

RUSSELL HALVORSEN

### Cold, Cold Water

THE RAIN IS COMING DOWN HARDER than usual at 4:34am in Marjah, Afghanistan. The Tower Post that guards your Patrol Base has cracks in the roof that allow the rain to leak through and soak whoever's standing inside. The bottom and interior of the Post are lined with sandbags to keep you safe from bullets, *or at least you'd hope they would*. Large puddles form and the water soaks through your boots and turns your already-cold feet to ice. The snacks you bring into the Tower Post are damp before they reach your mouth. The cigarettes are ruined, unless you've taken precautions to protect them. So for brief moments, you become the parent of a newborn child, caring for what is yours.

Chain smoking doesn't even begin to describe the amount of nicotine you inhale to stay awake. Inhale, then exhale, then inhale. The physical act of lighting the cigarette, inhaling, flicking away the ash, exhaling, scanning the area in front of you, cupping the cigarette inside your hand to protect it against the rain and bring some warmth, then switching hands to share the warmth, then inhaling, then exhaling; ok, by now 6 or 7 minutes have had to have passed; you look at your watch, see it's only 4:35am, curse, inhale, scan the area in front of you, exhale, repeat. These small repetitions keep your mind alert; structure presents an opportunity to focus on something other than your cold, cold limbs, your soaked clothing, your drenched weapon, and the fucking river swallowing your boots.

You could make a friend up here though, during these lonely hours; a family of rats lives inside the wood of the Post and the sandbags; the rats will occasionally shuffle out to sniff at your empty bag of once wet snacks. You say, "*Hey, little guy,*" or, "*You and me both, bub?*" Then pass it a crumb, if you're feeling generous. But in this condition, at this hour, you don't feel too generous and some god up in the sky who is sending down the rain is also now presenting you with an opportunity that you just can't pass up; so you grab a sandbag and lift it high over your head and slam it down and hear its faint cries. You grunt and whisper, "*You fuck,*" then lift it again and crush the little bastard who thinks his home is this flooded cell and not yours. You look down at your watch and it reads 4:36am. The elation of this act passed one minute, but now you are tired again, so you yawn and think to yourself, *shit, I have 84 minutes left on post before I can get in a quick nap before patrol.*

Two hours pass and you are shaken awake in your cot to turn on the trucks and start the day. You don't remember the last hour of post; you don't remember walking to your cot as your relief stood in your place with a dead rat for company. Flies will be climbing down the throat of the rat before the sun goes down again. You throw on your still-wet clothes that you just took off, but you can't remember taking them off and your half-naked body is cold from the local air temperature, and you curse and think, *fuck all those college kids*, but deep down you know this was your decision and your anger diminishes.

The mud hut holds four of you. Buck sits up and Sassy is wagging her tail, eager to start the day and get fed and empty her bladder. Buck asks, "*Will you start my truck while I take her for a piss?*" You respond, "*Yah yah, brother.*" Then you put on your still-wet boots and begin to get your gear together. You walk out from the mud hut into the mud, your muddy boots sloshing through the mud getting fresh mud stuck to them again and you think, *shit, the mud was just about to dry.*

You throw your gear into the truck, turn on the truck, start the radio, start the GPS, do radio checks with the two other trucks, go into the supply hut to grab MRE's and water for the Lieutenant in the passenger seat, and the gunner and the translator in the back—*no; no, no, that's not right, not today; today, there will be just the gunner and a Corporal in the rear for this patrol because he is being investigated for possible involvement and/or encouragement of a suicide that happened with one of the men in your company, Kenns, a chef, who couldn't handle the lifestyle, even though he lived in a palace on the safest base in Marjah, Afghanistan.* Whether the Corporal did or did not, whether he is guilty or innocent, whether you believe Marines are knights in shining armor or brutal, professional killers, whether you can embrace this lifestyle or choose to reject what violence lies dormant; what are friends for if not to encourage you to fulfill your empty threats of suicide and doubt?

