

LIONS FOR LAMBS

BY MATTHEW CARNAHAN

There are lone figures armed only with ideas, sometimes with just one idea, who blast away whole epochs in which we are enwrapped like mummies. Some are powerful enough to resurrect the dead. Some steal on us unawares and put a spell over us which it takes centuries to throw off. Some put a curse on us, for our stupidity and inertia, and then it seems as if God himself were unable to lift it.

-Henry Miller

INT. ARMY COMMAND TENT, BAGRAM AIR BASE, AFGHANISTAN - NIGHT

Taj Mahal-sized. Buffeted by foreign winds on all four sides. Special Forces Soldiers of the 75th Ranger Regiment assembled, sitting, waiting. One dozen eat coffee grounds straight from camouflage packs. Another dozen pop *Ripped Fuel* capsules. Pre-game. Most shiver, unable to master the daily fifty-degree flux. Exhales steam.

A WIRY-PINK bespectacled Captain stands at the front, near a battered podium. Lingered over maps and last-minute whispers from his Aides de Camp, moments from a full-volume briefing.

Wiry Pink focuses on a blown-up graphic containing three Maps of Afghanistan, different months written beneath each: *January, February, March*. On each successive map: a greater number of tiny, red-flame graphics stuck about scattershot. Escalating violence in Afghanistan over time.

Wiry-Pink flexes his jaw.

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - MORNING

JASPER IRVING: fly-weight African-American Congressmen in tailored *Boss*. Everything trim-clean-straight. Sitting at an expanse of polished, federalist-era oak. Silver and leather accents abound. A flat screen television powered on, muted, split-screen: 24 hour news channels duel on either side. A personal wall of fame erected behind him: West Point graduation photos, Military citations, advanced degrees, pictures with notables, framed favorable Media coverage.

Stacks of newspapers, magazines, and daily talking-point-type e-mail newsletters arranged obsessive-compulsively on his desk. Taking in a series of graphs from a copy of the New York Times: Graphs broken out by Month: *January, February, March*.

The things being measured over that time: Presidential Approval, Confidence in the G.O.P., Confidence in Winning the War on Terror. Every curve/percentage falling lower in each successive month.

Irving folds the paper in-half as hard as he can without shredding it.

INT. FACELESS OFFICE - TIME UNKNOWN

Solitary figure sitting at a pressboard desk. No windows. 'Professorial' detritus behind him: stacks of papers, stacks of testing blue-books, cheap black filing cabinets, USC football programs from 1979 to present side-by-side with Political Science treatises and tomes, yellowed degrees and citations on the wall behind. The name on those degrees and citations: DR. STEPHEN MALLEY. Malley: a shock of silver hair, a perpetual sunburn, the build of a Hiker who was once a runner when his knees were younger.

Malley reading a stuffed black binder. Open to an attendance record for one of the classes he teaches. Hones in on a specific name: TODD HAYES. The attendance list broken out by month: January, February, March. Todd's attendance: perfect in January, spotty in February, non-existent in March.

Dr. Malley slowly, barely shakes his head.

INT. ARMY COMMAND TENT - NIGHT

Wiry Pink steps to the podium now. Instant hush. Someone hands him a laser-pointer. Theatrical pause before his first words:

WIRY-PINK

We need to change shit. Starting tonight.

(beat)

Lt. Arian Thrush and his boys?

ARIAN THRUSH: an African-American Lieutenant, Platoon Leader, built, sitting.

ARIAN

All present, willing, and able Sir.

WIRY-PINK

(tiny chuckle)

Every time I say that damn name I see a little goose-stepping bird machine-gunning a Robins' nest.

(tent-wide chuckles, beat)

(MORE)

WIRY-PINK (cont'd)
And Lt. Ernie Rodriguez's Crew? You
all here?

ERNEST RODRIGUEZ: Mexican-American Lieutenant, Leader of
another Platoon, just as built, sitting right next to Arian
Thrush, shoulder-touch proximity.

ERNEST
(quieter)
Hoo-ah. Ditto, Sir.

As Wiry-Pink progresses through his briefing, he will
punctuate his words with laser-pointer mad-dashes and circles
on the multiple maps flanking him.

WIRY-PINK
Ask questions and take notes.
(beat)
Good News: we got Taliban and Qaeda
forces whittled down into starving,
scattered wolf-packs.
(beat)
Bad News: we haven't been able to
step on their fuckin' throats once
and for all. And the longer we
can't, the longer we violate
Napoleon's rule: never fight the
same enemy too long or he learns
your tricks. And I'll be damned if
Tali and Qaeda haven't been taking
pointers from all their punishment.
(beat, swings to the maps)
Case-in-point: Intel says the
little wolf-packs are rallying
bigger numbers in order to open new
fronts in Badakhshan Province. Dig
back into the Hindu Kush mountain
range again -- but lots deeper and
smarter than they did in '01-'02 --
force the Air Force to get their
bombers back up, force us on the
ground to spread out our bullets.

ERNEST
Badakhshan is Northern Alliance
territory.

WIRY-PINK
It could be the Northern Alliance
county seat, but so what? The best
N.A. Commanders and Fighters never
left Kabul when we took it in '02.

ARIAN

Why's the Enemy doing this now?

WIRY-PINK

With all the hiding and dying they been doing over the past four years, even the Arab World is starting to sniff that Tali and Qaeda in Afghanistan are mostly non-factors outside a' the occasional murder-maim spree. They're trying to change that perception by acting like a legit Fighting Force again.

ERNEST

You said 'rally bigger numbers,' Sir -- where are they getting more Men?

WIRY-PINK

One: doubling-up on recruiting, i.e. forcing more Afghan families to give up a Son or they murder that Son in front of those families. Two: Iraq. As that hole rips itself wider, Qaeda is able to rotate more blood-stained Arabs out, to come put a charge into the Born-to-Lose types here.

ARIAN

But rotate them through where?

WIRY-PINK

(laser dot on Iran)

Intel says Iran is turning a blind-eye to Sunni and Wahhabi dipshits hiking through: because more trigger-hard Sunnis and Wahhabis leaving Iraq means fewer Brother Shi'ites blown-up in Iraq, and more Soldiers of the Great Satan killed in Afghanistan. That might be the first 'win-win' Iran has had since it was called Persia.

(big beat, finality)

This fight is at our feet. And we're gonna counter-punch before Tali and Qaeda can muster those numbers, buy the necessary shovels and fuckin' climbing equipment.

(more chuckles)

(MORE)

WIRY-PINK (cont'd)

You all will Helo to Badakhshan,
establish a Forward Operating Point
on Pamela Left: a 9,600-foot peak
with a ridge that makes for a
perfect LZ, and sight-lines into
the surrounding 100 miles.

(beat)

If and when these Rat-Fucks start
moving like Men again, we'll
already be above 'em. Dress warm.

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - MORNING

JANINE JACKSON steps into Congressman Irving's office.

Jackson: a pear-shaped white Reporter for the *American News Network* in wrinkled *Lane Bryant*.

Jackson struggles with her bag, her water-bottle, her weight.
A voice like thumbtacks. Some obvious ice between them:
circumspect looks while the other's eyes are elsewhere.

JASPER IRVING

Morning, Janine.

JANINE JACKSON

The only good thing about Morning
is it ends at noon.

(pauses from her bustling,
takes in Irving's grin)

Am I gonna be murdered?

JASPER IRVING

(beat)

Come again?

JANINE JACKSON

The old Mob gem: the one who smiles
is your assassin...add to that what
we've been reporting recently...add
to that you called me to schedule
time...

JASPER IRVING

(beat)

You all were the first to call me
the Future of my Party. This is
just me returning that favor.

JANINE JACKSON

Considering the state of your
Party, how do you know that tag
wasn't pejorative?

JASPER IRVING

(beat)

Because I got 77% of the vote.

JANINE JACKSON

Cocky.

JASPER IRVING

It's called 'charm' in my district.

JANINE JACKSON

Like the shuttered factories are called 'brown-fields' in your district?

JASPER IRVING

(beat, tweaked)

Yeah -- we got lots a' local flavor...

Big beat as each continues sizing the other. Janine: establishing herself on someone else's turf without hopelessly pissing that person off. Irving: stanching a months-old anger in order to begin turning the tide at home.

Janine points to his stack of bad news on his good desk:

JANINE JACKSON

You obviously know I'm doing a where-are-we-now piece on Afghanistan.

JASPER IRVING

And I want to have a say in what you write. We're launching a large operation, our first 'tactical shift' in a while, and I think it's going to put us over the hump.

(beat)

And this is my effort to keep the press better informed so you all don't continue hypothesizing -- *assuming-*

JANINE JACKSON

-and you know what they say when you 'assume' -

JASPER IRVING

-you make an ASS out of U and ME.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

How much time we got together?
Because I've got a lot of questions
I could ask...

JASPER IRVING

The whole hour.

JANINE JACKSON

(looks down at her watch,
half-amazed now)

Wow. You all must be panicked.

JASPER IRVING

(beat)

We all are well past 'panicked.'

EXT. USC - EARLY MORNING

Academia brick, limestone, manicured green. Deserted paths.
The only person in-frame: a 19 year-old boy pedalling an
abused Beach Cruiser. Rhythmic racket.

Eyes still puffed with recent sleep. Dig his uniform:
Hawaiian-print short-sleeves, artfully frayed khakis,
assiduously cheap plastic flip-flops. Balances a to-go tray
of two Starbuck's cups on the handlebars. Everything studied
indifference.

INT. CAMPUS OFFICE BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Kid knocking on the door to Office #305. From the other side:

DR. MALLEY (O.C.)

Yup.

INT. OFFICE #305 - NEXT MOMENT

Kid steps in the windowless office we saw earlier. Clears a
chair. Pure Orange County smile-nod. That smile is our first
glimpse under an otherwise cookie-cut college facade. Nearly
drops the coffees -- hints of nerves.

KID

Closed?

DR. MALLEY

What's your guess, Todd?

This is Todd Hayes from the black binder, the gradual Truant. Todd shuts the door, makes a show of bolting both locks. Then sits quietly across the pressboard expanse from Dr. Malley. Obvious affinity between these two: think Uncle-Nephew. Malley lets the quiet stagnate, forcing Todd to take the lead.

Todd peers into the sip-hole of the first cup, then the second. Hands over the second.

TODD

Isn't it unethical making me bring you coffee?

DR. MALLEY

No more so than making me look at that shirt.

TODD

(happy things are light)
This is a genuine Reyn Spooner,
Doc: \$89.99.

DR. MALLEY

Oh. Then I take it all back.

Malley sips. Todd smiles.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Why'd I ask you to show this early?
(raises cup, mock toast)
With a gift?

Smile recedes a bit -- still cool -- small mea culpa shrug:

TODD

My Sporadic Absences.

DR. MALLEY

Sounds like the title of the book about your semester so far.

Waiting for Malley to smile, acknowledge his little zinger. Smile doesn't come.

TODD

I've just...never, ever been this busy in my life...

DR. MALLEY

What with?

TODD
Well...all my other classes-

DR. MALLEY
-this is your Major.

TODD
(beat)
And there's a...Young Lady-

DR. MALLEY
-same one you jockey to sit next to
when you do show-up to my class?

TODD
(beat)
No...

DR. MALLEY
Huh. So when's the wedding?

TODD
(beat)
There isn't one.

DR. MALLEY
What else is *keeping you busy*?

TODD
(beat)
I'm Vice President of the
Fraternity. You were in a
House...you gotta remember how busy
it can get-

DR. MALLEY
-I do. What with all the four day
weekends and thirty-minute study
hours.

TODD
That's not what I mean-

DR. MALLEY
-you asked what I remembered...
(beat)
Todd, in two or three years -- and
I promise you this -- you'll see
that Fraternities are mostly all
the same. At the end of the day
just different letters nailed to
different decaying homes.
(beat)
(MORE)

DR. MALLEY (cont'd)

We listen to Reggae, we wear cowboy boots, we're the hair-gel pixies who do a little coke and start fights. But that's mostly it by way of variation.

Todd's smile gone now. Nerves gone too, replaced with a fledgling frustration -- Malley's honest, un-PC punches are both unexpected and harder to side-step than he would've guessed.

TODD

That's totally stereotypical-

DR. MALLEY

-stereotypes aren't conjured.

TODD

(beat)

You don't think school should be as Social as it is Academic? Kind of like getting two educations-

DR. MALLEY

-no. I think that's what Turds with 2.4's tell themselves to justify \$30,000 per year for all those C's.

Malley's counter-punches land even squarer. Todd pauses, forces out one more Hail Mary to get the mood back to 'light,' 'avuncular.' A playfully chastising tone:

TODD

What would your Frat Brothers say right now, Doc?

DR. MALLEY

If they heard you say 'Frat' they'd clench their fists and ask you if you call your a 'Country a Cunt...' Then they'd turn to me with something like: 'Bro, this job at my Father-in-law's electrical supply company is killing me. Think you could hook me up with something at School?'

Todd readjusts in his seat without realizing it. Malley opens that stuffed black binder we saw earlier: attendance records.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

You been to 9 classes this semester.

(MORE)

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

That would be a hall-of-fame run if
we only met once a week...

