

A BROKEN MIRROR

Fiction by Ron Kaiser

This contribution by Granite State writer Ron Kaiser begins something of a new feature for the Coffee Coaster: posting of shorter fictional literature from the "alternative" creative sector. [Not that these spiritually young artists won't break through to the current state-infested, conformatose mainstream, but perhaps the Coffee Coaster can provide a freedom-inclined platform from which to penetrate the Big Pond at a better launch angle.][1]



Upon inspecting my jail cell I find the vinyl piss-proof mattress was stuck to the stainless steel shelf with congealed blood. A buzzing fluorescent light annoys my ears and harshly illuminates the paintless, porous concrete walls, with tiny holes that seem to drink the shrinking cell's air. There is only a tiny slot in the metal door to see the MP's eyes.

"Fucking murderer," says the guard.

"You're next," I say. Why not? He won't touch me, not when my trial's tomorrow. Screw him anyway. What does he know about that nightmare in Tikrit?

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We were doing 70 or so when the blast roared behind us and turned my side mirror into a bright square of light and Sergeant Sage yelled, "Jesus don't stop! Go!"

I stomped the accelerator and screamed, "Smitty!"

"Forget Smith! Go!" Sergeant Sage turned around and looked up at the turret. He said, "You alright, Smitty?"

I tried to loosen my grip a bit on the steering wheel but my hands made it vibrate like a cheap washing machine. I clutched it tight and followed the rapidly disappearing lights on the back of the lead Humvee before us.

"Christ, Disco, put your foot down," said Sage.

"I can barely see, Sergeant!" I had only been driving using night vision goggles for a month, and it always felt like a video game, the world looking like a green, static-y TV screen.

I heard Sharps in the back seat: "Want me to show this kid how to drive a truck, Sergeant?"

"Three letters Sharps," I said. "DUI."

"Shut up, Sharps, and point that head at your window like you're supposed to," said Sage. We were short two sets of NVGs, so Sage and Sharps were pretty much blind; I don't think it mattered whether Sharps was watching his sector of fire.

The radio crackled, "Carnivore to Hound Dog, pull over behind me and prepare to transmit salute report. Out."

Sgt. Sage flicked on his lighter and began punching codes into the keypad on the Sincgar radio. I had to block out the flame with my hand; even looking at light that tiny is painful if you're wearing NVGs. I was glad he was putting in the codes and not me, because it takes forever and if you mess up once you have to start over. The lights cruising through the dark before us slowed and moved off the dirt road, and I guided our Humvee behind them.

"Dismount and secure perimeter," said Sage.

I reached into the back seat, grabbed my M-4 carbine and opened the Humvee's flimsy canvas door. I leveled my rifle at the green-tinted desert night.

"NVGs off!" said Smith, standing up in the turret. My NVGs were clipped to my Kevlar, and I flipped them up. The spotlight snapped on and I was careful to keep the bright light at my back, following the sweep of the trembling light beam over the sand and brush. I shielded my eyes and looked up at Smitty, manning the spotlight in the turret. Something on his .50 cal was loose, because his shaking hands were causing it to rattle like hell.

"You alright?" I asked.

"You shouldn't have stopped," he said.

"Look alive!" yelled Sgt. Sage. "Sharps, what the hell are you doing? Stay next to the vehicle and secure your area!"

"I was just..." Sharps began.

"Shut up and scan!" said Sage.

Four soldiers spilled out of the Humvee up ahead of us, and three of them efficiently formed hasty fighting positions around their vehicle's perimeter, while the fourth soldier crunched over to us rapidly and flipped up his NVGs. It was Captain Hurst.

"Sergeant Sage!" yelled the captain. "What the hell are you doing? You think this is World War II? That spotlight's gonna get us killed!"

Sergeant Sage set his boots wide in the dirt. "We got three soldiers with broke NVGs, Sir. Why don't you tell me what the hell you'd go with, three blind soldiers or no blind soldiers?"

"OK, OK, Sergeant, settle down. You ready to send the salute report?"

Sage's eyes didn't leave the Captain's face. He yelled, "Sharps! Get HQ on the radio!"

The big captain looked at me, "Integrus, you driving, right?"

"Yes sir."

"So why in the hell did you stop when that blast went off back there?"

"I... no excuse, sir."

"Damn right, no excuse! You National Guard troops do whatever you want when you're back on the block, but when you're in my fucking convoy you goddamned floor it when there's a blast. You're lucky we were cooking right along when it went off."

"Yeah I already covered all that with him, sir," said Sage.