So, in the end, none of us really cared and we laughed and used his name to replace '*blow my brains out.*' So the joke goes something like this: "*I'm gonna' go Kenns myself now.*" Then you go into the mud hut reserved for shitting in bags and in your hand is your rifle and you are flicking the safety on and off, on and off and it goes click-click, click-click. You are shitting next to Buck; you're shitting together, and you ask him, "*You think it's loud if the barrel is in your mouth when you pull the trigger or does your mouth muffle the sound?*" and he says, "*Can't I shit in peace, is that too much to ask?*" and then there is a pause, and he says, "*It would probably muffle it.*"

Some shit bags are better than others; you want to write to the company that makes shit bags by the thousands and sends them to places like this for men like us and you want to thank them and you think, *maybe they'll send a gift card or a buy-one-get-one-free coupon*, but instead decide you'd rather just use the extra time to jerk off. The zippers on these superior shit bags seal tighter, and they reflect light. They are made of the material you imagine space stations to be made of. But the seal, yes, the seal, that is the *most* important part of the shit bag. Because when they get thrown into the burn pile, they will sit for days and days, and when it is summer if the seal isn't tight enough, they will pop from the heat and send shit flying through the air like an IED.

You hope and pray to god that you aren't in the area and you're not, so you breathe a sigh of relief, and then, your next inhale surprises you because you're sitting in the Tower Post, drenched and soaked and your boots are in a river and your cigarette is almost ruined from the rain and the wind has begun to carry the scent of a platoon's worth of shit through the air and there is nothing you can do and you don't even care because that was your last cigarette and the same rain that drops on you through the cracks of the Tower Post is the same rain that drenches your clothes and chills your bones and forms the river that you are standing in with your boots, the same rain that just put out the cherry on your last cigarette so you have to light it again which you shouldn't do at night because bad guys can see the flame a mile away in the desert *but didn't you already light it minutes ago?* and they can shoot you right above where they saw that flame and then you won't have any teeth in the right side of your mouth and half your face will be gone and then the river at your feet will have things that you were told the tooth fairy would come to take from under your pillow when you were a child but you realize that there aren't any tooth fairies in Marjah, Afghanistan and you aren't a child anymore and that where your tooth is—well, it's in a river at your feet filled with a platoon's worth of cum and ash and mud and you may be tempted in your temporary shock to reach down and pick up your lateral incisor and canine but remember how you and your buddies ejaculate and smoke to pass the time into that puddle and decide against it so you just stand there spitting up blood and gurgle out the words, *"Well, shit."*

But then all your gear is on and you are standing in a circle while the Lieutenant gives your squad a briefing of what the mission is for the day and that it's because of the Corporal's involvement and/or encouragement in the suicide of the weakest link of the company but then someone says, *"Kenns didn't even get the full burst off into his mouth; the guy can't even kill himself"*

*without fucking up,”* and you all begin to laugh including the Lieutenant and then he stops and says, *“Alright, alright, get in the trucks,”* and you and the other drivers are pulling the 3 trucks out of the patrol base. You give the middle finger to your buddy who is standing at the front gate post and you both are wet and miserable and unaware that the day holds in store different things for both of you, but you don’t know that yet, because even though pulling the trigger makes you a god among mere mortals, you have not yet gained the ability to see the future and stop bad things from happening to good men, men you love, men you care about, men you would die for because: *‘There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’*

You are driving the new third truck that replaced the last broken truck from the Company Supply Unit because it was leaking oil. As you sped down the dirt and muddy roads in that second truck, you saw the oil meter slowly inch towards ‘E,’ and you had to set the speed and tempo so that you didn’t stall in the middle of Marjah, Afghanistan to be ambushed because you were a sitting duck with a broken-down truck that had caused the entire convoy to stop and, well, you’re just shit-outta-luck, *but that’s life out here.*

So this third truck, yes, this new upgraded third truck, the truck that replaced the truck that leaked oil, well, this one has the windshield wipers broken and you think, *you can’t have everything you want in life,* and so, two minutes after leaving your base, you stop the new truck with the broken windshield wipers and you pull out a knife to poke little holes in the top of a sealed water bottle, then climb up onto the hood where there is mud and rain colliding together and you almost slip but you don’t because your boots were made to hold fast against raging climates, *well, except for climates that have rain,* and then chuckle to yourself as you pitifully squirt your water bottle at the mud that the tires splattered onto the windshield and that blocks your view of the road and you use your wet sleeve that’s still wet from post the night before to wipe it all away and you hear the gunner on top of the vehicle chuckle and say, *“You look like an asshole,”* and you tell him, *“I’m going to fuck your sister the first night back in the States,”* and you both laugh at the predicament you’ve found yourselves in but you won’t be laughing for long, because the future is upstream, swimming closer and closer.

