

Preventative

By W.A. McDonald

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I used to like it here. Long ago, when I was a child, this was where I went to escape boredom, loneliness... obscurity. Things are different now. It is a mess.

When I was a child, it was here I could find solace from the world around me. When I needed to escape, I retreated into my mind and the worlds I created. I set out on exciting journeys where anything was possible. I flew star fighters against alien invaders, and saved the world. I explored the deepest oceans and discovered new life forms. Here the most beautiful girl in the world always fell in love with me.

None of that is possible now. It is like a thick fog fills the place. No, denser than fog, it is more like pulled cotton balls. Thin filament's stretch throughout my mind, creating what appears to be easily broken barriers to my thoughts. However, as I push against those stretched fibers, they build up, bunching together, cutting into me, and create stronger thicker strands.

Putting together coherent thoughts seems impossible. All I can manage is confusion. When a thought sparks, or an idea begins to blossom, I reach for it, but cannot grasp it. It is always out of reach.

*Why am I so confused, I wonder, what is going on?*

I pull back, and look around, turning, searching for something I can grasp. Then through the crisscross of filaments, I see something I missed. Details are hard in this scattered frame of mind, but I am sure I see a wall.

If I shift my head to the left, looking through a different pattern of fibers, I see a brick wall. Then, if I turn so that I see the wall through my periphery, I see the irregular pattern of riveted boilerplate. Yet, the representation I see the most often is a stone wall. Like the Internet pics I have seen of old stone fences that crisscross England.

I push toward the wall, and the fibers quickly build up and hold me off. I throw a hand towards the wall, desperately wanting to touch its now stony surface.

*What is behind that wall?*

I fall into a dreamless sleep with that question bounding off the fibers of my mind.

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When I wake it is dark and time is lost to me. I wish days have passed, but a part of me knows it has only been hours. I can smell myself, my sweaty sheets...cigarette smoke.

I turn my head, and see the flickering glow of purple neon through a tear in the blind that covers my window.

"Sadie's Ladies is open," I whisper hoarsely into the darkness.

In some recess of my mind, it registers that the scar glows purple around 10:30. I have not risen from my bed since before dawn, and my bladder screams for relief. I roll out of bed and with effort standup straight. Instantly my head whirls, and I feel as though the world tilts at a steep angle. Involuntarily my palm slaps the wall for stability.

Stiffness in my joints causes me to shuffle my way to the bathroom. I use every available handhold to keep me from falling off the steeply slanted floor. For a moment, I gaze down at the shadowy outline of the toilet, pondering my next move. Lacking confidence in my balance, I turn and fall to the seat. With frustration, I lift my ass and yank my briefs down.

I tuck, and sigh with the diminishing pressure. Then a foul smell assaults my sinuses causing me to tip my head back and to the left in an effort to escape the foul odor.

"God, what were they putting in me?" I croak through dry lips.

Shaking off what I know is not the last drop; I stand, and pull up my briefs. Still unsteady, I maintain three points of contact to balance myself at the sink. My left hand gropes for and finds the light switch.

Even though my eyelids squeeze shut against the flaring light, my head explodes with pain. When I open my eyes, they close involuntarily against the fluorescent affront. This cycle

continues until my eyes become accustomed to the sterile white light.

"I think my eyes are broke." I whisper at the warped visage in the mirror.

I lean in, because I do not recognize the face looking back at me. Bloodshot whites blend with the copper band of my irises. Irises stretched thin around dilated pupils. I take note of my ashen skin and gaunt features. Five days of growth color my jawline a darker brown than the greasy matt plastered to my skull. I tilt my head and the subtle movement renews the throbbing between my temples.

"Is it worth it?" I ask the stranger looking back at me. He does not answer, just looks at me with those reddish copper eyes.

My mouth feels as though the same cotton that clouds my mind coats my tongue and the membrane surrounding it. I remember a small plastic cup with hard water stains on the outside. I locate it, activate the faucet, and fill the cup.

I take a deep breath, let it out, and lift the glass to my lips. It feels as though the liquid never reaches my stomach. I am so dry; the tissue between my teeth and stomach absorbs it greedily. I wait a moment for my stomach to complain. Getting none, I fill the glass again, and sip the contents slowly.

Timidly, I stand erect without support. My head pounds and my joints continue to ache, but the world is closer to even.

*Take the Preventative*, echoes in my head.

"Is it worth it?" I ask again, "Is all this suffering worth life without it?" After a moment, my reflection shrugs.

With some effort, along with ignoring the throb in my head, I can pull details out of the cotton. The government of Blue America puts the Preventative in our protein sources. As best I can recall, the government subjects everyone to the Preventative, at least everyone who is beyond the age of infant formula and baby food. That is because most everyone gets his or her nourishment from the public commissary.

"Here in Blue America anyway," I say to my reflection.

I am almost certain that the Preventative did not come into my life until adulthood. I search hard for a hint in my broken memories, still I cannot remember exactly when, but I do recall slices of life before it.

Was it high school? No, I know it was not. The Center for Mental Health did not require it then, not yet. I focus harder grasping for when. With effort, the origins of the Preventative become a little clearer. Once is it was approved by the FDA, the CMH mandated that only criminals and the mentally ill were required to take it.

Am I crazy? Did I commit a crime? Why am I addicted to the Preventative? If not high school when?

Then it dawns on me, most of the memories before joining the Army are there, within easy grasp among the fibrous mess of my mind.

*Take the Preventative*, rings between my ears.

Yes, take the Preventative. I remember now when I started taking it, basic training. I joined the Army to escape the wearisome mediocrity of living in a white trash lower middle class trailer park. I wanted to fly helicopters, and the Army was my ticket.

Do my time, I thought. Get my wings, come back to Free America, and live the good life as a commercial jet pilot. Maybe, if fate really smiles on me, I move up to Low Earth Orbit transport pilot.

"That dream didn't pan out." My reflection says, stating the obvious.

Now I want the Preventative out of my life. I want a clear head. I want to be my own man.

"But is it worth it?"