The Captain spit in the sand, "That right, Sergeant? How's that salute report coming?"

"Sharps! You get a hold of HQ or what?" Sergeant Sage leaned in the Humvee's window. "What's taking—What!"

"Hold on a sec..." said Sharps. "There's something wrong with it."

"You fucking cleared the codes! Stop touching it! Get out!"

Sharps climbed out the passenger side muttering under his breath, and Sage climbed into the driver's seat. He yelled, "You are in deep shit, Private Sharps!"

"Hey, I'm no private!" Sharps shot back.

"You are now," said the Captain. "You realize there are two other convoys coming this way, right, Sharps? You mighta just killed a few of our fellas."

"Yeah right," muttered Sharps.

The Captain raised his eyebrows at this blatant disrespect, then shook his head and spit. "Jesus Christ. Like herding cats!"

Sharps was one of these people you meet once in a while that had gotten their asses kicked by life. He was wore out at 35 years old, with the addled brain of a world-champion boxer and none of the glory. He had been sent reeling to the mat time and again by the mighty, loaded glove of Natural Light Ice, his beer of choice. Or rather, his beer of necessity, since it was all he could afford.

Sharps had been a Specialist when I joined up in '97. But before long I outranked him, as I was promoted by simple virtue of not showing up drunk.

It was on my first day of drill with my new unit that Sgt. Sage and I met in the freezing parking lot around six a.m. Ice crunched beneath our boots as we crossed the pavement over to the armory, and as we mounted the steps, Sgt. Sage stopped.

"I'll be goddamned," he said.

All curled up in the half-frozen leaves was Sharps in jeans and a t-shirt. He'd been locked out of the armory, since he'd closed down the Black Brimmer the previous night. Just like an animal, he'd dug himself a little hole with his hands and everything. So anyway you can imagine how much I enjoyed trusting Sharps with my life.

Sharps walked around the Humvee toward the Captain and I, abandoning his sector of fire. He began to speak but Captain Hurst held up a hand. "Tell you what. Sage!"

"Fixin' the radio, sir!" Sage yelled from inside the truck.

"I know that! You just listen. You boys go ahead and send that report, and then double back and check out the cluster of buildings we passed right before the IED went off. You remember that?"

"I'm almost finished with this radio, sir!"

"Alright. When you finish clearing those buildings you continue on north and we'll catch up at the checkpoint."

The Captain turned and left, but his absence didn't worry me nearly as much as the trepidation in Sergeant Sage's voice. He didn't want to be left out here in the desert with us rookies. Couldn't blame him. The Captain and his 1st Mountain Division convoy roared off, the tiny blackout lights disappearing into the dark. When we mounted back up I clicked down my NVGs and the road before me crackled luminescent green again. Heading back toward the blast sight, I looked at Sgt. Sage in the passenger seat. He was pushing tobacco into his lower lip, meditatively. If Sage, the Gulf War Veteran was worried, then we were screwed.

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I gripped the cold steering wheel until my hands felt like they were asleep. Goddamned Sharps. If he hadn't pissed off that 10th Mountain Captain, we might still be out here with some professionals, instead of one scared shepherd trying to guide three scared sheep. Well maybe two scared sheep. Sharps was too dumb to even know to be scared.

I heard a muffled yell and tensed up, then realized it was Smitty, manning the turret above us. He'd screamed, "Fuck you, Sergeant Marlowe!" At one time or another every soldier in the United States military hates their recruiter, at least momentarily. It was not uncommon to hear someone yell, "Fuck you, Sergeant So-and-So!"

I asked, "Who was your recruiter, Sharps?"

"Aw, I don't remember" he said.

"Well he ought to be hung, whoever he is."

Sharps mumbled, "At least when I drive, I can keep it steady at one speed. Sheesh, you're gonna get us killed."

Sage, who hadn't said a word since we headed back, whipped around and stuck his finger in Sharps' face. "Not another word from you. Not another fucking word!" With my green-tinted vision all I could make out was Sage's eyes. They looked white and wide to the point of bursting.

I pulled off the road about 50 yards from the small cluster of squat concrete hovels and climbed out of my Humvee. Sharps scrambled out of the back quickly and began walking slowly, deliberately toward the building, eager to prove himself.

Sage hissed, "Sharps! Back here!"

Reluctantly Sharps turned and came back.

"Light!" said Sage.

The spotlight clicked on and bathed in light Sharps's filthy face, his dirt-crusting moustache. He winced and almost seemed to shrivel, like an ant beneath a sun-streaming magnifying glass.

