

BRIAN O'HARE

Nothing Earth Shattering

SHE THOUGHT ABOUT HIM at the oddest times; the thoughts vaguely embarrassing, as if revealing her to be a fraud—something other than a good wife and mother. She considered herself a practical woman, and by her sober estimation the memories served no purpose: they were in fact counter-productive to the already complex task of simply living her life. Yet, as much as she tried, she was powerless to control them. That was the maddening part—their unpredictability. When they were upon her, a kind of *déjà vu* would take hold, leaving her unsettled and lost. Like the time two summers ago, on a family trip to Nags Head, when memories of a long ago beach welled up from the bright sand like a guilty confession, leaving her dizzy and lightheaded in the Carolina sun, as her family chattered about her, oblivious. Or while watching TV, when those Marine Corps ads came on, where the Marine pulls the sword from a stone like a young knight, her memories would crackle to life like the lightning filling the sky in the commercial and she'd bite her lip to keep the tears from revealing her. And last fall, when the Piedmont Gas man lit the pilot light in the floor furnace of their house, the masculine tang of Old Spice and clean sweat lingered long after he'd left, and she sat in the creeping autumn dusk savoring the scent until the smell of burning dust gradually overcame the memory. She hated the power these memories had over her, hated the way they made her feel. But her feelings—if they could be called that—were fleeting, vanishing into nothingness like the pilot light suddenly smothered. If she were being honest, she couldn't even remember what he looked like. Sort of pleasant and blonde with a nice smile, if she had to guess. She hadn't known him too well. That was a long time ago, she'd tell herself. She was forty-two now. Three kids, almost grown. A decent enough husband. A nice enough life.

Lance Corporal Larsen hadn't meant to blow himself up. In fact, Larsen was having the time of his life; living the grand adventure of war. He fantasized about his unborn children and the stories he'd tell them. Of how the old man helped take out The Dictator, a family

epic for a family that didn't yet exist. There wasn't even a girlfriend, just a girl from back home he'd flown out to Hawaii for the Marine Corps Birthday Ball the November before they deployed.

She'd been out of North Carolina only once, when she was small, to visit cousins in Roanoke. So Hawaii was a dream come true—the trip of her young life. They'd spent their time doing touristy things: a visit to the Arizona Memorial, buying three for ten-dollar t-shirts at the Aloha Flea Market, and dozing in the November sun on Waikiki Beach. And that dress blue uniform, like something from the movies! Erik was a nice guy for sure. No pressure - not even remotely serious. They'd just kissed.

Larsen, by all accounts, had the world by the ass. Thirty days paid leave. Full medical and dental. Three squares a day, as his old man always said. And if he ever got time, classes toward his Associates degree at the Camp Hansen branch of Central Texas College in Okinawa. (Go Eagles!) He had what any nineteen year old, especially a recent graduate of West Bladen High, would consider a lot of money, direct deposited, minus an allotment for his mom, every two weeks, whether his days were spent pitching quarters and drinking MGD in the barracks or taking on Saddam's Republican Guard. It was all the same to the Marine Corps. Sure beat the shit outta wiping down the soup and potato bar at the Golden Corral.

Before dawn on the day the ground war kicked off, Larsen stepped into the breach, nervous and excited. Though displaying an outward cockiness, (they were Marines!) Larsen secretly worried about a chemical attack. But Gunner McKee had put on an Oscar worthy performance the night before, making the men laugh with his dirty jokes, coolly telling them they had nothing to worry about, that they'd be remembered as long as there was a United States of America. *Ooob-rab!* They'd barked at Gunner McKee. And Gunner McKee hoped he was right.

Turned out Gunner McKee was only mostly right; Larsen was the only casualty that day.

Word spread from Larsen's squad to the platoon, to the company, and then on to battalion. The Marine Corps would send someone to his mom's place outside Raleigh,

right? Or was it Rocky Mount? She moved around a lot. His dad? Well, he'd find out somehow.

The others, the Corporals and the Sergeants in the battalion, wondered what the hell Larsen's NCOs were thinking. How'd they let Larsen get away with hanging grenades from his flak jacket by their pins?

"Kids..." they said, though they were only four or five years older. "Thought he was in the backyard, playin' John Wayne with his buddies."

To Captain "Bedlam" Bednarski, Weapons Company CO, it was Darwinism, pure and simple: "Life is tough; tougher if you're stupid."

They shot looks over their shoulders and chuckled knowingly, making figure eights in the grit with their boots, launching dip spit onto the littered tarmac of the smoldering Kuwait City airport.

