

This is how we met. He was nineteen years old, a Florida native, a father to a son, my first bunkmate at the United States Naval Recruit Training Command (boot camp/basic), and my Recruit Division's Recruit Chief Petty Officer, what we called "R-POC" (Ar-pock). With anticipation that we'd be able to riff together like two recreational comedians tossing dick jokes back n' forth, he excitedly told me that his favorite film was *Talladega Nights*. His perky anticipation gave way to deflation when I told him I hadn't seen it.

Though young, he was a decent leader of men. I say "men," but our recruit division was mostly children. They may well have been into their early 20s, but Christ, these kids were *kids*, in some cases, children... and many of them *had* kids, otherwise, they'd probably not be there. R-POC was hindered by a limited vocabulary, but he spoke with all the command his blend of Floridian slanglo-bonics could muster. Unlike most of his peers, he carried himself without an ounce of bitch or whine. I appreciated that. I was thankful for that.

I lied when I told him I hadn't seen *Talladega Nights*, only it was a half lie. Four years earlier, during my second trip to Brooklyn, I sat in the Life Café near my girl's apartment waiting for her to get home from Midtown. The cafe was having a movie night featuring my bunkmate's celebrated picture. I suppose I had technically seen it but being twenty-two years of age and excited to see my girl as well as being in New York City for the second time where the Bushwickian November atmosphere was refrigerated and, fuck if it wasn't motivating, I wasn't really honed in on the picture.

It makes sense that New Yorkers are braggarts. Those actually from there represent their community with more passion and authenticity than most Americans authentically represent McDonald's or The Apple Store. It is a place where everyone seems to have purpose. With exception to the trust-fund stooges and otherwise acceleratedly privileged, there is no coasting. So, though I probably sat in Life Cafe-Brooklyn for an hour or so with *Talladega Nights* hovering overhead while waiting for the woman I was in love with to arrive, greet me, have a drink, excitedly walk me to her boxcar apartment and fittingly reunite, I told R-POC that I had not seen it. And though I'm polite when telling him that, confusion and disbelief slide over him.

All things withstanding, R-POC was a good kid. After sixty days together at Recruit Training Command located at Great Lakes Naval Station in North Chicago, which is just north of Chicago in the state of Illinois, "The Land of Lincoln," (which has one of our most boring state flags) we were both flown from O'Hare International Airport to Baltimore-Washington International Airport then taxied to Fort George G. Meade, Maryland (which has one of our busiest state flags) for our "A" school.

We even ended up rooming together in the Navy Detachment of the multi-branch-armed-forces base at Fort George G. Meade along with his childhood friend who shared a name with a faux surf apparel clothing line that was fashionable with our country's suburban mall kids. Enchanted by the coincidence, he had the logo tattooed onto his back. As a child, I had a friend named Calvin who would sometimes wear a Berkeley "Cal" hat every once in a while, but that's as far as that went.

Basic Training exposed me to many tattoos that I would have most likely not seen or imagined branded onto someone's flesh. The Chevrolet "Bow Tie" (among other automobile manufacturers) was pretty popular. Clothing logos like the one mentioned above were extremely popular. The clothing line that has a diagonal, skyward-pointing "F" was everywhere. The T-shirt brand that targets clean suburban children by naming their brand Dirty Ghetto Kids was also a frequent sight. I wondered how these boys could care so much about T-shirt companies. Cars, sure, but I'm curious to find out how many kids got *HYPERCOLOR* tats in the early 90s.

Skin tones celebrated their statehood by branding themselves with a rendering of their home state of Nebraska "The Cornhusker State," California "The Golden State," Nevada "The Silver/Battle Born/Sagebrush State," Florida "The Sunshine State," (the best Fla. tattoo had the panhandle running along the kid's clavicle and the peninsula ran down his well-developed bicep) and, of course, Texas "The Lone Star State." When including the mockingly overused nautical stars, last names in Old English, religious images, Japanese characters, tribal bullshit, shitty song lyrics, departed loved ones etc., the majority of recruits were inked.

Both R-POC and Clothing Line Tattoo had wives. At the time, CLT's wife was twenty-one, he was nineteen and the father of two daughters. They were not in a committed relationship when he knocked her up the second time. In fact, they were both seeing other people, but after infideliously creating two humans, they conceded that marriage must be done. Love, surely, knows no bounds. When asked about CLT's reluctance to use birth control, he predictably pointed out that when having as much sex as he was, pregnancies are bound to happen. This is an impossible-to-circumvent equation; that no matter whether precautionary contraceptives are implemented or not, every hundred fucks begets one automatic pregnancy. Parenthood is simply the price you pay for fucking.

