

# Geography

BY ELIZABETH KADETSKY

**E**ver since the war I sleep just a little, and lightly, which has certain benefits such as I never need to set an alarm any more, and I don't have to worry about someone creeping in my window at night to rob, rape, maul, or otherwise harm me. Losing one's ability to sleep is, according to the therapist who comes to the Vets Center, the baseline symptom for everyone who suffers psychological trauma after combat. In my case I don't like to be out too long without knowing what's going on around me, so the situation works out more or less, except that if I'm operating at ten percent capacity when I'm asleep, when I wake up I'm at barely fifty.

The night it all started, Freddy left, and I bolted the door after him and opened the window onto my fire escape. I did this most nights: I left the window locked during the day to keep out burglars, but open at night for air. In other respects, too, the night went like others. When I started to drift off, I noticed myself dreaming the words *Wake up! Wake up!*—which I did promptly. When I got back to dreamland I stayed there maybe an hour, but then heard a rustling in the curtain in front of the fire escape and was wide awake before the wind blew it open to reveal a shadow of nothing. For a while I watched the sparkly cityscape in the distance beyond. Then after not too long I was out again and stayed that way a couple hours.

I thought it was about three when I heard a man shadowing through the building checking for unlocked doors. Then I shook myself sufficiently awake to remember this was the familiar sound of my neighbor setting out for her job. A blue rim of dawn laced the rooftops, so I put on my eye mask and drifted to sleep again more peacefully.

I'd made Freddy leave that night because he'd scared me, which even I knew was paranoid.

You've already gone to bed with me, Renee—he'd said. You liked it. I know you did—His face had let me know I was charming and irrational, so quixotically turning down the opportunity to sleep with him. But a flash of anger crossed his face, too, and that put a fear in me, and then I felt it more when I saw the same in him. What I saw was the terror of an animal that does dumb and witless and desperate things that do not necessarily advance its survival as a species.

It was true I always liked sex, pretty much, once I got there.

I'm just—I'd confessed to him then—a little frightened—which wasn't a lie. I heard the quaver in my voice, like there was something sharp on me, like glass shards on a cement wall.

Ah, c'mon. What's to be afraid of?

I shrugged. He is a sculptor by profession, and I was holding a globe he'd made for my birthday and given to me that night at dinner. I held the globe in front of my chest with both my arms, like a kidnapper who's using a child as body armor. It was protective and solid, complete as only a circle could be. If it were a man it would have been cavalier and courtly and hardy. And it was gorgeous, too, finely worked in metal and painted like a nineteenth-century explorer's map, which I told him as well.

Then he'd just stood there, so I pointed out again it was beautiful. He told me he wanted the globe to remind me of him when he wasn't there. I promised it would and then glanced at the door like now was as good a time as any to see if it really did. I sent out that hint because of the fear.

Disappointment shadowed his face, and that was when I also had the thought that if the globe were a person he would be a very different kind of a man from Freddy.

The therapist told me, the thing about the window and not sleeping more than four hours, it was a chicken and egg problem. If you secured the apartment better, he suggested, you wouldn't need to stay alert, and then you could maybe get a good night's sleep.

But just because you understand your pathology doesn't mean you can change it, thank you, I said right back to him, which made him shrug. I was right, he knew it from his other patients.

The Vets Center offers Group as well, which is mandatory for

those of us receiving benefits, though seeing the therapist is not. Not too many in Group take it that step further and sign up for one-on-ones with the doctor. If I'm the only one I'm also the only woman. Otherwise I'm more or less like the guys except I have a college degree. But like those guys I get the benefits and therefore don't have to work for a living, and I got the benefits for the same reason they did, which is, according to the doctors' report, I had stress.

At the time I got diagnosed for it I didn't think of this as stress, but it was true for the two years since the war I hadn't been able to hold a job, for all kinds of reasons it seemed to me but the therapist was right: if you traced back each it pointed either to the fact I wasn't functioning so well on next to zero sleep, or other things aside from insomnia that are on the checklist of symptoms for war trauma. These include, as well as paranoia, avoidance—a term that is essentially a euphemism for *Letting Your Life Fall Apart Without Your Actually Seeming to Make It Happen*. I let things fall apart with my now ex-husband, for instance, and then stopped paying rent when he moved out.

