

"What Time Is It Now, Where You Are?"
from: Thirteen Ways of Looking -
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1

He had agreed in spring to write a short story for the New Year's Eve edition of a newspaper magazine. An easy enough task, he thought at first. In late May he settled down to sketch out a few images that might work, but soon found himself struggling, adrift. For a couple of weeks in early summer he cast about, chased ideas and paragraphs, left a few hanging, found himself postponing the assignment, putting it to the back of his mind. Occasionally he pulled his notes out again, then abandoned them once more.

He wondered how he would ever push into the territory of a New Year's Eve story—create a series of fireworks perhaps, drop a mirrored ball in a city, or allow snow to slowly scatter across the face of a windowpane?

All the beginnings he attempted—scribbled down in notebooks—wrote themselves into the dark.

2

In early summer he landed on the idea that he could perhaps defy his own notions of what a New Year's Eve story could

achieve and tell a military tale, perhaps the portrait of a soldier somewhere far away, a young American, say, in a distant land. He could find himself, say, in a barracks on New Year's Eve in Afghanistan, the simple notion of a Marine—let's say a young woman, slightly exhausted by war, sitting on the edge of a valley, in the cold, surrounded by sandbags, in the vast quiet, looking eastward, under a steel mesh of stars, all silence, not even the thrup of machine-gun fire in the distance, the grim perimeter of the soldier's reality set against the possibility of what might be happening elsewhere, say, at home in South Carolina, say, a relentless suburb of no great distinction, say, a house gone slightly sour with the years, say, a broken drainpipe hanging down from the garage, say, a boy in the driveway, a young boy, in a striped shirt and torn jeans, with a bicycle lying forlorn at his feet, her brother, or her cousin, or perhaps even her son, yes, maybe her son.

3

Looking out into the Afghan night—although it would be better to be specific, and she could be facing the gothic dark of the Kerengal Valley, maybe even the ridge over Loi Kolay Village—she would draw herself into the savagery found at the outpost of every war, several layers of black pressing down on the already-dark mountains, an area where even the stunted trees might seem as if they want to step off the cliffs and hurtle themselves to the valley floor, the darkness made again more visible by the

layer of frost covering everything, the sandbags, the steel re-bars, the machine gun, a Browning M-57, the impossible stretch of distance, the enormity of black sky, with everything so cold that the young Marine, let's call her Sandi, wears a balaclava over her face, under her helmet, and the tip-ends of Sandi's eyelashes have frozen and her lungs feel thick with ice and when she looks through the small gap in the sandbags her teeth chatter so much that she is afraid she might chip them, a personal dread, since Sandi is hipheavy and small-breasted and unpretty in her own eyes, and twenty-six years old and feeling every single day of it, but proud of her strong white teeth, so that when she takes the upper lip of the balaclava and stretches it down across her mouth, the fabric tastes hard and rough and synthetic against her tongue.

4

Sandi sits alone in her rocky outpost. Unlikely of course, but he knows a few Marines back in New York, and he has heard their stories, and he is well aware that reality so often trumps invention, so he justifies her aloneness with the idea that a New Year's Eve party is taking place in the village barracks below, and Sandi has agreed to give the other Marines a break, that she will take the post alone for an hour while midnight tips over, while the ball drops distantly, because everyone in Sandi's unit knows that Sandi is decent, Sandi is cool, Sandi knows the score, and, let's be honest, Sandi likes her privacy, and she has been given special

access to a satellite phone that she can use at the stroke of midnight, since who wants to be alone on New Year's Eve without a way to at least call home and say—and what is Sandi going to say?

(He has, he must admit, no idea yet.)

What he does know is that the sense of cold seclusion is important: not only because it is a New Year's Eve story, but because it freezes Sandi in her cube of human loneliness, like most of us, at the unfolding of a year, looking backward and forward, both. Not only that, but the reader must begin to *feel* the cold that claws Sandi up there on the 308-meter ridge: so much so that she, or he, almost inhabits the very trees that want to step off the cliff. We should feel our own eyelashes freeze, and clench our cheeks to stop our own teeth chattering, because, like Sandi, we have something we must see, or understand, or at least imagine into existence, far away, and we, too, have a distant hope that Sandi will say something into her satellite phone, perhaps not a resolution, but at least a resolve of some sort, a small parcel of meaning.