But "Mad Mike" Madigan—Larsen's battalion commander—was pissed. Some pansy journalist from *Esquire* had attached himself "like a deer tick on dog balls" to Larsen's platoon when it happened; probably put Larsen on the cover, make him into some big goddamn hero. Cost Mad Mike his promotion to bird colonel and his regiment too.

As he simmered, Mad Mike drained a warm can of Coke, fortified with Wild Turkey, courtesy of the guys who ran the AT&T tent back at Manifa. Through a blackened hole in the glass departure lounge window, Mad Mike watched Marines posing for pictures in front of a wasted jumbo jet, their hands upraised in devil's horns, saluting the chaos they'd wrought. Silently, he vowed to hang Larsen's platoon commander's balls from the rear view of his pick-up for fucking him. Mad Mike turned up the Wagner on his Walkman, and tossed the empty can onto the runway below:

"Cocksucker."

Rumor ran wild. A Marine from Larsen's platoon swore it was suicide. Bullshit. Why not just stick a barrel in his mouth? Like everyone else, like that brother, that dark green from first battalion?

"That was *homicide*, dawg..." someone said.

Young Marines speculated whether Larsen would get the Purple Heart.

"Shut your sucks," Sergeant A snarled. "Guy blows himself up with his own grenade and you're talkin' Purple Hearts. Fuckin' boots."

Pham, his face stung and red by the shrapnel, said he tripped. The grenade went one way. The spoon another. The pin stayed put. Heard him say “Oh shit.” They hit the deck. That was it.

“Oh shit!” They laughed—not even bothering to look over their shoulders.

Whatever it was, it was exciting. It made the experience real. It was a war, right? Somebody had to die. Iraqis didn’t count. It was understood that *they* were going to die - by the carload, by the truckload. Hiding under mattresses in the backs of stolen vans. On foot as they ran: *Let’s get the fuck outta here*—all legs and arms and a cloud of dust, like bad guys in a B movie when the posse rides into town.

But Larsen was a Marine. He counted.

Corporal Rowley, a wrench turner from Motor T, volunteered to help with the mess that was Larsen, more out of curiosity than anything else. He’d never seen a dead body before and felt that by a certain point in a man’s life, a real man needed to see such things. A bucket-list item, if you will. (Not that Larsen was much of a dead body.)

Rowley held the bag for Harris, a dark green from Supply. They looked for dog tags. Teeth. Bone fragments. Whatever. Afterward, they went through Larsen’s personal gear. Found the usual stuff: A well-used Victoria’s Secret catalog. A fun size Butterfinger bar that fell apart in Rowley’s hands as he broke it in half. Three blurry snapshots: A dog panting happily in a red dirt backyard. A pale girl on Waikiki beach, Diamond Head looming and eternal behind her. The same girl, now wearing what looked like a prom dress, with Larsen at the Birthday Ball. Bootleg cassettes bought from Mama-san who ran the store outside Gate One at Hansen: Guns N’ Roses. Metallica. A mix tape labeled “For Jennifer” in ballpoint pen. Nothing earth shattering.

Mad Mike wanted a hero letter. It was the right thing to do—and it would cover his ass. The XO wrote it himself: “The expression of grateful comrades for the loss of an American hero, patrolling behind enemy lines in the defense of freedom.”

The letter was well received, even though the XO had misspelled “freedom”. But that was beside the point.

Thoughts soon drifted to the “Welcome Home Hero” free beer surely in their futures, the grateful handshakes, and the problem of how to send an AK home to West Baltimore. They came. They saw. They kicked ass.

The world was theirs.

She'd heard the song in passing - through a car window as she cut across the Hardee's parking lot on her way to work: Tears for Fears' *Everybody Wants To Rule the World*. She startled. Stopped in the middle of the lot. Her legs wobbled slightly, like the waves of heat rising from the asphalt, lured by the music to a car Larsen had borrowed for the weekend, the song playing on a small boom box that sat on the frayed backseat because the car's cassette player had been stolen. A gentle silence hung between them, sparkling and soft in the late afternoon light.

The music faded as the car left the Hardee's lot. She took a deep breath, and looked to see if anyone had noticed. There was no one. She got her bearings, and headed into the white light of the sun. After all, she was a practical woman.

The mythology of the Marine Corps has always fascinated **Brian O'Hare**—its dark promise led him to the U.S. Naval Academy and after graduation, to almost six years as a Marine officer. Yet it was during combat in the Persian Gulf with the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines that Brian realized mythology clashed with reality. That experience created a friction that drives Brian to write—and to reconcile his own mythology and reality.