Todd, without counter-points, migrates from 'fledgling
frustration' to the last refuge of the guilty: do whatever
you can to make it harder for your accuser. Tone calcifies:

TODD

Is attendance part of my grade all
the sudden?

Malley lifts his eyes...taking in Todd's change. Another long
silence as Malley searches his student's face, weighing
something carefully. The lack of a timely response, and the
unblinking stare signal Todd that this meeting just went to a
more difficult place.

Malley flips the notebook to a *different section*, uncorks a
red pen. Quieter:

DR. MALLEY

Would you take a solid B for the
semester? No plus, no minus.

(big beat, no answer)

Todd, could you live with a solid B
if I gave it to you right here,
right now. And this is far from a
joke or a bluff...

TODD

(disbelief)

But for what?

DR. MALLEY

For not coming to another class
this semester.

(beat)

For neither writing nor reading
another word I assign. For not
signing up for any more of my
classes the rest of your time here.

And it feels like when Todd's favorite uncle slapped him that
time. Same shatter-swell. His mind's first discernible
reaction: if that's how you want to treat me...

TODD

(small sneer)

Half the class would kill for that
deal-

DR. MALLEY

-four-fifths at least...but I'm not
meeting with any of them.

Todd searches Malley's face now, hard to recognize: the placid, easy-going manner replaced with something more intense, a different shade of red in the face, a forward lean in his seat that closes the distance between their faces.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Or there's another deal.

(beat)

Two parts, both non-negotiable.

First, you show up every day from here on out. Second: you sit here for the next hour and let me tell you about the last two Students I had that gave me some hope.

(beat)

It might explain why I called you here this morning, why I'm turning the screws on you like this...

Todd distant: hoping eyes re-absorb tears that just budded unexpectedly -- the parts of himself he hates. No response.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

(beat)

Both graduated the year before you started-

TODD

(eyes still down)

-I haven't nodded yet...

And Malley stops dead. Sits back, cedes Todd the floor. Malley's face now: someone waiting for test results. Todd keeps his eyes down, makes a show of looking at his watch...

Then turns the bezel to measure one hour's time.

TODD (CONT'D)

(beat)

What were their names?

Malley smiles small.

EXT. CH-47 CHINOOK HELICOPTER - NIGHT

Ear-splitting. Twin-rotor Vietnam-era rattle-trap above a half moon-lit expanse of snow caps.

INT. CH-47 CHINOOK HELICOPTER - SAME MOMENT

Arian and Ernest sit across from one another, at the back, closest to the door because Lieutenants lead: always first out. A 'Chalk' of 32 Rangers total. Full battle-regalia.

Bored. Cold. Exhales plume. Arian holds his hands out in front, elbows on knees, palms pressed together: prayer?

Ernest twitches small-sudden: trying to pop Arian's hands. Not prayer -- schoolyard past-time. Arian moves them apart, one up one down, fast as he can but still gets smacked. Again. Frustration on his brow.

Next round -- winner's rule -- still Ernest's turn to swing. Ernest cracks knuckles as he looks away, smiles, picking his spot, reveling. Chinook shimmies with turbulence: Arian seizes the seat netting with petrified claws, per usual, a scared hissing sound -- just as Ernest swings, missing Arian's hands completely this time...

ARIAN

(amazed at his good
fortune, taunts:)

Now what?

ERNEST

(laughing)

God's mercy is 'what.' You more
afraid a' clouds than bullets.

ARIAN

Because I'd rather take a bullet
than a fall. Now get your little
carnival hands up-

-Chinook banks hard right.

Faces change. Game done. Both look out the same window behind Ernest's head now as they feel the turn: initial full-speed pass to make sure the landing zone is as clear as reported.

The view outside: well above the vegetation-line if any actually grew in this place. The snow glows from hoarding ambient moon light. Landing Zone: wide, flat ridge patched with building-sized drifts, bare spots of igneous that look like black holes in contrast. Odd, abandoned Soviet-era war junk: tanks, trucks, and tents scattered even this high.

Anything man-made catches Ernest's eye -- especially as the big Helicopter starts to slow: final approach.

He locks-on to something, points to the ridge they're descending to, taps the CHOPPER CREW CHIEF sitting next to him: beer gut, bushy mustache because the guy he admired in high school had one, thick G.I. glasses, thinning hair hard-parted.

ERNEST

That's old AA right there -- looks unmanned...

Crew Chief immediately into his headset:

CHIEF

Anti-Aircraft gun on the ridge...

Soldiers' ears down the line perk. None of them turn their heads to look: don't be a pussy. Chief pressing on his earpieces: getting a response. Back to Arian and Ernest:

CHIEF

All good. Predators took pictures last night: rusty 23MM with spiked barrels. Good lookin' out though.

Breaths come easier for everyone, save Arian. Ernest senses it:

ERNEST

(to Arian)

Dude: Rusted. Spiked.

ARIAN

Spiked by who?

ERNEST

Who gives a shit?

A red-light adjacent to the rear door pops on. Chief straps himself into a safety harness directly behind a mounted 20MM 'mini-gun,' facing out: giant firepower to cover exiting troops if need be. Engages the hydraulic pump that opens the big rear door. Arian and Ernest to their men, yelling over the din of the rotors, the hydraulics, the open-air:

ERNEST AND ARIAN

EYES-UP!

See night and ridge beyond. 50 feet and dropping. Tough-guy yawns forced as the men ramp up. Re-check equipment. Arian up with binoculars now: shaking image -- but even then he can see the 23MM barrels blown wide at the muzzles. Ernest still riding his unease:

ERNEST (O.C.)

What?

ARIAN

(binoculars down)

Captain says they're learning --
maybe they learned an old, spiked
AA gun could make for a really nice
lure...

ERNEST

Only you think of shit like that.
The Captain meant they're finally
learning to walk and talk at the
same time.

(pointing in the direction
of the Gun)

That shit would be like sprinting
and singing.

Arian's P.O.V.: binoculars back up, scanning, no movement.

CHIEF (O.C.)

Sir, I see this kinda' junk from
the air all the time. Always old
and Russian, always in weird-ass
spots. That's why we call this
place Trash-ganista-

- 'pop' sound. Something covers the binocular lenses. Arian
takes them away from his face, half-puzzled, half-afraid-

- then the Chief's right half explodes full-fledged red. Pop
sound magnified. A shocked second lurches: then we actually
hear the bass-beats of machine guns somewhere below,
shredding Chief and Chopper. Arian's thought: a well-laid
trap just snapped shut...

Things mix, blur, come apart unfamiliar. Minds make peace
with Death close enough to touch by dumping chemicals that
change colors-smells-tastes. Analytical parts blink it back
if your blessed with bravery, accelerate ahead of things.
World turns true-blue-fast-

-RPG spears through the skin of the Chinook, across the
interior, rocket-exhaust blinding those nearest the impact,
punches straight out the other side without detonating:
shoddy Soviet build/Oaeda up-keep saves lives. Arian swings
his head: watch it wobble into night. A Soldier seated next
to the Blind Screamer, sticks his rifle muzzle out of the
new hole, empties his clip at the world, several of his
shells clip-spark off the ends of the spinning rotors.

Ernest tries to stand, odd-calm, thrown into the opposite bulkhead immediately. Holes pock fuselage in end-to-end sweeps. Red mist detonates in violent puffs. Trapped in a Coffee can hit with a shotgun.

Arian with the binoculars up to his eyes again, foot bracing against the fuselage, scanning the horizon: can't make out so much as a muzzle-flash from the ridge-

-Chinook goes rattle-spastic-shudder. A mechanical high-pitch whine on the heels of the shudder: the sounds of engineering and metallurgy failing in earnest. Whine louder than the screams of the two platoons now: a collection of wide-open mouths framed by bruise-purple faces, drowning in War roar.

A Sergeant sitting next to Arian gouts blood from a line of wounds that explode his lap. Both stare down vacant like they're behind safety glass. Arian takes the man's fingers, sticks them into his wounds so it will take six minutes to bleed-out instead of two.

The Chinook's organs begin rupturing: oil-water-hydraulic fluid spray the interior. Burn screams double the human volume, becoming barely audible now underneath the Mechanical treble.

Ernest up again, centers himself over the Chief, then just sits down hard on dead bulk. Splash sound. Rips the bloody headset off the Chief's pate, mic up to his mouth:

ERNEST

-TURN ASS TOWARD IT-

-on command the Chinook rips left, exposing it's tail/mini-gun to enemy ground-fire. Too hard to the left: just a glimpse of the landing zone where we think the Fire is emanating, but still haven't seen a single enemy or flash.

Ernest still lets loose a burst on principle.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

TRIM BACK-

-coming back right. LZ centered now. Ernest desperate now for something to aim back at: gunfire dies. Silent. They've indeed been learning: know this helicopter, where the big gun is, when to go mum. Ernest just opens indiscriminate in back-forth sweeps. Horizon churns: ten 20MM rounds per second. Tracers like supersonic arrows. The electric backwash lights the inside of the dying Chinook drug-den orange.

The Chinook's primary avionics fail with a thud/air pocket-style drop.

The nose pops up of it's own volition as power in the rear rotor slips. Too sudden. And before his next breath, Ernest Rodriguez and the dead Chief, both oil-blood-hydraulic fluid soaked, slide out the open rear.

Almost gently.

The dead Chief snaps at the end of his safety-tether. Ernest never buckled-in. An unknown fall to the ridge below. Return to the empty spot where Ernest just was, the blood-oil-slick handles of the gun he was just firing. Arian's eyes: horrified-wide. A blink to register that reality...then a soul-gassed wail aimed up at the pilots:

ARIAN
LAND-LAND-LAND-

-move with his words toward the cockpit. No chance: dissolve into the now 20+ other fight-or-flight 'GO-GO-GOs.' Pilots engaging every redundant system they're blessed with, right the nose, begin to turn away from the enemy, desperate for lower ground, to save the Chinook and what's left of the Ranger platoons.

Arian feels the rational retreat. Meets eyes with the death-pale Sergeant plugging wounds with his fingers, blood soaked up to the forearms...and then Arian stands, turns around, and awkwardly steps out the rear of the Helicopter like he's descending the first rung of a ladder.

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - MORNING

Bright sun bathes the office now, refracting off silver, crystal, and oak. Janine scribbling furiously on a steno-pad as Irving speaks as though he's dictating -- eyes intently focused on Janine's scribbles.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
We are moving the Soldier's eye
forward again. That could be your
lead-in if you ask me: pithy,
direct, forceful.

JANINE JACKSON
Why now?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
(beat)
I'm going to be honest with you.
(beat)
Because our drones and satellites
aren't as omniscient as they've
been marketed to be.

JANINE JACKSON

Certainly haven't caught or killed anybody worth the ink lately.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Hence this tactical shift.
Specifically: establish Forward Operating Points on the high-ground all over Afghanistan, from which points we'll observe, attack, preside. It's why the Romans built forts: if you don't establish a constant presence, you're going to have constant violence-

JANINE JACKSON

(excitedly)

-wait: so we're moving-in? Like the Romans -- we're there for good?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

I said 'constant,' not 'permanent.'
(beat)

And even more reason to move quickly with this tactical shift: Intel says this is exactly what the Enemy is trying to do too -- re-seize high-ground, make us start bombing again. That would inherently look like backward steps -- 2001 and 2002 all over again. The World will see it as: America has two real fights on her hands now.

JANINE JACKSON

But didn't we break the Taliban's back with air power in '01 and '02?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Well, people with broken backs can still crawl. And also, we have to assume they learned a few lessons from the back-breaking.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

Examples of which are...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Off-the-record.

(Janine sets her pad down)

(MORE)

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (cont'd)
 Maybe they've woken-up to the fact we're fighting on two fronts, and history always seems to punish that kind of hubris. Might have learned if they dig-in deep enough, over a wide-enough area -- i.e. evolving from 'caves' to 'tunnel complexes,' air power alone can't destroy them. And we would not only have to shift forces already in Afghanistan, but maybe even start shifting troops away from Iraq.

JANINE JACKSON
 That would be a huge headline-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
 -that would then force a very public decision from us on whether or not to open a Third Front: Iran.

JANINE JACKSON
 (baffled)
What?
 (beat)
What are they doing?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
 Outside of building nuclear weapons and telling Israel they don't know what a real holocaust looks like?
 (beat, no response)
 Letting Wahhabi and Sunni insurgents hike from Iraq to Afghanistan using the most direct route...

JANINE JACKSON
 (amazed)
The country-side of Iran.
 (beat)
 My God -- is this confirmed?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
 By their denials. But not formally -
 - CIA is on it.

JANINE JACKSON
Can I print this Iran part?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
 (beat)
 Just that part. Yeah.
 (MORE)

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (cont'd)
The American public needs to be reminded who their enemies are.

JANINE JACKSON
(big beat)
You're being honest with me, so let me return the favor: that wouldn't be the thrust of my article at all.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
(beat, fighting a scowl)
What else could the thrust be?

JANINE JACKSON
1300 years of bloody murder between Shi'ites and Sunnis getting back-burnered so they can fight and kill American Soldiers more effectively.
That our involvement in the region looks to be uniting radical extremes that have been butchering each other five times longer than we've been a nation...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
(beat, keep it together)
You are the only one I'm sitting down with...

JANINE JACKSON
(beat, okay...)
Because we're the biggest.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
But not the best.