Nothing much in particular happened to me in combat to explain these symptoms aside from having my nervous system set to a permanent eleven on the audio dial due to all the ambient threat, and on top of that disillusionment about whether we were actually doing the right thing there, as an army, wasting all those government tax dollars and Iraqi lives and jeopardizing our survival and of course our sanity as individuals.

The one thing from Iraq that still gives me a nervous and prickly sensation on the hairs of all my body is one time I was with another soldier out at night, and I got more scared than I'd ever been in my life, more scared than during all the special ops training and more scared than even being there when a bomb went off and watching people run around frantic and missing their arms.

The soldier and I were in the dark alone, which doesn't happen often at war at the bases between a man and a woman. He was dark skinned but rosy complexioned, and when he smiled I felt like I was someplace war had never been invented. We talked and talked, about life and the army and about what we were doing here, not just in Iraq but on the planet. It was that kind of conversation when time doesn't seem to pass—that makes you feel human that you and another person share so much. For the first time since I'd landed there I noticed my skin. It felt moist, in that inhuman desert parched of water and cracked, deprived of breath. More time went by but I didn't sense that.

Then he took something out and smoked it. Suddenly everything changed. All at once I remembered where I was: at the end of a footpath fenced by chain link on one side and a concrete barricade on the other, out behind an army base bulls-eye center in the desert, with no one around but people with guns and tanks and too much artillery and not enough conviction to make them know what to do with it.

Now I saw how he saw me. I was a victim, weak and alone on a dark footpath with a man at nighttime.

What I saw, I saw maybe because he'd seen it first. He was looking at me but his eyes were pointed a little bit away at the same time, and that was it, I wasn't a person anymore. When he turned back I noticed my eyes reflected in his, and that there was a fear in them.

What are you doing alone at night, out in the dark by yourself, Missy? Don't you know soldiers are dangerous? Hell don't you know the desert's dangerous? War is dangerous. What are you doing here?—He went on like that.

I was boxed in. I thought about running but there was nowhere.

I'm not by myself, I'm with you. What's to be scared of?

That didn't do much. Nothing changed back in his face. His eyes were thin and angry. They'd got blank but with the rage still there.

I thought if I could say some right thing, I could alter the situation back to safety. *What's your mother's name?*—I came up with that. I don't know what I was thinking, just that if I said this it would save my life. Maybe it did. I don't know if my life got saved or squandered. I'm alive, anyway.

Françoise—he answered. I'd interrupted a current.

French—I said.

Creole.

Now we were back to being human we two shared so much.

We're French, too—I said—My mother's Fleur. My grandman's Cecile.

For a second he looked at me like these were his aunts. *Tante Fleur. Tante Cecile.* I stared at his eyes and tried to make him remember his Tante Fleur, his Tante Cecile.

But then he Jekyll-Hyded again, and out of nowhere came his fist at me. I don't know if I went unconscious then or only when I hit the ground. I can say that several seconds of my existence passed that have been completely gone from my memory ever since. He was twice my size, that was the first thing I thought when I came back to consciousness. My face was bloody and broke and the guy was

coming at me with a hand like an ink stain.

When I went to the Med unit later the doctor told me I should have heard a crack sound when that fist hit me, loud like a bat on a hardball. It had broken my bone clear and clean. But all I'd heard was my screaming. My head was numb in and out. Nothing seemed to be moving inside it except my eardrums reverberating with that scream going on and on, because it didn't stop for a long while, maybe several minutes, so long that after another while I did feel pain, but it was in my throat, sharp and hot like fire. I didn't feel it when he punched my ribs after, either, and I knew he'd done it only because later I saw bruises, and under them the doctor found another fracture.

Because of my screaming he ran off, and some guys came, but not before that Creole tore something, too, deep in my belly. *Ostie*—I heard my mother's voice. As if I didn't know his name to report him. Not that the case resolved one way or the other ever, which is what happens with about ninety percent of assault charges in the military, or so I hear from the therapist, Dr. G. There's a case open but I never hear of it.

The motherfucker. Not Dr. G, I mean, but that Creole who broke my face and is probably attending his own Vets group for stress now someplace deep in Neanderthal-ville, USA. I hope he passively let his life fall apart even better than I did.

