Among Soldiers

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translated from the Dutch
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"The future we saw as belonging to us, a thing contested by no one, the war as a tempestuous prelude to happiness, and happiness itself as a part of our character," wrote Isaac Babel in one of his stories about the Soviet-Polish War of 1920. War, that tempestuous prelude to happiness, had eluded me so far. The wrong time, the wrong place, the same old story. Yet fate is pliable.

At 1:30 on a midsummer Tuesday afternoon, I made my way to Eindhoven airbase, from where I would fly to Kabul. Then to Kandahar. And perhaps on to Tarin Kowt, depending on the security situation, as the defense department put it.

The "security situation": a term open to interpretation.

I was not going as a soldier, not even as a spiritual adviser; after having been declared unfit for duty at the age of eighteen, that would have been too much to hope for. A psychiatrist had written a letter, and a few weeks later I was notified that the Kingdom of the Netherlands would not call upon me, not even in times of war.

I was traveling as an "embedded journalist." What "embedded" meant was as yet unclear, and calling me a "journalist" was rather dubious. But, like "security situation," "journalist" is a term open to interpretation.

Captain Cynthia, a spokeswoman for the defense department, met me in the departure hall at the airbase. She would be traveling with me to the finish, to Afghanistan and back.

There were fewer family members out to wave goodbye than I'd expect-

ed. I was spared the tearful separations. If it hadn't been for the uniforms, you'd have thought we were waiting to board a charter for Majorca.

One little boy of about seven was dressed like a soldier and toting a plastic machinegun. He was more interested in his machinegun than in his family members. He had probably grown accustomed to it by now, having an absentee father.

I wondered how that went, the last evening with one's family. Were there soldiers without a home front, soldiers who left behind nothing but an empty apartment and a birdcage? The neighbor lady who comes by once a day to feed the canary. The smaller the home front, the easier it was to face death. At least theoretically.

After half an hour, the outbound soldiers—army, air force, and military police—separated themselves from those to be left behind. The men and women in desert-colored uniforms walked with me to the check-in desk. Those military personnel in uniforms more suited to service in the rainforest remained behind. I was the only person in line not in uniform. No, not the only one. A young man in civilian dress, a journalist for the regional broadcaster in Overijssel Province, was going to Afghanistan as well. "I'm planning to talk mostly to soldiers from Overijssel," he told me. "What's your angle?"

My angle. That I was going along to experience that tempestuous prelude to happiness seemed better left unsaid. "The person behind the soldier," I mumbled. That always worked, the person behind.

The boarding area where we found ourselves was no different from boarding areas at other airports. Normal airports, from which people left on holiday. War, though, is a kind of holiday as well. As one soldier in Afghanistan would tell me later: "It sounds weird, but I relax here."

"With us it's just like with Ryanair," Captain Cynthia said. "The first one in gets the best seat."

I ended up beside a real Dutch solider, Tinus, who after an hour's silence asked: "What are you going to do in Afghanistan?"

"I'm going to try to understand the mission," I whispered, whereupon Sergeant Jordy, sitting in the row in front of us, joined in the conversation.

The sergeant held up a wedge of cheese, as though it were the spoils of war.

"Why are you taking cheese to Afghanistan?" I asked.

"Because I love cheese," the sergeant said. "I've got enough with me for the first few weeks, and after that they're going to send me more from Holland. I told everyone, my girlfriend, my family, my friends: 'Just send cheese.' In Afghanistan it melts, but that doesn't matter; it's vacuum-packed anyway. You just put it in a refrigerator and it gets hard again. After that all it needs is a good whack and it's back in shape."

"Have you been to Afghanistan before?" I inquired.

"Twice," the sergeant said, "but this time I brought a cheese-slicer." He grinned triumphantly. Then, as though relating confidential information, he said: "Once they find out you have cheese, everyone wants a piece. But if you let them cut the cheese with a pocketknife, it's gone before you know it. This time I brought a cheese-slicer, so everyone gets a thin slice, you know what I mean? So this time they won't eat all my cheese right in front of me."

I felt a fondness for this Sergeant Jordy, who would not enter Afghanistan unprepared. For the first time on the trip I sensed that my hunch had been right. I was going to find out something about the happiness that had eluded me all these years.

A few hours later, Captain Cynthia arranged for me to sit beside Lieutenant-Colonel Nico. An army marches on more than cheese-slicers alone. Lieutenant-Colonel Nico is a tall, athletically-built man of around forty, but you could only mistake him for a gym teacher if you didn't look carefully. He commands a tank battalion. He was going to Afghanistan, however, without his tanks. The men of the "PRTs" are recruited from within the tank battalions. PRT stands for Provincial Reconstruction Team. The army exists by virtue of abbreviation. Rarely have I picked up as many abbreviations as during my stay in Afghanistan. "Lupa" is a lunch packet, "detco" a detachment commander. The amount of time that saves is staggering. From now on, happiness would be just plain "hap."

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico had always been an idealist, and that hadn't changed. He had originally joined the army because the Russians were coming. Within two hours, he and his tanks could be at the former East German border. He had aerial photos to show where each tank was to be positioned. Everything was laid out, down to the last square inch. But the Russians never showed up.

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico speaks of tanks with such sincere affection that I began loving them as well. I discovered that a tank can be as much a thing of beauty as a well-written novel.

Nico said: "If it hadn't been for that cabinet crisis, maybe we'd be going to Iraq right now. When you've been training all the time, at some point you want to find out how good you are at the real thing. When you write all the time, at some point you want to find out what your book does to an audience, right?"

I nodded in complete understanding. That was certainly something I wanted to find out, and I could imagine that he wanted to find that out as well. No more practicing anymore, time for the real thing at last. Maybe that's the problem with literature: it never becomes the real thing. At least not entirely.