I take another gulp from the cup and contemplate how I feel versus how I imagine life without the Preventative. For a long time I stare into my own bloodshot eyes as I weigh out several possible futures.

I decide life without it is my future, and that standing here is not getting me any closer to relief. So far, sleep seems to offer some escape, so I shuffle uneasily back bed. To this point, one of the symptoms of Preventative withdrawal is the lack of dreams.

As I lay down, my mind's eye glimpses the wall. I perceive it as rusted boilerplate steel. I notice rivets are missing, and along the top edge, large sections have rusted away into dust. I can only imagine what lies beyond, but I do recognize that its condition deteriorates with each passing day of Preventative withdrawal.

"What nightmares do I face once the Preventative releases its hold?" I ask the glowing purple scar before closing my eyes.

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Mommy usually comes and tucks me in. Where is she? I look at the bars that are supposed to confine me, and then up at the rocket ships and planets circle lazily over my head. Judging by the ruckus and boisterous laughter coming from down the hall, I am not home alone.

I discovered some time ago that I could crawl out of my crib and do so now. Normally I try to be quieter, but feel confident no one will hear me over the commotion penetrating the thin walls. Tentatively I reach up, turn the knob, pull open

the door, and peek into the narrow hallway. It is empty, but a dim blue hazy light casts an eerie glow in the hallways entrance on my left. I creep into the narrow passage and ease along the wall toward the kitchen. The palm of my left hand slides along the smooth surface, its solid structure giving me strength.

The hallway opens into the kitchen and a dining area beyond. I hang back just inside the shadow cast by the light hanging over the dining room table. A blue grey haze floats over my cousin and others sitting around the table. Tendrils of smoke rise from cigarettes, some in ashtrays, others hanging out of the corners of mouths, while a few rest between fingers.

Many of them hold cards in their hands. One grabs a can and tips his head back draining the last remnants of golden liquid into his mouth. Another lifts an ass cheek and emits a loud fart. This triggers laughter from the group.

Aside from my cousin, I do not recognize any of these people. They are strangers in my mother's home. They talk too loudly, curse, and laugh even louder. One slams his fist on the table, making me jump. I stare in dismay, afraid of discovery, but badly wanting to find my Mommy.

I creep out a little more into the kitchen, leaving the security of the shadows. I try to look into the living room that lies beyond the scary people. It is hard to see anything through the haze and the shadows cast by the hazy light. I lean

left, right, up on my tippy toes, trying to see into the dark places. Within moments, I decide there is no one there.

I retreat to safety of the shadows, and then my room. Is my Mommy in her bedroom?

Back in my crib, a memory offers some comfort. I will cry out for a glass of water. My Mommy always comes when I cry.

I cry for what seems like an eternity, when suddenly, my cousin throws open the door, a glass of water in his hand. I stare in disbelief as its contents arc through the air, bathing me in icy liquid. I gasp with a shuddering breath.

"Here is your God damn water, now shut the fuck up."

The door slams, and I lay there terrified, wanting to, needing to scream out the air filling my lungs, but afraid it will bring my cousin back.

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As I stare at the predawn twilight peeking around my window shade, I dwell on the long forgotten, but painful memory for a moment. That memory obviously predates the Preventative. My childhood was not terrible, but moments like that sure did not make it great. Thinking back, I hated being a child, hated childhood. Not because moments like that filled it, in fact, there was good with the bad, but overall, it was pedestrian at best.

I clearly remember wanting to grow up and escape childhood. Now that I have escaped, I look back through the fibers that obscure my view of the wall, and know I would not go back.

"Yes," I acknowledge, "the wall."

*Is that what is behind the wall? I wonder, memories best left forgotten.*

Reliving the memory leaves me exhausted. I contemplate what else might be behind the wall until my mind surrenders to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stare at the ceiling of my tiny apartment looking beyond the yellowed textured surface. Part of my mind registers that the source of discoloration is from decades of cigarette smoke, and the countless meals cooked on a stove not ten feet from my head. Recognition that smoking is illegal settles into my thoughts, has been for decades. Yet, when I walk down the narrow halls of this tenement, I smell the pungent odor of homemade cigarettes.

I still feel the fibers of stretched cotton. It is difficult to concentrate on anything that matters. Every coherent thought is a struggle. Only one thing sounds in my mind with any clarity, just one single persistent thought.

*Take your Preventative dumb ass.*

When did the Preventative start? *Ugh, think Erik, it's not like you have lived a lifetime.* Isn't every day a lifetime? How old am I? Why can't I think?

*Take the Preventative!*

A wave of fatigue pushes all thoughts from my mind. Behind the wall lies the answer. Lost memories hidden behind an impenetrable barrier, sealed off from me for some unknown reason.

Was I bad man? Did I do evil things?

So tired. I thrash through the fibers of my mind, looking for something...anything, but it is all gone. Just mind numbing fatigue and...

*Take the damn Preventative!*

I do not have any in this little apartment. I flushed it all. If it is not available, I cannot take it, was my reasoning. To fix my head, I would have to go to the clinic. Let them shoot me in the neck.

"I am strong enough," I whisper, resisting the desire to get up and make the trip.

Instead, I think hard about when the Preventative took hold of my life. It came shortly after joining the Army, in basic training.

"They don't put saltpeter in the Kool Aid," Joey said with his slow simple drawl during some rare downtime in our second week of basic. "I woke up with wood this morning."

"Yeah Joey, who'd you slip that wood to, your hand?" Max chided with a sharp Brooklyn accent, "You big ape."

There may not have been saltpeter, but there sure was the Preventative. Joey took shit from no man. I am six feet and if I stand tall while facing him, my eyes look at the place where the thick cords of his neck muscles meet his collarbone. The nylon threads of his rolled up sleeves strain to hold the seam when Joey flexes his biceps. When ordered to drop and do twenty, he cranks out fifty effortless pushups, just for show.

For days, we listened to stories of his barroom brawls. How his entrance into the military was questionable because of an incident at the Front Porch in Troy, Alabama. As he tells it, some college jock reached over his girl's shoulder to get a drink from the bartender. The incidental contact with her shoulder caused her face to curl up into disgust as she winced away from the contact.

