

# **GUNS, SHACKLES & WINTER COATS**

By M. Stefan Strozier

## **Characters:**

Sergeant John Brown  
Specialist Michael Plansky  
Specialist Jose Rodriguez  
Private Thomas Johnson  
Kara Brown, wife of John Brown  
Dr. Ellsinore Zinn, John Brown's psychiatrist  
Kerry, a homeless Vietnam veteran  
Iraqi Soldier

## **Act One**

### **Scene One**

**Setting:** Homeless vet moves among the crowd, collecting change. Brown enters, dressed in slacks, a tie and jacket, carrying a briefcase.

#### **Brown**

Solider! Front and center!

#### **Vietnam Veteran**

Sergeant Brown! You got any change on you?

#### **Brown**

I thought you were working at Hoffbrau. Kara's friend helped me get you that job.

#### **Vietnam Veteran**

Yeah; but something happened. I lost my cool with one of the customers. I couldn't deal with them. I appreciate you getting me the job. But they got attitudes – especially, the little punks. One of the guys still gets me free meals; so, you can't beat that.

#### **Brown**

No, I guess you can't. But, can't you just do something? Look: I'd put you up, if I could; but there's no way my wife would allow it. What about a shelter?

**Vietnam Veteran**

There is no way in hell I am living in a shelter. I can't believe you said that. I still have some pride, man. I'll be all right; I'll survive out here. I can get help from guys like you. Who needs anything else? I'm just tired of dealing with the BS, man.

**Brown**

I hear you.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Thanks for thinking about me, though. I'll remember that.

**Brown**

Anything for a First Cav Scout.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Old Cav Scouts never die; they just go to hell and regroup.

**Brown**

They've already scouted a way out of hell. When you and I get there, we'll just follow their signs.

**Vietnam Veteran**

That's right, buddy.

**Brown**

Listen, buddy: I am really sorry; but I'm skating on thin ice with my wife. We're not speaking the same language.

**Vietnam Veteran**

That's how it is with women. They don't hear a word you say.

**Brown**

Were you ever married?

**Vietnam Veteran**

I got a "Dear John" letter to prove it.

**Brown**

I have to get home, before I miss dinner. I'll see you later, all right?

**Vietnam Veteran**

You can count on it, buddy.

[Exit Vietnam Veteran. Brown watches him leave; then he steps into his kitchen, as Kara simultaneously enters, through the curtain.]

**Brown**

Kara, you're here. How are you?

**Kara**

I'm fine. How was your day?

**Brown**

I'll tell you about it, later. Guess who I saw by the subway?

**Kara**

Your homeless friend? You gave him some of our money, didn't you?

**Brown**

No, I did not give him any money. You should have more respect for him, Kara. He is Vietnam Veteran.

**Kara**

Yes, you have told me before.

**Brown**

Did you cook dinner? I'm hungry.

**Kara**

No. I am ordering Chinese tonight. I am tired of cooking dinner you never eat.

**Brown**

I eat dinner! All right, let's order Chinese. Let's make it a candlelit dinner. How does that sound?

**Kara**

Sounds nice.

**Brown**

Good. Do we have any more candles? Aha! Sit down. This afternoon, I fell asleep during lunch. I dreamt I was crawling underneath concertina wire. The wire kept cutting me, making me bleed. I couldn't breathe; but I knew I had to make it through the wire. I crawled faster. My arm got stuck in the wire. I pulled my arm, hard. The razor wire dug deeper into my skin. I couldn't move. I was stuck. I woke up, screaming.

**Kara**

John Brown: this is a horrible nightmare. Every day, it is something with you. It wears on me to have to listen to you tell me war stories, in our home. I talked with my friends about you. I think you may need to get some help. I am saying this to you as a friend.

**Brown**

Not as my wife?

**Kara**

Can't you take that for granted?

**Brown**

I get scared you'll leave. I've lost people before.

**Kara**

I want you to get some help, John. Things are not going well for you. The only problem is you have no health care at your temporary job.

**Brown**

I have health care at the veterans' hospital; but I am not going to a VA hospital.

**Kara**

Why not?

**Brown**

VA hospitals are filthy, under-funded labs, where veterans are treated like animals. Army doctors are bad enough; VA doctors are even worse than they are. What are you trying to say, anyway?

**Kara**

Nothing. I am just talking to you.

**Brown**

Why are you dressed? Where are you going?

**Kara**

This is Friday night; I want to enjoy myself.

**Brown**

What money do you have?

**Kara**

I am going out with my girlfriends, tonight. They are treating me. Besides, I have found a job. I will be working at Macy's, during the holidays.

**Brown**

I don't want you working. I told you that. You never listen to what I say.

**Kara**

I am not sitting in this house, listening to you tell me your nightmares.

**Brown**

You shouldn't be working. It stresses the fetus.

**Kara**

I will work! We have no money to do anything. There is nothing here – no furniture. We never take trips. We used to travel all around Europe, remember? All of my friends have nice apartments with nice furniture. I want nice things, too.

**Brown**

Who are all of these friends of yours? You've been in America 6 to 9 months. All right. What kind of furniture do you want? I'll buy a couch, okay? How about a leather couch? I know how much you're into leather. How about red leather?

**Kara**

Don't be funny. I am being serious. You can't just count on me like that, anymore.

**Brown**

Oh, really?

**Kara**

Yes, really. Have we even paid the rent, for this month?

**Brown**

Why are you so hard on me? Let's get ourselves situated, first. I don't want to worry about jobs right now. I want a family. I got fired today.

**Kara**

What? Well, I see I can't rely on you. I am going to work, that's it. If you can't take care of your family, I will take care of myself. And, besides, I feel I am not yet ready to be a mother. I want to wait.