"But don't you find it a pity that you're being sent to Afghanistan to talk?" I asked.

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico had told me that the PRTs would mostly talk to the Afghanis. Talk till they were blue in the face. Reconstruction is a matter of endless conversation. Of gaining the people's confidence, or, as the official phrase goes: "winning hearts and minds." For a person who has seen the beauty in a tank, who had actually convinced me that a tank is more beautiful than the Virgin Mary, that could not be an easy assignment.

But the lieutenant-colonel kept a stiff upper lip. He and his men were looking forward to the mission, even without their tanks.

"And what about Srebrenica?" I asked, because I didn't want the conversation to peter out, not yet. I wanted to go on, on with the tanks across the plains of Germany. "Is that still a trauma?"

The lieutenant-colonel shook his head. "Not for these boys," he said. If there's one thing they have no intention of being, it's cowards. Back before seatbelts were mandatory, scads of people were killed in traffic accidents. Everyone thought that was normal. Would a fireman refuse to go into a burning building just because there's a chance that he might not come out alive?"

Now I knew why he didn't look like a gym teacher. Everywhere the lieutenant-colonel turned, he saw death creeping up on him. He was braced for the ambush. That's how he'd looked at me as well, like an ambush.

"Did your wife take you to the airport?" I asked.

"No," the lieutenant-colonel said. "That's always a bad idea. I have a buddy who's in the army too. When he goes, I take him to the airport. When I go, he takes me. I say goodbye to my family at home. It's not fair to them to do that, to drag them along to the airport like that."

I nodded, thinking about the little boy dressed up like a soldier who had been running around the departure hall.

"It's getting dark," Nico said. "It goes pretty quickly now. I'm going to catch a few winks."

I wondered whether the lieutenant-colonel really would catch a few winks, and if he did whether he would dream about Afghanistan, or still about the plains of Germany. And about his tanks, which would be at the former East German border within two hours. Not as a maneuver this time, but the real thing. Maybe the Russians would show up anyway. You can never tell. Anything is possible. The world may smell of the abattoir, but the air-force KDC-10 smelled of cheese.

"I'm going to try to catch a little sleep too," I whispered.

I went back to my seat. Sergeant Jordy had his eyes closed. In his left hand he was clutching an iPod.

We landed in the middle of the night at Sharyah. The United Arab Emirates. The desert, a foretaste of Afghanistan, where they'd told us the heat could get up close to fifty degrees centigrade.

Our carry-on bags had to stay onboard. We left the plane in reasonably orderly fashion, but still a bit rowdy, like a class of schoolchildren.

The airport at Sharyah: two coffee bars with three pieces of lemon pie in the display cooler. One shop selling perfume, cigarettes, alcohol, and a few dates tucked away in a wooden box meant to look like the Koran. A local souvenir, amid the bottles of Chanel and Christian Dior.

The two TVs in the corner of the coffee bars were showing skiing and bobsledding, probably to make up for the lack of air conditioning.

I didn't get much chance to fraternize with the soldiers. They were hanging out together in little cliques, but I didn't see Sergeant Jordy anywhere.

Then it was time to get back on the plane. The flight to Kabul would take a good two hours. . . . In flight, one soldier took a raisin bun out of a bag and began eating it dreamily. For a moment I had a vision of his wife in the kitchen that morning, smearing butter on it. "Take a few raisin buns along with you," she'd said. "You probably can't get them in Afghanistan."

Someone else was passing out cinnamon candy. The steward, a soldier as well, came by with omelets. The boy across the aisle from me was flipping through a magazine that featured pictures of motorcycles, and women in states of partial undress. He had at least ten of those magazines with him, and he leafed through them nervously. I had the impression that the motorcycles were what interested him.

By the time we began our approach I had become initiated into the world of motorcycles. Kabul at last. More than twenty-four hours earlier I had left New York, and now I was longing to get to my destination. To the war, of which I hoped to catch at least a glimpse.

Through the clouds we saw the city, just as they'd said we would, lying in a sort of bowl. Nothing but mountains around Kabul. And we circled on over Kabul, we circled and circled, and then we left Kabul behind. The visibility was too poor to land. We were going back to Sharyah. A desert too, but then different.

At this point I was introduced to the term "spastic moment." Some of the soldiers were experiencing a spastic moment. But, generally speaking, everyone took it fairly well.

One soldier said: "The army is about waiting. First you wait for a war, then you wait till you get there, then you wait to see action, then you wait again for them to send you home."

I had always thought that making movies was about waiting, but making movies, it seemed, was nothing compared to the army.

Sharyah again. Even hotter than a few hours ago. The same three slices of lemon pie in the display case. . . .

I was assigned to a room with Dennis from Special Units. We lay beside each other like brothers. Like brothers we shared the Internet in the room, we both had our laptops with us. To stay in contact with the home front.

Dennis did enter the bathroom without knocking though, while I was taking a shower, but I could see that waging war and knocking on doors did not mix. I dried myself hurriedly while Dennis took a pee. In order not to have the situation escalate unduly, I asked: "What's Special Units going to do in Afghanistan, anyway?"

"We're going to protect the PRTs," he said, then flushed. . .

In the hotel lobby, I saw Sergeant Jordy sitting in an armchair. He waved me over.

"What are you doing in the army, anyway?" I asked. "What made you sign up?"

"Have you ever seen Apocalypse Now? The movie?"

Had I ever.

"Do you remember what Martin Sheen says at the start? 'I'm here a week now, waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room, I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger.' That's why I joined the army."

A member of the Apocalypse Now sect, you didn't run into them very often anymore. But I was a member as well, and had no trouble following his lead.

"And do you remember what Martin Sheen says before that? 'When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle.'"

That, I realized for the first time, was probably the essence of that tempestuous prelude. The jungle that calls, the jungle that won't let go.