Joey reached over her and grabbed the guy by the throat, lifting him off his feet. Three of his rugby buddies witnessed it and quickly jumped into the scrum. As Joey is telling the story, he shows us the scars that crisscross his knuckles and splay across the back of his hands.

He went to jail, his hands bandaged in price-fighting boxer fashion. The other four went to the hospital, faces almost as heavily bandaged, so Joey says. The guy reaching over Joey's girlfriend, he was still in the hospital when Joey posted bail the following Monday.

"He was still walking with a limp when I shipped off to basic." Joey finished while absently rubbing the scars on his right hand.

After Max's snide comment, we all braced for what we were sure was a beat down. None of us looked forward to stepping between Joey and his punching bag. Yet, much to the entire squads' surprise, all Joey did was give Max an indifferent look and say, "Shut up Max."

After day three we all just got along. There was no angry outbursts, no matter how mean hearted or cruel a squad-mates' words. We were all easygoing, non-violent tools of the Army of Free America.

It was not even subtle. On day one and two, there was the dinnertime reestablishment of the alpha male, men walking around puffing out their chests and growling at each other. I watched this ritual with muddled interest. A couple of times, the rest of us needed to step in to break up a fight. Then on day three, it was all brotherly love, all the time. Nothing more than the easy ribbing men deliver to their equals.

As we realized what was happening, we started to call the Preventative - MiKultra. My bunkmate Leonard suggested the nickname, claiming he read the name came from a CIA mind control program back in the 50s and 60s. The goal of the program, Leonard informed us, was to alter people's state of mind through drugs and other more intrusive methods. Most of us did not understand half of what Leonard said, but the name stuck.

We later learned it was not in the Kool Aid, which was obvious to me, since I hated the shit and would not drink it if I suffered the burning thirst one felt after days of crawling through the Sierra. Yet I still felt the calming effects of the MiKultra, we all did. The Army added the Preventative to any protein-based foods.

The military was the first wide spread experiment of the Preventative. Outside of military bases, people were tearing each other apart. What was left of Detroit burned. L.A. and New York's citizenry hid behind locked doors and gated communities, while every other city endured seemingly endless riots. Police shoot a young man...riot. The local team loses the championship...riot. Making absolutely no sense, but just as true, the cities sports team won the championship...riot.

Along with frequent mob violence, there were mass homicides. All too frequently, the media reported some type of psychosis-based violence. Reports of a father killing his

children, his wife, and then himself, or a disgruntled assembly line worker walking through the production line with a hand held plasma cutter slicing up her coworkers. Recently, a regional airline pilot flew himself and thirty-six passengers into the grandstands of a sporting event killing and maiming hundreds of spectators.

Yet, within the confines of Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, it was all bro hugs and fist bumps. We worked together, trained together, and eventually fought together without any animosity.

What was truly miraculous about military training, and the Preventative, was how easily we transitioned from loving our fellow troops, to butchering our fellow human beings when the commanders of the North American Coalition pointed us at an enemy and said, "KILL."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Take the Preventative*, echoes relentlessly in my mind, its cadence matching the steady beat of my heart. White light burns behind my eyes. The sound of a child squealing on the street below sends a bolt through the thin pane of my window adding to the explosion of light and pain within my skull. A crow squawking from the roof tops, yet another bolt of pain and light. The steady pulsating wail of a police siren almost sends me over the edge.

*MiKultra...will...stop...the...pain!*

I squeeze my eyes tighter in a futile effort to block out the fierce light. My stomach flips and I do not have the strength to fight it. I turn my head towards the floor as my whole body spasms in an effort to expel the misery. Yellowish acrid smelling liquid splashes onto the floor. The smell generates another spasm, and this time I vomit up more air than bile. My head explodes with pain, as my body wracks with several more dry heaves.

*Take...the...Preventative!*

Those three words are my whole existence. If I could move, I know I would find myself at the clinic, begging the nurse to fire the mind-altering shit into my neck. Hell, at this point, I would grab the gun from her hand, point it at my jugular, and shoot myself. My resolve is crumbling. If the pain would stop, the white light fade, I could sleep. I could escape.

I try to think around the thumping call of the MiKultra. To see through the barrier of pain and light, but both consume my brain. Consume my existence.

I roll onto my back, as far from the stink of stomach bile as I can get. *Breath*, I think to myself. *Slow steady breaths, you're stronger than this.*

With effort, I continue to concentrate on my breathing, fighting the fierce light that burns behind my eyelids. After what seems an eternity, the intensity of the light dims along

with the pain. A semblance of calm settles over me, and I am able to ignore the chant in my mind.

I escape.

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I really need to get up. Take care of the basics. Clean up after myself. Wash my sheets. Instead, I bury my face into the pillow. Normally the cool caress of a crappy government issued pillow provides comfort. However, it smells of dried sweat and puke laced saliva, odors that take away my pillows ability to comfort.

Still, I keep the thin fiber filled pillow wrapped around my head. My eyes remain closed to the small world of my apartment, while my mind's eye stares at the wall that seals off somber memories.

I am afraid. Afraid of what is beyond this Preventative induced barrier to my past. What crimes did I commit? What horrors did I see? Do I want to see into my past?

*Take the Preventative.* Echoes quietly in the dull throb that is my head. I wonder, no I hope, that the worst is behind me. Ignoring the Preventatives pleas is almost bearable now.

"How many days has it been?" I hear my hoarse voice ask aloud. I think hard, trying to count the cycles of light and dark. The best I can figure; it has been four days since I flushed the protein packs down the toilet. Government issued

protein packs, picked up at the municipal commissary, during my by-monthly visit for nutritional supplementation and medical screening.

"Feels like an eternity," I groan at the yellowed ceiling.

I close my eyes, and turn my thoughts inward. Now that the screaming is subsided in my head, the path through the wall is clear. No more cotton, no more filaments holding me back. I know, with a gentle push, I can expose those memories.