“And I mean, shit, I aint never gonna stop fucking.”

Both these kids took the two grand they made while in boot camp and got themselves a car loan. R-POC chose a low-mileage Dodge Magnum (marketed as a muscled/manly family wagon). Relatively sensible compared to what his buddy CLT would be spending the next ten years paying off: a Cadillac.

These childhood friends also married childhood friends. The wives were neighbors and damn-near sisters. Smartphones throbbed and rumbled with nude pics and masturbatory video clips. These fellas would dress up in their fatigues and snap dirty/sexy/hunky military-type photos of themselves in the commode/shower partition of our barracks. It was humorous to witness the lead up to, and aftermath of, these photo shoots.

2 - 10.1997 -Houston Suburbs- “What if my own skin makes my skin crawl?
 What if my own flesh is suburban sprawl?”

Roughly ten years before social media profiles became everyone's digital social resume, I heard someone say "Uhhhh" thanks in large part to Master P. One peer (who had a cool name, Roscoe, though he went by the fairly milquetoast title "Ross") was revered because he could perfectly recite the incredibly fast verse originally performed by Mystikal while riding his bike with no hands guiding the handlebars and, due to all the Mountain Berry Powerade he consumed, always had a blue-gray tint to his gums, tongue, and teeth.

That an overwhelming percentage of fortunate suburban kids garner parts of their identity from commercially-supported, gangster-illusionary Radio Rap is the boiling ice-cube of stupidity and reverse logic. What I shared with Tupac Shakur or Eazy-E in the 1990s will never be answered by a sociological report, culture manifesto, or therapy sessions. Thanks media, entertainment industry (whoever), for making me say "Uhhhh" even though I have contentedly never said "Uhhh" again.

3 - 08.2009 -StL- "I'm digging all the way to China with a silver spoon
while the hangman fumbles with the noose"

The hashtag insurgency and the occupation of the economic collapse have both taken ahold of America's day-to-day. I am in St. Louis mistakenly spending the days craigslisting for a professional future. My evenings are consumed by cheap bourbon, Anheuser-Busch products, and the St. Louis Cardinals. After stints trying to work for "moral" money (altruistic community organizations, non-profit programs), followed by what might've given my collar a shade closer to white by day at a crooked supplemental insurance office and serving as a restaurant professional by night, my patience and ambition has expired. I need a job fast. No drawn out interview process, no questionnaires, no recruiters, no background checks- just a job.

Moving westward from the river is downtown, then a black community, followed by an Italian one, then a warehouse district that has brick buildings large enough to house football fields. The warehouse I arrive at is outfitted with truck bays on the walls facing south while being backed up alongside railroad tracks to the north. A four-and-a-half-foot concrete foundation supports the twenty-some-odd-foot brick walls. The beat up truck bays are covered by tattered, weathered pads desperately requesting to no longer be kept on a duct-taped life support but finally retired to the dumpster.

An egg-shaped minivan with politically-charged bumper-stickered braggadocio and a stick-figured family portrait is parked alongside a set of iron stairs leading to the entrance four feet from the ground. Five meters inside stands a recently and cheaply erected office/break room. The proximity surrounding the entrance and stark-white drywalled office/breakroom was a clutter of relocated office furniture, neglected tools, warehouse resources, and metal bed frames, but a few steps deeper into the warehouse provides a view of hundreds of distant stacks of mattresses.

A homey door serves as the tiny new office's entrance. The bottom half of the door has four decoratively routed equilateral triangles forming a square while the top half is outfitted with a window supported by a brass frame dividing the windowpane into nine identical rectangles.

Inside, a woman sat behind a desk supporting a computer, phone, stacks of paper, and a colorful placard that read "Ashleen." Her thin, brown hair was pulled into a nub of a ponytail. She wore faintly blue, near-white jeans, black Old Navy foam sandals, and a NASCAR shirt that illustrated drivers' heads in a much larger proportion to their bodies and overstated each man's facial features. The shirt rested on her large, three-bulged pregnant torso which further amplified the caricatures. Though she seemed due in a matter of days, her limbs didn't appear swollen.