"Sergeant," I asked, "would you let me look at your cheese-slicer?"

At 9:30 that evening we gathered in front of the Millennium Hotel for roll call. . . .

When their name was called out, some of the soldiers shouted: "Present." With a roll to that "r" that made me feel jealous. Others simply said "Present." Others still went for "Present, Sir!" The occasional soldier shouted "yeah," which one of them abbreviated even further to "yo." I myself answered "Yes," for I felt that shouting "Present, Sir!" would make it pretentious. . . .

Standing behind me, a little to one side, was Dennis from Special Units, with whom I had just shared a room for seven hours. And more than sim-

ply a room: a bed, and toothpaste as well. He had even said: "You need a toothbrush? Take this one." The letter from the Ministry of Defense had stated that I would be issued a flak jacket and a helmet, but that I would be responsible for my own personal hygiene. But my own personal hygiene was still on board the plane.

The rest of the group was used to this, to living without their own personal hygiene; for them, the world was a huge campground.

I had always seen life as a strictly individual pastime. Even within a family, a company, or a social club, one lived alone and largely for one's self. But now that I found myself within the ranks of this modern-day foreign legion, the time had come to modify that view. Here there existed a form of interdependence that could not simply be broken off. Lying beside Dennis, I had realized that I would have to find someone to worry about. So that someone would worry about me in turn.

The ride out to the airport. Sharyah by night. Through the windows of the bus, a few soldiers took pictures of brightly-lit restaurants. There was some whispering about tent dresses. The Arab in his natural habitat.

War was a form of tourism. Active tourism. At a certain point one began taking part. At a certain point one intervened.

In front of the duty-free shop at the airport I met two F-16 pilots. One of them was called "T-Band." That wasn't his real name. . . . T-Band explained, F-16 pilots always have nicknames in order to prevent mix-ups in the air. There are countless Marks, but only one T-Band. Why they called him T-Band was something he preferred not to go into. In Afghanistan I was to meet an air force cadet by the name of Midget. He was about my height.

T-Band's colleague had a real name embroidered on his uniform: Martin.

Martin had attended the technical university at Wageningen, but eventually became bored with biochemistry and signed up with the air force. He had never regretted it. One time he went back to visit Wageningen. After the F-16, a laboratory made him feel claustrophobic. It smelled bad, too.

In an F-16, he explained, one was subject to huge gravitational forces, so they put you beforehand into a kind of gigantic spin-dryer, to help you acclimatize. You had to show them that you wouldn't pass out.

I had once read a book about a little boy whose abusive parents put him in the spin-dryer all the time.

"Yeah," Martin said, "and you can't use the ejector seat too often either. It's bad for your spinal column. It presses you together like a pat of butter. Bailing out with the ejector seat makes you shrink. You're about an inch shorter."

Was that why there were so few female F-16 pilots? A shrunken womb might not have enough space for a fetus to grow.

For the rest, they told me that the Balkan war had been a holiday for the F-16 pilots. They had been stationed in Northern Italy, and flew missions every once in a while. A loop over former Yugoslavia, then back to Northern Italy.

"I went there on holiday once," I said. "Northern Italy. It's lovely."

The F-16 guys were different from the rest. Maybe it was because they flew alone all the time, or because they had to take shrinkage into account. They weren't particularly tall to start with.

A few other soldiers came and joined us. It was time to change the subject. "During the Vietnam War," I said, "there were tens of thousands of prostitutes working in Saigon. What about you guys? You're away from home for a long time, aren't you? Are there any kicks to be had in Afghanistan?"

Before anyone could answer, a defense ministry spokesman said: "Our bingo evenings are very entertaining."

Once again, my image of war was in need of revamping. After the bombardment, bingo games?

T-Band walked away. When he was on the ground, he walked as though the G-forces were holding him down.

At the coffee bar, I ordered another espresso. Soldiers were standing around, talking about their future. One of them said: "I'd rather shoot one too many by mistake than one too few."

When I turned around, they lowered their voices. And that was what survival was all about: making sure you weren't the one too many.

2

Early in the morning, just when everyone had stopped thinking it would ever happen, there it was: Kabul International Airport. A civilian airport that serves primarily as an airbase. Even though I see an Austrian Airlines plane there as well. For the businessmen, I figure. You can get rich quick in Afghanistan, and you can lose your life there as well, but then all things have their price. War provides opportunities for those who are fast on their feet.

An officer points at a little windowless Red Cross plane taking off from the other side of the runway. "Strange flights," he says, "probably CIA."

Our arrival hall, where coffee is served, is a tent for Dutch military personnel. I decide that the best thing to do is follow everyone else. It seems they're getting ready to pass out our gear.

I move into line. . . . A soldier comes over to me. "Do you have a gun with you?" he asks.

"No."

"So why are you standing in line for ammunition?"

"That's a good question," I reply.

"My name's Fons," he says. "I'm in charge of the press here in Kabul. Come along with me. We'll get you a flak jacket and a helmet."

I tell Fons that "small" would probably be my size in helmets, my size in anything as a matter of fact, but small turns out to be too small for my head. The mediums have all been taken, so I get a large. The flak jacket weighs more than the rest of my baggage put together, and I have the tendency to drag a lot along with me. . . .

"I'll check to see what we're going to do with you."

In the shadow of a tent I wait to see what will be done with me. All around me, soldiers who have no idea either.

"Is that always the way it goes," I ask them, "not knowing what's going to happen? Is that normal?"

"Oh, very normal," a girl says. "You shouldn't even want to know". . . .

Fons comes back. Now he knows what they're going to do with me. "In half an hour you're flying out with the first group to Kandahar. You're going with the Canadians."

He shakes my hand.

"Have a wonderful time in Kandahar," Fons says, an ironic lilt in his voice.

"You mean you're not going along?" I ask.

"I've been to Kandahar already," he says. "I'm staying in Kabul."