Still unaware of the events of the future, you climb back down off the truck and get back into the driver’s seat and the Lieutenant asks, *“These windshield wipers don’t work do they?”* and you think to yourself, *no, they do, I just enjoy making an ass out of myself and being the truck’s manual windshield wiper with my water bottle and my fuckin’ sleeve that’s still wet from standing post for four*

*hours before the sun came up*, but instead all you say is, “*No sir, they do not,*” and then you throw the truck in gear and catch up to the other two trucks in no time.

The road intersection is called Lions and Magdalene. There is a large canal on either side of Magdalene, the road you will be turning onto, and you have driven through this turn hundreds of times to get out of the general area of your Patrol Base and continued on with the mission; then you smile and remember that time you drove over an IED that didn't go off and it is something to laugh about because your life is fucked in this shit hole anyway.

But not today; today, yes, today, the rain is coming down and the mud has begun to pock mark the windshield again after you just cleaned it and you are almost completely blinded and you should probably stop to poke holes in a second water bottle with a knife to clean it again but you don't. You'll wait until after the turn; yes, after the turn with the huge hole from where the IED had been removed, but the Lieutenant and you look out each of your respective windows and it looks clear on both sides so you take the turn and trust your instincts which have kept you alive so far and then, halfway through that turn, the Lieutenant is screaming, “*Halvorsen! Halvorsen!*” and your side of the road gives out from the avalanche of mud caused by the rain that came down harder than usual that morning in Marjah, Afghanistan, and you sink, sink, sink and roll and slide and as you slide you think, *this isn't happening I've taken this turn hundreds of times this fuckin' truck with these broken fuckin' windshield wipers that blinded my fuckin' eyes and I want to rip out the throat of the Vehicle Maintenance 'Specialist' who lives in a palace where the chef also used to live on the safest base in Marjah, Afghanistan and it doesn't seem fair but after all life isn't fair,* and then BAM the side of the vehicle crashes into the canal and water begins to pour in and chills you to the bone and Death crosses your mind as it wraps itself around each body in the truck in a menacing embrace and you hear the Corporal in the back lurch forward from the impact and he tries to free the gunner who is still strapped in to the cockpit with his head underwater and choking and drowning on the strength of the current that is pinning him to the steel and he can't go anywhere but you need to free yourself first and the Lieutenant lets you undo your seatbelt so that he can undo his and you move aside as best you can while simultaneously keeping your own head above the water and then gravity lets him fall on top of you because the world is turned on its side and you both stand right-side up on the wrong side of the truck and the cold, cold water is defying both sides so the only way out is through the Lieutenant's door and so the Lieutenant and you push up against it as hard as you can but

the weight of the steel halts your escape and you hear choking and gurgling and you know that the water is drowning the gunner but for now it is up to the Corporal to save him.

Then you have a sudden thought: if it hadn't been for Kenn's suicide, there would've been an Afghan interpreter sitting in the back, instead of the Corporal, who would have panicked and frozen with fear, and this would have caused the gunner to choke and die; but instead, the Corporal who is possibly getting charged with the involvement and/or encouragement of Kenn's suicide is here, and appears almost as an angel and you think, *well, maybe good does come out of bad*, because the Corporal finally cuts the rope free with his own knife and the gunner swings his head up and gasps in the air and coughs up the water and begins to desperately climb up the side of the canal to rid himself completely of the current's fury. Then the passenger door finally opens and the Lieutenant, the Corporal, and yourself climb up and out above the surface of the water and you all look down the road and notice the gunner of the second truck that was supposed to check on the vehicle behind him after each turn, didn't, and so you and your crew are stranded in the canal with the radio ruined. The three of you are shivering and soaked to the bone from that cold, cold water and you all have clean, clean boots that the canal was generous enough to wash and you look up at your gunner who is choking up more and more of the shit water that will infect him and you and the rest of the platoon for the next month and a half with dysentery and you'll be on your hands and knees vomiting and Buck will be shitting water into top-of-the-line shit bags with top-of-the-line seals, and you wonder, *well maybe having dysentery is a nice vacation from standing post and patrolling on foot or in trucks, day and night, for months on end*, so you smile and show off your nicotine-stained lateral incisor and canine and the Corporal pulls out a soaked and ruined pack of cigarettes and laughs and says, "*Smokes anyone?*"

**Russell Halvorsen** was an infantryman in 2/9 Echo Co. He deployed to Marjah, Afghanistan in 2012 and Camp Leatherneck in 2013 to conduct helo-operations to disrupt the flow of narcotics and homemade explosives.