Ashleen, who in a phone call two days prior had arranged for me to come in and meet the man I'd potentially be working with, wasn't quite sure what to make of my presence, once I mentioned "job" and "Craigslist" she instructed me to wait outside the two-inch dry-walled office as someone would be with me shortly.

Matt Kruger and his aggressive stride appeared almost instantly. Pausing at the open truck bay closest to the office, he performed a Tobacco Stick Ritual: locate the box, pound the box, tear off the plastic, wad up the plastic, carelessly discard the plastic, open the box, remove papered stick and place between lips, locate lighter, clutch box with thumb while cupping rest of fingers, light up and inhale. While holding stick in one, remaining tools and supplies in other, drop hands. Exhale. Secure tobacco tools on person. Move on with life. Or don't move on, brood for a bit and allow the cigarette to secrete some sort of physiological Phillip-Morris equilibrium.

As I walked toward him, he motioned towards me. Kruger wore battered basketball shoes that were once white, browned and aging tube socks that were once white clung to his mid-shins, and baggy JNCO jean shorts sagged well below his hips causing the hem to meet the top of the dingy tube socks. His spare-tired waist was covered by a worked-over wife-beater that was also once white. The sleeveless undershirt left capable arms exposed. Landscapes inspired by the monstrous goose-stepping hammer visions of *The Wall* paired with the passions and politics of *Mein Kampf* sat atop his biceps, triceps, and deltoids. A pointy, oily, Bic'ed-bald cranium towered over his sunken eyes and reaching nose. A graying Billy-goat beard clung around his yellow teeth and hung down to the middle of his sternum making it appear as though his entire head was drooling. Once within reach, I extended my hand. He took a mighty drag with his left, and shook with his right while nodding.

"I'm Jack" I say.

Accompanied by grey exhaust, he lazily allowed the word "Matt" to fall from his mouth, who then re-inhaled the lingering cloud, and finally exhaled it out the truck bay. He quickly took the final drag to the brown of the Marlboro, finger-shifted the stub in preparation to flick, and sent it flying out the bay as he expended his last breath of the nicotine dust. Again, he held up a finger signaling me to hold for a moment as he audibly snorted mucus from his nasal passage and, with skilled precision, hacked it onto a flattened tongue serving as launch pad. Mustering power from his diaphragm, he ejected the loogie in the same direction as the flicked cig.

"Jesus! Excuse me-" says Matt.

He took one final moment to collect himself by hiking up his shorts and brushing his hands against the denim before re-introducing himself with a slightest percentage more of courtesy.

"Okay, I'm Matt- you're Jack."

He begins pacing while looking for something in particular; I follow behind. Locating what seems to be the perfect trial mattress for interview purposes he says, "Okay, this'll do. Let's go."

On the opposite side of the king size memory foam mattress, I bend as he bends and grab the mattress that's wrapped in something of a giant Ziploc freezer bag.

With nicotine energy Kruger spouts, "Uh-uh! Now look, you've got grab the matt itself. Never the plastic. NEVER the plastic. The plastic breaks, then we have to fucking tape it up or re-wrap the whole shit and... yeah. Just don't grab the plastic. Grab the matt."

"Yes Sir."

Reacting to being called 'Sir,' Kruger releases his grip on the mattress, stands up straight, and continues his hustling hand gestures, "Don't call me 'Sir,' man. Shit, that's just weird. Just call me 'Matt' (pause)... now let's move this bitch."

He's acting just about as I had expected once I caught sight of him. Therefore, I'm playing this as I do most situations when I'm not holding any cards- keep my head down, do what's asked, and remain confident that if I hold my tongue, I'll have myself a much needed shitty job. "Sounds good."

We lift the matt. Kruger purposely pushes and pulls the mattress awkwardly to make sure I can handle it.

"Good. Good. Now let's put this bitch on top of that pile over there."

With both hands on the matt, Kruger gestures with his head. We maneuver and heave successfully.

"Okay. Good. What was your name again?"

"Jack. Uh, Jack Kohler."

In a thick German accent, "*Kohler!* That's right, when I heard from Ashleen that you were coming in, she had uhhh, she... uhh... told me your name-" begins stroking and smoothing

his goat beard, "and I said to her, 'oooooooooh, way to go, a nice German-boy huh? Ohhhh kay.' Hah."

He taps me on the shoulder with a balled fist.

"She was all like" shrilling his voice to mimic hers, "Maaaaatttttt, come on now- you shouldn't be like that. You know-oooo.' Or whatever."