The others have already put on their flak jackets and helmets. For me, it's still too early and too hot for that. I drag the flak jacket along behind me like a dear, dead pet.

After a twenty-minute wait, the first group can go on board. We're flying out in a Canadian Hercules. Someone says to me: "The Hercules is the workhorse of the air force." I look at the workhorse with interest and also with a kind of awe.

The Canadian crew collects the soldiers' weapons. No one's allowed on board with a loaded gun. Then a Canadian pilot gives a short speech in front of the plane. He explains that during takeoff we will probably have to make a "low-flying tactical maneuver." He finishes his introduction with the words: "Think of us for your future needs."

Now the time has really come for the flak jackets. We're about to board. Inside, the Hercules looks as though it's still under construction. Our baggage is lying in a huge pile at the back. The pile is bound together with rope.

The Canadians hand out earplugs. . . . The pilot starts the engines.

A soldier next to me points to my earplugs. "I do a lot of flying," I say. "I don't need them."

"Roll them up and stuff them in your ears," he shouts. "You're in a Hercules now."

I stuff the plugs in my ears.

In *Apocalypse Now*, one of the soldiers on board a helicopter sat on his helmet to keep from getting his balls shot off. I hold my helmet close to my crotch, but a Canadian signals to me to put it on. Ilse, the female air force member sitting next to me, helps me with the chin straps.

Someone passes around a bag of brightly colored licorice. . . .

The only thing you can see in the Hercules is soldiers, other soldiers. I smell them, I feel them.

Right after takeoff, the tactical maneuvers begin. Not long after that the vomiting begins. First I see one soldier clutching an air-distress bag, later I see more. The tactical maneuvers seem endless. The mood in the Hercules is a little tense, but it's not clear to me whether that's because of the vomiting or because everyone secretly thinks we'll never get out of here alive.

Later, during the landing, someone tells me that the Hercules has been shooting off flares. The magnesium-fired flares are used to fool heat-seeking missiles. "But," one Dutch soldier says after we're on the ground, "that doesn't necessarily mean anyone was shooting at us. They keep the transport Hercules very highly tuned. They'll start shooting flares if someone on the ground is welding his car."

So let's leave it at that: just as we flew over, an Afghan started welding his car.

As soon as we reach cruising altitude, the tactical maneuvers stop and we're allowed to remove our helmets. I put mine down close to my crotch again. Around me, I see some of the soldiers still holding bags up to their mouths. . . .

Finally, my first steps on the tarmac at Kandahar Air Field, commonly referred as "KAF," which is how I'll refer to it: KAF. A storm of sand and dust that envelops everything in a deep fog. Intense heat. Tents, containers, something in the distance that looks like a watchtower.

Everyone is herded onto a bus. I follow the others, waiting for the right moment to finally shed my flak jacket.

We drive, but there is nothing along the way to indicate where we're going. One tent looks like the other. One container is identical to all the rest. The occasional stretch of barbed wire and a sign: "Restricted Area. Stay out." And, through it all, a relentless storm of dust. I have arrived at a camp, I tell myself. This is a camp.

Everyone is herded off the bus. Someone, I can't remember who, tells us that it's important to consume a lot fluids here, and to start doing so right away. Bottles of water are handed out. I see a big poster with two words on it: "Heat Kills."

In a few minutes, they announce, we will receive our official welcome and a safety briefing.

We are led to a tent. . . . Colonel Henk, the commander, extends us his official greetings. Then a soldier gives a talk about safety. He has a laptop with him, and a video projector.

"To start with," the safety man says, "around here we live on Zulu time". . . .

Zulu time, as it turns out, is American army time. In the summer, that's two hours earlier than Dutch time.

If central command orders a bombardment for 17:00 hours, of course, you can't have people running around asking whether that's Afghan time or Pakistani time or Teheran time. One plane, one bomb, one time of day: Zulu time.

"But," the man continues, "we also have different nationalities here at the camp. The Canadians, for example, live on local time, which is four-and-a-half hours later than Dutch time. So if you agree to meet someone, you need to ask: "Is that local time, or Zulu time?'. . . We live, think, and dream in Zulu time."

The words "Zulu time" appear on the wall. For a moment I have the feeling that I've ended up in a remake of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*.

The man continues: "Air-raid alert. Sometimes there are little rockets fired at the camp, nothing to really worry about, but inconvenient. When the air-raid siren goes off, put on your flak jacket and helmet and get to the nearest bunker. If there's no bunker around, don't start running around the camp like a chicken with its head cut off, just crawl under a bed. Don't think this is silly—'I'm not going to do this'—because if you do there is a chance that you will return to the Netherlands like this."

A photo is beamed on the wall of an honor guard and a coffin being lifted from a plane at Eindhoven airbase.

I wonder how I'll ever find a bunker in this desert. Where the hell are the bunkers?

Later that same day a soldier tells me: "If you hear the sirens, you've lived through it. What it's all about are the minutes just before the siren goes off."

So the big question is: How do you recognize the minutes just before the siren goes off?

At the end or only sort of believe in it. To me, it's become clear that belief is not a prerequisite. One goes because one is sent, and that is what professional honor is all about. . . .

"Don't take food from the mess tent back to your own tent. That's not allowed. Food draws mice, and the mice draw snakes."

Somehow the safety man at this camp makes me think of the Old Testament.

The safety briefing continues, but the press is now allowed to leave the tent.

Outside, the temperature is close to 45 degrees centigrade. The sandstorm still hasn't subsided. Through the clouds of sand I see a man approaching. He introduces himself as Major Erwin. "Welcome to KAF," he says. "I'm here for the press."

I'm not exactly sure why there should be two majors for the press. But I catch on soon enough: Major Erwin is army, and Major Robert is air force. The Dutch military organization consists of at least two competing armed forces.

