made the uniform invisible, the voice inaudible. I was of them.

One morning I made my way into the heart of the city, choking on the smell of sulfur from coal burning somewhere in the distance. The market was already packed. I had no idea why I was there, but felt that I had to be and before I knew what had happened the sounds evaporated, disappeared, as if God had reached over and hit the mute button at the same instant

flames leaped straight up, stalls disintegrating into a cloud of debris and dust so that I watched in awe, only just realizing that someone had lit off a bomb. The shockwave lifted me from my feet and carried me through the air. Untouched. I landed on what felt like a bed of feathers, soft and giving, because it was a bed of feathers, piles and piles of them having just been stripped from chickens that hung in rows to be sold.

An old lady grinned. Her back had bent into an L-shape, but she hobbled over and helped me up, dusted me off with an old broom so that I could stand up in time to see the people run back and forth, knowing that some of them must have been screaming from the looks on their faces.

It was still soft. Quiet. Numb. The walk through the market took longer than usual and the damage barely registered through my high, but a crater about thirty feet across had appeared in the middle of the square, and blackened bodies lay in a circle around it. Who cared? It occurred to me then that if I had been a few feet closer to the blast I might have been able to go too, with Heather, and then something broke through, made me sad despite the high and I quickened my pace to get out of there, suddenly terrified that my ears would return and I'd hear wailing. I made my way through the city, sprinting and jogging, unable to stop until I'd gotten to the far side, into the country, and began climbing one of the tall hills to the west.

When I got to the top the sounds returned.

"I almost shot your ass," someone said. An operator. He looked like it too, wore a coat from L.L. Bean, duck boots, and a red plaid hunting cap, just like he had stepped out of a magazine from the 1950s -- complete with a high-powered rifle and scope.

"Why? I'm wearing a uniform."

He spat and lit a cigarette. "It doesn't mean anything. You've got their look, on your face,

like you belong here. That look'll get you killed."

From our vantage he had a perfect view of Kabul, a clear view of city center, and the last warmth of my high disappeared. "What are you doing up here?"

"Crowd control. Pest control. You can tell the insurgents from their faces and not all of them have weapons but you can see them through the scope, see their eyes. I have the gift, man, second sight. God told me. Told me to abandon the airfield and come on high to reap his people."

"You're the guy who used to live in a tent. Outside Bag. We all wondered where you went."

He nodded then, smiled around his cigarette. "Yeah. I was crazy back then, but not now. Now it's all clarity and nicotine."

"Wanna get high with me?" I pulled out a foily and my spoon, getting ready for it, knowing that in half an hour I'd start to auger all wrong, edgy, and already I could feel her tugging at my gut, reminding me that nothing was right anymore.

"Screw that. You know, you're totally messed. I know you, knew your girlfriend, knew both you guys and when she was around, you were all right, I never would have put you in my scope, never would have come close to pulling the trigger."

"You didn't know me. Or her."

"I get around troop. Me and Doc Matthews." He held up one hand, crossed his fingers. "Like that. Tight."

"I didn't know his name."

The operator laughed at it, made me feel the cold for the first time. "You worked with him for all these months and didn't know. You're so messed. Like subhuman. That's the

problem with letting kids in the army, you're all whacked and semi-solid."

My insides shifted. The foil lay on the ground in front of me, its contents moving in a cold wind, off-white powder like a tiny mound of snow that had a life, that called to me with a tinny voice and wouldn't stop. But for a moment the operator had killed it -- stopped the voice -- and I looked away, looked at him.

"She was non-issue. Totally cool."

"Want me to shoot you?" he asked.

I thought about it. For about ten minutes we sat in the wind and cold, thinking, until finally I shook my head. "No thanks. I think I'll go home now; I'm tired."

"Careful on your way back through Kabul, that bomb was bad and some of them will blame us for it. Better to go around, take the long way."

I picked up the foily and re-folded it, tucked it into my pocket thinking I'd decide later what to do, whether or not I'd let in the super flu and see if I could hack it -- hack all of it. It wouldn't work. You just didn't take as much as me and then walk away, but there were ways, there were outs and rat holes.

"I'm not going to Bag."

The guy lifted his rifle and peered through the scope, his attention already gone from me as he focused on a target, tuned his second site. But then he glanced up. I felt his eyes as if they were twin lasers, burning through my forehead and swear to Christ I think he must have been chosen by God because he saw right through me and pointed to the west.

"That way."

END