JANINE JACKSON
Subjective.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
(beat)
You're the only one to whom I'm giving this level of detail.

JANINE JACKSON
'Off-the-record.'

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
To illustrate to you the type and level of threat so you will correctly report the type and level of response.

JANINE JACKSON

And I might say 'correctly' is code for 'slanted.'

Long, anticipatory silence...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

You really think your audience cares more about the history of rival Muslims sects murdering each other, than they do about who wants to kill Americans here and now?

JANINE JACKSON

I think-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-I mean I'm *assuming* -- and you know what happens when you assume -- you all could fit either sound-byte in-between those round-the-clock 'Land of the Free, Home of the Obese' exposes, and all that hard-hitting Entertainment Coverage you pump now: 'we got pictures of Baby Tom-Kat soloing the Atlantic!'

(beat)

Janine, how dusty are all your Desert Storm Pulitzers by now?

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, tweaked herself)

When does this 'tactical shift' start?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

15 minutes ago.

INT. OFFICE #305 - SAME MOMENT

A clean hand picking up a coffee cup. Malley taking a sip, looking at Todd, smiling again.

TODD

And you taught both these guys, all four of their years?

DR. MALLEY

I did.

TODD

Kind of like with me.

DR. MALLEY
Kind of like with you.

DR. MALLEY
(beat, can't help it)
Like Master-Race 'Aryan'?

Malley nods 'yes.'

DR. MALLEY
Spells it with an 'i' instead of a
'y' -- but yeah.

TODD (CONT'D)
(beat, smile gets bigger)
If you look up 'Irony'...
(no reaction from Malley)
I mean, a guy named 'Arian' can
only be...

DR. MALLEY
...what's that?

TODD
African-American.

DR. MALLEY
Can 'Ernest Rodriguez' only be
Mexican-American?

TODD
(takes Malley's charge)
This part a' the country? Probably.

DR. MALLEY
He's mostly Navajo.
(beat)
So stay focused on the 'American'
parts...

Conversation hits a lull. Malley takes a long pull of coffee to keep his mouth occupied -- flat-out hesitant now. Nowhere near as confident as he was breaking Todd down. Gathering up all he wants to say before he says a word, mulling how to do it in the most effective way -- getting ready to tell Todd things that aren't easy to swallow.

We sense real risks involved with what Malley is about to dive into, risks even in choosing what words and inflections to use. Quieter:

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

26 years back I had daydreams about what this job was gonna be.

(beat)

I'd publish theories that would change all the thousands who read them. Every four years my shine would attract all the Moths trying to be President -- offering up spots in their soon-to-be administrations. I'd always refuse: 'Our Young need me more, Sir.'

(Todd and Malley share a chuckle)

The University Fathers would be so taken with my commitment they'd bestow season tickets on the fifty.

TODD

Elaborate daydreams.

(beat)

So what, 2 out of 3?

DR. MALLEY

Minus 2.

(beat)

Papers I do get published don't get read much. Not even a student council candidate has asked for my advice. And the School still spells my name wrong on memos and mail.

TODD

You're still here for the Money.

Malley laughs out loud.

DR. MALLEY

God no.

(beat)

I'm still here, Todd, because I'm a selfish old man.

(leans forward again)

Selfish for the very, very rare times you know you have someone in one of your classes with big gifts to do things on a big scale.

(beat)

I'm selfish to be that close to maybe-Greats.

(MORE)

DR. MALLEY (cont'd)

Because my gifts aren't my theories
or my God damned 'shine'...but the
ability to see great potential in
others...and maybe give them a
shove when they need it.

(beat)

That's why I've been here 26 years,
even though those years don't like
a thing like I once thought.

Todd's breath catches. Long silence.

Then a question, all the possible answers to which scare him:

TODD

You think I'm one of those people?

DR. MALLEY

I don't know yet.

(beat)

But this meeting, this 'solid B'
deal...it's all definitely a shove.

(beat)

I can't make peace with just
glimpses -- told you I'm selfish --
so much so I'd rather not see
'glimpses' at all -- ignorance is
easier than knowing something
exists, and is being wasted...you
know what I mean?

Todd doesn't answer, just sits quiet, still. Then:

TODD

So...Ernest and Arian were able to
show you that they were 'rare'
everyday?

DR. MALLEY

No. Just enough to erase doubt.

TODD

How?

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - NIGHT

Guttural mix of Pashtu and Arabic, spoken 40 yards down-range
-- several different voices, no visible faces. A nervous,
forced laugh reverbs: unsure taunt.

Closer moans. Pull back: Ernest. Landed on one of the patches
of exposed rock. Left leg folded underneath him, destroyed in
the fall. Left side of his face blood-pulp.

His only weapon: a 9MM side-arm already gripped tight in his serviceable right hand. Tears in his good eye.

Heedless of any enemies within earshot:

ERNEST

Why would you do that?

15 yards right: Arian. Buried to his waist in snow from the 40 foot plummet. Torn/pulled muscles everywhere from the impact. Cement-tight. Pain catches fire as he starts trying to dig himself out -- scanning for hostile movement at the same time. His weapons: his own 9MM side-arm and a M-4A1 rifle that was slung across his chest when he jumped. The strap/buckle attached to the gun exploded on impact: neck sanded from friction burn, bleeding from buckle fragments.

Providence 20 yards ahead: an unevenly high, wind-swept berm of ice and snow 70 yards long, separating them from the enemy. A curse 20 yards behind: 2,000-foot sheer drop separating them from an escape.

ARIAN

(forced whisper)

You're echoing.

ERNEST

So are they-

ARIAN

-they can move.

Arian's wide eyes. Tearing from cold. Afraid to stop scanning the berm for the inevitable rush. Reminds himself to stop holding his breath. After five breaths he looks to his friend, let's his eyes focus. 'Worried' is too weak a word: takes in Ernest's left leg folded underneath him, takes in his whole left side, bashed and bleeding.

Arian tries to engage his mind, slow the 150 beats per minute, stanch chattering teeth. Finger tips numb.

Twenty seconds.

Thirty.

Another forced whisper:

ARIAN

Show me the leg...don't black out...

Raises his M-4 to his shoulder, fumble-flips a lever on the side of the pistol-grip: single-shot firing mode. Aims at the top-edge of the berm, shaking.

Ernest: gulping breaths in anticipation of white hot pain.

ERNEST

Don't waste the rounds. Let 'em hear me-

ARIAN

-they'll come like wolves then.

Ernest hesitates, swipes tears, bunches a handful of his own collar -- enough oil-blood stained fabric he can bite down on without breaking teeth...

...then Arian's M-4 starts firing. Big light and sound that stabs black night. Ernest rolls off his leg as Arian fires: bullets popping the top of the berm, then each end of the berm. Implied to the Enemy: *I can cover my front and flanks.*

And Ernest's self-muffled screams roil under M-4 echoes.

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - DAY

Tension. Janine scribbling more notes...

JANINE JACKSON

Forward...Operating...Points. Can I say F.O.P.s for short?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Yes.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

Instead of F.O.P.s...could I call them Bait? Our viewers would get it and the Pentagon wouldn't have to log another acronym.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(beat, count to five)

It's not like we're putting one or two guys on a mountain top, Janine. These are full teams-

JANINE JACKSON

-how big is a 'full team?'

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Two platoons: 32 men. And that's just initially.

JANINE JACKSON

Still sounds small.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

That's kind of the point.

(beat)

When Insurgents see large numbers, they hide. They see small numbers, they engage. We want them to engage, to fight, so we'll oblige with small but absolutely lethal Forward Operating Points.

JANINE JACKSON

And new versions of old songs are never better, Congressman.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(beat)

What?

JANINE JACKSON

General Westmoreland circa 1968: 'I can't get the V.C. to engage in big fights so I'll send out smaller and smaller numbers until they can't resist ambushing us -- at least then we'll be fighting.'

(beat)

58,000 names say that particular 'tactical shift' didn't work so hot-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-different military. Different doctrine.

JANINE JACKSON

I don't think so. Not on either count-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-Soldier Specialists who can inflict pinpoint damage with the same B-52s we once used to just carpet-bomb jungle. Soldier Specialists who can utilize our technological superiority-

JANINE JACKSON

-like the drones and satellites
that prompted 'moving the human eye
forward again' in the first place?

Steals Irving's head of steam. Or re-directs it into places
less patient...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(finishing his rebuttal)

And Professional Volunteers, not
plodding draftees counting backward
from 365.

(beat)

How long you been on this beat,
Jackson?

JANINE JACKSON

(smelling the change)

Before the guy before you was in
this office.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Then you got enough salt to know
that we're at a tipping point. The
Pentagon, the American People, the
President, Me. We, all of us, are
desperate for Wins. The waiting,
the stalemates are becoming
exponentially more abhorrent and
damaging -- doing nothing is the
same as losing it just takes
longer...

(beat)

This idea, this 'tactical shift' is
the action that will bring Wins
about. I believe that.

Janine scribbling again. Counting to five herself now. Slowly
but surely, her face starts bunching like she smells a fart --
continuing to scribble -- then steam vents:

JANINE JACKSON

Then why take three years to up-
armor our Humvees if we're that
desperate for 'wins not stalemates'--

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-they're up-armored now-

JANINE JACKSON

-why tell our Troops to go into
their own wallets for their body
armor-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-we don't anymore-

JANINE JACKSON

-why keep spending two billion per
B-2 bomber while we're stuck with
fleets of Helicopters that showed
their age when Saigon fell-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(done)

-Jackson, you're not stuck with
shit outside of Bethesda property
taxes-

JANINE JACKSON

-wins not Stalemates? Then why send
150,000 troops to a country that
didn't attack us, and one-tenth
that number to the one that did?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(decorum dying in earnest)

I get so tired of repeating why.

JANINE JACKSON

I get so tired of asking why.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Iraq was almost First World.

JANINE JACKSON

And 'was' sure is the right tense.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Yeah: Sadaam and Sons were building
Camelot-on-the-Tigris in-between
the rapes and the gas attacks.

(beat)

Iraq is organized: armies-cities-
highways. You could take it quick
with numbers. Afghanistan was, is,
and will always be the opposite,
the definition of rugged Third
World. Big numbers have bogged down
there since Alexander was still
'The Good.' So that jab is tired.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

And what about my other three?

Irving just stares at Janine now. Long enough that she can't remember what his smile looked like. She doesn't flinch.

INT. OFFICE #305 - MORNING

Disbelief cut with a scoff:

TODD

Enlisted?

DR. MALLEY

Is that a question or an accusation?

TODD

Both.

(beat, Malley's visage
tells him to be a little
more respectful)

Question.

DR. MALLEY

Yes, they volunteered.

TODD

(still respectful, still
urgent)

Why?

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

The quickest way to explain it:
because they aren't afraid of
things that scare them.

TODD

(beat, bunched forehead)

And the quickest way to understand
that?

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

Just because you're afraid of
something doesn't mean you
shouldn't do it...

Forehead doesn't smooth out...

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Most of us, our fear rots into paralysis. And at some point we just start refusing to -- take your pick, Todd: public-speak, fly, walk down an alley, leave a job, make a commitment, come to a class...

(beat)

And those refusals are the limits we place on what time we have.

TODD

(beat)

Our limits are our fears?

DR. MALLEY

(can't help a chuckle)

'Deep' huh?

TODD

(his own chuckle)

I don't think so.

DR. MALLEY

Well when you say it out loud it sounds like something that self-help shaved water buffalo lookin' guy -- Oprah's head-shrinker...

TODD

Dr. Phil?

DR. MALLEY

Yeah -- like something he'd say. E-mail this to him, he'll tell you.

TODD

(beat, thinking again)

So Ernest and Arian are...like Adrenaline-types? 'We like it extreme...'

DR. MALLEY

You're trading self-help sound-bytes for redneck bumper-stickers.

(beat)

Ernie and Arian aren't adrenaline types. What I'm talking about, Todd, is how my Granddad described it: fearless is being so terrified you have to will yourself your next step.

Todd's face: smile gone, words resonating...wrenching gears into motion...

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

That is why I think they enlisted.

TODD

(big beat, a light-bulb:)

You're not trying to get me to think about the Army are you? You do that with them?

Malley turns his head, points to the beginning of scar that starts just off the hair-line, running diagonally behind and away from the ear.

DR. MALLEY

44 stitches across my head protesting Vietnam. The Chicago Cop who hit me did his real damage after he knocked me out...I did the very opposite of recruit or encourage Ernie and Arian.

(beat)

That doesn't mean I don't revere the reasons they went.

TODD

(big beat, more question than statement)

Because they had the courage to...

DR. MALLEY

I wish you could sum it up with one word. You can't -- which is why I wanted this hour with you, and even then...it's hard.

(beat)

I guess you can say it's in part 'Courage,' but the real kind.

TODD

As opposed to the fake?

DR. MALLEY

As opposed to the kind ESPN prattles about when a ballplayer with a bruise stays in a game. There's that, then there's -- yeah - - the real kind...

A long pause...then Todd, flat and resolute like quick-cement:

TODD

I don't have that, Doc.

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

Have what?

TODD

The real kind.

(beat)

I know it...I hate it but I know it. You couldn't pay me enough to enlist right now...then compete for the Special Forces-

DR. MALLEY

-forget the God damn Army. Please.
None a' that is the point...