When Major Robert goes off for a moment, Major Erwin says: "The problem with the air force is that they can't march and they don't abide by the dress code."

Once Major Erwin has left, Major Robert tells me a joke about a men's room, an air force crewman, and an infantryman, a joke I won't repeat here, but one in which the foot soldier gets the short end of the stick.

I hop in Major Robert's jeep for a tour of the camp.

"This," Major Robert says, "is the boardwalk." An attempt has been made in wood to imitate Coney Island in miniature. Unfortunately, the construction has never been finished. Along the boardwalk are little shops where you can buy souvenirs, there is a tailor, and a Burger King in the back of a truck. There is a Pizza Hut and a Tim Hortons where you can buy iced cappuccino and doughnuts. The doughnuts, however, are sold out.

That day the headline in a Canadian armed forces paper reads: "Canadian troops at KAF suffer under doughnut dearth."

We stop at the PX, the American army store. A barrack full of commodities, with two cash registers.

"Go in and check it out," shouts Major Robert, who gets more enthusiastic all the time. "It's not expensive."

It is definitely not expensive, and seeing as my backpack is still in Kabul, and won't be leaving Kabul for the time being, I buy a hat, a towel, slippers and a set of thermal underwear. Even though the package says that soldiers aren't allowed to wear the underwear beneath their uniforms—because they're inflammable. I also buy a pair of short pants with "Army" printed on them. The shorts, in fact, are meant only for American army personnel, but at the register I pretend to be American.

The shorts I have just purchased are part of the American army's leisure uniform. To Major Erwin's annoyance, the Dutch army has no leisure uniform. Which is why, in the heat of the day, one sees our officers knocking about the camp in Philips Sport Vereniging t-shirts.

Major Robert is waiting beside the jeep. . . . We drive up to a gate on the

hillside, the place where the Afghanis who work at the camp are admitted. They have to turn in their IDs at the gate, and are given a one-day pass for KAF in return.

"The Afghani trucks," Major Robert says, "we call 'jingle trucks', because they're all done up inside like a Christmas tree."

The trucks look like they're about to breathe their last.

"We also have to make sure," Major Robert says, "that no bombs are smuggled into the camp. . . ." A group of Dutch soldiers is sitting in a jeep at the top of the hill. This afternoon it's their turn to check the incoming Afghanis.

The soldiers aren't talking much. They're watching the camp, the Afghanis who come in, the Afghanis who go back out again. From the vantage of this hilltop, the Afghanis somehow do look a little less human than us. It is impossible, I realize, to see at a glance which Afghanis can be trusted and which ones cannot. All the more important, therefore, to keep a good eye on them from behind your machinegun. See here the classic dilemma of all occupational forces: how do we know who's on our side?

"Everything okay?" I ask.

One of the soldiers nods. They're not particularly talkative.

"Ever have any problems?" I inquire.

The soldier shakes his head slowly. "Sometimes we have to fire a warning shot. Bullets—a lot of times that's the only language these guys understand."

Major Robert sniffs. "Do you smell that?" he asks. "The wind has shifted. That's the 'shit pit'."

The shit pit is a pond where the camp's sewage runs to be purified. The story goes that one of the Rumanian soldiers once swam through the shit pit for two hundred dollars.

"Time to eat," Major Robert says, rubbing his hands in anticipation. He takes another look at the workers. "A primitive people, but lovely, the Afghanis," he says. "And everything is tomorrow. Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. When it comes right down to it, though, they get the work done."

There are a number of mess halls, but only the British soldiers have a dining hall to themselves. The food in all of them is catered by KBR, a subsidiary of the Halliburton concern. KBR also sees to the sanitary facilities.

Whenever you enter the mess tent, after the ritual washing of hands—which feels to me like something from the Old Testament as well—you have to sign in. A military identification code is required.

"What should I write down?" I ask, concerned.

"Anything you feel like," Major Robert says. "I always write down the number of days I have left to go in this place."

In the dining tent I become acquainted with the camp's non-Afghan civilian personnel. Most of them are Americans, who do this in order to put together a little nest egg. A year's cooking in Afghanistan doesn't pay badly.

Tonight is stir-fry night at KAF. "This is the best food I've eaten here in three months," Major Robert says. His grin widens. "Last week," he says, "in the other mess tent, a rocket landed in the salad bowl. You should try eating over there. If the siren goes off during a meal, everyone gets up and runs to the bunker. But by the time you get back there's a chance that dinner's over. That's why the Rumanians don't stop eating when the siren goes off."

I look at the Rumanian soldiers at the next table. They eat as though their lives depend on it. Hurriedly, yet with a certain fondness for their food.

"Have you ever been to Kandahar, the city?" I ask the major.

"We never leave the camp," he says. "That's much too dangerous."

After dinner I amble over to the Dutch Corner, a sort of café where you can play ping pong and table soccer, and where you can buy a glass of Pakistani peach juice for an extremely reasonable price. Coffee and tea are free for the taking.

There I meet Sergeant Wouter. He's twenty-seven years old, he serves in Lieutenant-Colonel Nico's tank battalion, and he met his girlfriend while on maneuvers in Germany.

Sergeant Wouter teaches me some army lingo. "Peppi" is nice, great, cool. As in: that's a pretty peppi holster you've got there.

"TIC" stands for Troops in Contact. "Which means," Wouter says, "that we're either shooting at them or they're shooting at us. Today, for example, there were a couple of TICs. You have two kinds of TICs; TICs that we provoke, and TICs that they provoke."

Then one has the euphemisms: "'He experienced a moment of relative discomfort' means: he was badly wounded during a mortar attack. Up for a game of table soccer?"

We go over to visit the Canadians, who have a kind of makeshift café as well, although without the Pakistani peach juice. But then they have coffee with vanilla flavoring.

Private Marieke and Adjutant Harry go along.

