

An Earnest Prayer

by Paula Sophia

Small arms fire in the distance, flares floating overhead. Shadows dance in the shifty light, growing and shrinking. The swirling mass of darkness creates the photonegative of a black hole, and there I am in the center of it, staring over the sights of my M16A2 rifle doing the best I can to cover my sector of fire. Except the shadows make it seem like a whole army is moving around out there, an army of phantoms. I almost prefer the darkness. Almost.

The convoy's been stopped for almost an hour, an ambush, a platoon of Saddam loyalists. They're putting up a fight. That wasn't supposed to happen, was it? Weren't we supposed to bomb Saddam's bunker, take out the leadership, sweep across the country, greeted by millions of grateful Iraqi's finally freed of oppression?

I'm afraid. We're sitting ducks out here in the open, and if the Iraqi military was even halfway competent, they'd be raining artillery on us, strafing us with aircraft. So, I'm waiting, waiting to see what happens next, waiting for orders, waiting.

Idle time sparks an active mind, and I'm thinking about my last care package, the bag of Hershey's Kisses my wife sent me, each loving chocolate morsel, a kiss from her own lips. I'm thinking about my son, newborn before I left. He's holding his head up, smiling, quite the personality. I'm hoping to be home by the time he learns to walk.

There's a boom in the distance, the whoosh of projectiles streaking across the sky, and I wince. Here it comes, artillery, but it passes overhead, reaches across the distance and explodes near the horizon, an airburst and a bunch of secondary explosions, a rain of bomblets, Improved Conventional Munitions. Our stuff.

I'd hate to be them, but I'm glad it's not me.

The flares sink to the ground, bringing a blanket of darkness, and I look up to the sky. No moon. No stars. I try my NVG's, but there's not enough ambient light for them to work, just the glow of fire in

the distance, a tricky, unsteady source that makes the world look like a flickering green television screen.

It feels like the apocalypse, the stench of oil fires, burning diesel. It could be the sulfur of hell, I don't know. All I know is I want to do something, get up, move, shoot and communicate, but we're under noise and light discipline, each of us guarding our own slice of sand, each of us lying there trying to be a man, ready to fight and die for freedom.

Freedom... for who?

I'm not even free to take a shit.

I'm holding my breath, all tense, my muscles clenched, especially my ass. That's what I have to do, number two, but I'm afraid to move. So I lie here, waiting.

It's quiet now. No gunfire. No explosions. Just the night, the purr of machinery, diesel engines, the industry of war and death, and I'm thinking I could pull back, just for a moment, find that wadi I saw a few meters away when the flares were flying. At least then I'd have a little privacy. Ha, I have to laugh. Here I'm concerned about privacy in the most isolated place I've ever been.

It's like faith. My battle buddy is out there, I know it, but I can't see him, nor can I hear him. I just know he's there, trusting he'll do what he's supposed to do, and he's trusting in me. So, I stay put, sweat beading on my brow.

I wish I was a machine, a rock, a patch of sand, something besides a stupid piece of flesh wrapped in Kevlar, all vulnerable, exposed, subject to biological processes. I contemplate shitting my pants, relieving myself so I can stay focused on my job, my little task, my own personal slice of war. Though I know the backlash of a rash can last for days, I stay in place, holding my position. Waiting...

There's a burp of automatic weapons fire somewhere way out there, the hiss of rockets streaking across the sky. Another round of flares, arcs of smoke, bathing the desert in pallid light, lifeless, like a black and white movie, like a bad dream.

I can't see anything moving in front of me, nothing to the left or right. We're nowhere near the action, so I grunt with satisfaction,

slide out of my position, planning to do my business. In the wadi, I do a little dance, peeling away layers of clothing: my MOPP suit pants, my BDU's, my undies, and I squat, hunched down like a turtle recoiled in its shell with my ass out there, exposed, my own full moon illuminating the night.

I imagine an Iraqi sniper setting his sights on me, grinning at finding me in mid-squat. He's holding his breath, making steady his aim. I can almost feel his finger squeezing the trigger.

And all I can do is pray.
Please God, don't let me die like this.