Todd's face falls. Malley's thought to himself: you better find your God-damned hook, quick...

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

The second or third lecture you ever had with me. I called on you from the blue: saw the wide-open face, I thought you were Midwestern-

TODD

-be more novel than 'Anaheim.'

DR. MALLEY

You were up front but way to the right: the spot you all think is perfect if you don't want to talk: close enough to show commitment, far enough away that it'd take me too much effort to look.

Todd nods, forces a smile.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Remember?

TODD

Yeah. Every time I'm in Tappan Hall. It's called embarrassment. You asked what I thought a' the reading, I said I didn't do it-

DR. MALLEY

-on reflex. No excuse...no bullshit.

(MORE)

DR. MALLEY (cont'd)

(beat)

Honest.

TODD

Terrified.

DR. MALLEY

But willed yourself the next step.

(beat)

As embarrassing, as painful as it might have been.

TODD

(beat)

Seems small though...

DR. MALLEY

So do oaks when they're acorns.

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - NIGHT

Ernest on his back: a permanent grimace from the pain. Staying conscious by rubbing handfuls of snow on his exposed neck. Wad of soiled collar still near his mouth: teeth marks still prominent. Move to his left leg, exposed now: his lower leg at an acute angle relative to the thigh -- obvious breaks near the knee, maybe another near the ankle but it's hard not to look away before we can make sense of the direction his foot points.

Arian: muzzle-up, eyes unblinking, still scanning the top of the berm, ears peeled for enemy sounds. Vigilant from here to whatever end. For the rush he thinks inevitable. For a well-placed grenade. For help.

Hold on Arian's rifle sights. The only noises: Ernest still winding down, Arian's own breath coming in erratic plumes. Checks each end of the berm Tourett's-like. Pondering each more critically: flanks that can be turned, attacks that could come from the periphery with no warning before the shots. Can't see the entire mass in one glance -- head has to swing back and forth -- inherently blind to one avenue of attack at all times.

A text-book position you move away from.

If you could move.

Forces himself to take his left hand away from the rifle, still keeping the weapon up and half-aimed with his right, always scanning the berm no matter what his hands might be doing. Chattering with fear and freeze as he starts digging himself out again with the free left.

Feels like dull knives stabbing in forty places. Quick glance to Ernest's desert brown fatigue pants: no blood stains means no compound fractures. Eyes snap front again.

ARIAN

Re-tie your boot. Tight.

ERNEST

S'good.

ARIAN

Re-tie it: tourniquet-

ERNEST

-I'm one-handed.

Arian squints at Ernest's destroyed arm, then the knot: too far away to see. Vision quick up to his friend's grimace. His own grimace: gut-twist worry-

-enemy footfalls sprinting in multiple directions on the other side of the berm. Flinch close. Arian snaps his attention back to the berm. Pupils dilate. Digging left immediately up to the rifle. Trigger finger squeezing. Quick exhales plume. Ernest stays on his back, instinctively aiming at the flank nearest himself: far left of the berm.

Footfalls stop as quick as they came. Snow-fall quiet again.

30 seconds during which we only hear our own phantoms. Nothing materializing. Arian's trigger-finger slowly slacks: firing at sounds smells like panic.

30 more seconds. Desperate to keep ears tuned -- hear the Enemy before they appear because if you don't it becomes academic very quickly: more of them than you, 'mobile' to your 'stuck,' blood for blood at best. Survival depends on the shock of vigilance: anticipate a boot or a scalp and blow it off the second it shows. They stay at bay. You buy time...

Nothing comes. Sound nor image. Minutes plodding past now-

-an incoming fusillade BOOMS. The rush of hostile bullets stops our heart. A dozen guns firing back at Arian and Ernest. Ernest presses deeper into the ground. Arian bends forward, legs still buried, hugging snow, eyes and weapon half-aimed at the far right flank. Top part of the berm shredding. Electric clicks and whines clench our muscles.

Arian turns his head to check on Ernest -- as Ernest rapid-fires at his end of the berm that same blink: POP-POP-POP-POP-POP. 25 yards down-range his intended target: a banshee shadow twitching back behind the snow and ice..

ERNEST
THIS IS COVERING FIRE-

-Arian all muscle-memory now: thumbs to full-auto, estimates the retreat, lets loose an entire clip. Closely grouped, expert shots. The far left flank of the berm disintegrates.

Arian rips another clip from his combat-vest, re-loads. Incoming slacks sudden. Hot screams mixing in now from that same side: hit something/someone/the Banshee.

Arian's rifle sights up again, moves his aim right of the last visible rip he made in the berm. We watch his lips count backward from five. We think we hear quieter footfalls now -- give the Enemy time to get to their wounded, start tending/dragging -- at 'zero' Arian let's loose another sustained full-auto stream. Screams cut to nothing. Incoming cuts to nothing.

Five silent seconds.

Then frantic Pashtu/Arabic barks from further back than the footfalls. Arian swings his aim back to his right: just remembered his uncovered, unwatched flank. Big flinch-startle like when you remember you left your baby in the car in August.

Nothing there. Chattering exhales from both Men.

Arian, eyes up and scanning again, pulls his own 9MM, makes sure the safety is on by feel, tosses it to Ernest. Pulls another clip from his vest, re-loads his smoking rifle. Ernest pulls the three M-4 magazines he has in his own vest, throws them to Arian.

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - MORNING

Brass tacks:

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Are you 'planning' a story, or is it already written?

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

The more we talk...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

The more you talk? Will this story be a retrospective on how we all got it wrong, Janine?

(MORE)

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (cont'd)
A shoulda-coulda-woulda hindsight
hypothetical?

(beat)

Because I wonder where all this
concern of yours was four years ago
when your Network led every report
about the Invasion of Iraq with
that screen-sized flag, the
saluting Marine, the bald-eagle
soaring to Aaron Copeland-

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, on her heels for
the first time)

-wait-wait-wait-wait: because you
asked the media for 'unity'-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-and the American News Network
answered emphatically. More so than
any of your competitors.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, getting it)

So you're going to use our
commitment against us? Punish us --
blackmail us somehow now?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

I'm not punishing you for the
commitment, Janine.

Holds up a print-out of the ANN web-site home-page. The bold
font headline: Degrees of losing: America's War on Terror six
years later

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (CONT'D)

But I will punish you for the wane.

Janine stays silent. Thinking.

JANINE JACKSON

How?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Think of all the ways.

A lull to re-group. During which Janine's eyes can't help but
sweep Irving's wall, the degrees, the picture of him with the
President where the President looks like he's the one being
done the favor, West Point photos, the framed two-page fold-
out of a Time cover-story on the 'Capitol Young Guns,' the
Military history titles clogging a book-shelf.

All still there, valid. Remembers it wasn't lip-service when ANN called Irving the 'Future of his Party.' Remembers that you try not to alienate a source like this, especially when he's on the come. Remembers, in short, that she is cornered.

JANINE JACKSON

My story isn't written yet.

Irving nods curt like an Emperor.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Good.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, quieter)

Will you do me a favor?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(small smile)

Depends.

JANINE JACKSON

At least tell me where you think it all went to shit?

(beat)

Please? Off-the-record, whatever...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

'It?'

JANINE JACKSON

19 hijackers. 3,000 murders. Six years on here we are: no longer greater than our parts, if we ever were -- stumbling through one of the worst ever times to be an American.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

C'mon. Hyperbole doesn't do us-

JANINE JACKSON

-c'mon. No one is monitoring our Patriotism.

(beat)

You gotta admit this is at least one the 5 shittiest times to fly the stars and stripes. I just want to know why? I want to know what happened? What happened to who we were on September 12, 2001?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(big beat)

Off-the-record...

(off Janine's 'yes' nod,
very quiet)

The worst Intel in our history,
leaders who have never bleed in a
fight, and photos of some Hick
Gnome pointing and laughing at
Iraqi dicks.

(beat)

Off-the-record.

Just a wall clock ticking. Janine doesn't write a thing.

JANINE JACKSON

So...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

We change it.

JANINE JACKSON

By moving forward with 'tactical
shifts...'

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Step-by-step.

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - NIGHT

Close-up: a step. A boot pressing into the snow for leverage.
Nearly silent again on the ridge.

The boot belongs to Arian. His left. Still hunched into the
smallest functional ball possible. Pressing his now free foot
into the snow bank he's built up around him from digging
himself 50% free. Leverage needed to rip his right leg free.
Sweat has washed away the oil-blood cake from his face in
surreal streaks.

Cold-front bearing down. 50 mile-per-hour Arctic blasts.
Arian digging feverish despite the howling cold-

-shadow-something-movement darts in his periphery.
Immediately up with his rifle with a gasp-

ERNEST (O.C.)

-snow. Just blowing.

A drift almost the size of a man dispersing. Arian turns to
look at his Friend.

Ernest staring at the right end of the berm, end closest to Arian, back turned to the side closest to himself -- the side they shot up. Ernest shivering, rigid, just as scared.

ARIAN

Watch your flank Brother-

ERNEST

-we just bit 'em over there. Dig.

Arian hesitates. Realizes what Ernest is saying without the words: you gotta dig yourself out to give us a chance. No blinks.

Arian falls into a CPR-style rhythm: 10 digs, 1 pull of his limb, 10 digs, 1 pull. The iced-over gusts smashing them at irregular intervals, now take their breath away.

10 digs, 1 pull. Sweat pouring again despite the freeze.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

They're waiting. Why?

10 digs, 1 pull.

ARIAN

Take us alive. Figuring out how.

10 digs, 1 pull.

ERNEST

Just end it.

10 digs, 1 pull.

ARIAN

No. Takes Pros to capture Rangers --
just Criminals to kill 'em:

(Captain's earlier quote)

'acting like a legit fighting force
again.'

10 digs, 1 pull. Digs getting progressively more labored...slower...Arian starting to slack now, exhaustion-numb. 5 smaller digs, then a pause to breathe, to believe everything he just said...

And finally he sneers at this position that deserved sneers
when they first hit. Feels good, counter-productive. Tears
would feel the same if he could let them loose. Within a few
breaths, the inactive self-pity gives way to
instinct/training: pick up your rifle-

ERNEST (O.C.)
 -put it down. I got you.
 (beat)
Breathe.

Arian just does as he's told now: puts the rifle down, clasps his hands over his head to open the lungs, closes his eyes. Breathing.

20 seconds. Gusts getting evil.

And then Arian *smiles*. Incongruent considering the seconds-ago-sneer, the wide-eyed vigilance since they've been on the ridge, all the other obvious reasons not to.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

150 students. Packed. A slightly less silver-haired Malley at the front. The last whispers/rustles of a large group settling.

DR. MALLEY
 Team 1 gets to set the bar. The topic they pulled...wow...
 (reading)
 'What Foreign Relations theory or concept could be applied here at home, to greatest effect?'

A few 'Thank God' chuckles from the class...

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)
 Yeah. Pulling this one's like pulling the short straw when the Donner Party ran outta trail mix.

Laughs from the few who get it, the more who follow.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)
 Team 1: 15 minutes of fame or flame. You're up.

Malley presses a button on his watch, walks to a seat near the middle of the hall. Pin-drop silent. Then younger, skinnier versions of Ernest and Arian step to the front. Nervous. Papers and overheads in-hand. Ernest steps past the mic like it bites, turns on the overhead.

Big white light and fan hum.

Arian taps the mic, tries to mask shaking hands by moving them quickly. Lips licked repeatedly to stave off cotton mouth. Nerves muddle thoughts muddle words. Short of breath so those muddled words come quiet-quick, distracting dry-mouth clicks abound:

ARIAN

Morning...ask questions as...create
them...go, come ahead and interrupt
me...again, Morning...

Ernest, eyes down no matter what, places a transparency on the projector. Their names, their team number -- mic slips out of Arian's clammy hand. Bounces off the table-top then onto the floor on the other-side of the long lecture hall dais. Big bomb sound both times. A collective startle-squeal from the class.

No way to reach over, pick it up. So Ernest starts to hustle around the length of the long, wide table to grab it -- not so much out of friendship but the desire not to be the one standing in front of the entire class with nothing to say and no way to communicate even if you did.

Arian waits...clears his throat...peers up into the audience: dig all the by-proxy embarrassed-red cheeks. Veiled grimaces at his obvious pain. Scratches his head, grits his teeth, bears into the terrible task-at-hand. Ernest finally at the front of the podium. Leans down, picks up the mic -- how many of the '15 minutes' have 'flamed' by?

Arian reaches out for the mic like you would a Roulette revolver. Ernest hesitates, then quickly puts it to his own mouth. His quiet, easy voice the antithesis of Arian's:

ERNEST

Forgive my Boy: he's so desperate
to get my dumb-ass a good grade
he's either gonna shit his pants or
swallow his tongue.

Explosion. Lancing a boil. Laughter that wakes up adjoining classrooms. Ernest turns back to Arian, turns the mic off,. Arian grabs it quick as the laughter rolls behind them:

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Put it down. I got you.

(beat)

Breathe.

Arian takes a deep breath, eyes on Ernest like you look at your brother who just said 'follow me.' Things immediately slow, re-focus. Laughter just now starting to die. Ernest nods down at the Mic: now.