I attempt to avoid awkwardness while not sharing a similar pride in the etymology of my name. So, I smirk a little, keep my head down, and allow silence to hang a moment. He closes in tight on me as if he didn't want anyone else to hear even though there was no one around.

"You see... it's just that I... I don't work with black guys. You know?"

He says this with a Beetlejuice affectation while looking at me like he's absolutely positive that I'll know exactly what he's talking about and will agree, or at least gain an understanding. For a moment, I mask my offense. After giving him a tight stare, he shrugs his shoulders and plays it off like he knows that I, and anyone else, can see his arms and know that, with regards to race, among other things, there are some major defects and backwards convictions inside him.

"Well, in my book, you're alright" he says.

I remain silent, but my stare subsides.

"So, yeah. I think you'll about workout. Just, uhhhh get here around nine, yeah nine on Monday and be ready for a full day's work."

Kruger moves towards the back of the warehouse.

"So, ummm, what will we be doing specifically?"

He abruptly turns around and reignites his gesticulations, "First things fucking first- this is a hard job. A real-fucking-hard-job. So, don't act like you're here to work unless you're really here to fucking work. But, shit man, there's a lot we do here, I mean, we-uhhhh, we prep the deliveries that are to be made to peoples' homes and shit, we actually make the deliveries to people's homes and shit. Also to our stores and shops... uhhh, we load and unload the rigs that pull up in here" points to the truck bays.

"We unload the fucking trucks, not the truckers, that's what Ashleen is for, how else do you think that bitch is pregnant? You know what I mean?"

Kruger prods me with the balled fist each time he repeats this statement while grinning about his dirty joke.

"You know what I mean?"

His grins and prods persist.

"You know what I mean? You know what I mean?"

Trying to make things uncomfortable, Kruger continues to test me. I unwillingly laugh it off.

"Yeah... I do. I get ya. I get it."

Christ, all we need is Gina Davis and a trainscape.

"Okay sport, just fucking with ya. No shit though, her husband is fucking shit up in Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever. Doing the Lord's work of killing Sand Niggers."

I keep telling myself, "It's this or call your Old Man. Again."

A yawn overtakes Kruger as he stretches his arms over his head and looks across the warehouse like it's his kingdom.

"Ohhhhhh (yawn).... Ummm, but seriously, we've got as much as 180 units to unload out of those bitches, as well as processing about 40 matts a day."

Once his stretching yawn is completed, Kruger's hands scratch his ass and torso per routine.

"Sorry, what's processing?"

"Yeah, well, many of the trucks we get are from the manufacturer or from other furniture joints and we've got to process the shits and make them look fresh and feel new again."

I have an idea, but am still uncertain with what he's driving at.

“Look kid, I’ll explain it all to you on your first day okay? Right now, I’ve gotta get ready to make a run Northside. But yeah, after the first week, we’ll see if you can hang. Oh, and at the end of the day and when our work is done here on this end (points to the warehouse), we’ve got to go and re-stock the area stores and fill in the holes on the floor if they sold anything off the floor. Basically, what I’m on my way to go do right now. Alright? Ya got me? Ya get it?” “Yeah, I got it.”

“Yeah? Does that sound like something you can handle?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“I gotta say, I like how you followed me and stuck around, you seem like a good listener... A lot of guys get their shit in a wad with the way I talk, so, yeah... It should work out. Okay. Seeya Monday.”

“Okay, Great. Thanks alot. Seeya”

“Oh, one last thing-“

“Sure-”

“So, do you listen to rap?”

“Ummm, it's whatever.”

“Well, ya aint gonna hear that shit here. Mostly metal and rock. So don’t bring any rap-crap CDs or whatever okay?”

“Sure. You don't have to worry about that.”

We shake hands. I leave as he rips out another cigarette and lights up.

4 - 09.2011 -Maryland- “Here I’m alive / Everything all the time”

Showered and toweled by 0500 hours, I prepare for the day while my bunkmate and roommates do likewise. Having been the last to shower, I'm the only one not dressed. Across the hall of the all-male floor of the Navy detachment at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland (The Free State, The Chesapeake Bay State, the Old Line State, and features our nation’s most Old Worldly state flag), I hear digitized percussion paired with a woman performing a vocal stair climb of the letter "O" followed by something about a dicey romance. A mighty stereo powers the Nouveau Disco Fuckstick Pop through the assailant's door, throughout the passageways, and penetrates itself further inside the surrounding victims' doorways.