The night after Freddy gave me the globe I didn't see him, but I did take his artwork to bed with me and hold it close. It made me feel strong. It would have been nice to be holding in my arms a man as formidable as that globe, as fearless and full of integrity and interior structure, someone who carved pathways from chaos. Those dark maps of unexcavated forest, those rivers with mysterious sources: that man could transform them to a grid-work of rational lines. I could love that man. I suppose that's who Freddy wanted to be when he handed me that globe, the person he'd been when he conceived it.

I get better sleep come daytime, which is another reason it's been hard to hold a job and my life has more or less bottomed out financially except for the Vets' benefits and the rent now paid in alimony by my ex-husband, who doesn't talk to me. He is a vet, too, but not the kind who has war stress. I usually stay exhausted even if I'm not sleeping,

and remain in bed till two in the afternoon. That puts about half my life in bed, though usually I'm up somewhere before dawn drinking somnolence tea and reading my alumni magazine or *Army* or *Elle*.

My day is basically sleeping till two, then walking to Group—Brooklyn to Queens—which takes about two hours but I want the exercise, plus I save on carfare. I take a different route every time, and when I get home I study my path on Google Maps.

Starting when I got Freddy's globe, I kept his sculpture on my desk next to my computer and glanced at it while I checked my route on Google. I felt like that explorer myself, carving pathways.

Sometimes I walk home, too, unless I have plans, which during that time usually meant with Freddy. Otherwise I make dinner and then it starts all over again, my battle against sleep and sleep's battle against me. My relationship with sleep is pretty much the same as my relationship with sex. Freddy guessed that one right. I want it and I don't want it. I don't want to fall for it—to love it so much I'll want more, and then like most things it will become hard to depend on.

Group is more or less storytelling hour, which passes the time and doesn't always feel bad. Someone takes the floor and amuses the guys who have to be there anyway to get their benefits, and then we go home and battle the real demons.

When it's my turn I talk about that bomb I saw go off that left those people missing limbs, or just the boredom and frustration of months in the desert with nothing ever seeming to resolve. I don't talk about what really happened to me. Freddy would probably think this was cute, but I don't want the guys in Group to think I'm a victim, the way that soldier did. That's all it takes and—*wham!*—you really are a victim. So I hold it close.

A few nights after Freddy gave me the globe I bumped into a guy from Group, Mike, on the street near my apartment in Brooklyn. He was the oldest guy in Group, a vet from Nam. Bumping into him was bizarre because I knew he lived in Queens, so what was he doing here? He was holding a map but couldn't seem to tell east from west or the Gowanus from the East River. It gave me a pang, seeing him so under-prepared and out on the street. He held his jaw rigid and his lower lip in an eternal pout he always wore, as if these contributed to the project

of ensuring his survival and locating home. Maybe he'd have done better in the rainforest in Nam, but whatever skills he learned in the army, they weren't translating in the nighttime city. I felt like a guide while I tried to help him out, pointing him this way and that and turning his map right-side up for him so north was actually north.

What brought him all the way out to Atlantic Avenue from Queens? —I asked, friendly enough.

The question made him nervous. As it turned out there was not much of anything bringing him out to my neighborhood, which gave me a weird feeling. When he tried to explain himself his jaw got even tighter and his upper lip turned to an even more rigid straight line, and his voice shook and his face got pink and his eyelids flickered like someone on a moving subway watching the pillars.

I tried to help him out—Good vegetable market over here, huh?—We exchanged more pleasantries—G train, huh?—Stuff like that.

Afterward, I was up a long time reading my magazines and listening to my chest thump. One of the things they tell you in Group is your body circuit-shifts to alert mode at even a slight worry of crisis. The instruction to circuit-shift back is to observe the feeling, which in my particular case just then was as if the hairs on my arms had sprouted ten million itch receptors and my eyes could stare down the wall with Infra-red. In theory the feeling would pass, but I was up with it till long after my neighbor went to work and a hazy morning light shone up the rooftops.

At Vets group next day I understood a little better why Mike, the vet from Nam, had got so eyelid-quivery when I encountered him with his map.

He told a story about one time he'd got kidnapped in Florida. He said they were black guys, and kept saying over and over that they were stupid, which bothered me since it's a mixed group. It annoyed me same as pornography irks me—people should keep that to themselves, in mixed company.