(Though he still has little idea of what exactly she might say, she is beginning to become a little more complex for him, which he's grateful for, since deadline is approaching, he has to have it finished by mid-October at the latest, and he hunkers down for three or four days, in late September, in his apartment on Eighty-sixth Street in New York, though he can still somehow feel the cold seeping in from the Afghan hills, and he wants now to cap-

ture the essence of what it feels like to be far from home, to be in two or three places all at once, and the simple notion that what we really need on New Year's Eve is a sense of return, whether to his own original Dublin, or to Sandi's Charleston, or to his New York, or Sandi's birthplace which is, let's say, Ohio, though Sandi of course could be born just about any place, but Ohio feels right, let's say Toledo.)

5

This he now knows: Sandi Jewell is twenty-six years old, from Toledo, she lives in the south, she's a Marine, she perches in her camouflage more than 1,010 feet high in the debilitating cold, wearing a balaclava, looking out at the Afghan dark on the eve of the new year, about to dial a loved one on a satellite phone at her side. (He wonders what might happen if once, a year ago, there were three space heaters in the lookout, but they leaked out a light so that a sniper took out another Marine simply by lining up the shot in the center of the heaters, a perfect mathematical triangulation, an incident Sandi might have been aware of when she volunteered to take the outpost, adding another sense of dread to the story—perhaps it could happen again, a leak of light from her satellite phone this time? After a few days he decides against it—it would be far too simple to embrace the ease of death by sniperfire, and what sort of New Year's story might that be anyway?) The essence of Sandi's story has begun

to place layers upon layers, though he does not know yet who the loved one is, or what might eventually exist between them. Still, a certain mystery has begun to join things together.

6

What Sandi sees, or what he imagines Sandi can see: the boy lays his bicycle down in the driveway, somewhere suburban, a Legoland of houses, on the outskirts of Charleston. It is midafternoon in mid-America, eight and a half hours behind Afghanistan. He is a tall, thin handsome boy. Let's say he is definitely her son (the desire to talk must be immense, and the potential for tragedy real: what might happen if she doesn't get to talk to him? What happens if the line goes dead? What happens if a shot rings out in the night?). He is fourteen years old, tricky, of course, since Sandi was earlier established as twenty-six years old. (Is he *really* her son? Is that feasible? Is it even possible?) The boy lifts the corrugated garage door, his heart thumping in his blue-and-white-striped shirt, and he hears a shout from inside the house, a woman (let's name her Kimberlee) trilling out to him (let's name him Joel) to say: *Quick, Joel, your mom's about to call.* And Joel is late, he knows he's late, and he's old enough now—almost fifteen in fact—to have a sweetheart and to know some things about the complexities of loss. He has spent an afternoon with her down there near the school bleachers on Lancaster Street. He has pledged himself to her, he will be with her later tonight when the real clock (the American clock) strikes

midnight, but first he must talk to his second mother in Afghanistan from the kitchen of his first mother's house.

(And though Joel calls her his "second mother," and he has only known Sandi for four years, he has scrawled an ink tattoo inside his wrist, *K & S.*)

Joel hurries through the house, slings his jacket across the kitchen table, yanks up a chair, glances at Kimberlee, and says, while he stares at gaps in the hardwood floor: "What time is it now, where she is?"

7

Sandi sits in the dark, wearing a watch strapped to the outside of her wrist, over her tan Nomex fireproof gloves, waiting for the countdown. There have been problems with the phone signal in the past—dropped calls, endless ringing, failed satellites.

It is too early yet to call but she keys the phone alive anyway and touches the ridges of the numbers, a rehearsal.

Out beyond the outpost, nothing but the dark and the white frost on the land. The stars themselves like bulletholes above her.

8

He wants desperately to create gunfire across the Afghan hills, or to see a streak of light that is not just a metaphor—an RPG perhaps, or the zip of an actual bullet into one of the sand-

bags—to force a tracerline across the reader’s brain, to ignite alternative fireworks on the eve of the new year, and to increase the intensity of the possible heartbreak.

But the simple fact is that the Afghan night remains quiet, no matter what he imagines, not even the howl of a stray dog, or the faint hint of voices in the outpost.

At two minutes to midnight Sandi drops the balaclava from between her teeth and leans across to pick up the satellite phone once more. (He has an inkling now of what she might say to her son, or rather Kimberlee’s son.) Sandi clicks the flashlight on the front of her helmet, thumbs the phone on forcefully. The front panel lights up. She has been given a code. She takes off her gloves in order to dial the numbers precisely. She has a botched tattoo on the flap of skin between her thumb and forefinger, the initials of someone else’s name from long ago, she does not think of him anymore.

It is midnight in Afghanistan and early afternoon in South Carolina.