I naively thought that joining the military would shield me from the accidental disco song bombs that bombarded me on the civilian streets and acquaintance apartment parties, but here is the sound of grown-age teeny slobber bobbbers regurgitating the echoes they've heard while spitting whatever new game they believe themselves to own. Death metal and radio rap? Sure. I fully expected that. Any tunes that carry some type of machismo braggadocio weight, I knew they were coming. But gals singing like a baby-crazy Brittany? This was a little unexpected.

But you persevere. You turn to your roommate who is putting the finishing touches on polishing his boots while plugged into some exorbitant battery-powered headphones, then to your bunkmate who is ironing his fatigues while wired and logoed plugs clog his ears. The situation makes sense. This is real life. Real life are those parts without expression, without coping mechanisms, without sun, without sweat, just a lingering shower-swampy atmosphere, toiling strangers, trespassing sounds, and the foreboding future. Stealing away from all of that is the very reason you live. You live to get away from life.

5 - 04.1999 -Houston Suburbs- “I was talking to preachy-preach about kissy-kiss and he bought me a soda”

“Kingwood is a 14,000 acre master-planned community located in Northeast Houston, Texas, United States. The majority of the community is located in Harris County with a small portion in Montgomery County. Known as the ‘Livable Forest,’ it is the largest master-planned community in Harris County and second largest within the 10-county Houston–Sugar Land–Baytown metropolitan area. Kingwood was created in 1971 as a joint venture between the Friendswood Development Company and King Ranch. Its name was derived as part of that partnership.”

Houston and Dallas’s economic boom coincided with the Steel Belt’s decline to rust (as well as other regions’ economies falling as fast as Houston and Dallas’s were rising). Consequently, Texas ended up attracting a considerable amount of out-of-region, white-collar talent. Growing up in a town that isn’t older than your older brother is an odd thing. The community is without history and every resident is a transplant. These corporately-planned housing developments were constructed with the intention of being a conglomeration of conspicuously privileged and petrifyingly normal people. Every-Upper-Middle-Class Suburb, U.S.A.

To top that off, all of us who were raised in EUMCS, USA had only a trace, or none of, the accent our parent’s owned. We were ready for MTV and commercials to do whatever they wanted to us. Thank God I grew up with a group of guys that enjoyed separating themselves from all of that. One of them wisely invested in some 10oz Everlast Pro-Style boxing gloves. At over one thousand students per class, our high school was larger than many division II colleges. Thus, athletically, my friends and I were labeled “role” players, sat the bench on “important” teams, or were integral members of less-important team sports like cross country and lacrosse (this is Texas, so the lacrosse team at the time was a “club activity” and not an actual, relevant sport).

Most of all, we were slackers that didn’t speak southern suburban slanglo-bonics. We didn’t have the energy or the ability to spend our parent’s money in order to keep up with The Preppy Adolescent Jones’s, or the desire to spend our minimum-wage paychecks on anything other than concerts, albums, instruments, etc. At the center of our group was an odd set of twins that coordinated a lot of sporting and social outings. Odd, because one stood six foot tall, had a wiry, translucent frame and the other looked like he had boulders attached to his dark and squatty frame.

Basketball, football, ultimate frisbee, sand volleyball, and other pick-up games were regularly organized. The first boxing session took place after some pick-up games. We played, enjoyed the sun, the shit talking, the camaraderie. And as is always the unfortunate case, once the first guy bails due to whatever excuse he issues, the level of play and number of participants quickly dissipates. As the two-dozen originally assembled turned into half of that, Dark and Squatty had the idea to see who was interested in boxing. Goddamn, I was. The few childhood fights I was involved in didn’t go in my favor; in some cases embarrassingly so.

Father-son clichés in family-driven situational comedies my generation grew up with included the “bird’s and the bees” talk as well as the “father teaches son to fight.” As a kid I thought those premises were ridiculous and was thankful my old man never attempted to discuss those things. That said, I still needed a guide of sorts to correct this deficiency of not knowing how to fight. After the juvenile excitement calmed and the murmur that comes with everyone telling everyone else how badly they were going to beat the shit out of each other died down, Dark & Squatty dropped the gloves. We intuitively formed a circle and D&S’s square jaw demandingly asked, “Who’s going first?”