The story held us all, though. He talked at a clip, without taking breaths between phrases, with a faint southern accent and without moving that rigid jaw. His lower lip was a little fleshier than his upper, so this created that pout, suggesting that to ignore him would be to violate a natural right he'd been born with.

These guys were so *stoo*-pid they blindfolded me when they took

me *in*, and left the blindfold off when they took me *out*—he said—Then they drove me home and put on the blindfold *there*. They thought I didn't *know* where I *lived*.

Apparently that day, back in 'seventy, three men in a van picked up Mike hitchhiking. They'd been following him, because they thought he'd ripped them off in *some deal* and owed them *some huge amount* of cash. It took Mike three days to convince them he wasn't *their guy*—*They'd* done the job and couldn't pick out the white guy who'd done it *with* them. They were so *stoo-pid* they didn't know I wasn't *their guy*.

Mike by now was talking with stress on half the words and at a fast rumble so no one would ever be able to interrupt until he reached critical mass, when either everything inside got spent or our eardrums got so worn down we busted in. So finally he did let his jaw relax about a half centimeter so it almost looked like he was grinning, and for the first time since he started he let in some air.

People asked quick what they did with him three days, which was to tie him in a chair and put a gun in his mouth to make him "confess." People also wanted to know what happened afterwards. That was the part it sounded like he hadn't thought about in a long time. He had to squint hard to remember.

Yeah I did something 'bout it—he snickered—I got three o' my *guys* and we *kid-napped 'em*. They didn't *blind-fold* me. I knew where they *lived*—Mike and his friends drove his kidnappers to the woods and chained them to a tree and left them there. Mike cackled at the memory.

I had this visceral feeling against him, the way he talked through his teeth and how his skin was pasty and scaly and how he was a racist. I should have felt empathy: I could see just talking about all this was getting Mike rattled. He spoke with emphasis now on every fourth syllable, now every third, now every second. Also, his whitewash—white face was turning pink. At one point he put out his hand to act the guy holding the gun and it was shaking. Sure enough somewhere in there Mike also revealed he didn't sleep much, and that he never dreamed, which was just what Dr. G would predict.

We don't sleep because we don't want to dream, because then we'll inevitably try to make sense of those memories that in real life we can't, because they *don't* make sense. War doesn't make sense, and it doesn't make sense someone would try to kill you, and it doesn't make sense someone would tie you to a chair for three days. The only

way you can rationalize all that is if you toss out everything you tell yourself so you can get through the day, for instance that people are not murderous and that strangers will not harm you. But if you've really seen evil you know people will murder and harm you for no good reason, so there you go. You've got two contradictory realities existing simultaneously in your head, and they have to exist in your mind comfortably side by side. Your mind can't grasp that. Instead it chooses one version or the other, and spins into an endless loop convincing itself first of one reality and then the other, and before you know it you've got a wrench twisting up what was once a machine, quietly humming with happy untruths. Better to let it hum. Otherwise your nervous system gets triggered to permanent *On* and you're up all night reading *Elle*. Try and dream about it and all you see is blood and chaos.

Next someone asked Mike kind of in a random way when this all happened.

He seemed to think that one over a bit, too, as if this were another part of the story he'd never told.

You know I forgot this part—his eyes blinked about ten thousand times—I'd just got back from Nam. I'd been back maybe three days, that's why I was in Florida. I was hitchhiking home.

I couldn't stand it, how Mike couldn't see it one trauma piled up on top the other. He'd been this way since 'seventy, and still he wouldn't stand for a one-on-one with the doctor. Women aren't so proud. That's why we're better warriors. Another reason women at the Vets Center go for therapy and men do not, I think, is we have greater optimism. We go to war so we can end it. We go to therapy so we won't have to live out an insomnia-ridden existence of paranoia and fear. We read fashion magazines because we think someday our breasts will be that big and our skin that clear. All those articles about improving your abs, your sex life, your mood: they are about aspiring, sculpting your body and developing your self. That is what warriors do: hold an object and decide to be that thing.