Then a terrifying thought grips me. What if, what is behind that wall shatters my resolve? What if it sends me to the municipal clinic for a quick dose of MiKultra?

I push anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sit in the dummy seat of an AH-12 speeding low over the North African desert. Since I am the FNG, fucking new guy, as Cutter, the prior FNG, explained it to me, the commander takes me as his copilot. This is my first combat mission out of flight school.

It is a simple strike against a suspected Insurrectionist training encampment. Captain Adams sits to my right as the Pilot in Command. He guides the aircraft over the sand dunes with ultra-sharp precision. Even though I am just riding as ballast, the exhilaration of being in a real combat aircraft bent on its intended purpose has my nerves thrumming.

I am grateful the frustration of combat flight school is behind me. That place where the exhilaration of learning a new skill quickly fades into tiresome repetition. So tiresome were the drills once I mastered a maneuver, doubts about my love for flying niggled at the edges of my thoughts. Now all those seemingly endless hours of repetition are paying off.

My instructor's words echo in my mind, "Your actions must become instinctive. When your brain freezes, your body better act."

*This is the real deal, I think, no more rehearsals.* Instinctively I scan the data displayed inside my visor and the terrain opening up before me. Although data is coming in haste, within my mind, time slows so I see and hear everything; giving me time to process.

I try to stay relaxed, but my muscles twitch involuntarily in anticipation of assuming control. It took only the one incident flight school to teach me not to let my guard down. "A lesson well learned," I say without keying the mic.

I marvel at the rate that our deadly attack helicopter devours terrain. Some of the gauges' tint towards yellow as my PIC pushes the aircraft to its limits. Limits I know from rote, and if I bounced them like my PIC is now while in training, the academy would have bounced me.

I look over my left shoulder and see two more AH-12s in a trailing V formation off our weapons pod. Their wide angular fuselages permit the pilots to sit abreast. In days of old, the pilot sat in tandem to the gunner. That design created a higher profile, while the AH-12 is much squatter.

Short stubby wings with high efficiency rotors embedded within them pivot continually to keep the trailing aircraft in a tight formation. To my right are two more AH-12s. The belly of our flight is a mere ten meters off the desert floor. A dust colored rooster tail rises up from the desert in our wake. I muse as to how this display is contrary to our otherwise stealthy aircrafts profile.

As the thought of our arrogance flashes through my mind, I hear and feel the helicopter shudder. Chaos erupts in my periphery. The bulkhead of the aircraft to Captain Adam's right fractures. My PIC explodes into a mist of red. His blood and tissue paint the interior. I feel the pilotless aircraft descend, and training takes over as I assume control. We fly on as my mind tries to grasp what has happened.

I test the controls, and the AH-12 responds, but I cannot see the world outside through my commander's blood and gore. I switch my attention to the information displayed on the inside of my visor. Looking under it, I trade the cyclic to my left

hand and with quick icon taps; feed the outside cameras to my display.

Now I try to clean the gore from my visor with the inside of my right sleeve. The goo streaks, but my vision is acceptable and I look at the gunge I transferred to my sleeve. For a moment, I am dumbfounded as what to do with it. Never mind that I am failing to recognize that Captain Adams innards cover most everything else.

The radio erupts with call outs pulling me back to the moment. I hear my commander's call sign as someone yells, "Raven is hit, I repeat, flight lead is hit!"

The world around me is in chaos, but my mind continues to process and prioritize. I test the controls, and scan the trouble lights. My AH-12 is wounded, but not mortally.

"Raven is down," I say over the combat channel as I look to my right, "I repeat, Raven is down," I pause, taking a deep breath, "Red One is still operational."

"Drop back Red One," comes back over the radio. I think I hear a hint of sorrow in my XO's voice, but I am not sure. "Red Two is taking lead." There is a pause, then, "Are you okay Striker?"

For a moment, I do not recognize my call sign, then I double tap the microphone trigger to signify an affirmative.

"Striker is now Red Four. Red Five, keep an eye on him. Mission is a go."

I turn my attention back to the other side of the aircraft. The hole is not much bigger than my fist and is waist level. It must have been an armor piercing shell with a timed fuse. Tendon and muscle are all that loosely tie together the remnants of my commander, but nothing from the waist up is identifiable. My eyes settle on a helmet facing away from me on the glare shield. I trace a blood and tissue covered spine as it snakes out of the helmet and drapes over the edge of the console.

I wonder why I do not feel like throwing up.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sit on my bed, naked from the waist up. My face buried in my hands. Elbows propped on my knees. I poked that wall of sealed off memories, and the first one was that mission. So quickly did it fill my thoughts, I thought it was a dream. However, dreams are still impossible. I still hear the call of the Preventative.

No, it was a memory, and in vivid detail. We completed the mission, in spite the loss of our commander. The Insurrectionists were not supposed to have such sophisticated weaponry.

Isn't that the case with all military intelligence though? Always saying what should have been.

Nightmares of that mission pulled me from my sleep on many occasion, often, just before missions similar to that one.

Recalling the memory ratchets up the plea; *take the Preventative!*

From over the crumbling brick wall washes another memory.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are not a lot of beautiful days in North Africa, but today was as close as you can get. It rained yesterday, and the infamous desert dry heat became oppressive humidity. The little bit of greenery that took advantage of the rare moisture already shriveling under the desert sun. Now the air is once again dry and a little cooler than the last few days.

"Wish I could take the day off and go to the beach." I mumble to myself as I walk towards the dining facility.

Stepping past one of the many rows of barracks, I picked her up in my peripheral vision just a fraction of a second before the collision. If not for the circumstances, the "oh," she uttered just before the collision would easily be the most pleasant "oh," I ever heard.

The two of us plough into the packed sand in a tangle of limbs. I could not tell if the elbow digging painfully into my ribs was hers or mine. However, I was certain the knee digging into my inner thigh was hers. We came to a rest with me on my side and her on top of me.

"I am so sorry Lieutenant." She cried, frantically trying to gain some purchase with her hands in the sand.