Arian picks it up, turns it back on.

ARIAN

(beat)

His G.P.A. is why they're killing
affirmative action.

Round Two. Laughs ramp back up: go from 'release' to 'comfortable.' Back-to-back cracks almost makes the class think the earlier nervousness was planned pratfall. Ernest smiling as wide as anyone.

Arian a new man, settles into his task. Close-up: the same big, incongruent smile considering the seconds-ago-stage fright...

RETURN TO:

INT. OFFICE #305 - PRESENT DAY

Malley's coffee cup tossed in the trash. Todd quiet, checks his watch again: time running down.

DR. MALLEY

Where do you have to be?

TODD

(beat)

Another meeting. Coming up.

DR. MALLEY

(searching his face to see
if it's true...)

I think it's easier to not admit
you might have something special.

TODD

I told the truth because I choked.
Because I couldn't put together a
good enough lie on the spot! Does
that sound like 'something special'
or 'courage' to you?

DR. MALLEY

(beat, going right past)

Because with an admission comes
expectation.

Todd sighs small and quiet, frustration cut with the anxiety that Malley might be right.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)
And with expectation comes the possibility of genuine failure.

TODD
(beat)
Versus some other kind?

DR. MALLEY
You bet your life.
(beat)
You said once you really want to go to Law School, right?

TODD
Yeah.

DR. MALLEY
If you didn't get into one, a first-tier-type, what would you do then?

TODD
(beat)
Are you saying I can't?

DR. MALLEY
I know you will. I'm just asking.

Big hesitation.

TODD
I'd...move on to something else.

DR. MALLEY
Then why do it in the first place?
(beat)
Kid, you should have no time for take-'em-or-leave-'em goals. For 'I guess so' pursuits.
(beat)
Aim for something that if it doesn't work -- if you don't succeed, it crushes you. That's genuine failure. And in that way Life is learned, then Lived.

TODD
Through failure?

DR. MALLEY

Sometimes. Many times.

(beat)

A genuine failure is still infinitely better than aiming for a goal you can't miss. What I've been trying to say all morning is I think you might be someone who can take big swings and, heaven forbid, succeed...

TODD

But you don't know for sure...

DR. MALLEY

Come to class and let me find out.

TODD

(big beat, here's the real question:)

And what if I don't even know what to aim at?

DR. MALLEY

Nobody does. Not even the people who say they do.

(beat)

Not until they truly look for it. Until they put the question in their heads. And that's when things can really get scary.

TODD

(beat)

Scary how?

DR. MALLEY

'What about being a lawyer, or a doctor, or a marketing-cog, or a Drug Rep, or a writer, or anything makes it worth your speck of time on the planet?'

TODD

(beat)

Are you asking me?

DR. MALLEY

(right back at you)

Have you asked yourself?

TODD

(beat)

Arian and Ernest aimed for the Army...like how you're saying? Did they ask what about the Army was worth their specks of time?

DR. MALLEY

Yes.

(beat)

And the answer was the Army is part of a bigger plan.

TODD

What plan?

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Ernest back on the right side of the table/podium, looking out. Second round of laughter from Arian's 'Affirmative Action' crack dying. Ernest places a new transparency on the projector: THE JUNIOR YEAR PROJECT.

ARIAN

Engagement is the Foreign Relations concept we'd apply here at home.

Ernest changes transparencies: Engagement written above a cheesy Air Force 1 graphic, a world map peppered with dots. More good-natured chuckles at the obvious graphical effort.

ARIAN (CONT'D)

We're good at it abroad: our Secretary of State has traveled more miles than any in our history. We have more embassies today than ever-

This doughy Sniper near the back who 'participates' every class:

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

-to your first point: isn't that just because of easy access to Jets? And to the second: aren't there just more countries now to put embassies in?

Points that knock a still-wobbly Arian off-stride. Not Ernest, leaning into the microphone:

ERNEST

We could always chose not to fly those Jets. Chose not to recognize any of these new countries. Choosing to do so, I guess, is Engagement. Capital E.

Malley hides an impressed, surprised smile. Student #2, up front, stirs the pot by voicing what those paying attention are thinking:

STUDENT #2

Ouch. Capitol O.

Laughter at Sniper's expense. More of the tuned-out students tune-in: *what did we miss that was funny?* Sniper smirks-shrugs-settles in: I'm a blade in your side now for the duration. Ernest waits for a rebuttal. Gets nothing but the smirk. Changes transparencies.

ARIAN

Again, we're pretty good engaging abroad despite some big failures-

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

-like?

ARIAN

(beat)

9-11. Rwanda. Somalia. Fall of the Soviet Union. Castro 90 miles off Miami...we'd need a lot more than 15 minutes.

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

No country is perfect.

ARIAN

Every country wants to get better.

(beat)

So if you're cool with it, we'd like to use our time left on how the type of 'Engagement' we see abroad is never really seen on our own streets. We've more or less turned away from the biggest problems here at home, even though the lesson we've learned abroad seems to be: the best way to double the size of a problem is to turn your back on it -- just not look-

Asian female student, two seats away from the Sniper, part of his crew:

STUDENT #3/FEMALE

-so who knew: America needs to do more?

Ernest calmly puts up the next transparency: facts and figures. Our boys finding their stride now. Arian treats his next point with the care you'd give century-old dynamite.

ARIAN

Yes we do. Like: do away with your Junior year of high school.

Nearly every eye raises to look at the slide now, half planted in derisive faces...

ARIAN (CONT'D)

Everyone's Junior Year.

ERNEST

Three options instead: a Peace Corps-style year abroad, an Ameri-Corps-style year here in one of the 500 poorest zip codes, or an R.O.T.C.-style apprenticeship here or abroad. Everybody picks one. Nobody gets a note from Mom.

Meaner laughs/scoffs now. But no one is focused on anything but Ernest and Arian. Malley scans: nervous this thing is going to get pilloried, envious of the universal eye-contact.

STUDENT #4

(half-sneer)

Is this another joke?

ARIAN

Like Democracy? Like a head-up with Hitler and Tojo at the same time? Like Civil Rights-

STUDENT #4

-what the hell's Tojo?

ARIAN

It's a 'who.'

Everyone smells a see-saw battle brewing now -- *these guys seem for real, prepared.* Heads swing to Sniper as he fires another volley, glove-slap haughty:

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

How about every Junior then also
learns to march in-information, and
we invade our neighbors?

Rebel ripples -- Students #3 and #4 leading the charge.

ARIAN

(rifles pages, looking for
a specific gold nugget)

...um...

(found it)

Because we would get lost on the
way-

(interrupts Sniper who's
trying for an early kill)

-73% of Freshmen in California
couldn't name the country that
borders Minnesota. 87% of all US
Freshman can't name both their
Senators from their respective
states. 70% of 8th graders can't
write or do math at 8th-grade
levels...

Whisper-rumble: people turning to the person next to them,
verifying Senators' names.

ERNEST

When 25% of our workforce didn't
function, we called it a Great
Depression and reorganized society.

ARIAN

What do we call 80% of our students
not functioning? Greater
Depression?

No words. No arguments. Not even from the Sniper. Students
taking it in osmosis-like. Silence. Then:

STUDENT #5

How many Juniors are there in the
US though?

Ernest blows a small exhale of relief as he changes
transparencies: think they bought the first part...

ARIAN

49 million students total. Divide
that by 13-

STUDENT #4

-why?

ERNEST

K thru 12 equals 13.

(beat)

And Canada borders Minnesota, Bro.

Student #4 flies the bird.

DR. MALLEY

(to Student #4)

Smartest thing you've said all day.

Cackle ripple.

ARIAN

Do the math and it shows about 3.8 million Juniors spread across the 19,000 high schools in the US. So about 200 per school.

STUDENT #6

Yeah: thus what about the costs?

Ernest changing slides again. Sniper doing his own calculations, making sure their numbers are right, doesn't even look-up...

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

Think he means how ridiculous, infeasible would they be?

Arian just stays silent...waiting for the scribbling Sniper to actually look up for his answer:

ARIAN

Not as ridiculous as the 9000-bucks we already spend per student per year in this country.

(beat)

9000 dollars times 3.8 million Juniors is 34 billion dollars -- just for Juniors. Not anywhere near that 'infeasible.' And we spend two billion more today than we did five years ago -- for worse results.

(beat)

Our idea would only need a fraction of that money for travel, housing, food, security, legal costs to fight all the parents who'll sue-

STUDENT #7

-well, because you're forcing their kids to do something-

ERNEST

-what 17 year-old wouldn't want to?

ARIAN

Wouldn't want to be part of a common experience? No matter your race, your wealth, or where you're from. 'Common' simply and only because you're American.

(no answer)

Maybe we can sacrifice a bit of our fat ass comforts, for just a school-year, so we can see what the rest of America and the world looks like...lives like...

(no answer)

That year would shape the rest of our lives, make us better. And a common, level playing ground like that is something we don't get in the United States anymore outside of a Draft-

ERNEST

-or a Great Depression.

Enemies stumped. Malley: something like a Father's love in his eyes. Students soaking in the numbers, how the once outlandish seems something like plausible.

STUDENT #8

Bros: I'd have to stay in school a year longer?

ERNEST

Maybe another year in school means those pictures of you doing the bing cherry ass-race never go up on collegehumor.com.

Huge cackles. Student #8 smiles big: dull bulb/good sport. Bumps fists with the a guy in front of him who looks exactly like him.

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

How many kidnappings, murders, rapes you expect that first year?

ARIAN

(beat)

How many do you expect we'll have
here that same year?

Sniper thinking. Arian's thought: don't let him answer. Your
turn to try for the kill:

ARIAN (CONT'D)

Each of us could, with our degrees,
work hard enough to go hide in a
big house with a high wall-

STUDENT #3

-when hasn't a big house with a
high wall been the American dream?

Great question. All eyes on Arian, but Ernest answers:

ERNEST

July 5, 1776. December 8, 1941.
September 12, 2001.

Better answer. More of the remaining smirks die off.

STUDENT #1/SNIPER

So I take it you two don't want
Harvard Law or Stanford Business
after you graduate here?

(beat)

Isn't it hypocritical to just talk
this giant game...

Ernest and Arian just stare back at Sniper. Tension mounts:
'...maybe Sniper just speared their idea...called their
bullshit...'

Ernest flips to the last transparency: copies of their
induction papers into Army Officer Candidate School.

Classroom reads, buzzes.

Malley's hand over his mouth: half-shock, half-admiration.
Sniper stays tight-lipped, wiggling his pen between thumb and
forefinger.

STUDENT #1/SNIPER (CONT'D)

...those aren't real...

RETURN TO:

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - PRESENT DAY

Janine Jackson tight-lipped, wiggling her pen between thumb and forefinger.

JANINE JACKSON

All I'm saying Sir, is I don't know if this is a story. I am 'listening' and 'synthesizing' your point of view on this...but I truly don't think there is a story here. Yet. Now, when shots start to get fired in anger...that's when-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-none of what I've been telling you? None of it warrants a mention? A fifteen-second byte?

JANINE JACKSON

(earnest 'no' nod)

Not after six years.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

I just don't believe that.

JANINE JACKSON

Sir, this warrants a spot on the bottom-scroll between '12 year-old Floridian raped and buried alive' and 'British Researchers say chocolate is good for you'-

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

-Soldiers get ratings for God's sake, Janine-

JANINE JACKSON

-when they blitzkrieg a country. When they hug their wives after two or three tours. When they're learning how to walk with the prosthetic. But their orders, their tactics, do not.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(beat, genuine)

Why?

JANINE JACKSON

Honestly?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

No.

JANINE JACKSON

Sounds too much like 'losing' to the American ear anymore. 'Tactical shifts? What the fuck have we been doing for the past six years? World War 2 only took five...'

Irving's tired eyes: he knows she's right. Silence.

Then his computer dings: new mail. Looks away from Janine, over to his screen, mouse clicks, reading, then to Janine:

CONGRESSMAN IRVING:

Hang on.

Janine's eyes lock on Irving's face now the way a gun-dog locks on movement in undergrowth. Picks up her pen again. Jasper picks up the phone, dials, waiting...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (CONT'D)

This is Irving. E-mail details are the latest? Nothing new known?

Waits for an answer. Get's it. Hangs-up. No 'good-bye.' To Janine, something like vindication in his eyes:

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (CONT'D)

Shots are being fired in anger.

(beat)

One of the first Helicopters we sent out. Looks like we were able to place a small team on the ground to engage the enemy before the Chopper had to bolt because of ground fire.

(almost a gloat)

Now does that get a mention?

JANINE JACKSON

(scribbling like mad)

Casualties so far?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

No details outside of 'yes.' Scrambling two fast reaction forces to reinforce this team on the mountain-top, but the weather is-

JANINE JACKSON

(scribbling)

-how small's 'small?' The 30 or 40
you talked about?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(scanning his screen)

I don't know. But it can't mean
less than platoon-sized. Wouldn't
worry about size though: we're
flying air cover sorties-

JANINE JACKSON

-you were just saying something
about weather though?

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - PRESENT DAY

Blood-stained camouflage blurred by wind-blown sheets of
falling snow now. Move up to Arian's face: wide-eyed frozen.

