

Airman

by Matt Mendez

Dear Linda,

I thought about you on the flight. The plane shook like crazy, and Pandullo puked himself. I remembered you telling me how your baby brother got sick and smelled up the car on summer trips to California. I imagined you rolling down the window and sticking your head out. I pressed my head against my own little window and watched the ocean. That was as close as I've ever been to it, the water moving and me wanting to jump in. Maybe you could take me to the beach where you went swimming, if we ever see each other again.

We landed in the middle of the night. The whole camp is razor wire and watchtowers. We got briefed: no going off base, no booze, no phone calls home for at least a month (you should send me your number). They set us up in Tent City, a group of tan flaps lined in rows. We each got a cot, a pillow, and a blanket, then an A-bag, a C-bag, and a flak vest. I watched the older guys and did what they did, unpacked my duffel and marked the back of my Kevlar helmet with masking tape. No one expects to need chem-gear, but they say the enemy has nerve gas and blood agent and who knows what else. I checked my mask over, just in case.

I slipped pictures in the Velcro seals above my cot. There's one with my má and pops standing next to each other at my cousin Lena's quinceañera—those two don't smile for shit. There's another with Beto and Manny, my older brothers, all drunk and toothy the night before I left for boot camp. Beto's eyes are red from the camera. I hung one with me and Ana. I put it because everyone had more pictures than I did, and I didn't want them knowing I got no one back home. If I had your picture, I'd put it up and take Ana's down like nothing.

Pandullo felt better after landing. He's nineteen like me, except he's already hooked up with a wife and kid. Pretty nuts, huh? He's

my three-man. We talked about Country, our ate-up loading chief. On the plane Country had told Pandullo to keep an eye on me, make sure I didn't crack up. He doesn't like Mexicans. Do you get that from people in college?

Country didn't want me on his crew when I first got to base, but I showed him what was up in the load-barn, learning GBU-10s, 12s, 27s, and 87s real quick. I've won Load Animal three times. Being a two-man is about hustle. I walk bombs from the trailer, line them up to the rack and sway them down. I do this faster than anyone. I check out seeker-heads, fuse and wire and cart. I've always been good at turning wrenches. I bought *The Motorcycle Diaries*, by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the same one you were reading, with the coffee ring on the back cover.

I hope you don't mind me writing this, but you were looking good at that bookstore. If I'd known girls as fine as you were hiding inside, I'd have gone in sooner. I went in because I promised má I'd buy a bible before I left. Maybe us meeting is fate, you only in town to see your cousin off and me deploying with him. I didn't even get the bible—can you believe that? I'll keep an eye out for your primo. Joel Guzmán, right?

I'm getting tired. The cot is rough, scratchy green cloth sewn to short aluminum legs. I'm not sure when I'll get the chance to write again. No one knows what our schedule will be, if or when the war starts. Country said nothing's going to happen, "All this just a waste of damn time." I bet he's right.

Sincerely,

Tomás Cota

Dear Linda,

I'm not sure how long the mail is taking, and I hope I got your address right. My folks already sent me a letter. I've read it twice, and I will probably read it again after writing this. They're not doing too good. Tata had a stroke. I'm not sure what that is exactly, but they found him passed out on the porch, a rosario balled

in his hands. He's in a coma. Pops wrote that he'd started acting funny, roaming around the house and talking about ghosts, said their faces were gray and peeling like burned paper. Má told me to pray to San Judas and sleep with the bible under my pillow. Like somehow that will help. Still, I feel bad for not getting one. You had my head wrapped up that day.

Have you started back at school? Maybe one day you could write a story about me, your friend Tomás from the Air Force. You would get an "A" for that one, no doubt. I haven't found your cousin. He's not a flightline guy. I checked. No one seems to know a Joel Guzmán. Where does he work? Does he have a nickname?

Country's real name is Barry and we sometimes call Pandullo, "Pandy." I'll keep a look out.

So far all we've done is unpack our toolboxes and wipe down jets. We toured the bomb dump. I've never seen so many munitions. The bombs were stacked one on top of the other and could take up a football field. I ran my hand over one, taking a layer of sand off the body and sharp green fins. I can't imagine loading all these.

