

Duck Sauce

by David Abrams

In Iraq that year, they never knew when they'd catch a bullet in the head (or the throat or the shoulder or the soft meat of the ass). It happened, no stopping it.

So they got to thinking they could protect themselves with habitual superstition. Always put your left boot on first in the morning and you'd be IED-free the rest of the day. Shave your head every Monday to ward off snipers. Never eat the M&Ms in your MREs—toss them in the burn pit and, voila, *hajji* left you alone for another three days.

One day Cortez announced he was bored with all this mumbo-jumbo shit and he ate three packages of M&Ms just to spite them all. Fuck if they weren't holding a memorial service for the bastard at the end of the week, some of them ashamed of feeling justified in the way his death proved their point.

In principle, Sergeant Brock Lumley resisted superstition, but if you were to stop him on any given day he was patrolling Baghdad streets with the other eight men in his rifle squad and ask him to open the front left ammo pouch on his flak vest, he'd get this look on his face—like you caught him farting in a quiet room—then pull out a fortune-cookie fortune. On the slip of paper, no bigger than a grass blade, were these words: “Life is either an adventure, or nothing.”

One corner of the fortune had a small dab of brown sauce. Lumley had often thought about touching that dried stain to his tongue to see if it would bring back that night: The sticky take-out boxes piled on the table. Emily by candlelight. Pearl Jam and then Aerosmith ripping harsh from the iPod speakers on the end of the table, “Better Man” giving way to “I Don't Want to Miss a Thing.”

And this: Caught up in the moment, how he reached across the table to slip his fingers inside her blouse. How she pulled away, slapping his hand, promising “Later.” The acrid string of smoke from the blown-out candles pulled up to the ceiling. Both of them cracking open the fortune cookies at the same time—laughing at

hers which promised she'd win the lottery, then sobering up at Brock's fortune which was sort of a "yeah, no shit, Sherlock" moment for both of them.

"Life is either an adventure, or nothing." By then, his unit already had the deployment order and the pucker-factor was running high.

He'd held up the sliver of paper and said, "This one's going with me. Something to remember you by, Em."

She'd called him a corny bastard and cleared away the take-out boxes. Or was that "a horny bastard"? As he watched her dump them in the trash can, how was he to know that he probably should have been *more* sentimental, *more* of a corny bastard, and less of a horny bastard?

No way did he see it coming. No way sitting at that table with the dried-out Chinese food did he ever suspect that seven months later he'd be thinking of her as his *ex*-girlfriend. She was already moving away from him by that point, walling him off in her head, saving herself from the heartache and certain grief that comes with sending your boyfriend into war. She just couldn't do it, couldn't go through a year of that shit, she said later. If he came back home—legs, arms, and (especially) dick still attached—well, then maybe they'd re-think all of this. But for now...

Even now, Lumley still couldn't move on. In Iraq, as they said, it was always Groundhog Day: same heartache, different day.

No, Brock hadn't moved on. And, he suspected, neither had she, despite all of his unanswered e-mails. Yeah, he knew he should forget about "dat bitch," as Staff Sergeant Kinkle advised, but he still held out hope that she was, even at this very moment, tossing and turning in an otherwise empty bed, torturing herself over the stupid-ass way she'd left things between them, agonizing over the just-slapped look on his face, regretting the harsh words she'd thrown at him, and for damn sure regretting the slammed door. Even as he shaved his head each and every Monday along with the rest of them, Brock Lumley hoped that his *ex*-girlfriend was knotted in sheets and blankets, missing his face, his voice, his hands, and, yeah, his dick. He tortured himself with fantasies about their

reunion. If he thought about her long enough and hard enough—her face, forgiving and remorseful, waiting for him on the other side of the parade field and him marching across in formation until the brigade commander bellowed “Dismissed!” and they all swarmed their families—if he held that vision in his head, then somehow he'd get out of here alive.

Until then, he carried the duck-sauce-spattered fortune in his ammo pouch, thinking about all the shit he'd catch from the rest of the squad if they ever caught him licking the paper.

