

Kuwait, Briefly

I tie my boots, sling my weapon across my body and follow my buddies through the tent flap and out into the unforgiving blaze of the sun. My eyes tingle from the intense light and threaten to tear. Remembering the sunglasses that I keep strapped around my Kevlar, I reach up and tug the shades down onto my face.

The trip to afternoon chow plays out as always. The desert landscape lies open and endless, but ditches and taut tent ropes force us to step carefully along the packed tan earth. Cassell and Taubin complain about the whereabouts of their overdue packages from home, triggering Bracken to say for the fiftieth time that she has yet to have a problem with postal.

Such a goody two-shoes, that Bracken. She's the only one who maintained her grade school pen pal since we deployed. She doesn't think babies can be ugly, and every other day, postal receives a huge package with her too-long Yuppie name on it. If this weren't the desert Podunk of Kuwait, but say, Disneyworld, Sutton Melissa Hadley Bracken would be Snow White and the rest of us, her entourage of birds fluttering and furry rabbits hopping behind her.

Just as Murphy chimes in about the cyber-fight she had with her boyfriend, the mess hall comes into view. Despite the rumbling from my middle, I wish to turn back. Once again the line is impossibly long, and therefore, not worth enduring for the overcooked food at its end. Some days I can deal with it, but most of the time I forego the hassle and remain in the tent attacking a box of Cheez-Its and guzzling a bottle of water.

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As I look on the scene – a never-ending queue of soldiers in chunky boots, baggy uniforms and floppy Boonie hats, like clowns gathered around the circus tent - I decide that I'd rather polish off the Wheat Thins I had stashed in my foot locker.

As soon as we make our way to the end, more soldiers approach in gaggles and fill up the space behind us.

"You ladies been up north yet?" asks a private using the military construct for Iraq.

"No. We leave in two weeks," Murphy replies.

A conversation ensues between our groups, but the chit-chat isn't enough to hold me. I find myself distracted and soured by what Murphy doesn't say: that we've been hearing 'two more weeks' for over a month.

"You know what guys," I butt in, "I'm gonna have to pass."

"Again?" Cassell looks at me incredulously. "Are you on a special diet plan, Rew?"

"No, my appetite's been kinda funny since we got here." I start to inch backward away from further questions that might require quick covers for the real issue.

"Hey, can you check the mail on your way back?" Bracken's face brightens like a private's on leave.

"Roger that," I reply and head away from the lines of human dominoes.

Postal is clear on the other side of camp. I don't mind the long walk because I know that with most of the troops at chow, getting the mail will be

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quick and painless. My trek takes me through more tent communes, past the huge tanks of potable water and past soldiers playing cards and having a down-time smoke. I wave to the Kuwaiti civilians who sport their permanent smiles as if they're honored to scrub our shower points and drain our Porta-Potties. Along the way I ponder and wonder. Somehow I ended up here and I wish I had been less eager.

I remember the chain of events - the towers falling, the Ground Zero fire dying, and the same fire reigniting under my ass. I took the oath and then made a beeline Middle Eastbound. I thrived on the immediacy of it all; the fast-pacing that stemmed from tragedy and hopefully would end in triumph. It was full speed ahead, that is, until I got here.

Kuwait is supposed to be a holding area, a temporary stop just before charging into Al-Qaeda territory. Instead the tiny country with its extreme temperatures and mutant insects is the monkey wrench halting my momentum. I want to go to Iraq, do my time and get back home. But each day I spend here is a waste. While I burn in record heat, my countdown remains frozen, unable to begin.

I'm halfway to postal and I pass the telephones and makeshift computer labs. The lines that surround them curve and stretch, like electron paths around a nucleus. They taunt me and attack my sorest point. Having spent the last 10 years as a peon in the evil world of retail, I've grown to withstand any form of aggravation. But the one blow that upsets my threshold is waiting.

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“Wait patiently,” I was always told as a child. What I presumed to be a virtue soon sounded more like an oxymoron. Patience is easy to have when you know what’s in store for you on the other side. But waiting is a most grievous surprise, like falling down into a trap and counting the minutes until you’re discovered.

I should’ve seen it coming. I joined an institution that claims “Hurry up and wait” as its unofficial motto. I was forced into a combat wardrobe, hastily trained for battle and ushered onto a plane only to be condemned to limbo in Kuwait. I cringe when I consider the last four letters in that name.

The tiny postal trailer lay just a few feet ahead and I am relieved to find no one loitering out in front. I walk through a mass grave of newly discarded cigarette butts, remnants of the pre-chow rush.

Inside a large floor fan is on full blast, sending forth muggy air with particles that dot my lenses. I wipe away the grunge with my sleeve, but keep my sunglasses tight on my face.

“You’re from Bracken’s unit, right?” asks a specialist behind the counter.

“Right.”

“There are three big packages and some letters,” he said. “I piled them on that hand truck over there.”

He points to a bright red contraption with chipped paint and dusty wheels.

“Thanks.”

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I scribble my name, rank and social on the clipboard, and then wheel the hand truck out of the trailer.

Upon my return to the tent, my stomach continues its tirade. I park the hand truck by my cot and throw back the lid of my footlocker. I shove my hand into the box of Wheat Thins and seconds later, my hunger subsides.

I begin to distribute the envelopes, setting aside anything for the male soldiers and placing letters for the females in their respective sleep areas. The first two packages are addressed to Macklin and Jones, and I sigh at having to lug them over to the male tent.

The last box is heavy and I decide to pull the lip of the hand truck out from underneath and leave the package for Bracken to deal with. As soon as I free the machine, I see the address on one of the box panels and realize that the package isn't Bracken's problem at all.

Written clearly in Sharpie-black letters is the name, SPC Carew, Elaina. I reach for my cargo pocket and free the flaps from the buttons that secure my Gerber knife.

I slice through the strip of tape and sift through the contents of the box. My fingers touch packages of cookies, candy and toiletries. Taped to the inside flap is a letter written on my mother's yellow stationery. I read it and munch some more. The last three lines give me pause.

I wish you weren't so far away. It's like you're somewhere out on Mars. I'm keeping the porch light on until you come back home.

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My mother's words linger and suddenly the cracker mush is dry and sticky as it inches down my throat. Until this moment I never gave a thought to the burden that persists with each day she waits for me. I imagine every moment to be an exercise in torture of not knowing exactly where I am, what I'm doing or if I'm breathing. And I, the source of her entrapment, fret shamelessly, eating one out of four food groups because I don't want to bear a fraction of her heavy load.

I reach in the box to grab the last of the Wheat Thins and reconsider. The heat is stifling, but I figure that it's time that I come to grips with the fact that I have no choice but to wait; to wait in line and start eating better.