

Listen

a monologue

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A man in a suit sits on a plastic chair in a deserted waiting room. He obviously has a military background, but is a shadow of the man he used to be.

Soldier:

Do I look hungover? I feel fucking hungover.

When I was in my 20s I could drink all night and be up in the morning like nothing had happened. Hadn't fucked up my insides at that point. Liver wasn't hammered, kidneys weren't battered. I'm sure it's killing me, slowly pickling everything. But I like a drink...the poor man's holiday. There's nothing in this world like finishing work and heading straight for a pint. The best bit's walking through the door, straight to the bar and ordering the first one. Watching it being poured and knowing that it'll be in your mouth soon.

I always take a second to smell it; cos once that first mouthful's done then the best bit's over. After that first sip it's just finishing it, ordering another and enjoying the slow slide into oblivion.

One of the lads used to say; 'I'm not an alcoholic, I'm a drunk, alcoholics attend meetings'. He said it all the bloody time, so it wasn't funny anymore; but it's one of those little phrases that stuck with me, a little piece of a man I used to know.

The army isn't really a job, it's more than that...it's something that people who've not been part of it don't understand...the people you're with aren't colleagues, they're not workmates, they're not even mates. People say stuff like 'he's married to the army', or 'the army's his family' and they're right. It's something you're part of, probably like the mafia; you're in it and you'll never really leave.

I liked that, I liked the way it was as much a part of me as my right bollock, and something I'd equally not want to be parted from...at least at the time.

But sometimes divorce is unavoidable...sometimes something gets so broken it can't be fixed. Sometimes you have to leave the one you love so you don't end up destroying each other.

There was this Captain I knew who used to say; 'if there's a war on, make sure you're on the same side as the Americans'. Before I went on tour myself I just thought it was him taking the piss, cos everyone knew that the British army was a million times better at what they did than the bloody yanks.

When I first landed in Iraq though, I knew what he meant.

No one on this earth is as good at killing people as the Americans. When one of their platoons rolled into whatever hell-hole we found ourselves, you could literally feel the ground shake. The American military is like trying to squeeze a spot with a baseball bat...they get the job done, but make a hell of a mess doing it.

On my first tour I had the glamorous fucking job of collecting bodies, or sometimes bits of the bodies of the silly fuckers who'd fallen foul of American fire power. Yeah these guys were the enemy, but unlike those mad cunts who blow themselves up, these people were just soldiers; poor bastards

trying to do a job, who'd found themselves on the wrong side in a war they didn't start. We picked them up and bundled them into massive fucking holes in the ground so they didn't rot in the sun and poison the water supply. Seeing your first dead body on a battle field is a big deal, really fucking weird, even when it's an enemy soldier who you don't give two shits about.

Mostly they're in one piece; just shot. It's messy but sort of manageable, like they're still a person with all the parts you'd expect to see. But sometimes they're not, sometimes they've been blown up or hit by a mortar or something...then you've got to hunt for the bits. Put together the jigsaw puzzle. You and a mate out there trying to locate all the arms, legs, guts and whatever else has been splattered across the desert, to assemble this flat-pack human body. Build your own Frankenstein's fucking monster.

The worst bit's the smell. Death stinks. If they've been dead a while then the hum of dried blood is everywhere...like wandering through an abattoir. If they've just been hit then it's the smell of charred flesh...uncannily like your Sunday roast.

You get used to it quickly though, I'm ashamed to say. Some fucking rag head has been blown to shit, so fucking what? You know deep down that he's probably got a wife and kids and stuff waiting for him, but you can't care...it's not possible to care cos he represents the reason why you're there in the first place. He is serving a regime that's a problem and you're there to fix it. And people die every day. Innocent people who aren't part of any army...old ladies get stabbed by muggers, fathers get electrocuted in their sheds, kids get hit by fucking drunk drivers. None of that's fair, none of that should happen, it all ruins lives and makes people sad. At least when someone's in the army people won't be so surprised. It's a dangerous job, people die doing it; you know the risks when you sign up...

But getting used to something isn't the same as be ok with it. I don't care what anyone says, but no one gets used to death; doctors, paramedics, fucking funeral directors. No one isn't bothered by it. Cos avoiding death is the most basic thing humans do. Survival, living as long as you can, doing all that shit you promised yourself you'd do; loving someone, breeding...it's all programmed in and you've got to stay alive to get it done. Seeing someone who's failed to do that, someone who's had that cut short is never ok...you just pretend it is.

The other thing that no one ever talks about is being fucking terrified. They trained us well I'll give them that. We spent months doing exercises and pretending in the cold and wet of fucking Wales... but no one in Wales is generally trying to shoot you...not really...and you can pretend all you like that it's the same and they can be as harsh as they want with you, but you know when it comes to it that they're not gonna kill you. When you fail or decide you've had enough you might get called a pussy, you might even get fucking court marshalled and discharged, but no one will pull out a gun and shoot you in the face; no one will stick you in an orange jump suit, put you in front of a camera and saw your fucking head off. That just won't happen. Which is why when you land there, get suited up, and for the first time go out on a patrol, you're shitting it. Not because you don't know what to do, not because you don't trust the people you're with, not even because you're forced to use crap equipment; you're shitting yourself because suddenly it's real, suddenly the kid gloves are off, the rounds are live and the people that want you dead are on the loose. And anyone who doesn't find that scary is a fucking idiot.