

CLAYTON BRADSHAW

Five-Sentence Biography

YOU SIT IN CLASS, WONDERING WHAT THE HELL you are supposed to say to the professor's prompt. A five-sentence biography? Your entire identity wrapped up in five strings of letters and words? You listen as your classmates expound on their affinity for chocolate and other vices after living in multiple states. Young kids who haven't truly lived, never indulged in the four-course meal of a five-star restaurant in a Parisian paradise or felt their knees crack under the weight of a fifty-pound ruck and a metric ton of gear as they creak across a log over a literal river of human shit.

You sit on the floor with your two-year-old son in the spare room of a three-bedroom house with your uniform jacket off, rolling a baseball to him. You bought him a bucket of them to take to Germany so he will never forget you, not realizing that your soon-to-be ex-wife would leave them all behind. You make promises of playing catch with him and teaching him the most American sport because that is what a man is supposed to do with his son.

"You." He points his slender alien finger with at least eight knuckles. "Where are you from?" "I'm from Buffalo, New York, Drill Sergeant." The kid's voice wavers in a high-pitched lisp. The Drill Sergeant narrows the dark eyes on his conical head.

You could assert your masculinity with a single grunt while flexing your arms and back, showing off the manliness you take so much pride in, but then that just wouldn't be you. You could strip off your shirt and count the chest hairs while quoting Hemingway, but that would isolate you from the class, alienating you as a crazed buffoon. You would rather brood in silence and answer with crossed arms and your feet on the desk.

You remember this kid you came into the Army with, the self-professed Buffalo bourgeoisie. Brandon Morrison. The platoon is sitting around in sweaty PT uniforms as Drill Sergeant Mallen asks each new soldier where they come from. This is the first time in a week that you have been able to relax and speak on something about you, the opportunity to identify as someone who is not simply a microcosmic member of an oppressed collective. Drill Sergeant makes it around the circle to Private Morrison.

You listen as many become ashamed of their own gender, not realizing the point of the exercise. It is OK to be gender fluid. It is OK to be gay. It is OK to be neutrois, and you don't even know what that means yet. It is even OK just to be a dude as your good friend shamelessly shouts. You are none of these things and that is OK, too.

Good old Ft. Lewis. The under-age drinking. The constant fighting off-post. The rain that never stops. The training that never stops. Brandon's arm hangs out a window, cut from a drunken magic trick. He lies there on a bunk, letting the rain wash the blood that never stops.

As each student speaks, you wonder why no one has called on you to go next. You hypothesize that it might be your grumpy look, a perma-sowl learned from the male authority figures in your life. You may have learned a few more social skills than your father, but the trademark Bradshaw sternness persists. You are not as anti-social as you once were, but you still avoid certain people and make an attempt to hold your tongue until a valid idea can be formulated. A recent linguistics class taught that you have negative politeness, placing more value in silence than in speaking.

"Morrison, I want to ask you a question, right now, but I can't." Drill Sergeant Mallen's glower never stops. He is from the old school, never changed from the war he would never fight.

Your cheeks slicken with each roll of the baseball as he looks back at you with your own eyes on his cloned face, the proof of your manhood, your masculinity. The overwhelming sadness and failure radiates from deep within your gallbladder, the time drawing nearer for his departure from your life, your status as father revoked, your maleness challenged. The unbearable pain manifests in sobs as the little white baseball stops. She is coming to take him. You grab the child and hold tight, kissing his little head, wet from the tears and combined body heat.

Finally, someone calls your name. You are second-to-last, but at least you are not last. At least the impending meltdown that will let your classmates see you as entirely too serious will not be the last thing they hear. You begin with the basics. “I am Clayton. I am a he. I served as a US Army infantryman for eight years.” Here is where it gets messy.

When you return to Germany, Brandon loses his desire to remain hidden among the straight men. He carries a purse, never a satchel, drawing the ire of entrenched leadership. He then returns to Buffalo, completing his physical nostos and falling from view.

“You have no right to him. You are why we leave.” The German accent overtakes her normally careful speech as she removes little Linus from your arms. As much as you hate her for leaving, you would hate her more for staying. She will falsify transcripts from your arguments and post them on Facebook. She will curse you on Skype and reiterate that something is wrong in your head as you helplessly watch your son accept it.

You sit in shock for a while. You knew he was gay, but this... An immediate crisis occurs, a battle amongst your conflicting infantry ideals. One side reminds you of the shared experience of combat while the other frightens you with memories of shower antics in Basic Training, reaching in to turn warm showers cold and snapping each other with towels. You cannot question your sexuality; that would be a death sentence in an infantry platoon. The easy answer is to reject an old buddy to ease your mind. You immediately un-friend a bad-ass motherfucker.

What are the remaining three sentences supposed to say? How can you summarize thirty-one years of varying degrees of homelessness, vagrancy, short high points, and extended periods of alcoholism? Your identity is wrapped up in the past, dependent on memories of explosions and gunfire in desert countries. You fight daily to remain a thought in your distant son’s head, a little boy you will never see unless you are able to get an education and find a job that pays well enough for you see him. That job must be in something you love, something you are good at, something that won’t trigger a melt-down when some self-professed future Texas Ranger states that the country does not owe its veterans state-covered healthcare. No, your identity cannot be summarized in three sentences.

Three years after saying goodbye to Brandon, you sit on a dust-covered computer in the MWR of a tiny base in the Kandahar Desert. One more week and you return to your wife and newborn kid. Scrolling through Facebook, a post from your old buddy sticks out. “Sorry I haven’t been online in while. I needed to figure some things out and find my new identity. My name is now Beatrice. I went ahead and had the operation done. I will be opening a new Facebook page if anyone wants to remain my friend.”

You go off script because you are embarrassed by its tone. You speak on writing and how it serves as a way for you to redefine yourself, how it helps you answer the Hemingway question. Then, you remember the very essence of who you are, of what a man is.

You stare at the screen, unsure of whether or not to click the button to add a friend. Your abdominals burn as you force yourself to face an old mistake. You hold the mouse over it for a few seconds until shifting forward in your seat, pushing your finger onto the clicker. The immediate release of tension convinces you to message the old/new friend. *Hey, Beatrice. I’m sorry. Didn’t know how to react. I never was good at going against the grain. I hope we can still be buddies.* A few days later, the response. *No problem, man.*

If she had never left, you would still be a soldier, chained to antiquated philosophies and accepting a fate determined by how skinny you look in a uniform. You would not be sitting in this classroom, looking for a way to define yourself in three sentences. So you get to the point, summarizing your basic identity well past your allotted sentence count. “I have a kid in Germany. Everything I do is to get back to him.” Back to being a real man, a brother, a father. Back to being true to your identity. Back to being a man like Beatrice.

Clayton Bradshaw served in the US Army for eight years as an infantryman. He deployed with 3/2 SCR to Iraq from 2007 to 2008 and to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011. He graduated from Sam Houston State University with a BA in English and currently participates in the MFA-Creative Writing program at Texas State University. His work can be found in *The Deadly Writers Patrol*, *Second Hand Stories*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, and *O-Dark-Thirty*. He is currently writing a novel, *Quietus*, based on the post-war struggles of the veteran community.