You have to pity them, my mother said of men. They are scared, distracted, addled by pride. When she used to say that was when I got the idea to be a soldier. I wanted never to be lost, to never lose sight of the pathways out. I wanted the bigness of the world never to collapse on me, for my world never to become small. I don't envy men.

That stoicism, that pride: it looks like strength, but all you have to do is come over to their side, join the army, to discover it's not. Strength, real courage—I see it in the fashion models in *Elle*.

Today people weren't so proud, Dr. G said when I told him about Mike and that I thought women made better soldiers. It was a better time to be a soldier, or a soldier back from war, whatever your gender, he said.

It was true that even if we doubted what we were doing in Iraq we still got treated to all kinds of praise and honor at home. People stood and clapped when our brigade showed up back home in our camo at the Atlanta airport. That made an impression. There we were, a plane load of dirty, bawdy, raucous soldiers traipsing off the causeway in clomper boots into the harsh light of an American airport, face to face with hundreds of civilians. I'd forgot what they looked like, all different sizes and shapes, fat people and kids with matching lavender hoodies and backpacks, everything stickered with cartoon characters and flashing LED lights. The civilians stood and cheered.

How did you feel then, Renee?—Dr. G asked, because sometimes he acts like he's dense.

I felt good.

He let that phrase sit a while.

I also told Dr. G I was pretty sure Mike had been stalking me when I saw him in Brooklyn the other night. Call it paranoid, but even paranoids have reason to be paranoid. He didn't rule it out.

Later I told Freddy about Mike, too. He got quiet and looked wounded, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. We sat in a restaurant off Atlantic finishing a bottle of wine. After I said I thought Mike was stalking me, Freddy kept looking at me, like he was waiting for me to start a conversation about some other topic.

What?—I finally said, in my shards-in-cement voice.

What what?

Do you have an opinion about this one way or the other?—I'd given something up, confessing that fear of mine.

He shrugged, with a face that said it was painful for him, this thinking really hard about the story and not wanting to hurt my feelings by telling me what he actually thought of it, or this thinking hard about something else, I had no idea what. I could never tell what Freddy was

thinking, the problem was. He was a master of the blank expression, which meant I was free to conjure absolutely anything and imagine he was thinking exactly that. It made me aggressive, that vagueness.

It's just—he trailed off and looked at me timidly, still waiting, like he was afraid to choose any one direction.

Just what?

Finally he gurgled something about how he felt bad I worried about my safety. If you thought about it his answer didn't commit him to any one path over the other. That was Freddy, excavating cautiously, penetrating nowhere. At that moment I was finding it hard to imagine he'd built that globe, so I told him so, how he was a hundred-eighty degrees opposite from the heroic adventurer his globe was. The real Freddy was at an entrance to a maze. He needed the globe bad as I did. Suddenly I understood he gave me the globe because he thought I'd lead him through the map, make grid-work from his forest squiggles. The world got small when you stood at so many thresholds and couldn't decide.

He didn't defend, but only got an injured face.

We did have sex that night, but I found Freddy weightless and strange, like a specter, and I wouldn't let him spend the night. When he left his face said he was hurt and angry and alone. Afterward, I carried the globe to bed. I felt out of place in my body and full of guilt because I knew I didn't love him, that when we embraced we got lost there. I fell asleep beneath a breeze from the fire escape, wishing for a man who could make the world bigger.

I'm a little bit in love with Dr. G, actually, which is weird because he's probably gay and he's no older than I am, and unlike who I'd think would be the standard Vets' therapist he wears things like lavender Oxford shirts with purple ties and talks about Buddhism. The way I know I'm in love with him is that when I do sleep and do have dreams and the dreams aren't violent or about the footsteps of marauding males who are really my harmless neighbor, I dream of sex with Dr. G. Those dreams are colored in lavender and yellow and have a light like in France facing south on the Mediterranean. Otherwise I dream in black and red.

Over the next few days in Group we got treated to all kinds of crazy

stories: of gay bashing and landmine-sweeping operations and kids getting blown up, or about one guy's brother getting kidnapped by freedom fighters in India. Each man's tale outdid the last. The Group seemed swept in a malevolent twister, its whirl keening higher and higher.

The stories made me exhausted and buzzing all at once, and at the end of each day I collapsed in bed, but then my heart only beat faster and all I could do was watch imaginary ghosts and stalkers outside my window and never sleep.