Private Marieke sleeps in the same big tent as the male soldiers. It's never a problem, she says, but "the special forces guys make stupid jokes, and they steal from each other. Pillows, blankets, that kind of stuff."

After two games of table soccer I ask Wouter: "You guys are away from home for a long time, and there are plenty of fine-looking young female soldiers around here. Does anything beautiful ever blossom forth?"

The sergeant rocks back on his heels, then leans toward me again. For a moment I think he's going to punch me in the nose, but he simply leans on the table-soccer table and says: "We're all men. When a woman comes by

we all look, and we all have our feelings, but that's why we've been given two good hands. Or, to be more accurate: one."

I have the feeling that I have found happiness here at Kandahar Air Field. . . .

Major Erwin has loaned me a mat to put on top of the filthy mattress until my sleeping bag arrives from Kabul. Hoping that Captain Cynthia, who sleeps across from me, won't suddenly come into the tent, I undress. Then I wriggle into my thermal underwear, put on my slippers and head for the shower. The shower is a five-minute walk from my tent.

There are, Major Robert told me, good showers and bad showers, just as there are good toilets and bad toilets. A camp like this has laws of its own.

In passing, my thermal underwear draws a great deal of laughter from the soldiers who are still sitting in front of their tents, talking or playing cards.

I locate the good showers, but the cubicles are packed. In front of each shower hangs a curtain that must once have been white. A similar curtain hangs in front of the toilets. After a bit of searching I find a vacant shower and quickly undress. I put my underwear, glasses and a towel on a little wooden bench.

Under the shower, it soon becomes clear why we're not supposed to shower barefoot around here. The men's showers at KAF are one huge sperm bank.

Three minutes later, I've had enough. I stick my hand through the curtain to grab my towel. Someone else pulls on the towel as well. I pull harder. It doesn't help. So I step out of the shower.

A naked soldier asks me: "Would you mind very much drying yourself with your own towel?"

"No, not at all," I reply.

My own towel has fallen on the floor.

I dry myself in a hurry. The dressing room is so small that you can't help bumping up against other people. "Excuse me," I mumble again and again.

Half-naked and half-wet, I flee to my tent. After walking for fifteen minutes, though, I realize that I've lost my way. . . . At last I see a soldier. He's sitting outside, staring at the stars. . . .

"Could you point me towards the boardwalk?" I ask.

3

Later the next morning I buy a dozen muffins at Tim Hortons to hand out to to passing officers and soldiers. Friendship starts with handing out he right treat at the right moment.

When all the muffins are finished I run into Rik, corporal first class, and Michel, a sergeant. Michel is in his thirties, Rik is about twenty.

"We're going to the PX," Michel says. "Want to go along?"

I go along. Trudging through the dust. Occasionally a jeep goes by in the opposite direction.

"It's like, totally war around here," Michel says. "That's what the Americans told me."

I say nothing. The heat and the effort call for silence. . . .

I pull my cap down a little over my eyes. To lighten things up a bit, I ask: "Do you have a girlfriend, Rik?"

Rik hasn't talked to anyone for a long time, it seems. "My girlfriend is older than me," he says. "She's had her IUD taken out. As soon as I get back we're going to get started. Who knows, maybe it'll be bingo right away."

We trudge on through the sand. I listen. That's my task around here. Maybe that's always been my task.

At the PX, Sergeant Michel shops around for a pair of panties for his girlfriend in Hungary.

"How do you know her size?" the corporal asks.

The sergeant blushes. "Don't laugh, guys," he says, "but I've got something with me." From the breast pocket of his uniform he pulls out an article of underclothing. A pair of Eastern Bloc panties.

"She gave them to me," the sergeant says, more embarrassed than proud, "and I carry them around with me in case something happens."

"How old is this Hungarian babe?" Rik wants to know.

"Twenty," the sergeant says, sounding hesitant. For a camp .in Afghanistan, this place has an extremely wide assortment of women's underwear.

"Jesus Christ," the corporal says, "are you, like, a card-carrying pederast?"

That evening, as I'm making a phone call in front of my tent, I hear something go whistling overhead—followed a few seconds later by a modest explosion, not very far away.

This must be a rocket attack. This is what I've heard them talk about so often in the last few days. Just to be sure, I wait for the siren, for confirmation. One can be mistaken, after all, even at a time like this.

Thirty seconds later the siren wails.

The bunker seems too far away, I decide to go into my own tent. If I remember correctly, this is when I need to put on my flak jacket.

Major Erwin comes rushing into the tent right behind me. He seems ready to throw himself on top of me. It wouldn't make a favorable impression, of course, to send a journalist back to Holland in a coffin. Still, I'm

grateful to Major Erwin for not throwing himself on top of me. First he slaps the helmet on my head, then takes it off again and helps me into my flak jacket before slapping the helmet back on again.

"Now get under your bed!" the major shouts.

There's no room under my bed, so I lie down on my bed.

Listening to the air-raid siren I'm overcome by a mad joy, an excitement the likes of which I have never felt before.

They want to kill me, therefore I am.

After a little less than half an hour, the all-clear sign is given. The rocket attack is over. At least for this evening. I'm allowed to get out of bed again and take off my flak jacket and helmet. . . .

The rocket came down fairly close to the Dutch Corner. One soldier was hit in the back of the neck with a rifle while he was diving for cover. Other than that there are no dead or wounded.

Corporal Rik and Sergeant Michel are seated at a table in the Dutch Corner. Rik is drinking cola.

I sit down across from him. "Were you scared?" I ask.

"Well, you can't really pick up a rocket and throw it back," the corporal says.

It was a silly question, I have to admit. The kind of thing they ask on current affairs programs. "Tell us, what's been going on here?" And: "Were you scared?". . .