I turned my head, and looked directly into the most stunning luminous blue eyes ever to look my way. She stopped struggling to get to her feet for a moment, and returned my stunned gaze. Something passed between us in that moment. Something so powerful, it numbed the aches and pains of our collision, and stole my propensity towards shyness around beautiful woman.

"No worries." I said, pausing because her Army issue running shorts and t-shirt offered no nametag or rank. Gently I push her up to her knees, stand in one fluid motion, and pull her with me.

"What's the name?" I ask, shifting my gaze from her eyes to a lock of blonde hair that escapes from the hair tie. The lock arches gently over the peak of her gullwing shaped eyebrow, carves around her prominent cheekbone, and tickles the delicate line of her jaw.

"My name is Ivanna, Lieutenant Walker," she answered with that fantastic voice, pulling my gaze back to her eyes.

"Erik," I correct her.

"Well Erik, I am very sorry for taking you out like that, but you did step right in front of me," she chided coyly.

"Yes...yes I did. But I wouldn't take it back for anything," I reply with more bravado than was the norm.

She studies me for several seconds before replying. "Yes, it was a pleasure running into you Erik."

"I was headed to breakfast, care to join me?"

Again, she studies me, looking me up and down before answering. "I just started my run, and would like to get it in before it gets *real* hot."

"Understood," I reply, "another time then?"

"Yes, another time." She looks at her elbows, brushes sand from them, then looks up at me. "I am with Charlie Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Last name is Hylton. Look me up."

"I'll do that." I say, and then as she starts to jog away, a worrisome thought occurs to me. "Please tell me you're an officer." I call after her, drawing looks from those in the vicinity.

She stops, turns, and laughs, "Well of course I am silly." Then spins and runs off between two plywood barracks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Haltingly I pace within the margins of my apartment, arms wrapped around my bare chest, trying to squeeze out the pain that beats within. My bare feet shuffle across the worn linoleum floor. Nausea teases at my insides, while memories of those early days after meeting Ivanna dart about my mind.

*Take the Preventative*, pulses deep within my head with each beat of my heart. Part of me is tempted to give in. Stop the increasing flow of long buried memories.

I find myself standing before the window. I reach down and tug at the bottom of the old fabric blind and hold on to it as it slides up into the window casing. I look out at a drab block tenement across the narrow street from mine. Its featureless block walls and evenly distributed windows are a mirror image of the building I stand in.

I shift my focus to the ghost of my image reflecting back at me. I study my spectral outline as I reflect on the fact that most of my African campaign memories are still contained behind the wall. Now without any effort from me, the wall crumbles, and more memories come forth with each passing day.

Why would MiKultra block such pleasant memories? Meeting Ivanna was the highlight of my time in Africa. Something dark tickles the back of my mind. What other memories will I uncover?

\* \* \* \* \*

As our relationship develops, and our feelings for each other deepen, I have a better understanding the Army's rule against fraternization. We are both officers, so it does not apply, but I know deep in my soul that I could not order her into harm's way.

When Ivanna's company and mine fly missions at the same time, I am too busy trying to bring my copilot and myself home to worry about her. I am aware that a part of me monitors radio traffic for her call sign, but like breathing, I do it without thinking about it.

However, when her company flies off, and mine remains behind, it is maddening. Today is one of those days. Occasions such as this are mercifully rare and in the past, I tried to find distractions. Only to discover such pursuits were pointless. No matter what I did, jogging, engaging in a pickup game of baseball, or attempting to lose myself in some creative pursuit, I found myself pacing the operations center while looking at my watch, and listening to the sky. Every time the sound of approaching AH-12s expands to fill the world, I run to the flight line. First listening, and then looking for their approach, finally counting the formation as it materializes through the heat shimmers.

Now, when I remain behind, I take up a station in the briefing room, feet up on the row of repurposed aircraft seats before me. A tablet propped up on my knee, with some mindless game on the screen. For obvious reason, I avoid real combat simulation games.

These mindless games somewhat help distract me from the fact that Ivanna is flying into increasingly dangerous

environments. The Insurrectionists are growing in number, and getting better at knocking us out of the sky. Like the legend of the Hydra, it seems as though every time we kill one of them, two more take their place.

"We are feeding the beast." I say aloud as I look up from my tablet, frustrated with the direction my mind has taken.

We are not fighting a religion, but poverty. The impoverished of many nations are the origins of the current uprising, and there seems to be an endless stream of angry young combatants. Can you defeat a movement bred from nothing?

Like every enemy in the last half a century, there is no nation, just a belief. Currently we fight them in Africa, but they have no country, no borders, and no capital. Based on the drivel the Insurrectionists flood the Internet with, they want to end what they describe as rampant imperialism, while bringing about a world order that benefits all of man, not just the wealthy and privileged.

Part of me gets their disdain for the ultra-powerful governments of the world. Having been born a common man, I understand the disconnect between government and its people. Nevertheless, this war is a meat grinder, and so many have died already. Not just on the enemies' side, but ours as well.

Ivanna and I have talked several times about not getting too close to our squad mates, knowing that the bunk next to you

might be empty come reveille. Then, within a few days, new meat takes possession of the bunk, and footlocker. Judging by how quickly this conflict is spreading, the grinder is just getting warming up.

I feel the hum in my bones before my ears pick up the faint drone of high-speed rotors. The sound wipes all thoughts from my mind. The pitch is wrong; there are not enough of them. I check my watch, and my heart sinks as recognition of Ivanna's ETA match up with the digital numbers on its face.

I shift back to the tablet, looking absently at the animated scene waiting for my input. Instead, I focus on the sound of the approaching attack helicopters. There cannot be more than five of them, and of those; some are in bad shape.

Absently I blank the screen of the tablet, drop my feet to the floor and stand. I look to the direction of the approaching aircraft, and then the door. With long strides I cross the room and out into the desert heat.

As the sound of stricken aircraft grows louder, my pace quickens. By the time the AH-12s are clearing the horizon, I am at a full run towards the flight line. Charlie Company left with eight AH-12s and only five approach at a couple hundred feet above the sand dunes. Much higher than our normal flight profile, but prudent considering the condition of two of them.