One of those nights I stayed late at Group chatting with Angelo, the guy whose brother got abducted in India. He walked out with me and then just stayed with me as I veered toward Brooklyn. I didn't mind. He was handsome and big, a man you feel safe around because he's so big he doesn't know what threat is and isn't always finding it where it doesn't exist.

When we got to Brooklyn Angelo offered to buy me a beer, and by then we were so close to my apartment it was pretty clear I'd take him home. We came inside and I opened up the window to the fire escape. I felt the way I always did lately leading up to sex, uncomfortable knowing things were moving in that direction. It was like getting in the shower. Sometimes you avoid it for no good reason. You think it will be cold. Then you step in and it's warm, and you never want to get out.

It was like that with Angelo, sublime from the instant his fingers glanced the skin of my hip bone. Things built steadily. Pace, all that, we were in synch.

Slowly, though, afterwards, fear came over me. I observed the rising panic. It peaked, and then kept climbing instead of dissipating like it was supposed to.

Angelo was asleep. I lay there, my body taut. My heart beat fast. I turned on my side and watched his chest move up and down. He was beautiful, really. It occurred to me if the shadow came through the fire escape, Angelo could kill it first. Finally I fell asleep, actually fell asleep, in that confidence.

I shook awake maybe fifteen or thirty minutes later, at the sound of a *swish* at the window. Then I was up a long time, my heart beating fast again. I rummaged for a flashlight, read *Elle* on the sofa, came back to bed, got up again.

Through all that Angelo didn't stir, and after a while I felt okay making noise because a funny thing about Angelo, he'd had an

eardrum blown out during a bomb explosion in Afghanistan, and I noticed he slept the whole night on the side with the good ear, so it was like he had natural earplugs.

Eventually he did come to life and pulled me tight.

You can't sleep—he mumbled, matter of fact.

I never sleep.

None of us can sleep. Why don't you try a sleeping pill?

They don't work.

His would work, he said. They were the next best thing, he swore it.

I took one, and Angelo took one, and Angelo went back to sleep on his good ear, and I did not go back to sleep. The same thing always happened when I took sleeping pills. I got even jumpier and more cautious. My body didn't want to relax. Fatigue cranked its danger trigger tighter. Force it to tiredness and it has drunk a powerful cocktail of two parts exhaustion and ten parts paranoia, and that's when hallucinations start.

I thought I'd get to sleep when Angelo left at seven—he did tech work on motherboards, off the books so he could still get benefits. But worm marks were still twisting along the walls when my eyes were open, and there were bright red and orange flashes on the insides of my eyelids when they were closed. I put on the eye mask and tried to pay attention to the visuals to make them settle, but the shapes kept morphing and shifting into big and small masses of lurid colors, suggesting all kinds of disturbing potentially real-life scenarios that distracted me from the project of getting to sleep.

By nine I gave up and started the walk to Queens. I spent four hours getting there instead of the usual two. My body was wasted. My legs were rubbery and liquid. At one point I sat on a bench, then later at a café. I could have curled inside myself and fallen into beautiful rest on the street corner by then, but I was too far along, and pretty soon anyway I felt the espresso and a gnawing, glittery hunger. It made me want to move. I felt wrong inside my skin, like there was an animal wrapped outside my body and my body was another animal trying to pull itself from under so it could find some air.

I don't know what I did for the several hours before Group. When I got there, everyone was as tightly wound as I was. We were into day six or seven of the crazy stories. Tonight the men outdid themselves more, with gruesome tales populated by limbless corpses and merce-

naries cranked on coke. Mike talked a lot, rattled so fast and in a voice so frantic to get something out you didn't want to stop him because you knew otherwise it would come out some other way.

After the session it seemed the only thing to set things right was Angelo. We went to my apartment and fooled around, and that helped. Then I got out some whiskey, and that helped too. We sat at my table talking and talking, so we didn't feel the time move.

He asked about the globe.

I told him my ex-boyfriend made it for me, which sounded funny because I'd never actually acknowledged Freddy as my boyfriend, and if he was really my ex he didn't know it yet.

I wanted him to be like the globe, strong and solid and someone who knew his way around—I told Angelo—but he wasn't, I guess. Maybe that wasn't fair of me.