Sergeant Sage stalked slowly over, approached Sharps from an oblique angle, like a man approaching an unfamiliar dog.

"You running shit?" said Sage.

"Huh?" Said Sharps.

"You think you're running the show around here?"

"No Sarge," He said.

"Good. Because if you so much as sweat, if you so much as have a fucking idea, without clearing it with me first, I'll put a bullet in you myself."

"Light!" said Sage. The spotlight clicked off and Sharps disappeared.

"Smith. Cover us, don't kill us," said Sage.

"Got it."

"When Disco pushes that door open, you pour on the light."

I tasted metal, and when I swallowed I had a sensation like I'd swallowed a quarter. My boots grinding the sand sounded impossibly loud. I tried to take steady breaths as I approached the weather-beaten door, with Sage and Sharps forming a wedge behind me. I reached for the handle and Sharps cut in front of me like a kid in a lunch-line. I looked back at Sage and he shrugged. Help yourself, I thought. Plenty to go 'round.

Sharps held his M-4 vertically, placed his palm against the worn wooden door and shoved it open. It swung inward and he ducked through the dark doorway without hesitation. I followed Sharps into the dark. Suddenly bright light stung my eyes and I turned my head and squinted, tried to see out of my periphery but could see only spotty orbs so I blinked hard and made out a table, and behind it were two silhouettes with rifles. I heard Sharps yell, "Shit!" and there was popping all around, and muzzle flashes from the figures before us, and I crouched and fired my jolting rifle blindly. Everything was piercing and popping and smashes and flashes and the rank sulfur smell, and then a single metallic click. Empty.

When the gunfire ended I heard Sage hoarsely screaming, "Get out of the fucking doorway, Integrus! I can't cover you!"

"All clear," I said, and stepped toward the wreck of wooden furniture we'd shot apart. The spotlight beam showed bright tapestries covering the walls: turquoise, red, and gold. Drifting-down dust covered everything in fine white powder. Whatever the bullet-riddled wall was made of had fallen over everything like snow.

Sage peered into the doorway. "You hit?"

My attention was on the blue patch behind table and shot-up chairs, where the spotlight did not quite reach. I could hear ticking from over there. I treaded over splintered wood and dark blue glass fragments, made out a swarthy man in blue, stretched out on a mattress.

"Got one down over here," I said, and trained my empty rifle on him.

"Covering you," said Sage.

The man in powder-blue pajamas was lying perfectly still. My heartbeat pulsed in my ears as I saw that black blood welled up out of the man's nightshirt. His head was tipped back, his black, bushy beard encircling an incongruously stretched mouth, teeth that were too bare. Beside him was pink. I lurched because I saw pink, shredded pajamas soaked in sticky black. A little body with a black mop of hair, twisted around a chair-leg, motionless save the welling blood. That was the source of the ticking noise: her vibrating foot, that suddenly stopped when I looked at it. A little girl.

I smashed the rubble of furniture with my boot, but I could not see a single firearm anywhere. "Where are the fucking rifles?" I asked. It was not a question, but an indictment, I knew, against myself and Sharps. No rifles, because in the very back of the room on the floor, light burned back at us from the shattered shards of a wall-length mirror. It was us.

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Sitting here in my squalid jail cell offers no reprieve. The dead are in here with me. They have set up shop behind my eyes: the black, bloody mop of hair, the vibrating foot that stopped. The derision of my guard, bloodshot eyes contracted in hate: "We had this

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region pretty well under control before the National Guard started shooting up mosques. Lost three guys from my unit in the reprisal bombing. You know that?"

I close my eyes, but he won't stop.

He says, "You know, I'm on stop-loss because of you?"

"I'll have my trial."

"Did that little girl get a trial?"

He's right, of course. I am acquainted with death. What else could there be for me? But I look up, and in the rectangular slot I see in the MP's eyes something akin to pity.

"Tell you what," he says. "I'm gonna help you out."

"Sure."

"Just listen," he says. "Take your bed sheet and twist it into a rope."

"Then what?"

"Sling it up over that pipe and hang yourself."

[1] If you have a fictional piece and you would like to post on the Coffee Coaster, please send via email to Brian Wright. Mainly, I'm looking for short stories 1000-4000 words— with authenticity and feeling, humor, about them... and, if political, at least an implied peace-and-liberty edge. If your piece is posted, I will contact you for approval first; at this stage in the CC world, there is no remuneration but it will receive a full professional copyedit.

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