

## Coming Home

The sweltering Iraq heat mixed with the makeshift dirt floors of the base made Terrance feel like he was in a haze--the small dust particles glinting in the sunlight seemed to burn brighter than the red ash on the end of his bunkmate's cigarette. Terrance laced up his worn out, tan combat boots and struggled to tuck in the bottom of his light green and grey digital camo pants because of the habitual bouncing of his leg.

Terrance felt like the room was closing in around him. The sound of clinking silverware and laughter from the mess hall a few rooms down made him anxious; the rapid rise and fall of his chest made the magazine lined with hundreds of deadly-but-delicate bullets slip from his shoulder. Terrance flinched in anticipation of a loud clank when the bullets hit the floor. Before he re-opened his eyes, his bunkmate Sam was already kneeling beside him, picking up the mess he had created.

"Yeah, buddy, it never does."

Startled by his statement, Terrance asked him what he meant.

"Dude, you're extra out of it today. You've been standing there muttering some kind of *Wizard of Oz* shit to yourself for a few minutes, asking why you don't feel like you're at home. It's horseshit. It will never feel like home, Terrance, because it's not. It's hell."

The fierce tone of Sam's speech brought Terrance back to his consciousness for a moment, and he resolved internally to start paying more attention and kneeled down to help Sam pick up his mess. Before they got finished with their task, Terrance heard a loud banging on the shabby cinderblock wall.

“Fuck, man! We were supposed to do rounds 15 minutes ago! Come on, did you hear anything Sarge said? Get your piddly ass up and *move!*”

“What?” Terrance asked in a daze. He hadn’t heard anything after the banging on the wall.

Without words (or, at least, Terrence thought), Sam grabbed his arm and pulled him up, past the makeshift curtain door into the startlingly bright afternoon. The hot sand seemed to burn through his boots. Maybe Sam was right about the whole hell thing.

Terrance was suddenly on the ground. He saw the burning remnants of a blast about 300 yards away, but still close enough to burn his eyes with each passing second that he could not look away. He vaguely saw figures in the distance running. They looked barely human, hunched over with long arms dangling as they slowed, weighed down by the thick, grey-black smoke.

The smoke mirrored Terrance’s mind: heavy, floating, but somehow thin. Without thought, he began to walk toward the fire, reminded of the IED that he had encountered on his tour back in 2011. He realized he wasn’t even sure what year it was now. He guessed he must have been exposed to something that made him feel a little drowsy, but, he figured, nothing too out of the usual for someone living in an active warzone.

As Terrance ran, he heard a familiar voice in the distance. The feminine, pleading voice drew him closer toward the chaos. He felt lighter than air but his feet felt cemented to the ground, as if he could only travel by shuffling his feet back and forth in the dense sand. The sand seemed to mix unrelentlessly with the smoke, intensifying the hot, burning sensation in his lungs by creating miniscule cuts for the smoke to hide in and expand. As he trudged further toward the center of the fire, the images he saw

erased the pain in his lungs, but intensified elsewhere in his chest. A mother cradled her child to her breast, their skin melted together from the explosion. Their teeth were bared in eternal grimaces--the skin from their mouths almost dripping onto their hollow cheeks.

“Monica” Terrance tried to whisper. Although he knew from the dress and hijab that it was not his wife lying in the ashes, he could not help but flash back to his life at home. In vivid picture, he saw images of their summer wedding in the small chapel Monica’s uncle preached at. He saw her white, lacy veil juxtaposed on the skin of the charred woman’s face.

His legs moved faster than his heart. Terrance didn’t know where he was going, but he couldn’t handle any more of the gore and suffering that he had already endured. Running toward a small white building to the left of the explosion, he heard no shouts, no commands, no helicopters coming in for assistance. Filled with the dread of being caught, he snuck quietly into a dingy alleyway behind the building. He reflexively turned his head when he felt the hand on his shoulder, not sure if he should strike or run. Behind him he saw a civilian woman who spoke with the same voice that had sent him running to the explosion initially.

“You can come home now” the woman said in a gentle whisper.

Terrance simply looked at her, with her soft, familiar hand still on his now barren shoulder. Her stranger lips spoke words that he knew in another world.

“Come on, Terrance. Come back. Everything is ok.”

He caught a brief whiff of sweet cherry. He began to tear up.

The mystery woman’s brown hijab slowly faded into Monica’s auburn hair as Terrance awoke in the dimly lit bedroom.

“There you are, love. I’m so glad you’re home.”