After a moment's hesitation from the group, the loudest and most prolific trash talker of us, Tall and Translucent, jumped at the gloves. He went at it with his brother, but with the height differential and brotherly factors, it was mostly comic relief. The bout broke the ice and T&T did a good job of defensively keeping the much stronger D&S from landing any haymakers. He did, however, not throw a single exciting punch. The second bout included two fellas who awkwardly circled one another until one decided to bull rush the other while throwing a rapid-fire series of wild, spaghetti-armed hooks that were mostly ineffectual.

While receiving a lesson on what not to do, I began considering who my opponent would be. The bull rushers finished their bout and dropped their gloves. A kid who earned the nickname "White Stuff" eagerly approached the gloves and I bounced at the other pair. D&S laced my fists up and acted as my corner coach providing advice that was seriously pumping me up. Whatever little testosterone was in my scrawny pubescent frame, it was all going to the right places: my heart, my hands, my eyes. Unfortunately, I still didn't know how to fight. The awkward circles continued and, just like the idiots before us, we randomly bull rushed one another wildly throwing noodle-armed hooks and counters. The tactics reeked of fear and desperation. My personal awkwardness and profound unfamiliarity with how to fight hit harder than any punch could have.

6 - 05.2011 -Great Lakes Naval Station/RTC- "Everyone is so near, everyone has got fear."

Over the last eighteen hours, Chief Linebacker-Sized Luis Guzman has been babysitting these confused, fatigued, and helpless recruits. The purposefully exhausting In-Processing to the United States Navy begins the moment the recruits step on the shuttle bus running from O'Hare International Airport to Recruit Training Command at the Great Lakes Naval Station. In-Processing includes each recruit signing in, submitting a urine sample, mailing everything you arrived with home (including clothes, cellphones, books, watches, jewelry, and the socks/underwear you were wearing), and being issued a seabag followed by all the basic individual gear (toiletries, underwear, socks, athletic shoes/attire, etc) you'll need for the duration of basic.

After that, the hundreds of new arrivals were parsed into divisions, and, in place of sleep, a strictly enforced overnight study session of the texts recently issued emphasizing the United States Navy's Chain of Command and The Eleven General Orders of a Sentry portions transpired. Predictably, even when motivated by people whose job it was to put on a King Asshole façade and activate their diaphragm to vocally fling flaming verbal turds at fresh-from-civilization recruits, staying awake was easier for some than others. A few hours after dawn broke, the all-male Division 229 (pronounced "Two-Two-Nine") was led to their compartment ("home" for 229)-- a large and tiled space that, aside from the uniformly aligned rows of bunked racks, was bare. The forward and aft bulkheads were adjustable to be able to accommodate the different spaces needed with each new division's size. The ten-foot tall starboard bulkhead was lined with opaque windows whereas the bricked portside bulkhead provided entrances to two heads, one fishbowl office, one laundry room, and our only entrance/exit.

Chief Linebacker-Sized Luis Guzman gave the orders, "Fall in next to a rack. Any fucking rack, it DOESN'T fucking matter. Place your seabag on the deck near said rack. Your Recruit Division Commanders will be here shortly."

He pauses as the recruits attempt to throw thoughts and preconceptions into their rack selections. Believing that a rack selection possibly meant that sleep may soon come, a portion of the recruits even begin to excitedly murmur about trivial complaints and their overall tiredness.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP! Jesus, I have not given an instruction that necessitates you bitches running your fucking cum traps! And stop fucking around with the racks. It won't matter what rack you're at now, you'll be *assigned* a rack later on. This shit is simple. The commands

were to enter the compartment, find a rack, and to NOT put your seabag on the fucking rack; put it *beside* the rack ON THE FUCKING DECK.”

Recruits finally do so and are all awkwardly hovering near their selected areas.

“Okay. Now. Fucksticks- move slightly inboard.”

Most of the recruits have no idea what “inboard” means and, for a moment, remind me of the Springfield Elementary student body when told to “Stand Down” by Principle Skinner.

“That means move your asses toward the center of the compartment... goddam this fucking group. Never gonna make it, not a fucking chance. NOW, look at your feet. There is a line running across the compartment that is exactly one tile length inboard from your rack.”

The chief pauses as he notices two of the division’s Recruit Division Commanders (RDCs) enter the compartment.