Three aircraft trail smoke, but two of them are listing so badly I am amazed they are still flying.

The AH-12 is not capable of single fan flight. Therefore, I reason that the lower rotor must be turning just fast enough to maintain lift. At this distance, I cannot tell if any of them are Ivanna's. We do not mark up our AH-12s with anything other than our call sign in small grey letters under the pilots window.

One of the listing helicopters drops out of formation. It looks as though it is going to crash into the desert less than a mile from home. Then, much to the relief of those watching, it recovers, and laboriously rises back up with the others, black puffs of smoke dotting the regular trailing stream.

I am of a singular thought, is Ivanna all right. A crowd has gathered at the edge of the landing area. I elbow my way through, without any concern for offending those I push aside. I curse the black armored glass that makes it impossible to see the pilots inside.

The two AH-12s that seemed unharmed, and the one smoking lightly climbed as they approached the landing area, giving way to the two badly damaged aircraft. The one that seems to have little difficulty maintaining altitude touches down with a thump. Two touchdown pads over, the struggling AH-12 bounces

off the pad, careens sideways into the air, and falls back to the desert sand fifty feet beyond the landing pad.

I lurch forward, but feel restraining arms and hands across my chest and around my arms. I want to catch that AH-12 before it collides with the hard packed sand.

And collide it does. The port wing collapse under the aircrafts weight, shattered pieces of rotor fly off in all directions, propelled by violently arrested momentum. A large chunk of titanium slices through an AH-12 parked thirty meters away. Many around me cover their head and duck futilely away from the hazards screaming through the air in all directions.

I watch in horror as the nose of the helicopter slams into the ground, shattering the armored glass, exposing the pilots inside. The limbs of the PIC flail about lifelessly as restraints hold him or her firmly in place. The copilot tries desperately to hold firmly to any handhold available.

Once again, the AH-12 leaps into the air, its tail coming around to stick into the sand, collapsing under the weight of the broken aircraft. The collapsing tail absorbs the remaining momentum, and the fuselage comes to a shuddering rest. Within seconds, a dusty brown cloud mixed with black oily smoke obscures the crash scene.

Security and flight line personal continue to hold us back. Our distress for those who did not return, and those still

strapped into the mangled aircraft continue to push us forward. Desert camouflaged emergency vehicles converge on the settling dust cloud.

While the other three aircraft come back around and offer a more controlled display of approach and landing, two bodies are unbound from the busted AH-12. The copilot is conscious and requires assistance as he stumbles to the ambulance. Crews lower a lifeless body from the pilot's seat, placing it on a gurney.

I am relieved to see it is not Ivanna. However, my relief is short lived as I realize there are still two missing aircraft.

I shift my focus to the three aircraft that just landed. Fire equipment converges on the AH-12 that emits black smoke.

I watch all three intently, waiting for; no hoping that a familiar figure climbs from below the armored glass gullwing doors.

Both pilots scramble quickly from the smoking aircraft, and distance themselves as the fire crews seek out the source of the smoke. Neither one of them offer the familiar outline I seek.

With less urgency, first the copilot, then the pilot climbs from the AH-12 squatting next to the broken aircraft that did not bounce. Once again, I do not see the truly feminine gait I learned to identify with Ivanna. I seek out the two pilots from

the AH-12 that listed, but did not crash. In the chaos of the crash, I did not see them get out of their helicopter.

It takes several frantic moments for me to locate them. They stand a distance from their damaged aircraft, next to an ambulance, talking to medics. One is female in stature, and I squint through the heat haze. The ponytail is reddish, not the blonde I so truly adore.

One hope remains, and I turn to that aircraft, and see a sight that forces me to swallow a lump I was not aware of. Ivanna was yanking off her flight gloves and stuffing them in her helmet as she first strides, then runs across the hard packed sand toward me.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sounds coming from my burning throat frighten and disgust me.

"God I hate throwing up." I groan, my hoarse whisper echoing dully off the vomit stained water and porcelain.

My stomach reels once again at the smell of this morning's powdered eggs, soymilk, and stomach acid, all mixed with the heavily chlorinated city water. I hit the flush button, but the toilet refuses to obey as water saving macros count down the minutes since the last flush.

My body spasms, bending, and contorting to empty the little that remains in my guts. I spit stringy phlegm and pinch my nose to clear it of the spew.

"God, take me now." I plead as I grope around for a towel. My stomach heaves again just as two fingers pull a towel into a white knuckled fist.

This time just a wretched sound emits from my throat, nothing more. With a trembling hand, I wipe my face. Feeling spent, I let myself roll onto the floor. The cool linoleum chills the sweat that coats my body. My eyes settle on the dust encrusted ceiling fan as I contemplate my relationship with the MiKultra.

That deep gnawing need is still there, but faint, bearable. Yet now I feel a different part of me calling out for it. The part that is afraid of the kind of pain no doctor can fix.

The memory of the tightness in my chest, and the icy liquid that filled my bowels as I searched for her among the wreckage and remains of the aircraft that made it home is vivid. It is a memory blocked off from me before now; still, shouldn't the icy edge of fear subside a little with time.

My mind conjures up a memory from eons ago, before this war and the Preventative. Back to the final days of summer break, our final summer break before entering my senior year.

Lisa, my high school sweetheart led me from our trailer park on the hill down to the river. Something we did often when we wanted to be alone. This time there was no intimacy. Instead, she told me she wanted to break it off.

Her words hit me like a sledgehammer. I glared at her with burning eyes, my top lip clamped between my teeth. I had no words for her. The emotional trauma was something new and painful, an unexplored hurt.

Lisa waited for me to say something. When no words came, she said she was sorry. With glistening eyes, she turned and left me standing on the muddy banks of the Minnesota River.

The memory of the pain of that moment is still as vivid as the day I lived it. Even though the passage of time has taken the edge off, I still recall how I wanted to die that day. How I wanted to walk into the river and let it carry me away.