That's why you gave him up?—Angelo said that not surprised-sounding, but like he was doing recon.

Yeah—I said, though it wasn't actually true I'd given him up yet—He was always taking me the wrong direction. He was lost. It made me feel more lost than I already was.

You don't seem lost to me. You find your way home to Brooklyn every night. You got yourself to Iraq and then got yourself home again. That's not lost.

You know who was lost the other day was Mike—I said to change the subject—I found him reading a map upside down in Brooklyn.

He could talk the balls off a brass monkey. He talks like a fast-fucked fox in a forest fire—Angelo chortled.

I told Angelo I had no idea what he was talking about, but it lifted a lacy anxiety hearing those words. When I thought of Mike since I saw him in Brooklyn I imagined some part of him floating in the breeze off my fire escape. But what Angelo said made me think him a fox with his head cut off and his tail on fire, which made me laugh.

We drank more whiskey, and Angelo told me about how he blew out his eardrum when they were evacuating a school and the bombs came ahead of schedule and killed five dozen school kids. Then I told Angelo what really happened in Iraq that gave me war trauma.

He got quiet and looked down a long time, with a sad expression. For that entire time—several seconds but that felt like minutes—I wished hard I hadn't told him, and I made myself believe maybe he hadn't heard right because of his ear. I didn't want him to get ideas—not just about my being a victim but also that maybe something got

broke inside me then that could never get fixed.

I'm really sorry that happened to you—he said, which was pretty much the only right thing to say.

Then Angelo was holding me in his arms, the two of us rocking together like a pair of babies, and then we were in my bed again everything in synch and then he was asleep again, good ear to the pillow. And I fell asleep, too, so he was cradling me. I stayed that way for a while, maybe a long while.

When I woke up is when things got crazy. I say women are better warriors but it is men who know violence. Maybe we are better at war simply because that violence will always be exotic to us. Even when we experience it, it remains an alien thing, a place we can visit and whose language we can even study and speak proficiently. But we'll never pick up all the nuances—the idioms, the punch-lines to the jokes. We'll always be a half-beat out of time. That delay will give us the opportunity to place our thoughts between actions and our reactions to them. We will remain sensible beings. For a native the experience will be direct, so instant and built on instinct there is no space between for the mind to fit inside of, or the emotions. It must be. I imagine it is pure and direct, that feeling, like nothing I have ever known except maybe orgasm.

What happened first is the phone rang. Call Freddy a lot of things but one thing is he is sensitive. An artist. It was four in the morning. Angelo stayed asleep on his good ear. I didn't feel right picking up the phone and talking to Freddy while Angelo was in my bed, so instead of answering I switched off the ringer. I could see from the alert light it rang long as it could before switching to voice mail. It started right back up in a matter of seconds. This pattern went on a long time, ringing and ringing and switching to voice mail and ringing again.

I watched the alert light and wished for nothing but for it to stop. But when it did stop, stopped for good, I got an even worse feeling, and then all I could do was wait. It was forty minutes by subway from Freddy's but he had a pickup for his art materials and I estimated that four in the morning it couldn't take more than fifteen.

It took twelve. The buzzer rang from downstairs. The lights were out so it looked like no one was home or I was sleeping, so I didn't

answer. It buzzed a long time. I don't know how he got in but after exactly the number of seconds it takes to race up the steps, the bell on my door rang.

It's called avoidance but that word is never enough to keep you from doing it. I crept to the window long enough to see Freddy's pick-up down on the street past the fire escape. Then I crawled under the covers beside Angelo. The doorbell kept clapping. Still Angelo didn't stir. Then the clanging stopped and I didn't know if I felt relief or anticipation for something I hadn't even thought of enough to fear. I pulled the cover over both our heads and put on my face mask. It got very dark. I held Angelo and he stirred but didn't wake up.

Then there was a sound at the window. About then Angelo woke up, maybe because he felt my heart pounding hard like a piston against the skin of his back.

What, baby?—he said, groggy.

It's just—I pulled up my face mask.

He rolled over and looked at me, and I never saw anyone come to life so fast. In one second he was holding me by both shoulders his eyes bright black like a sun eclipsed in the desert, and then he was out of bed half dressed and leaping toward the fire escape.

