

Breaking Eyes

by Natasha Whyte

Last night again I dreamt I was at Gagetown. In the training fields below the main street I faced enemy forces alone and naked on my ass in the snow. There was no snow the day it happened but my memories turned to dreams and now the dreams begin to morph to nightmares. The drugs make the long hours here a blur and they seem to slide together like wet silt over slippery layer of silt. When I wake I cannot tell what's imaginary or what a dream looks like or hallucination. Gagetown was just a nightmare this time, it was only a nightmare.

The silent TV mounted in the corner blasts noisy headlines across the screen and assaults those who look at them with nervous stories and wanton bluntness. It's been almost six months since they stopped running the story of Gagetown and since then the snow has started to fall and the leaves have all died and fallen off the tress and the long days of summer have turned to the long nights of winter. Not that it really matters to me what's happening outside, I don't have a window. In the shallow hell of this room I lay with folded sheets folded nicely over my feet and knees.

The space here feels almost like the shacks. There's a stale sense of comfort that gets repeatedly sat upon and squashed by cleanliness as if it were trying to suffocate familiarity and hominess. Plain white — what an atrocious fate, to be trapped in white walled rooms walled white so that imagination gets quelled before it can be sparked. At least I had had company there more than an silent TV even if it was only a loud trio of roommates. When you live with another guy as long as I had lived with Tarly first you started to like him and then you started to hate him and then when you were gone you started to miss hating him. Three years is a long time and six months can feel like longer.

A nurse wanders almost without any purpose into my room to smooth the already smoothed sheets over my feet and stare at the neatly printed chart hanging loosely by a neat steel chain from the

end of my very neat bed. She smiles at my open staring eyes with haphazard lazy kindness. Her name is Gertrude. She starts to whistle randomly as she puts the chart down and checks the beeping machines to make sure their beeping is kept regular and loud. A nervous tic motion of her head to the left and then again to the left assures me she's still human and still alive. Hospitals breed zombie nurses like beer left unattended breeds fruit flies. Not real zombies, zombies of the mind.

She preps a syringe of an experimental nervous system stimulant before injecting it with some practiced professionalism of care into the glucose drip — a man's scream screams down the hallway — Gertrude smiles whitely and neatly at me again before walking out of my neat, white room — a confused flash of the flash of gun fire flashes briefly across my eyes — the TV goes to a commercial break. Why does Coca Cola still need to advertise? - Enemy forces bear down on us, there are five of them. This should be easy for the 27 of us to easily overcome. Crouching in the trench, I stand and turn quickly to fire. Someone collides with me; my green funny hat gets caught on their green canteen. My C-7 assault rifle melts to putty in my limp hands going limper. The pack on my back weighs twice as much in half the time — the white ceiling of this room swirls with anxiety. Every detail of its plainness begs to be real, begs to gain purchase, begs for a place to kick off and become a feature. I can only stare. The ceiling begs harder than I can — I feel the stench of paralysis fill and stretch my skin like a noxious balloon. Training for ruin to training ruined. White hallways, white lights, white dancing lights dance white and light across my unseeing white eyes. I must be blind now.

-*No, just drugged*, I remind myself. The hallucinations are more real, more accurate than before. While the dreams get more nightmarish, the hallucinations get more nostalgic. I prefer the nightmares. No one knows if this treatment will work, but what better patient to treat than a patient lying patiently paralysed?

- "Private!" someone shouts at me. The firing has stopped, the yelling, the fiery yelling has all stopped. All eyes are on me. I can't

move. My track vest is unbuckled by a pair of shaking hands; no one tries to rip it. No one is a hero here. For some reason I feel more still than I thought possible. I can see TNCO Srg. Brown pushing furiously on my chest, my still chest. Blackness creeps into the trench, slithering tender, raw tendrils of dark around my toes, spreading from my combat boots over trousers to bare chest, edging in my vision from the sides. A life-saving mouth closes over mine, breathing life once, twice into my empty lungs. Next, the hospital.

- I remember the first week in the white after the strange simple comfort of the black. The hallucinogenic treatment hadn't started yet, it was only beeping machines and flashing TV screens. A man in a white coat hung his diagnosis around my neck like dog tags, stamped it on my forehead in black ink: "Private Morgan Anderson: quadriplegic."

"This is the beginning of a long struggle for you, son." There was little sadness or remorse in his eyes. They were cold, white, detached from this interaction. A duplex had been made of his body with him emotional and free on one side and a doctor on the other. The struggle of discovering my struggle was no longer his struggle to struggle with.

Struggle; what a fucked up word, I thought with some humour. This was all before the treatment. Once it started, slip turned to slide and blink turned to workout.

The thing I miss most about base is the workouts. Circuit training is hard and strenuous and tedious and long, but at least it was something. Better than the long nothing of these hospital hours I've been struggling with.

Now, it's physio. So far I haven't as much as a wink or a whistle. Every day Dr. Fleming comes with his jokes and his fake smiles.

"Just bat an eyelash for me, kiddo," he says with a wink. I'm not sure that he's said it more than once, if he had said it only the first time I'm sure I would think he had said it every day because it was so awful the first time. Today is the last day I get this shit injected into my waking, shitty nightmare.

"Just bat an eyelash for me, kiddo." I was right, it is every day.

Then, A ROLL OF EYES.