I watch the news everyday. I bet you know all about this political stuff. I've never paid attention to all that. They keep talking about weapons and war and show groups of pissed off Hajjis burning the flag. People are getting spooked. The Hajjis that work on base don't look us in the eye and Country says its because they know what's coming. Some of them work in the Chow-Tent, and I had to guard them the other day, make sure they didn't poison the food or put a bomb somewhere. I remember you called TV a "real propaganda machine," and I wondered what you'd meant. You have perfect teeth.

You're not like the girls I know, only caring about landing a man and then being worry free. After high school all Ana wanted to do was get married, move to an apartment and put up curtains while I worked construction with pops. Ana was like that because I took her cherry, but also because she really wanted to be someone's wife, then a mother. I could tell she didn't love me all like she said, and

her eyes got big and stupid when I told her I was leaving for the Air Force with no plans of taking her along. I don't want to stay in El Paso forever. I don't want a woman who wants a family more than she wants me.

Have you ever been with a vato like me? What would your college buddies think if they saw us together? Probably wonder why you were killing time with a cholo, a grease monkey GI. Tata once told me, "If you want to be a man you gotta get things on your own." That's what Che did, went to check shit out for himself, to trip out on things he didn't know. That's what I'm doing. My plan is already working.

Tomás Cota

Dear Linda,

I found Joel. I was thinking you didn't have a cousin. Pandullo found him working on the frozen generators behind our tent. It rains hard at night and icicles freeze on the power lines and watchtowers. Pandullo and me throw rocks at them, knock the big ones down and bust the layer of ice on top of the sand. The ground looks like broken glass when were done. I've started Che's diary again.

I work nights and afterward wait outside the Comm-Tent to call home. Most of the time I can't get through, but that's okay. My familia has things to worry about besides me. So I watch the sun rise over the burms and listen in on phone calls home. Country fights with his old lady non-stop; Pandullo does baby talk. I lose track of the days, each one passing like the same no-brain movie they show all day at the Rec-Tent.

Your cousin is an AGE troop. I asked him for your address, to make sure I have the right one, but he didn't know it. He told me you went to school in New Mexico, and I felt better knowing you didn't lie. He said to watch out for you. That you think you're "all-good" and wouldn't write back no matter how many pages I sent you. I wanted to fuck him up for saying that. I told him he had it all

wrong, how we sat facing each other on those puffy red chairs at the bookstore, you telling me why war was bad but really wanting me to like you. You're better than he knows.

Che wrote that during his trip to South America he wanted to help all the poor people he met. Maybe that's why I'm here. I could be as good as that dude. I told Joel you could see some good in me, that behind your smart looking glasses you had eyes looking far ahead. You wanted to kiss me in that bookstore—I could tell. Joel called you a snob. I don't know why you'd want me to keep a look out on a guy like Joel, but I will.

Pleas write soon,

Tomás

Linda,

I talked to má on the phone. She's not doing good. Tata is still in a coma, and now *she* sees ghosts. They hang out in the backyard, around the porch waiting for a train that doesn't come. Pancho Villa is with them, and he's stolen all the corn from the house, all the cans and frozen bags, even the tortillas. He screamed at her, told her the soldiers wouldn't make it past the winter without supplies. He has holes for eyes. Má made me promise to read my bible and pray hard for things to turn right. I went to the Chapel-Tent after we talked, tried to get right with her and God. I found the Base Chaplain. It turns out he had bibles to give, and I took two small ones. I keep one under my pillow and the other in my pocket, that way I can finish reading the whole thing. I've started praying to San Judas and Santo Niño, but I don't know if praying works. It feels like wishing, which never does.

I sometimes close my eyes and try to remember what you look like—Country thinks I'm sleeping on the job. I remember your face, your wide nose and chubby earlobes, your black hair. I don't know why I do this, why you stick in my head so bad. I know I'm making too much of you, but something forces me, like if I don't I won't remember who I was, or am, when this is over.