"We were just kids." I say knowing my feelings for Lisa were just a ghost of the love I feel for Ivanna.

"Is life without pain so unbearable?" I ask aloud, wondering if I want to recall the past, acknowledging that MiKultra will stop the pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Forty-eight hours after Charlie Company came limping home sans two aircraft and two more badly busted up, my company,

Bravo Company suffered a similar fate. The difference was we lost three AH-12s in the field along with the pilots.

One of those pilots was my company commander. Now second Battalion consisted of two decimated attack helicopter companies, one lacking a commander.

Battalion promoted me to the rank of Captain, and gave me the shorthanded Bravo Company. To fill the empty ranks in my company, they reassigned the remaining elements of Charlie Company to me. Charlie Company's commander went on temporary assignment until new meat and equipment arrived.

Two things gave me nightmares about my new promotion, and the realignment of the Second Battalion. Bravo Company COs did not have much luck. In the eight months I flew with Bravo Company, we lost two of them. Second, Ivanna was now under my command.

Officially, Colonel DeLong ordered my relationship with Ivanna to end, and then unofficially reminded me of the consequences of letting it interfere with my duties. Our romance went underground.

What kept me awake most nights, her sleeping fitfully at my side at times, was the dilemma of ordering her into harm's way. A few weeks after she came under my command, we lay in bed waiting for sleep to come.

"With the exception of this bed," she started quietly, "I am one of your pawns."

Her statement left me without words.

"I mean it Erik. If you need my bird someplace, you send it." She fell silent, waiting for me to protest. "Erik?"

"The Colonel already warned me Ivanna," I offered to appease her for the moment, "But you are all I have in this world."

Now she is silent.

"Just give the order," she says after a moment, "or I will act on my own."

"I can't lose you," I finally say, then follow up with, "we are going to get out of this hell and live happily ever after."

Ivanna rolled over, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "With you in command, I have no doubt."

As the months went by, I never faced that dilemma. In fact, we earned the title, the Lucky Charms Company. The newly formed Bravo Company went over a year without a casualty or a lost aircraft.

Then Cutter, one of my senior pilots rotated home. That was the turning point. The charm was broken, and our luck changed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, I stare at the ceiling, listening to the distant cry of the Preventative. With every waking, the ache diminishes, but now lost memories fill my mind. The wall crumbles without any influence from me. I think I am starting to understand what the MiKultra did. It seals us off from the darkness in our lives as if to keep them from becoming triggers for later schizophrenia, an attempt to keep us sane. For a moment, I wonder if I am losing my mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

I cannot help but flash back to that morning when my commander exploded into fragments of bone and tissue. Now I am in the role Raven was when he bought it. PIC and flight lead, a fresh new pilot sitting in the seat to my left. The setting is different; the fighting has moved from the desert to the jungles of the Congo. Instead of my AH-12 skimming desert sand drifts, our rotor wake generates rolling green waves in the jungle canopy.

The Insurrectionists are much more sophisticated now than that day two years ago. We learned long ago that they are not fighting with stolen, outdated weaponry. They have the latest and greatest, and I cannot help but continually shift focus to the part of my HUD that displays threat detection.

I have seen many die without any warning. Yet, I still believe I will see the end coming. A notion with no basis in

reality, too often oblivion comes without warning. One minute you are shitting your pants; the next minute you are just a stain in the African countryside.

We are in route to Kenge to provide air cover to our ground pounders in an effort to take the city of Kenge back from the Insurrectionists.

Once the troops make initial contact, the fighting is fierce, and I direct my birds as calls come in to engage roof top mortar placements and heavy machine guns. As the fighting intensifies, the Insurrectionists start to involve civilians. I order the flight to use precision guided munitions only.

"Do not shoot the civilians. If they do not appear armed, don't shoot them." I command over the flight channel.

"It's not like they are wearing uniforms," Blue four shoots back.

"If you don't see weapons, don't engage!" I respond, allowing emotion into my voice.

Blue four double clicks his mic switch in acknowledgement and swoops between low buildings to take on an old Humvee with a heavy machine gun mounted on top.

"Blue flight, this is Delta Two, we have incoming bad guys on the west highway. Can you hold them off until we can move troops?" I hear from the XO on the ground.

"Roger, Delta Two, we will engage." I call out to Ivanna, "Blue Three, west highway, I will cover."

"Engaging," Blue Three responds and within moments is thundering past me.

Setting up as her cover while she engages the targets on the highway is not outside of doctrine. She was available as an asset, and so am I. As she engages a convoy of armored personal carriers, I spot a mobile antiaircraft battery further west.

"Heads up Blue flight, we have antiaircraft in the area." I announce over the flight channel and my copilot starts targeting the placement.

We whack the first one, and a second comes around the corner. I check our weapons stores, and setup to engage the second mobile launcher.

"Blue flight, this is Delta One, we have heavy cannon fire coming from a roof top east of town. Requesting air cover," Comes over the combat channel.

Quickly I do an inventory, and realize I only have one bird available. I listen to the radio traffic, and it confirms that Blue Three is the only AH-12 not directly engaged with an enemy target. I know I have already waited too long to commit assets, but I continue to listen in hopes that I do not have to send Ivanna alone to engage a heavy cannon.

I hear a mic click just before I make the decision. "Blue Three is en route," Ivanna informs over the flight channel.

A part of me wants to scream out, NO! Yet others are counting on me, and for me to ensure we function as a team. My copilot is busy targeting mobile antiaircraft, so I cannot protect her.

"Affirmative Blue Three, engage the target," I finally say.

As Strato, my copilot confirms another kill; I quickly fly along the road double-checking that there are no more. In my mind's eye, I see Ivanna flying alone over the city. Ahead of her, a large caliber heavy machine gun is thumping rounds from a rooftop to the troops below. All it would take is an alert ammo tender to spot her aircraft, and direct the gunner to turn the heavy weapon on her.