Pull back further: Arian with a handful of snow, halted mid-
dig. Looks over at Ernest. Ernest points to his ear then to
the berm: listen. After a moment, between gusts we hear a
voice, yelling:

PASHTU VOICE

-DZHORR-

Arian quickly-quietly shoulders-into his rifle: same teeth-
grit grimace we saw in the classroom flashback. Trying to
stanch his chatter-shake. Scanning back and forth, eye linked
to muzzle. To Ernest:

ARIAN

...they coming?

A sound different than the wind. Deeper but in the same
orbit. Arian scanning for movement, again trying to
hear/sense things more than see them. Ernest stays focused on
his hearing, trying to decode words...

PASHTU VOICE

-ORR KEM-

Hold on Ernest's good eye: expectant, unblinking wide. A
clinical close-up of how damaged his face is...

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. AFGHAN VILLAGE - MORNING

Same close-up: handsome Ernest. Robust in summer sun. Jolting in contrast. Crouching next to a seven year-old Afghan boy. The boy builds a dirt/mud castle. Intricate. Coveted plastic soldier stands guard atop the highest point of the fortress. Little Man incorporating sticks now to strengthen the walls.

Ernest takes a U.S. Army pencil out of his pocket, snaps it in half: 'AR' on one end, 'MY' on the other, hands the halves to the boy who immediately, nonchalantly, uses the halves to buttress a tower.

Then the boy, lost in his own furrowed-brow, slides right next to Ernest. All business. Takes Ernest's hand, places it where he needs some help: another part of the outer wall not wanting to stand.

PASHTU BOY

...dzhorr kem...

Smiles up at Ernest -- eye contact, big baby teeth gaps. Patting the back of Ernest's hand on the crumbling wall:

PASHTU BOY (CONT'D)

Dzhorr kem.

RETURN TO:

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - PRESENT

Ernest yells as this deeper-different howl continues to grow, rivalling the wind:

ERNEST

-THEY'RE SAYING 'BUILD'-

-blur of an A-10 Warthog rips by 250 feet overhead. See it flash past before you really hear it. Devious speed-size-technology. Noise that reverbs in your lungs.

Darwin would write odes to the A-10. An airplane perfectly adapted to a specific task: obliterate tanks-vehicles-structures-men from the air, at 350 miles per hour.

Ugly in the way a Rapist with a 20-inch neck is ugly. The seven rotating barrels of a seven-foot long 30MM cannon protrude from the blunt snout in a way that mocks everything aerodynamic. Barrels that fire 3900 one-pound depleted uranium rounds per minute, i.e.

65 pounds of vestigial radioactive metal moving faster than it takes your voice to reach your ears, every second.

Thus Ernest and Arian aren't sure what worries them more as the A-10 sweeps-in again toward their position. Track the sound, the fluttering outlines of malevolent movement in deteriorating weather -- winter storm snow-fall getting denser by the breath. Over the Loud Inevitable:

ARIAN
CAN HE SEE?

-cannon roar trumps jet roar. Ernest and Arian instantly duck-cover-ball up best they can. Ernest roaring with pass-out pain as he tucks into his shattered leg, his back to the berm. Arian contracts back into the hole he's been digging around his half-buried legs.

The World around them comes apart now: soil-snow-rock turn to blue-black vapor -- lightning wrapped in a sandstorm, twenty yards away. Ernest and Arian peppered with the vapor, bits of molten metal mixed-in to punctuate their proximity to a violent End.

Then silence as quick as the rumble came. Atmosphere sulfur-pungent: ozone-cordite-fresh dirt. The Earth catches its breath. Arian's left leg unburied thus half-exposed, bleeds in three places, pants ripped in a half-dozen other. The tops of his shoulders bloody from squaring them to the onslaught. Helmet saved his head. Ernest's back and ass similarly ripped, his good-eye still shut tight, tears leaking out.

Arian's eyes open, then immediately widen, locked-on something: the berm between them and the enemy half-gone. Sight-lines into their exposed position. The only things obscuring he and Ernest now are the few remaining snow-ice salients and the increasing snow fall-

ARIAN
(to no one)
-wait-

-slicing sound of jet engines suddenly close overhead again. Unsettling how the sound appears from nowhere, dives-in like a ghost. Then Cannon rumble again. Duck-cover-ball part two. More chaos vapor and white-hot shards, then near-silence as quick as the roar came. Jet engines fading fast.

Arian and Ernest don't uncork this time -- waiting to make sure another pass isn't bearing down. Ten seconds. Arian opens eyes again to a squint: berm gone. Like it never existed -- 70 yards of snow/ice blasted to gas. The new void exposes an open field of scree sloping up, then blending with the black behind curtains of snow.

A dozen boulders and out-croppings lie scattered. Any could be an enemy shelter...or multiple shelters...simultaneous attacks from the front and flanks....

Arian fights through his dazed fuzz.

ARIAN

...eyes up...

ERNEST

Over?

ARIAN

...for us if they lived. Eyes up.

Ernest rolls with a teeth-grit growl: starting to learn what angles/moves minimize the pain. White-hot versus red-hot. Gape-mouthed at the obliterated snow/ice mass. Has to focus on his breathing to calm his aim, right eye aligned down his 9MM sights. Blood frozen in clots on his face.

Wind and snow.

Ernest snaps fingers to get Arian's attention. Points to what used to be the end of the berm closest to himself: maybe two bodies. 'Maybe' because the remains are blasted: that's what the A-10 was strafing -- the 'Banshee shadow' who tried to turn the corner earlier during the incoming fusillade and another one or two who came to help as Arian guessed they would, killed them with his estimated shots fired through the berm.

ARIAN

...but they were already gone.

ERNEST

(wiping tears, points
straight up)

He didn't know.

Wind and snow.

Their quiver-shake-chatter now as commonplace as blinking and breathing. New holes in their uniforms expose new parts to the freeze. Our view moves behind their position. Watch them slowly oscillate back and forth, eyes aligned to gun muzzles, scanning the new, infinitely more threatening horizon.

Wind and snow.

Another gut-tense pause. We realize we might rather fight than suffer the expectation.

Silence extends long enough that the mind starts trying to explain the lull to itself: your enemy is dead, fled, or waiting. We dwell on 'dead' and 'fled' to sap momentary warmth out of hope-

-a head 40 yards down-range leans out from behind a boulder just as Arian scans past. Seeing it in the storm, in this jagged scape, is our first taste of good luck. And Arian pulls the trigger without a flinch: target-range clay pigeon. The head snaps back and pops in the same blink. Outlines of lifeless bulk collapsing. A heartbeat skips.

Dying echo of the single shot. Arian locks sights on the body -- gathering blizzard makes it hard to keep it discerned, no movement to give eyes multiple points of focus.

Wind and snow.

Ten seconds. Fifteen. Twenty. Then slowly, mechanically, soundlessly, the body is pulled back behind the boulder mass by unseen hands. No laughs. No taunts. No screams this time.

Tight on Arian's filthy-bloody-tired face: no blinks.

Tight on Ernest's filthy-bloody-tired face: no blinks.

INT. OFFICE #305 - DAY

Malley and Todd. Conversation stalled. Malley reaches into his trash, shakes the spent coffee cup to see if he got it all: nothing but swill left.

TODD

That Junior Year project sounds a lot like Unicorns to me: great in theory...

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

Probably.

Todd was expecting much more in way of Defense.

TODD

(beat)

Well, what grade did you give them for that?

DR. MALLEY

B+. Little loose with their stats,
and they never said what all these
Kids were actually supposed to do
for nine months or if indeed it was
only nine months.

TODD

B+?

(beat)

Why aren't you telling me about the
guys or girls who got an A?

DR. MALLEY

Because I don't remember them.

TODD

(beat)

So 'courage for real' is like a pre-
requisite for you...but grades
aren't?

DR. MALLEY

(small smile)

You're in on the secret now.

(beat)

We're talking intangibles,
potential, much better signals of
what you might do than an 'A' in
some class you won't really
remember in three years.

TODD

(beat)

Sounds like 'what Turds with 2.4's
tell themselves to justify all the'-

DR. MALLEY

(bigger smile: kid's fast)

-nice. But neither had C's-

TODD

-maybe both got 'solid Bs.'

DR. MALLEY

(big beat, smile vanishes)

Not by quitting.

No eye contact.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Let me put it-

TODD

-so when is it cool to peak then?

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

What?

TODD

You said we're 'talking potential.'
How it's a better signal of what I
might do than the grade you give
me...so when is it not better?

(beat)

When does what you're doing mean
more than what you *might* do...

Malley's breath catches now...maybe the best question he's
ever been asked.

DR. MALLEY

That's one hell of a question.

(beat)

What I think is the answer will
piss you off...

TODD

Shoot.

DR. MALLEY

Never.

(Todd's wrinkled forehead)

Because real Potential means never
losing the ability to see the
things you're doing today in the
light of how good they might make
tomorrow...and I know that sounds
like more Shaved Water Buffalo
bullshit...but I think that's the
key to meaningful years on the
planet. To starting a 1000-page
book the day of your death. To a
gaggle of Grandkids-

TODD

-or you get a terminal cancer at
age 35-

DR. MALLEY

-Or you don't...

TODD

(beat, hesitant)

What good is that potential if you-

DR. MALLEY
-die before you use it?

Todd nods respectful. Malley darkens at the thought. Never allows himself to stay there for long.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)
Why the Greeks started writing plays.

TODD
What's that mean?

DR. MALLEY
A tragedy.

TODD
Yeah...dying in your twenties in some country that still has the plague?

DR. MALLEY
Yeah...versus wasting fifty years on a paint-by-number life. And after you die, no one who hasn't met you will ever have a hint you existed.

TODD
(beat, genuine)
Are you happy they're over there?

DR. MALLEY
I already told you I tried to get them to stop.

TODD
But revered the reasons they didn't stop.

DR. MALLEY
Yes.

TODD
But I'm supposed to listen even though the two you've been telling me about for almost an hour now, didn't?

Another great question, however incomplete. Reminder of why Malley is even bothering in the first place.

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

Yup.

TODD

(beat)

How did they tell you no?

DR. MALLEY

Are you telling me no?

TODD

I'm just asking.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CAMPUS RESTAURANT - AFTERNOON

Arian's healthy-scrubbed face. Smiling. Ernest's healthy-scrubbed face. Smiling. The younger versions we last saw in Class. They sit across from the less-gray version of Malley. Just the three of them.

Table-clothes, napkins on laps, beers poured in tall glasses. All adds up to a last supper. Quiet outside of silverware on plates, and the surrounding maw of hushed teachers-students-families dining formally.

DR. MALLEY

You two had an 'A' without the
Officer Candidate School finale.

ERNEST

Then fat Sterling gets the last
word.

ARIAN

Who names a naked baby after
silverware?

ERNEST

Brother-

-Malley's eyes sharpen on the word-

ERNEST (CONT'D)

-you're gonna cap on first names?

ARIAN

Do my taxes, Ernest.

(back to Malley)

(MORE)

ARIAN (cont'd)
Don't worry Doc. This project
didn't make us enlist.

DR. MALLEY
I don't believe you.
(beat)
You two could pick any grad school,
in any field you wanted. And just
because you go to a good school
doesn't mean you gotta turn your
backs.

ARIAN
I don't believe you.
(beat)
\$150,000 in the hole, the day you
graduate. After interest: it's
probably more like 190, 200-

DR. MALLEY
-loan forgiveness programs.

ARIAN
Not as forgiving as they advertise.

DR. MALLEY
(to Ernest)
Arian's doing a lot of talking for
the two of you.

ERNEST
You think he did all that math by
himself? Doc, you're the one who
told us not to live over a safety-
net.

DR. MALLEY
My man, I never thought that would
be translated into you two heading
out to a War. If I did, I'd a cut
my tongue out-

ARIAN
-you're missing the point-

DR. MALLEY
-because I can't see how the Army
is a better gig than graduate
schools most students would give a
finger to get into?

ARIAN

No. Because you're not seeing that if we did anything else, we wouldn't be a part of the most important things going on right now: the events that might define our lives.

(points to Malley's skull)

Like Vietnam did yours.

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

But I never fought, Arian.

ERNEST

You get that scar minding your own business?

ARIAN

You told the class once you'd have gone if you'd have been old enough-

DR. MALLEY

-and I'd have played Quarterback for the Raiders if I had more than a BB-gun arm and you didn't need to time my 40 with a sun-dial -- I can say anything from the cheap seats.

(beat, switching gears)

The Starched-Collars who run our Wars are not our best and brightest -- they're nowhere near. But the Boys who fight our Wars, just by the sheer fact they're bleeding, they're the ones we can't afford to lose.

ERNEST

We agree. Where's your problem?

DR. MALLEY

The 'bleeding' part...the guys in-command who've never been in a fucking fist fight...

Heads turn. Parents cluck tongues at the vocabulary. Students re-double their secret wish that Malley was at their table instead of their clucking Parents.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

(beat)

Look, I know you guys are going to get whatever you want, and I know you're going to want some damn fool thing like Special Forces-

ARIAN

-if we get lucky-

DR. MALLEY

-so don't. Please. Take my word for it: you guys got it -- you don't need to go 10,000 miles away to prove it in the middle of a country that would rather see you dead.

(beat, not getting through...)