Má told me pops spends his days at the hospital, crying for Tata. I've never seen him even sad, only pissed off. I don't know who else to tell. I don't want people to think I'm losing it or going soft. Your cousin has been avoiding me around camp. Now that I know him, I see him everywhere: the Chow-Tent, the PO-Tent, the Laundry Trailer. Have you told him something weird about me? I want to go home.

Tomás

Dear Tomas:

Please do not write me again. You sound like a crazy person and have the wrong idea about us, and your letters, the third one especially, were completely inappropriate. We had a nice "talk" at the bookstore (Lloyd's Books, by the way), but that is all. You seemed interested in Che, and I thought you could use some background information before you wasted your money on something you would not understand. I regret giving you my address. I felt sorry for you. You should forget about me and reconsider things with Ana. The way you describe her, she sounds perfect for you.

Also, what you and your "friends" are doing over there is wrong. If I had known what you did specifically, I would not have spoken with you in the first place (At least Joel only fixes heaters). You need to wake up. What you are doing there is nothing like what Che did. He gave up all he had to protect the poor, all his family's wealth. What have you given up? Who are you protecting?

Linda

Linda Guzmán,

You lied in your letter. I can tell when a girl's in to me, and you were. We'd talked the way people do when they'd rather be wrapped around each other instead of only sitting close, with hands touching, the little hairs sticking out. You talked about revolutions

and corporations and then stopped and waited to see if I was impressed. We had a dance going. I let you lead. You can put whatever you want in your letters, but I know what I know.

Che was a soldier, fighting and killing, everything that could happen here. If my parents had had the money, who knows? I could've been smart like him, had the chance to act brave and abandon everything for a cause instead of having to search for one, hoping to make my own life better. Still, I understand what Che writes and what he means. "The stars drew light across the night sky in that little mountain village, and the silence and the cold made the darkness vanish away. It was as if everything solid melted away into the ether, eliminating all individuality and absorbing us, rigid, into the immense darkness." After reading so much of these words, words I can't put together no matter how hard I try, I know that this is the kind of vato you go for, even when you want one like me.

We've been flying the hell out of our planes. Country thinks the war could kick up any day. He's still fighting with his wife. I watched him yell at a letter. She's missed some bills, and his kid got expelled from school. She wants a divorce. I almost feel sorry for him. Pandullo can't get a hold of his wife. He thinks she moved back to New Jersey with her parents, cleaned out their house and turned off her phone, took the kid. He cries at night. I've tried the bible, but the words are hard. I feel stupid and can't get a hold of anyone back home.

Tomás

Linda,

Tata passed (he actually died two weeks ago). Pops wrote that Tata went down looking peaceful. He was always like that. I went for a walk at the bomb dump and cried (don't tell no one). It looks like a cemetery, each blue bomb body like a tombstone. Má still sees the ghosts and has asked Padre Maldonado to come bless the house (he promised to come sometime after the funeral, which probably already happened). I wrote back, telling them not to worry about

me. That I was fine. I feel bad for always lying to them. The phones have been cut off.

Everything over here is flat, no mountains, no trees or even spiky bushes. No wonder the Hajjis are always pissed; they don't have nothing to block the sun or stop the wind. Everything's always in their face. Tent City has gone quiet. Even Country has shut his mouth. There is a deadline. I heard it on the news. I've never thought about the word before. How in this place it means what it means.

Sincerely,

Tomás

P.S. Maybe I should have stayed with Ana, but I didn't.

Linda,

I was rereading Che's diary when Country burst inside the tent and yelled, "Grab your shit and head to The Line. Time to load!"

They bused us to the flightline, the same kind kids ride to school, with the drop-down windows and missing seatbelts. My stomach jumped to my throat and my hands twitched as the bus slipped through the cement barriers. The GBUs had already been delivered. I pushed my toolbox to the flightline and prepped the stations, running through the steps in my head: sensing switch straight, hooks open, ejector feet set, sway arms retracted. Pandullo cranked the jammer and a plume of black smoke stunk up the air, the motor making a wheezing *put put put* sound. The first bomb was off the trailer before I was ready, and I hurried to wire the BFDs and cart the stations. Sweat dripped off my arms and ran down my legs. My hands smelled like metal. I hadn't been sleeping right, my mind all over the place. Country guided the bomb toward the first station. He yelled, "Hurry the fuck up, Cota."

