



## **Downtime Downrange**

*By Joshua M. Patton*

The desert there is hard sand, grainy and full of rocks. Sometimes, late at night while pulling guard detail near our motor pool Rogers and I would take turns rolling cigarettes like we're sure the British soldiers did there during World War II.

Mine were always sloppy and looked pregnant, but hers were slim and perfect, just like her fingers. We would share the cigarette, passing it back and forth between us in silence. Except for that one night. That night she wouldn't stop talking.

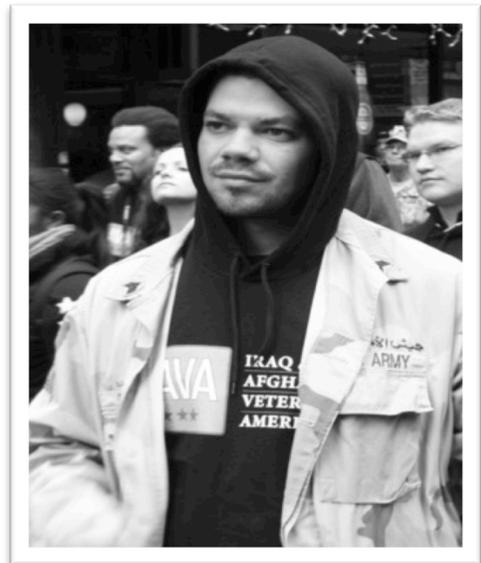
"Every night. Like clockwork. I dream of home." I handed her the cigarette, she inhaled slow.

"I don't dream at all," I replied, smoke escaping from my mouth in inconsistent bursts. "Sounds kinda nice, you know? Being able to go home every time you close your eyes."

She took another drag, then passed it back to me. "It's not always good to be home." I offered her the cigarette again, but she shook her head. I flicked it out into the sand and rocks. After a minute she spoke again, "Every morning when I wake up, I realize I'm still in Iraq."

I turned towards her, but she kept staring ahead, her eyes looked gray in the almost total darkness of the post. After some time, your eyes adjusted, as if you were wearing too-dark sunglasses. On nights when the moon is full, it's positively brilliant. "I'm sorry you have to go through that every morning."

She turned and met my eyes. I imagined that my brown eyes were like black holes, they didn't catch the little light available like hers. She smiled at me, and put her hand on the back of mine. "It's not always bad." She rose from the wooden crate she had been using as a stool, taking a few steps forward. "Anyway," she continued as if we hadn't spent the past few minutes in silence, "last night was different."



“How?” I asked, “Were you here in your dream?”

“Have you seen that video? On the internet? It’s all the little Claymation creatures and they’re singing?” I shook my head, but she was too far away to see me.

“No,” I spoke up.

She sighed, I could tell by the movement of her shoulders. “It’s great. After breakfast tomorrow, come by the internet café with me. I’ll show it to you.”

“What does this have to do with your dreams?” I asked her, pulling the pouch of tobacco from my cargo pants pocket. I started rolling another cigarette. Sometimes all there was to do in the Army was smoke.

“Well, I dreamt about it. Only, instead of little clay characters, it was all of us. You, me, Brown, Davis. First Sergeant Thill would be the big egg in the top hat.” She turned to me, and though I wasn’t sure, she sounded like she was smiling. “It’s so funny. You have to see it.”

I wouldn’t see it for two days. In a few hours a soldier would be killed on patrol. The base always shut down the internet and phones until the family could be notified. Sometimes we would go weeks without being able to connect with home. No one wrote letters anymore. Hell, the soldiers in charge of the post office spent most of their time drunk. They’d get booze from the pilots who flew in with the mail. The pilots were civilians.

Rogers walked back to me, her silhouette even darker. She stood with the stars to her back. “Let’s make one of our own.” I looked at her, confused. She continued, “We’ll remake the video, and everyone can play the different roles.”

I laughed, only because she was so excited by the idea. “Why?” I asked.

She never told me. After a few seconds she went back into the motor pool to check the locks on the doors and mark it down in the logs. A few weeks later, we were able to film the video. Rogers was still the only one excited about it. A week after that, while on a convoy to service a broken-down vehicle, Rogers was wounded in an IED blast. She took some shrapnel in her leg and was sent off to Germany.

The *Today Show* did a segment about our video, interviewing all of us. Except of course for Rogers, who was in an Air Force hospital in Rammstein learning she was going to keep her leg but was being discharged. When they asked us who had the idea for the video, we told them about her. Apparently they had her as a guest in studio two weeks later. I never saw it, because the phones and internet were shut off for nearly two months. When we got back online, the world’s attention was elsewhere.