“Okay. Once you’ve identified the line, all you shitbags need to align your toes with said line in a uniform manner. That, which all of you are currently lined up on, is the toe-line. When you hear any chief or petty officer give the command that involves getting your ass to the ‘TOELINE,’ that means you drop whatever the fuck you're doing and get your fucking toes on the fucking toeline. Tracking? Following? You fucks understand? Now Stand-the-fuck-by.”

RDC1 (Petty Officer First Class Castor Troy, the Officer-In-Command) approaches the Chief on the forward side of the compartment while RDC3 Petty Officer Second Class Louis Skolnick permeates around the center to aft. As the Chief exits, he and RDC1 shake hands, and mumble a few smiling words to one another.

Recruit Division Commander of USS Chicago’s (most of the buildings at Great Lakes Naval Base are named after “famous” vessels) Recruit Division 229 First Class Petty Officer Troy comfortably and confidently scans his large compartment housing one-hundred bunked racks and their newly acquired occupants. Petty Officer Troy notices some slouching and some overall inattentiveness. With a commanding voice that sounds eerily like Nicholas Cage’s, his throat booms, “Stand at fucking ATTENTION!”

Petty Officer Troy even uses similar tonal inflections as Cage.

At three inches above six feet and a build that was obviously not genetically gifted to him but built by a commitment to the physical training regimen belonging to the United States Navy he enlisted in eight years prior, he commanded all of the civilians-turned-recruit-shitbags’ respect.

“You are now at Recruit Training Command located inside Great Lakes Naval Station and this group makes up Division 229 which is under my command. I am your 1st Recruit Division Commander and this (gestures to Skolnick) is your 3rd RDC. The 2nd in command will join us in a few days.”

Petty Officer Troy notices a sagging, glazed-eyed recruit and approaches him like an R. Lee Ermey replicant. The recruit attempts to straighten up, but Petty Officer Troy already has his jaw cocked at the recruits face.

“I SWEAR to CHRIST, that I put your FAT ASS IN ATTENTION! Is that really what you call at attention?”

Petty Officer Troy’s body language never wavers. His back and legs remain straight, shoulders upright, and hand gestures are perfectly swift; near robotic.

“IS THIS THE BEST YOU HAVE? THIS IS YOUR BEST? You have *got* to be shitting me.”

“Sir, I don't--”

“DON'T YOU FUCKING CALL ME 'SIR' YOU FUCKSTICK, I WORK FOR A LIVING! NOW STAND AT A PROPER FUCKING ATTENTION!”

Even though I, and suspect we all, know these guys can’t hit us, the intimidation tactics are clearly working. The recruit offers an attempt at a satisfactory stance paired with a confused look.

“Christ. Okay. How long were you in DEP (Delayed Entry Program)?”

“Ummm Sir ahhh”

“I ALREADY ORDERED YOU TO NOT CALL ME 'SIR!'”

The recruit, intimidated and a mental mess, struggles.

“Ummm, ahhhh-”

Petty Officer steps away from the recruit towards the center of the compartment and projects, “‘Petty Officer.’ You will address all of your RDCs as well as anyone else who is wearing ‘crows’” grabs his insignia worn on the collars “as ‘Petty Officer.’ Anchors worn on collars indicate chiefs, we’ll get to the rest later...”

“Anyways, you” points back at his first victim “DEP, how long?”

“Uuhhhhh...”

Petty Officer Troy nods head slowly and affirmatively saying “Petty Officer” in a mockingly mentally challenged fashion.

“Uhhh, Petty Officer, about 6 months, Sir-”

“Relax kid. And stop calling me ‘Sir.’ Jesus, you’re thick. You’re in the military now- certain people are ‘Sirs;’ others are not. Those who work for their paycheck are not called ‘Sir.’ Everybody got that? Okay. Jesus, 6 MONTHS- fucking A! They do not teach you shit down there do they? SIX months and you can’t stand at proper attention? God Dammit.

“Now recruit, move to the center of the compartment. Stand here. Right here.”

Petty Officer’s Troy’s gestures are efficient. A single finger never points, rather the whole hand does. And I understand why the military does this, the point seems like the appropriate thing to do when a not-yet-potty-trained puppy has soiled the carpet, or when a fed up elementary teacher is disciplining misbehavior with instructions to “stand in the corner,” but in here, you can see why they would want to avoid those kinds of similarities. With that in mind, there is no shaking that this style of gesturing calls to mind history’s most infamous straight-armed and straight-handed military.

The recruit successfully moves as directed. The poor kid looks like he’s so tightly wound and all of us recruits look like our wads are in bunches thanks to the military-issued tighty whities we’re all crammed into.