The first bomb didn't go up pretty. Country struggled to lock it in without tangling the arming wire in the hooks. Pandy had come in crooked. We've done this a hundred times, practicing

month after month. Country grunted as I jerked the tail, rolling the 2,000-pound mess into the rack. He locked it in, and I was relieved when I heard the clack of the hooks. I got my rhythm after swaying the first bomb down. Everyone did. The next bomb went up easy, then the one after that easier still, then easier and easier.

I didn't notice the crowd that had gathered to watch. Some bullshit airman like us, pilots and a group of civilians I'd never seen before. After we'd finished, Country took a grease pencil and wrote, "God bless the USA" on the first bomb we loaded. Soon slogans like, *This is for 9/11* and *Fuck Rag Heads, We Will Never Forget* and *Greetings from the USA*, covered the bomb body. Country handed me a grease pencil and told me to put something down. I'd earned it. I found space where the guidance fins bolted to the explosive body. I wrote my name in small letters.

There wasn't a star in the sky—no moon. I'd never seen it like that before, like someone had unplugged outer space. We smoked cigarettes after the launch, my hands shaking. Country looked happy with himself, like if he were to die at that moment it would be fine with him. I thought about his kid, how after getting kicked out of school he wouldn't even have the chance to end up here. Pandullo stayed quiet. We loaded more bombs than any other crew.

Who knows where these bombs are going? The air is hot and I can't breathe right. There is a radio playing the news, and I hear the voice of a woman talking, but no word of bombs or explosions or numbers of people dead (not yet anyways). There is something heavy in her voice, like after tonight the world will be different, worse than before. I've never thought about the job I do—even while here and after all the times loading I've never really given it much thought. But I am now. I'm thinking pretty hard now.

Tomás Cota

Linda,

They called everyone into the hangar hours later, when the last plane got back, the bomb racks clean. The commander spoke. He said things like “target of opportunity” and “high priority objective.” A television had been wheeled in the middle of the hangar. He turned it on, and I watched from behind Pandullo. The TV had a gray sky view of a city block, a crosshair on a stone building that didn't look high priority or like any kind of opportunity I could think of. Just a store in a neighborhood. The hangar was quiet because we knew what was coming. I heard the pilot sucking air through his mask. The crosshair began to shake above the structure, and I wondered what the pilot was thinking. If what he was about to do seemed like a video game.

The bomb looked like the shadow of a diving bird, and after the hit the building ballooned into a cloud of black dust. There was no audio, no ka-boom or sounds of falling rocks. Everyone clapped and cheered, even me. I wanted terrorists, whatever enemy we were fighting, to be in that shop, to make the happy feeling I had easy to like. We were all guilty of wanting to see what a bomb could do.

They showed another, this time a grainy figure running toward the objective, a man not making it inside the small house before impact. They played more, one after the other until I quit counting. How many drops were there? I couldn't really think with all the noise. Only about the man and why he was running to the target instead of away. He never got to see what or who was inside the home. Neither did we.

I thought of the first bomb we loaded, my name somewhere on a tiny twist of metal, proof I am part of this. Evidence that Country, Pandullo, and me are in a war, but the war seems far away watching from a TV screen. In the hangar everyone seems glad it's that way, happy to have no ugly memories so we'll always feel good about bombs and freedom, God blessing America forever.

Country said it wouldn't be long until we head home, a few more days of heavy bombing and the Hajjis would quit, but Country's wrong. The war has just started and Linda, wars don't end so easy. If it were my home being attacked I would never stop fighting. I'd

find Ana and make babies to keep the war going even knowing one day the sky would drop on me, but I'm not on that side. I'm on the side of a country that's more afraid than anything else, and I'll keep loading bombs until its feelings change. I don't expect you to understand this Linda. I've read how scared you really are.