With enough force to make Strato and me grunt under the strain of high G's I pull the AH-12 around and point it towards the city. I pull in power and nose the aircraft over willing it to accelerate faster than its limits. We cut across the jungle that separates us from the city, while I search desperately for Blue Three.

I spot her hovering in an evasive manner as she hammers the heavy machine cannon with her own thirty-millimeter cannon. The chain gun is wreaking havoc on the placement. Sparks and pieces of concrete fly into the air as the thirty millimeter rips into

the rooftop, the cannon placement, and the small squad of Insurrectionist manning it. Finally, an explosion rocks the nose of Ivanna's AH-12 backwards as the ammo stash explodes.

For a moment, I am terrified that the explosion damaged the attack helicopter, but Ivanna quickly corrects the helicopters attitude and swings around scanning the city's skyline.

I begin to relax when the radio erupts with three words that send ice down any pilot's spine.

"Rocket...rocket...rocket!" Blue three calls out, and her AH-12 lurches right as she attempts to dive below the projectile. She is not quick enough. The heat-seeking missile impacts with the fuselage just in front of the port engine intake. Much of that side of the aircraft, along with the copilot, port engine, and the rotor system disappear in an expanding ball of fire and shrapnel.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Preventative no longer calls to me, but I am terrified of my memories. I grew up afraid of nothing. That is until I fell in love.

At the moment I sit at a shitty little plastic table, my face buried in my hands. I am willing myself not to look at the door that leads to the hallway. That hallway leads to the stairway, and that stairway to the street. Just a few short blocks away is a clinic, and the end to all these painful

memories. From there, the commissary to collect my protein packs, and forever forget the horrors of a distant continent I will never see again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The crippled aircraft spins helplessly into a collection of low residential buildings. I watch in dismay as it crashes through a low roof and explodes on impact. "Ivanna," I whisper as I watch a rolling ball of fire belch from the hole left behind.

Recklessly, I bank my aircraft into a low orbit around the crash site. Oblivious to everything around me, I focus on the flaming hole that consumed my sanity in all this chaos. For nearly two years, we shared happiness in the midst of hell. She was my single source of peace in all this destruction.

*At least she knew it was coming.* I think absently.

Rage boils away the constant fog of the Preventative clearing the way for unfamiliar thoughts. I see Insurrectionists running through the narrow streets towards the crash site. Without thinking, I tap out commands that tell the computer to target them. Within seconds, a thirty-millimeter chain gun mows down humans like so many blades of grass.

"Weapons free Blue flight!" I shout into the com. "Engage all targets!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The odor of chlorine, rust, and something else emanates from the city water that streams lukewarm from the calcium-encrusted showerhead. I feel it getting colder with each passing second, but cannot bring myself to care. I hate cold showers, but not nearly as much as the waves of emotion that wash over me. My forehead rests on my forearm, which I brace against the tile wall just below the showerhead.

Moment's ago I was finishing my first shower in days. Then, as I turned to rinse the thin layer of lather from my body, the memory of Ivanna's final moments came rushing over me with powerful clarity.

I thought I was in control of my memories.

When my squad returned from that mission, I made a beeline for the shower. I felt vile, and needed some sort of cleansing; hoping soap and water would wash away the filth. As the lukewarm water ran down my chest, rage and grief overwhelmed me. I sobbed alone in the officers' shower long after the stream turned icy.

After the tears diminished, I wondered at how ineffective the preventative was at controlling powerful emotional outbursts. When ordered to engage the enemy it was just a matter of training, each of us a tool in the military arsenal. The Preventative kept us unattached, cold emotionless killers.

The Preventative cannot deal with love, or the grief that can come from it.

The next morning, I was standing before the Battalion Commander, answering for my actions. I did not walk out of his office unescorted. MPs, like bookends, escorted me to the brig. My court martial was swift. They convicted me of giving the order that lead to the death of dozens of noncombatants.

The African Federation wanted me tried for war crimes, and the North American Coalition wanted to go along with the AF, but Free America told them all to pound sand. I was an American troop; America will take care of the trial and punishment of its own.

As the foul city water goes icy, I pull myself from my reverie. Shivering, I turn the water off and reach for a towel. I look around the tiny bathroom and reflect on my life since my court martial. I wonder if this is any better than an AF prison.

My court martial killed my chances at Free America citizenship. So now, I flounder in this tenement, a drain on the system. Once again, I am a citizen of Blue America, with no real prospects of making something of myself.

"At least that seemed like the future before kicking the Preventative habit." I say to my distorted reflection in the scratched stainless steel mirror.

\* \* \* \* \*

I bath in the heat of the midday sun, enjoying a near cloudless sky. It has been days, no over a week, I correct myself, since I stepped out of the confines of my apartment.

I wonder if it is my long isolation in that cramped place that makes the sky seems so blue. Immediately I dismiss that thought knowing it was something else taking the joy out of life.

"Definitely the Preventative," I remark aloud drawing looks from those that walk past me.

I can see it in the eyes of those who trudge along the sidewalk. Dull and lifeless eyes, faces slack, presenting little emotion, faces of the Preventative.

I do see something in the faces that glance my way. I see the look of disdain for my relaxed posture and beaming smile. My ass rests at the very edge of a park bench, legs stretched out fully in front of me. Shoulder blades supported by the benches back. My hands folded easily at my waist, clear eyes scanning the green space wedged between tenements. It is a postage stamp of a park, but at least it is something other than concrete and asphalt.

Life offers me nothing more today than it did before kicking the Preventative habit. I am still stuck in Blue

America, still a drain on a broken system. I probably cannot find a job even if I looked.

*At least I am my own person again,* I think with satisfaction.

My heart aches for the loss of Ivanna, an ache that intensifies when I recall the happy times. I sniff deeply as I recall her fragrance, my hand twitches at the memory of her silken hair sliding through them, my whole body quivers as I recall the touch of her skin.

The difference is, I can recall those memories. Memories lost to me before kicking the habit. I would trade anything to have Ivanna back, to have my military career back, and the prospect of Free American citizenship ahead of me.

However, I will never trade the absence of pain for the memories of the very brief time I shared with Ivanna.