“Now, recruit, do you give me permission to place your body in the proper attention stance?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes petty officer?”

“Great, you’re not as dumb as the chiefs told me you were. First things first- stand up straight with your heels touching and put your feet at 45s.”

The recruit, so racked, is still struggling.

“Okay, don’t nuke this shit. Are you a fucking nuke? Nukes tend to over-think the simplest of orders cause they’re so smart; they’re retarded.”

“No, petty officer.”

“Well, shit kid, you sure fooled me. 45s, as in your feet are angled at a 45 degree. Jesus. Okay back straight, good. Now hold out your hands--- YOU ARE ALL TO BE FUCKIN DOIN THIS TOO!”

Petty Officer Troy turns his back to the unfortunate recruit and addresses the entire division. He extends his hands in front of his face connecting at the wrist making a stiff V-shape to illustrate what our feet are to look like.

“Your heels are to touch like so.”

His hands illustrating the pronouncements.

“This is the only time that I will take to show you this shit. Next time? We’ll just drop the whole division for your individual stupidity if you can’t stand at a PROPER-FUCKING-ATTENTION. With your hands- pretend you’re holding a roll of quarters.”

Looks around and notices everyone is following along.

“Good. Now, you should all have your knuckles lined up, place those knuckles at the outseam of your pants. I know you’re wearing sweats right now but do the best you can. That is Attention. When you’re at Attention you are permitted to speak but only when addressed. Is that understood?”

The compartment offers some murmurings, but nothing quite coherent other than a few eager beavers hollering “Yes Petty Officer” as though Admiral Farragut was their great-great grandfather.

“The appropriate response to that question is ‘Yes Petty Officer.’”

A few more chirp "Yes, Petty..."

Humorously displeased, then suddenly serious.

“You shitbags are NOW. IN. THE. MILITARY. It is *TIME* that you realize that you are no longer civilians and that you are no longer allowed to do whatever the fuck you want to do and act however the fuck you want to act. It is called MILITARY BEARING, and if you want to make it through basic, shit if you want to make it through the day, you had better fucking find some. Whatever soft-voiced, limp-wristed shit-civilian you were, that shit is OVER! 99% of the time when I ask this division a question the total response better be either ‘Yes Petty Officer’ or ‘No Petty Officer.’ This shit aint rocket surgery.

“So now, I ask- Division 229, is that understood?”

In unison and as loud as committed pep rally attendees, "YES PETTY OFFICER!"

Our voices unify and bounce off the linoleum and bricked bulkheads.

“Right now, we need to get you to chow, leave your seabag at your rack, and form a line that wraps around the inboard side of the racks. It’ll look like a rectangle here. Once in line you are to look only at the back of the head in front of you and you will remain silent. Get there.”

The line forms, Petty Officer Troy stands in the center of the compartment, RDC3 Skolnick, standing a few steps in front of the line, exits to the passageway. The beginning of the line is uncertain to follow.

“Go dammit. Follow Petty Officer.”

7 - 08.2002 -StL Suburbs- “Man is breeding forever, because of the weather”

In the early dawn and sometimes at perfect dusk (provided none of your lights are on), a low, dense, blue-gray light will break its way through your curtains or blinds and, for a moment, vision is monochromatic. The first time I consciously absorbed this setting was when I was finishing high school and sleeping with someone I was happy to be with. Unaccustomed to laying alongside anybody, paired with the fact that her bed was of comparable size to a large ottoman, I woke with dawn. Considering that I woke with a girl in my arms whose features were on a much higher level than anyone I’d met, it was a moment I tried to suspend and prolong.

Her Cuban-Anglo lineage gave her features that were hard to beat and she took care of herself in such a way that I didn’t fully comprehend what I had at that age. My first waking moments with her were reflecting on what a lucky sonuvabitch I was, followed by hands on flesh, lips on lips, a gradual, cinematic fall to the floor where the blue-gray vision only enhanced what followed. Since then, when I wake with either someone I care about, or even a mild acquaintance, and the conditions are just so, I struggle to capture even a portion of what I felt during that moment that has proven much more elusive than that young man could have known.

This is what we do. We wade through women pathetically thinking the next will make you forget about the rest. And she never does. It never will. You'll only be chasing things that no longer exist. Everlasting happiness is the false rabbit the track hounds never catch.
You'd be lucky to find it momentarily.