"Michel," I say, "does anything ever happen around here? I mean, some of the female soldiers are pretty good-looking. Things happen, don't they?"

"Sure, all kinds of things happen," the sergeant says. "In the bunkers. In the offices, at night. Off in the dark somewhere, in the back of a jeep."

So one never knew whether a bunker was occupied or not.

I heard a female soldier at another table say: "You know what I'm really longing for? To be on Crete, four months from now."

Dutch soldiers on their way back to the Netherlands are obliged to first spend a few days on Crete, to get accustomed to civilian life. A group of Dutch marines once came back from a mission in Asia, and the first thing they did when they got to Holland was wreck two cafés. Ever since then, soldiers who have been on a mission abroad are given a few days to cool down after the fighting. At first they made them do that in the barracks in Holland, but because that seemed a bit silly—sending soldiers back to the Netherlands and then keeping them locked up for three days in the barracks—they now do it on a subtropical island.

Someone introduces me to the chaplain. His name is Adriaan. Adriaan is a humanist. The Dutch army is the only one in the world that also has humanists as chaplains.

Adriaan studied philosophy. "I was planning to become a student counselor," he said, "but then I saw this ad. 'The army never stops; we're looking for someone who'll help us stop and think about that.' That sounded good to me. I applied for the job and I got it."

We're sitting beside each other, the chaplain and I. Like two old buddies. The rocket attack seems like it was days ago. In another lifetime.

"Do you like it here at KAF?" I ask.

The chaplain nods. . . .

Colonel Henk had told me that he refuses to attend the humanist services. Colonel Henk belongs to the Dutch Reformed Church; humanists aren't his cup of tea. He goes to the services held by the Canadian chaplain. But, of course, chaplains don't take such things personally.

"Do you know how to shoot a gun as well?" I ask Adriaan.

"I had to learn. When I went along with the convoy to Tarin Kowt, I was armed. But if the chaplain has to start shooting, you know things are pretty much lost."

The man who stops and thinks about the army that never stops goes back to his tent.

I catch sight of Sergeant Wouter. Now that I'm feeling a little more at home here, I've started talking to people as though I've known them for years. I walk over to Wouter. The sergeant is a bit disoriented. He was only about forty feet away from the rocket when it exploded.

"I'm not going to tell my girlfriend about this," he says. "There's no sense in doing that. She'll hear about it later anyway. You shouldn't either. Tell people about things like this."

The two of us go to look at where the rocket hit. The remains of the projectile have already been removed. They do that fast at KAF. "Did you know," the sergeant says, "that the CIA probably had something to do with the September 11 attacks? I saw a DVD about it once. I don't believe everything they say, but strange things happened that day. Did you know that one of the planes didn't even have windows?"

I've noticed a certain animosity towards the Americans among other military personnel as well. Even among the officers. Allies, the Americans, but competitors, too, it seems. And, well, isn't that a lesson of history? Today's ally may be tomorrow's enemy.

Darkness has come. I don't know what time it is according to Zulu Time. All I know is that it's time for me to go to bed. My baggage has arrived from Kabul. I have my own sleeping bag at last. At KAF more than in other places, luxury is in the details.

Major Robert comes in. He's turning in as well. "You know what's weird?"

he says. "We've never had a rocket attack on a Tuesday before."

That evening I do not walk to the showers in my thermal underwear. . . .

The next day, not far from the PX, is a shop that says: "Massage and Day Shop Beauty Salon."

Soldiers can get a massage here. But, in principle, so can the civilian personnel working for KBR.

I announce to Captain Cynthia that I would like a massage. That, as it turns out, is something Dutch soldiers don't do very often.

She says that she and Major Robert will wait for me outside.

I enter the massage parlor. A plain waiting room in a plain Quonset hut. There is a plant. A desk. A price list on the wall.

A dark-haired young man in civilian dress asks in middling English how he can be of assistance.

I look at the price list and, thinking of Captain Cynthia and Major Robert waiting for me outside, decide to go for the simple, thirty-minute back massage.

"We'll be with you in a moment," the young man says.

I take a seat. A black female American soldier comes in. She goes to the back right away. She has an appointment.

"Where are you from?" I ask the young man.

"Tashkent," he says.

That, if I remember correctly, is a city in Uzbekistan.

"And what's your name?"

"Roman."

He doesn't seem particularly eager to talk.

"Why did you come to Afghanistan?"

"To earn money," he says.

"How long have you been here?"

"A long time."

The masseuse comes to get me. She leads me to a table separated from the others by a curtain. I hear voices coming from the other side.

The masseuse makes it clear that I am to take off all my clothes, except for my underpants.

I can't make out her name. I am able to figure out that she comes from Kirghizia. That says nothing to me at all. Kirghizia.

She massages intensely. I almost doze off. Music is coming from a transistor radio on a stool. An American army station, I presume, is keeping the hits right on coming for the men and women of the armed forces.

A lot of soldiers stay here for months on end, without ever leaving the camp. What they get to see of Afghanistan is KAF. In a situation like that, a

massage parlor like this one is always useful. People need to relax. Especially when you've been staring death in the eye.

I'm a bit disconcerted by the fact that the woman from Kirghizia keeps edging my underpants down a little, but then none of this is completely new to me. Besides, there's a war on.

A poster on the wall says that it is strictly forbidden to sexually solicit the masseuse and/or ask the masseuse out for a date. Then, without warning, the massage is over. Still slick with oil, I wriggle into my clothes. . . . Outside in the shade, Captain Cynthia and Major Robert are waiting. "It's another scorcher today," Major Robert says.

A "scorcher" means that the temperature is up to almost fifty degrees Celsius.

Some Dutch soldiers sunbathe almost naked in front of their tents during the hottest hours of the day. Neither skin cancer nor sunstroke can daunt them. To them, KAF is a summer's day at the beach. With rocket attacks at night in lieu of fireworks.