In a flash I imagined the fist of the guy who beat me in Iraq, and then I felt a hot searing ache under my face bone where it broke.

Angelo was out the window and on the fire escape before I could stop him, and when I followed to the window all I could see was his body rung-by-rung-ing to the sidewalk.

Outside was lit by an old-fashioned iron lamp, its light diffused through new blossoms on Japanese pear trees. From the window I couldn't see any other life, until something shone in the bushes and I saw a glint flash off Angelo's T-shirt as he dove in after it. Angelo was fast like an animal.

That's when I moved away from the window and took the normal route to the street. Something had already happened by the time I got down. There had been fury, unmediated and raw. I hadn't seen it, but I could feel it, could almost smell it still hanging in the air.

I smelled other things, too. It was March now, and there was a faint floral odor from those pear blossoms. There'd been a light rain earlier, and the pavement was still slick with it, and there was the scent of that too. The street was newly tarred and acrid-smelling, like creosote.

Things seemed very quiet, the way the air on a thick wet night damps the city's frenetic currents. I guess the silence lasted only a

few seconds because I don't remember Angelo having time to react or even see me up on the stoop across the street before squad cars swept in stealth, the noise of them like wind, the wheels spinning a *whoosh* over the moist pavement, capable and assured. In three squad cars were six cops—half of them women. I guess the neighbor called them. They looked stocky and strong, in steel-toe police boots and belts made weighty by flashlights and Billy clubs and bullets and a revolver each, held in place by a firm pressure of palm to metal. Two cops grabbed Angelo and cuffed him and then another two pulled a guy from the bushes. I saw it wasn't Freddy at all, but Mike.

Freddy's pickup was gone now, I noticed for the first time since I'd got downstairs. Then things started to make sense to me. Freddy must have gotten tired and left—after all he was not, essentially, an explorer. Nor was he an instigator by constitution. That's when Mike saw his opening, in through the fire escape. Angelo woke when he saw Mike. He never heard Freddy at all. He was deaf.

Angelo and Mike stood face to face. Their eyes glowed first red and then yellow and then black. It was sirens reflecting in them. I didn't know when they'd started. They revolved slowly. A police man and woman flanked each man.

I still don't know if the lights were flashing the whole time, and I never found out why Freddy came to the door: if he'd guessed about Angelo or that there was another man with me, because I stopped talking to him after.

I do know Mike had been there, had been there many days, probably more than once on the fire escape.

Angelo said Mike was a curly-headed fox of a son-of-a-bitch. I got a restraining order against him and got him barred from Group, but aside from that there was nothing we could do against him, just like the Creole in Neanderthal-ville.

After I didn't talk to Freddy a long time, I discovered he'd installed a secret switch in the globe. It was expertly hidden, like a latch he and I saw one time at an antiques store, on a finely tooled mahogany writing box. That box had been the kind soldiers in the British military carried across deserts when they traveled in caravans, and set up tents, and hunted in exotic locales for jewels and spices. Or at least that's what

Freddy and I told each other when we saw it.

The catch on Freddy's globe tripped a lever holding together the two hemispheres of the globe. When the globe fell open, I saw that Freddy really did know he was lost. He'd never intended that globe as any kind of directional at all. It was a celebration of being lost. Inside was a tangled and tightly balled mass of wire. Freddy's world must have been just that, knotted and confusing. I imagined his heart coiled tense and convoluted as that ball of wire.

I missed him, then, a little, and then the thought disappeared like one of those thin strands of memory that floats in and then out again as you are drifting to sleep, when the logic gets lost and you can't trace how one thought led to the next or where you are in the sequence. You know only that you are there standing in the present, perched someplace at the edge of the world.

Now, deep in the night when I am awake reading *Elle*, sometimes I think about the soldier who attacked me. I think about how his face turned to something animal and how his movements got quick and graceful, and how when he threw that first punch it was as if he'd been created to do just that thing, how he was smooth and controlled as an athlete. That's when I peer at the continents on Freddy's globe and see that each is just a dried-out desert grown from bramble and wire and tumbleweed, a place gasping for breath. The ocean is a salted wasteland, too, a three-dimensional void where there is no straight line from A to B, because there are no fixed points, no starting marks or endpoints or paths between them.

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