9

He is writing this (almost) last part now in France where he is traveling after a book event. It is the middle of September and deadline is looming. Some things he knows for sure—Sandi will not die, she will simply pick up the phone, she will dial through, she will call her lover and her lover’s son, and she will simply say, “Happy New Year,” in the most ordinary way, and they will

return the greeting, and life will go on, since this is what our New Year's Eves are about, our connections, our bonds, no matter how inconsequential, and the story will be quiet and slip its way into its own new year.

10

Inside the kitchen on North Murray Avenue, Kimberlee stands at the counter, with her hands webbed wide, waiting for the call. Spread out in front of her is the prospect of a feast—chopped peppers, onions, a half pound of oysters, a cup of cooked shrimp, tomatoes, sprigs of thyme, lemon, lime, olive oil, salt, three cloves of garlic for the bouillabaisse she has planned.

Kimberlee has placed a second wineglass at the end of the table. She is thirty-eight years old, tall, slim, pretty, a university professor. She aches for the call. She has not talked to Sandi in a week, since just after Christmas, when they argued about the length of Sandi's tour. The call itself has become a distant memory, a barely remembered pulse. Kimberlee listens to the wine gurgle against the side of the glass. This to her is the essence of the season: the loneliness, the longing, the beauty. She reaches for a spoon and begins to stir.

11

It's late September, and he is seriously deadlined now, but he is struck by the notion that the story is endless. He could stay with

Kimberlee, or he could return to Afghanistan, or he could slide into the past, or he could follow Joel down to the bleachers with his sweetheart later tonight (let's call her Tracey), or he could descend the hill to where the other Marines are having their party, or he could follow the path of a satellite, or he could go back to Sandi's original lover, or he could summon in the snow to swirl across the night.

He is in Normandy by the sea. The waves ribbon and buckle on the shores of Étretat.

12

He cannot get this phrase out of his mind: *The living and the dead.*

13

How is it that a particle of a voice gets transmitted down a telephone line? How is it that Sandi summons up a simple phrase, and the muscles in her throat contract? How is it that Kimberlee hears a sound and already her hand is moving through space to reach for the white kitchen telephone? How is it that Joel feels a pang of desire for Tracey? (What exactly will those bleachers look like at midnight?) (And who, by the way, is Joel's father?) (And what is it that Kimberlee teaches in university?) (Did she meet Sandi on a college campus?) (What might Sandi have been studying?) (When did Sandi move from Ohio?) (Did she join

the Marines after a breakup?) (Was she married before she met Kimberlee?) (What is that initial tattooed on her hand?) (Does she want to have a child of her own?) How is it that a voice travels halfway around the world? Does it go through underwater cables, does it bounce off of satellites? How does a quark transmit itself to another quark? How many seconds of delay are there between Kimberlee's voice and Sandi's? Could a bullet travel that distance without them knowing? Could there now be a death at the end of this story? (Are there any female engagement teams in the Kerengal Valley?) (Is there even such a thing as a Browning M-57?) How private is the phone call? Who might be listening in? Can we create a brand-new character so late on, let's say an agent in Kabul, a malevolent little slice of censorship, eavesdropping in on Sandi? Can we see him there, with his headphones, his heartlessness, his bitterness, his rancor?

And what about his own childhood New Year's Eves in Dublin? Could he disappear back to them? What was that song his father used to sing? What about those days when he used to run out into the Clonkeen Road at midnight, banging saucepans to ring in the new year? What about that sense of promise the Januarys used to bring to his boyhood?

But more important—and perhaps most important—what happens to Sandi when she gets through on the telephone? What sort of feeling will rifle through her blood when she hears Kimberlee's voice? What great desire might arc between them? Or what sort of silence might hollow itself down the telephone line?

What will happen if they argue once again? Will Sandi describe the bunker where she sits? Will she try to articulate the darkness? Will those fine teeth chatter in the cold? Will Kimberlee open up immediately and make her young lover laugh? Will the white wine disappear from the glass? Will she talk about the bouillabaisse? Will she even use the word *love*? What will Joel's first words be to Sandi? Will he tell her about Tracey? Will he tell her that he will go down to the bleachers tonight? Will Joel's father (let's call him Paul, living up north, in a college town in New Hampshire, a biologist, an anti-war activist) ever hear any of this? How many years has he been estranged from Kimberlee? Has Sandi ever met him? How long will the phone call eventually last? What happens if the satellite suddenly fails?

Where will his own children be this New Year's Eve?

How do we go back to the very simplicity of the original notion? How do we sit with Sandi in her lonely outpost? How do we look out into the dark?

(And who, anyway, was that dead Marine?)

13 redux

The phone rings: it rings and rings and rings.