Down by the boardwalk I run into Klaus. He's a truck driver, but he works for the army. He often goes to Tarin Kowt with the convoys. Klaus walks along with me for a while. . . .

"If you ask me, we're just a little too chummy with the Americans," Klaus says.

He's having a hard time deciding between the Pizza Hut and the Burger King. He goes for the Burger King.

"We're here more to protect the oil than to help the people," he explains.

What oil? I should have asked, but even that question seems superfluous to me.

After Klaus has left, I go over to the man behind the counter at the Burger King. He's somewhere around forty, I think. It's hard to tell. He's sweating heavily. And he smells strongly of frying food.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"India," he says.

"And when will you be going home?"

I have to repeat the question.

"Home," the Indian says. "Not good."

KAF is better than home. That probably goes for a lot of the people here. Feeling guilty, I order French fries from the Indian at the Burger King.

KAF has a lawyer as well. In fact, it has a few of them. I hadn't expected to find a lawyer in the army. After a little looking around, I find him drinking coffee in front of his tent.

His name is Nils. He looks like the archetype of the perpetual student.

The lawyers here advise the military personnel, for example, on whether they're allowed to open fire. If there's enough time for that, of course. Sometimes there's no time for that. . . .

"And what about the suicide attacks?"

"We try to keep the other traffic at a distance. That goes for the convoys, for example, but also for traffic here at the gates. We use flashing lights, screaming, waving, honking. After that we begin with warning shots. Then we aim at their tires. And finally, possibly, at the driver. There are situations in which it might turn out that we've had to shoot someone who is unarmed. That's an extremely shitty situation. Some family might be left without a father and a breadwinner. We don't have any special budgetary allotments for that, but we would try to come up with some way to help the family. For example, by hiring the mother to work here in the kitchen."

Nils has things to do.

The temptation to play God, I understand, is born of pure necessity.

I go looking for Captain Cynthia. She's in one of the air-force tents, where unauthorized individuals like myself are not allowed to go.

They let me in anyway.

In the tent, a group of air force personnel is watching a DVD. They are hanging around on a couch, slouching in chairs. The tent has been darkened.

Sometimes an army base looks very like a college dormitory.

But I didn't come here to spend time in a college dormitory. I go back to my home base. The boardwalk. The Burger King, Tim Hortons, the shops with souvenirs about which no one knows whether they were made in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or maybe even plain old Pakistan. The tailors who, for next to nothing, will embroider your name on your clothing.

Uncle Fester is sitting on a bench. He's in the air force. He also served in Iraq. That's where he got the name Uncle Fester.

Uncle Fester is bald and heavyset. We arrived at KAF on the same plane.

"Was the Hercules a bad ride for you, too?" I ask. "Did it make you throw up?"

"Not me," he says. "If it had, you would have noticed. When I throw up, this huge blast of vomit comes flying out. I could audition for a part in *The Exorcist*. One of those little bags isn't enough for me."

"Yeah," I say. And, after a brief silence. "Do you like it here?"

"It sounds weird," he says, "but this is where I relax." Uncle Fester sits staring into space. "There is one little thing, though, that does get a bit tiring sometimes."

"What's that?" I ask.

"The army is one big sewing circle. Sometimes they act just like a bunch of old ladies." Uncle Fester runs his hand over his bald head. "You know what you should write about? Defense department underwear. Our underpants are issued by the defense department. But women who wear underpants like that turn me off right away. No matter how pretty they are". . . .

My last experience at KAF is a church service. When I come in with Captain Cynthia, the church is almost deserted.

A little group of American soldiers is busy preparing a service. They sing a few hymns.

Then they stand around in a circle. They hold hands and begin praying. They want Captain Cynthia and me to join the circle, too. The invitation is a friendly one, and not the kind you could refuse.

I hold Captain Cynthia's hand and that of an American soldier I've never seen before.

Most of the American soldiers here are black.

After standing there like that for five minutes, we're allowed to sit down.

To my surprise, standing around in the circle with the soldiers was moving. Despite the sweaty palms.

The church gradually fills.

More hymns are sung.

The man leading the service—Is he really a minister?—says: "Before we continue with the service. . . . I need to tell you that, should anything happen, the church has two emergency exits. One on either side." He spreads his arms like a stewardess in a plane.

We fly back to Kabul aboard a Dutch Hercules. This time no one vomits. . . .

After a sleepless night—without a sleeping bag, nights in Kabul are awfully cold—we walk in the early morning light to the KDC-10 that will take us back to Eindhoven by way of Sharyah and Crete.

Suddenly, from the back of the crowd, Major Robert comes rushing by. He passes everyone. He looks like he's competing in the world championship race walking. Major Robert: a man with a mission.

"I know where the best seats are," he says. "With extra leg room." And without turning around he shouts to Captain Cynthia and me: "You guys have little bodies, you don't need it."

At Eindhoven airbase my baggage is checked for opium.

My girlfriend is waiting for me.

"You know how you looked when you came walking up to me?" she says. "Invincible."

It's a word that never crossed my mind while I was in Afghanistan.

Literary prizes, good reviews, satisfactory sales figures, it had been great, but none of it had ever made me feel invincible.

I had to go to Afghanistan in order to feel that.

Maybe that's the reason why Kurt Vonnegut, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, wrote: "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers."

People will always find new and different reasons for going to war, and some of those reasons are undoubtedly legitimate. But in the end it's about that overpowering feeling that comes sneaking up on you, out of nowhere: the brutish and joyful realization that you exist. Without ambiguity, without reserve, without pesky doubts.

And, right on its heels, comes that fleeting glimpse of invincibility.

Acknowledgements

In addition to all of the military personnel portrayed in this work, I would also like to thank Johannes van der Sluis, Saskia Verhoeff, Hans Steketee, and Michel Krielaars.