World War I. Germans Soldiers would write poems about the bravery of British Grunts. Absolutely admired them. Almost as much as they scoffed at the British High Command who just fucking wasted those same Grunts. A German General wrote, 'Nowhere else do you see such Lions led by such Lambs.'

(beat)

That statement has never been more dead-on than it is right now, this half-assed 'War on Terror' which really isn't a War on Terror-

ERNEST

-we've thought that far ahead.

Malley squints: clarify. Arian, quieter:

ARIAN

The fact that it's going badly makes it even more important, Doc.

DR. MALLEY

What?

ERNEST

Would we have spent three weeks in class on Nixon without a Watergate?

Malley can't find his argument.

ARIAN

If we killed Bin Laden on 9-12, if Iraqi Shi'ites greeted us with ticker-tape, we would have never had to think about things like: What are these people? Can a religion preach murder? Do they really need a Dictator who intimidates them into order? Why can't the greatest Military in History catch 4 or 5 guys? How do you preach Democracy but send billions to Saudi Kings that are the furthest thing from it?

DR. MALLEY :

(beat)

So load yourselves into the breech.

ERNEST

Or sit the bench.

DR. MALLEY

Or use your heads to change policy here-

ARIAN

-by making copies? You think we're gonna get real jobs before this War is over, without planting our asses in more classrooms to get more degrees first?

DR. MALLEY

Here or there, you're taking orders from Turds who don't have half your talent. But here you won't get killed-

ERNEST

-you're the smartest guy I know Dr. Malley. And I don't mean any disrespect: but you don't know shit about 'rep.'

DR. MALLEY

(vaguely mocking)

That shorthand for 'reputation' Ernie? I don't keep up...

ERNEST

Shorthand for: the guy who runs his mouth gets punched in his mouth.

(MORE)

ERNEST (cont'd)

But the guy who leads is the one
who put in work when there was work
to be done. Who lived things
everyone else read about.

ARIAN

If we come back from this, then we
go to school-

ERNEST

-on the Army's dime-

ARIAN

-that's when we can do something.
Black and Mexican Combat Vets --
with educations -- no debt to
dictate what we do next -- Man, you
gotta listen to us then...

DR. MALLEY

If. If.

ERNEST

(beat)

But nothing worth having comes
without risk...

RETURN TO:

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - PRESENT

Ernest aiming down the sights of his 9MM.

Wind and snow.

Arian back in his standard posture: one hand digging, the
other keeping the rifle up, vaguely aimed, eyes-up vigilant.
Minutes passing.

Somewhere down-range, behind the boulders but still trench
warfare-close, heavily accented:

PASHTU VOICE

ARMY. STOP.

Shock. The words work for a time: Ernest and Arian don't so
much as blink. Silence. Expect to see another head or foot
flash. Ernest never takes his eyes away from his aim:

ERNEST

(to Arian)

Two hands.

ARIAN

(beat)

What?

ERNEST

Use both.

Arian hesitates, drops his rifle, puts his head down. Digging like mad. Trying not to focus on the obvious threats. And we now see he's been making real progress even before this most recent flurry...almost at mid-shin...

PASHTU VOICE

ARMY! STOP!

ARIAN

(head still down and
focused, to Ernest)

Digging?

Ernest doesn't answer -- stays aimed, trying to hone in on the location of the voice. Ten seconds.

PASHTU VOICE (CONT'D)

DIGGING!

Arian does for a heartbeat...looks to Ernest who stays focused down-range.

Then Arian closes his eyes, resumes digging, double-time. Vice-grip tense: fully expecting a bullet to hit him the gut/chest/face any second. Opens his eyes to look over at his Friend again, remind himself why being naked like this is worth it -- *Ernest already looking back at him.* A nod: look down my man...

Arian does: pulling up blood-red snow. Eyes wide: please God nothing awful. Sees the top of a rip along the outside of his leg. He has dug down to almost his ankle now.

Another pause.

Suddenly -- shockingly -- Arian begins tugging at his leg with both hands, trying to simply rip it free now. The pain and movement is better than the tension: if you're going to shoot, here I am. Agony growls.

Something screamed in Pashtu. An obvious response to Arian's effort to rip free. Another moment as Arian keeps ripping.

Then the shock of armed movement: several Men out from behind the boulders down-range, 20 and 30 yards away, sprinting toward the flanks.

Ernest fires his 9MM instantly, swinging his aim back and forth, trying to hit each group as they sprint in opposite directions. Covering fire emanates from behind boulders now.

Arian pulls his leg out as the electric incoming whines past. Like pulling an abscessed tooth with dirty pliers. Blood staining the surrounding snow at an alarming pace. Look down into the hole: jagged rock protruding two feet down.

Ernest hits one of the running men in the shoulder, knocks him on his ass Indian-style awkward. Doesn't stay down: back up run/stumbling the very next second. Ernest can't follow it up: empty. Drops the smoking pistol, picks up the one Arian threw him earlier-

ERNEST

(to Arian)

-GET TO ME-

-a bullet drills Arian's helmet. Blows it off his head, bouncing him back against blood-stained snow violently.

Shock. Ernest's own blink to register reality...

ERNEST (CONT'D)

LET HIM MOVE!

No one left to aim at: covering fire done. Ernest rapid-fires half-aimed shots at boulders and out-croppings he thinks are the new Enemy strongholds: shells pock/splinter rock. Arian moaning: guttural panic to it -- someone half-conscious but still understanding they're in real trouble. Unsettling.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

TAKE GULPS-

-Arian, on his back, begins blankly crawling towards Ernest's voice. Ernest, tears welling:

ERNEST (CONT'D)

YOUR RIFLE-

-takes time for the words to register. Then Arian rolls over, still somewhere else, but not so far gone he doesn't remember to crawl back, grab the M-4. Rolls back over to resume his crawl -- accidentally fires: the burst tears past Ernest's face. Massive flinches heedless of his shattered leg -- pain of instinctive, unplanned movement makes him scream.

Pashtu laughter 20 yards away.

Arian, dazed and murderous, swings the muzzle wild, vaguely at the enemy, lets off another long red-orange burst of what we realize is increasingly more precious ammo: focus on ejecting shells accumulating in a pile...

INT. RAYBURN BUILDING, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - DAY

Sun shining brighter. Irving in obviously better spirits. Finally getting traction with Jackson.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Getting back into the weeds for a second: what should really strike people about these boys is that they're unflappable. That Special Forces are special precisely because they don't rattle. Even six years in. If you could convey that.

Janine scribbling fast, trying to get it all down.

JANINE JACKSON

Audiences love those guys. We've got some stock we can roll...

(beat)

Tell me more about these Fast Reaction Forces that are en route to the 'small team' that was placed on the mountain -- Fast Reaction isn't code for 'rescue' is it?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

No-no-no. Think of it as waves of attacks, we engage the enemy, deduce their numbers and intent, then send in another wave.

JANINE JACKSON

How big and how long?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Two Helicopters. My info actually says Navy Seals on one. And they'll be at this Forward Operating Point within the half-hour. We'll then get a much better picture of the situation.

(beat)

But I just want to make sure, one more time, that the story will be on a more macro level: the strategy behind these mechanics...

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, writing)

I don't think that's going to be a problem...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Good.

(beat)

And maybe, hope-hope, we'll be able to look back on this as the real beginning of the end.

JANINE JACKSON

Will you have any footage of what's happening on that ridge, like the gun camera stuff after we got Zargawi?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

I don't know yet.

JANINE JACKSON

People love the infra-red stuff: always our best streams and downloads from the web-site. It would be a great hook for the overall story. I could set the table so that when it's released...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

(beat)

At the risk of re-igniting a fight we just had, the only way we would have that footage is if a drone was on-station, circling the fight...

JANINE JACKSON

Okay -- and I've seen that before -- I think back in '02 when Tora Bora was ground zero...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

There weren't snow storms going on then in Tora Bora.

(beat)

I'll continue being honest: we've sent three into snow-storms before, and none came back...

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)

We outfit them with all-weather cameras, sensors and what not, but the airframes can't take snow?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

A fight we already had, Jackson.

JANINE JACKSON

Add that bit to my bitch-litany from earlier.

(beat)

How are your people getting any information then?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Preliminaries from the first Helicopter itself, and the Commanders at Bagram-

JANINE JACKSON

-the first Helicopter that had to flee from the ground-fire...

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

In order to tell us what we need to go back with.

JANINE JACKSON

The Fast Reaction Forces. The next Wave.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

Exactly.

Janine scribbling again, getting the last bits. Silent as she looks over her notes, scanning for any unasked questions. Irving smiling warm.

She closes her steno, checks her watch, makes a small hiss sound at the lateness of the hour, starts gathering her stuff.

JANINE JACKSON

You'll call me as soon as you get the Fast Reaction reports?

CONGRESSMAN IRVING

And only you.

(beat)

(MORE)

CONGRESSMAN IRVING (cont'd)
 Just remember: this could be the
beginning of the End. And it's your
 story first.

JANINE JACKSON
 (beat, standing, slinging
 her bag, a smile)
 I hope the rest of my day is a lot
 less intense than this was.

CONGRESSMAN IRVING
 (smile returned)
 Good luck with that.

INT. OFFICE #305 - PRESENT DAY

Todd eyes his watch: 8:05 AM. Malley eyes Todd eyeing his
 watch. Their time together winding down quick. Audible bustle
 outside the door now: the day is starting. A big knock-knock
 on his door.

DR. MALLEY
 (voice aimed at the door)
 READ THE SIGN.

O.C.: a frustrated female sigh. A pause. Then one hard-loud
 fist against the door in parting. Then quick foot-steps.

Malley and Todd smile, then laugh. Then:

TODD
 Doc, I gotta get moving here...it's
 been an hour and change...

Malley searches his face, trying to find a positive answer,
 some tell-tale that Todd has been sold...

DR. MALLEY
 Two more minutes for one more
 point. Please.

TODD
 Sure.

DR. MALLEY
Numbers.
 (beat)
 How there's two of them-

TODD
 -and one of me?
 (off Malley's 'yes' nod)
 (MORE)

TODD (cont'd)
I figured it had to count for
something -- that I'm alone and
they had each other for back-up.

DR. MALLEY
It does count...
(beat, almost pained to
admit the following)
...against you, I think.

TODD
(beat)
What? How's that?

DR. MALLEY
Bear with me, Buddy, please.
Because this is the last bit.
(beat)
Ernie and Arian became Brothers.
(beat)
And that, more than their courage,
more than their potential, gave me
my hope in them.

TODD
(beat, the smirk)
Brotherhood.

Malley just nods 'yes.' Almost emphatic.

DR. MALLEY
Go ahead and shit on that word too.
But never forget that our first,
great city was named for it.

TODD
(beat)
I thought your rap so far has been
all about 'boot-straps:' you
determine what life you live,
greater than your fears and
things...so how can having help
mean more than my own courage? Or
my own potential?

DR. MALLEY
This is hard...

TODD
I got that part.

DR. MALLEY
It takes even more than things you
just mentioned.
(MORE)

DR. MALLEY (cont'd)

(beat)

No one has ever really done anything without help, Todd. Without something like a Brother for back-up...

(beat)

The moment you think you can, that you can go it alone, is usually the same moment the World swallows you.

TODD

(beat)

So why do you think I pledged the fraternity?

DR. MALLEY

C'mon. Remember, I've been there. And I would bet there isn't anyone in that entire House who would die to save you -- who would kill to save you-

TODD

-how do you know?

DR. MALLEY

Because you gotta pay for it. And when you gotta pay for it, by definition it's not Brotherhood. It's 'Club.' It's defined by who can't afford it.

(beat)

It's England, not America.

Longer silent pause. Louder bustle outside the door.

TODD

Why are you telling me this part now? A minute before I have to leave?

DR. MALLEY

I've never done this -- pitched someone to re-commit...I don't have it planned just so...

TODD

(beat)

You think I should quit the Fraternity?

DR. MALLEY

I think you should throw yourself at this place, otherwise why are you here? I don't think you should give a shit about greek letter limitations, not one worry about who and what's cool-

TODD

-and you think that's just what Ernest and Arian did? Threw themselves at this place-

DR. MALLEY

-you tell me: one was raised on Grape Street, the other in Hollenbeck. But both escape all that idiot-malignant shit: 'I'm gonna pump bullets into you because you grew-up three blocks south of me instead of two blocks south of me, and your sweatshirt's a different color.'

(beat)

They get here. They get thrown into the same Hall. They sit next to each other in their very first class because they recognize a face. And two guys with no reason to look at each other, start to become something more because of the other person...

(beat)

Their 'Junior Year Project,' as nuts as it might have been, was them preaching what they were practicing. Because for the first time they found someone to watch their back. Someone they never expected, who didn't look a thing like they thought a Brother would look. But that's what they got...and I it changed their DNA...and I think each will make the other great.

TODD

(beat)

I'm from Orange County.

(beat)

I grew up on a street with no crime, in a house that looked just like the neighbors'-

DR. MALLEY

-then don't join a Club where you
look just like all the other
members.

TODD

That's just arbitrary.

DR. MALLEY

It's just me asking you to risk
throwing yourself into the bigger
mix...because you can not only
handle it Todd, I think you can
flourish in it. You've got
fearlessness in you...whether or
not you see it yet. And you've got
potential in-

TODD

-but I didn't think you *knew for*
sure...

DR. MALLEY

(beat)

I said that to get you to stay and
listen.

Todd hesitates, smiles slow, small.

TODD

Just keeping you honest.

DR. MALLEY

(his own smile now)

Putting me through the paces.

Another set of knocks on the door. Startling. Abrupt. Todd
takes it as his signal to finally stand up, begin leaving --
and we notice his eyes are bloodshot tired.

Malley searching for further words...thinks he's said his
peace, however scattered. A sigh.

DR. MALLEY (CONT'D)

Do you believe what I said?

TODD

(beat)

What part?

DR. MALLEY

All of them...

And his office door just opens now: some nervous, impatient student, maybe the same person who knocked earlier.

NERVOUS STUDENT

...um, it's after 8...

Todd steps to the door, turns before leaving, looks at Malley's face: like someone who has been interviewing for a job he desperately wants, and has no idea how it has gone, even after an hour and ten minutes.

TODD

Yeah...I think so.

(beat)

See you Monday.

The nervous Student sits where Todd just was without an invitation, a testing bluebook in hand.

NERVOUS STUDENT

Dr. Malley: this grade you gave
can't be right...

Malley's countenance doesn't lighten...his eyes stay on the last wash of Todd's movement out his door as Nervous Student waits for a response to her concern...

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - NIGHT

Arian next to Ernest now. Arian just now coming back around. Eyes bloodshot from concussion. Ernest pats Arian's combat vest: no more clips. Pats his own: none. Ernest pops his 9MM clip: two rounds left...

ERNEST

(beat)

Go.

ARIAN

(still groggy)

Fuck off Juan Wayne.

Ernest can't help a laugh even though it hurts.

ERNEST

Shut up. Climb down.

ARIAN

Rather take a bullet than a fall.

ERNEST

Please Brother.

(beat)

I got two rounds...I can buy time
enough for you to find a way down.

Arian just puts his hand on the back of Ernest's head. A long moment that brings a close cousin of 'calm' to both...despite the fact that we can hear multiple points of movement converging. Ernie and Arian no longer vigilant.

ARIAN

Not if there was a ladder.

Local sounds continue closing in around them. Then another, more distant: the distinct reverb of Helicopters... prompting excited Pashtu and Arabic yips from further back in the scree.

INT. AMERICAN NEWS SYNDICATE NEWSROOM - DAY

Janine Jackson nosing through the bustle, aimed at her Editor's office, forward-lean to her stride, checking her watch.

INT. EDITOR'S OFFICE - NEXT MOMENT

Janine knocks as she enters. Her EDITOR: 10 years younger, designer blue jeans and black Prada loafers. Editing copy with a red pen. Doesn't even look-up:

EDITOR

How's the Terrible Infant?

JANINE JACKSON

At the head of a tactical shift
happening in Afghanistan, as we
speak.

Editor lifts his head, more than interested:

EDITOR

Any action?

JANINE JACKSON

Fighting going on right now.

EDITOR

(excited now)

We'll put what you have on air-

JANINE JACKSON

-hang on...

(beat)

Within the first 15 minutes of our meeting he threatened the network.

EDITOR

(beat)

How?

JANINE JACKSON

In so many words told me we better get on board with his new 'tactical shift,' give it favorable coverage or he'll use our Iraq Invasion coverage, promos, and lead-ins against us, and at some point soon.

EDITOR

The 'United Front' he asked for?

(off Janine's 'yes' nod)

Son of a bitch. What's the 'shift?'

JANINE JACKSON

Bait Afghan Insurgents into fighting by placing isolated teams on mountain tops.

EDITOR

Interesting.

JANINE JACKSON

Cluster-fuck.

EDITOR

(beat)

You guessing or confirming?

JANINE JACKSON

Guessing in an educated way: one of the first helicopters they sent out, with a full stick of Rangers inside, took fire while it was landing. Only a few guys got out-

EDITOR

-how many?

JANINE JACKSON

Don't know numbers -- but if the chopper had to bolt because of the gunfire before it dumped all it's Rangers, then that gunfire must have been like flies on shit.

EDITOR

But we don't know numbers. They could have already killed the enemy and sent the Chopper on it's way-

JANINE JACKSON

-they've sent out Fast Reaction Forces in response. Two choppers. One full of Navy Seals. They don't send out Navy Seals for guard duty, for clean-up...

EDITOR

(beat, devil's advocate)
Well, this is a War after all Janine...any move is going to get intense, cost lives...inherently.

JANINE JACKSON

(beat)
You old enough to remember The Who?

EDITOR

(beat, what?)
...and I'm young enough to still listen to them. So?

JANINE JACKSON

'Meet the new boss, same as the old Boss.'

(beat)
This 'tactical shift' It's Vietnam-era thinking -- fuck, Roman-era thinking -- because they're getting desperate to make it look like we're not stalemated in Afghanistan too -- mid-term elections close around the corner...any movement is better than none...

EDITOR

(beat)
Is this is your exclusive?

JANINE JACKSON

Because he knows he can't fucking strong arm any of our competitors the way he can us...

EDITOR

(beat)

Then I say we wait and get the details from here -- all the details -- before we pillory this...these things can get real fluid: what looks like a loss becomes a win a week later: remember how hard we came down on the Pentagon in the first week of November 2001 for not getting things done -- then Kabul fell the next week?

JANINE JACKSON

It's a different enemy now. Irving took great pains, off the record, to drive that point home: 'they've learned lessons...'

EDITOR

And haven't we too? At least in lock-step with them?

JANINE JACKSON

(big beat)

Look, we need to get out from underneath the perception we were bought during the Iraq invasion: God-damned saluting Marine, God-damned digital star-spangled banner -- I mean we couldn't find a real flapping flag? We've been a late-night punch-line ever since-

EDITOR

(brass tacks)

-okay. What's your take?

JANINE JACKSON

(beat, commits)

We attack him. His championing of this idea, his office, his upcoming candidacy-

EDITOR

-he's not going to lose regardless of how hard we-

JANINE JACKSON

-but maybe he's no longer the future of his party. He could go on to be a ten term Congressman, but relative to what people thought he was going to be, 'ten terms' would still be a failure. We use this 'tactical shift' as our sharpest weapon. We make sure our viewers see this Afghan shift as a loser.

(beat)

Irving becomes the latest symbol of the overall War on Terror stumble. And we become 'impartial' again.

EDITOR

(beat)

That's a lot to-

JANINE JACKSON

-did I mention the CIA can't confirm whether or not Iran is letting Sunni and Wahhabi Insurgents from Iraq hike through to get to Afghanistan?

EDITOR

Are you shitting me?

JANINE JACKSON

Would I about this?

Editor hesitates big now, scales see-sawing in his head...

EDITOR

This is going to be a really big meeting, Jackson...

JANINE JACKSON

(small smile)

Call it.

(pulls her steno-pad)

I've got plenty of notes.

EDITOR

What about our coverage until then?

JANINE JACKSON

Bury it.

EDITOR

It's a major operation...

JANINE JACKSON

A ten second byte then. Just ugly facts once Irving gives them to us...those same ugly facts rolling on the bottom scroll-

-Janine's cell-phone rings that moment. She looks down at the caller ID, turns it to face the Editor. We read it along with him: *U.S. House switchboard...*

EXT. SNOW-COVERED RIDGE - NIGHT

The other side of the blasted berm, coming out the rocks and scree. We move fast, low, aim for the one last mole hill remnant of the blasted berm. We bleed. Shadows and foot falls around us. We sprint to the top of the mole hill, rifle braced into the shoulder ready to fire first...get to the top:

Two battered U.S. Soldiers.

Standing.

Barely. Both bleeding badly. Right in the middle of an expanse with no cover. Backs to a cliff. The black one holds a rifle in one arm. The lighter one a pistol. Both weapons un-aimed. With the other arms they hold each other up-

-Helicopter echoes. More than one. Gaining. Fast Reaction Team en route.

The two U.S. Soldiers don't look back to see if they can pinpoint the rescue -- no hope washes over their faces. They just keep their eyes focused on us. Silence.

SWITCH TO:

Side-view. A horizon-wide shot. Ernest and Arian and the Enemy standing on the Mole Hill at opposite sides of the same frame: 18 yards apart. We see another Enemy low-move into frame, straight ahead of us, near what used to be the left flank of the berm, near the obliterated bodies. He splits the difference between the two parties, twenty yards from each.

Ernest and Arian either don't see him or don't care to look.

The man on the Mole Hill, mouth hard-set, points up to the Helicopter noise, says something in Pashtu that sounds like: 'if you would have just let us capture you...'

Another moment. Chopper noise bearing in. Closer...

Ernest, head low near Arian's chest, just closes his good-eye tight.

The Enemy to their left fires his entire clip. Both Ernest and Arian pop, collapse over already dying legs. No ceremonial gasps or clutches -- just instant, ugly deaths. Two bodies in one heap.

The gunshot echoes fade -- Helicopter echoes re-emerge. The Enemy on the Mole Hill simply turns, points back up the scree, yells retreat orders. Fast mass movement up the ridge from at least a dozen men.

We think of a Wolf-pack.

INT. FRATERNITY HOUSE - DAY

Bright sun shining through big beautiful windows, filtered by front yard palm trees. Fills the giant, old rooms with light from floor to 15-foot high ceilings. A massive projection TV the dominant feature. Cast off chairs-couches-tables-lights arranged in no discernible order.

SKINNY sits in front of the projection TV flipping between Sports Center and ANN. Big dip protruding from his lower lip, a red-plastic Solo cup in his left hand as spittoon. Just woke-up. No shirt. A Rolex Submariner on the left wrist.

Todd walks in. Yells into the kitchen at fresh-faced kids wearing pins on their chests, scurrying about, bringing people food, clearing plates, etc.

TODD

Denver omelet, bag of Salt and Vinegars, Orange Smoothie no vodka.

One, wearing a Viking-style horned helmet for whatever reason, scribbles his order on a pad.

Todd Dumps his messenger bag in the middle of the floor. Sits down next to Frat-Daddy. Starts watching along with him.

Worn to a nub from this morning's session with Malley.

TODD

(beat)

You going to Astronomy today?

SKINNY

JD's putting together a Madden tourney.

TODD
Xbox or Playstation?

SKINNY
I dominate both.

Skinny flips back to ANN, sets the remote down. On screen: a close-up of a morbidly-obese ass in stretch-pants, walking -- just that giant, sloppy, disembodied ass filling the frame...then the ANN shot pulls back to show the Ass has a torso and head, and two morbidly-obese children in-tow, both Ass-height, both eating ice cream...

SKINNY (O.C.)
Fuck you doing up so early?

TODD (O.C.)
Nearly noon.

SKINNY
(spit)
Fuck you doing up so early?

TODD
Had a meeting with Malley.

SKINNY
About what?

Back to the TV: Ass report ends. The News Anchor's head fills the frame now -- a guy named Chip, Flip or Chaz who looks like he has been constructed from parts of lesser Newscasters. A picture of the Map of Afghanistan with a digital Helicopter on-fire superimposed over the Map, appears to the right of Chip-Flip-Chaz's head. Volume too low to hear the words-

-but the scroll running underneath provides a sub-title:

...six Army Rangers killed today during the first hour of what Congressman Jasper Irving called a 'tactical shift' in Afghanistan. Two of the six bodies have yet to be recovered...

TODD (O.C.)
Rapped about life, these two Dudes that gave him hope...

Move from the TV back to Skinny:

SKINNY
Hope?

TODD
(still bloodshot tired)
Yeah.

SKINNY
(spit)
I've had four classes with that
dude and he's never said one word
to me. Prick.
(beat)
Pissed he's sporting the Seiko.
(spit, turns to Todd)
By the way, you look like Death
takin' a shit...he flunking you or
something?

Just Todd's face in-frame now: not answering, intently
focused on the TV. Something has grabbed his attention --
Todd not even blinking...

TODD
Turn this up would, you Bro...

Skinny, put-out by the movement, languidly grabs the remote.

Starts turning it up as we switch to the TV again: the green
volume bars rising on-screen. No longer the Army Ranger
Report. On-screen now: a vaguely-pudgy, glamour blonde
holding a baby in one arm, a bag slung around the other
shoulder with a 'dog' poking it's head-out.

A guy we assume is her boyfriend/husband on her right:
scraggly beard, gaunt, gold chain, pushing back the cameras.
The sounds of a paparazzi fracas, threats of lawsuits.
Boyfriend holds up his right fist like he's a blink from
dropping it on the people snapping/filming. Bites his bottom
lip hard.

We hear Pudgy Glamour through the TV, as she opens the gull-
wing door of a silver Lamborghini.

PUDGY GLAMOUR
I straight up warned y'all...

Switch to: Todd's eyes, a small smile on his face now, hasn't
looked this awake since he first entered Malley's Office --
these images are what have him transfixed...

TODD
No, I'm not flunking.
(beat)
I'm getting a solid B.

Skinny forgot he asked.

On the television: Pudgy Glamour Blonde and her significant other still fighting off the press, pretending they hate the swirl, the attention.

TODD

Louder, Bro...this Pig is a train-
wreck...

SMASH TO BLACK.

THE END.

LIONS FOR LAMBS