**Brown**

Stop talking like that! We are going to have a family, damn it! Do you hear me?!

**Kara**

John, stop yelling. It's just that things are not in order. You are not well. This is no time to start a family.

**Brown**

There is nothing wrong with me! What are you saying: that I'm crazy? That's what you think, isn't it? You think I am insane – a freak! Sit down at the table with me.

**Kara**

John, when we met, in Germany, you were so much happier. You were confident and funny; and, I was very much in love with you. But, there is something on your mind, ever since you returned from war. You never tell me what you experienced; so, I have no idea what you are going through. I have tried to get you to talk to me – you never tell me what you are feeling. It has gotten very bad, John. You are right: a job is not as important as a family; but if we are not happy, then there is nothing. I want the man I used to know. You are not ready for a family, John. I wish you would come to church.

**Brown**

I wish you would stop talking about religion and abortion in the same sentence! I don't understand you! I want a family. I do not want you to have an abortion. It is not a natural thing. I am tired of death, Kara – tired of war and death. I am begging you.

**Kara**

And, now that you are fired, how can you support another person?

**Brown**

Yes, I can. With my family, I can do anything. Don't worry about money, baby. The economy is strong; and, I am a veteran of an American war. I can get work anywhere I want in this country.

**Kara**

You have not had a decent job since you left the army. What is wrong with you, John? What can I do, if you tell me nothing; and, sit there, quiet?

**Brown**

I am trying to get my head right! Why do you have to keep up this constant pressure on me! Why can't you give me some space? I feel like you're squeezing the life out of me. I am not all right. I have to take it easy, until things come to me. It won't be long; but if you don't back off of me, you're going to be sorry.

**Kara**

I won't tolerate being spoken to like that, ever again!

**Brown**

I am sorry. Please understand me. Stay here tonight, baby. You'll enjoy yourself more with a man than with your girlfriends. Go get the food.

**Kara**

Ha ha. Okay, I will stay tonight. You always seem to convince me. You have a way with words.

**Brown**

It's my silver tongue.

**Kara**

That is the only thing you have.

**Brown**

It's all I need. Follow me.

**Kara**

Where?

**Brown**

Can you help me with something?

**Kara**

What?

**Brown**

It's in the bathroom. I need help with the water temperature. You do such a good job.

**Kara**

Oh no. I have to go get the food.

**Brown**

Order delivery.

**Kara**

No! I'm going.

[Kara exits.]

**Brown**

Good, leave me alone. You'll never understand me. I need peace and quiet to drown out the sounds. The silence is all I have left.

**Scene Two**

**Setting:** Light fade to black; only the candle is lit. Combat sounds play. Brown's team takes up their seats, alongside Brown. Combat lights (red, orange, yellow) flash. Plansky is driving; behind him is Rodriguez. Brown is in the front, passenger seat; behind him is Johnson.

**Johnson**

I can't take this anymore! Do you guys hear me?

**Rodriguez**

Where the hell are those 16 SCUDS landing? Sergeant Brown! We're lost in a tank battle! Pull your head out of your fourth point of contact!

**Brown**

This place is hell on Earth. Look at the sky. There is no beginning and no end: sky and sand and red, forever.

**Johnson**

Sergeant Walker's team is dead, for Christ's sake – gone, in a ball of flames!

**Plansky**

Sergeant, we are lost in a tank battle, at the front lines of the Persian Gulf War.

**Johnson**

This is real war. I'm scared, man.

**Rodriguez**

No shit, Sherlock.

**Johnson**

Why can't we follow the tank explosions? We are cavalry scouts! Aren't the tanks supposed to follow us? Tell the tanks we're behind them; but to keep going that way.

**Plansky**

Jesus H. Christ, Private Johnson, what a genius idea; drive in front of the tanks! Here: (Plansky picks up the microphone): 'Excuse me, Mr. Tanker, my name is Private Johnson; aren't you supposed to be following me? We would appreciate it if you could keep killing the bad tanks'. Privates are not paid to think, private!! I'm a specialist; so, I can think more than you can!

**Brown**

Shut up! Plansky: Was that Sergeant Smith's team, who was shooting at us? If you had let me radio Smith's team; and, not driven away like a coward, we wouldn't be lost.

**Plansky**

Well, golly, sergeant, I'm not sure who was trying to kill us. Does anyone know who was trying to destroy us?

**Johnson**

Listen to me! I am scared! I can't think. I – I can't breathe.

**Rodriguez**

Don't be a pussy, private. Sergeant Brown's not scared; right, sergeant?

**Plansky**

*The sergeant's not scared; right, sergeant?* We all know you want to be a non-commissioned officer, Rod. Why don't you focus on the team?

**Brown**

*At ease.* I am scared. I feel as if I am living a few hours in the past. I am watching everything happen; but not experiencing it. I don't even feel like I am a human being.

**Rodriguez**

I know what you mean. Everything is fading into one thing, like being inside a big dream; right, sergeant?

**Plansky**

I just had a brilliant idea! Why don't you two put your crack pipe down; pay – the fuck – attention! Because I'd like to remind you we're lost in the middle of a tank battle!

**Rodriguez**

What are we going to do, sergeant?!

**Brown**

Follow the tank explosions, like the private said. See that Bradley Fighting Vehicle, specialist: The one going slow, stopping to shoot its twenty Mike-Mike cannon?

**Plansky**

I see it, over there, away from the pack.

**Brown**

Maintain precisely 25 meters directly behind it, all night long. Our tires are to be kept exactly in its tracks. When it moves, we move. When it stops, we stop.

**Plansky**

Yes, sergeant. Follow the Bradley like stink on shit.

**Brown**

Who the hell did that, Rod?

**Rodriguez**

It's the MRE's, sergeant. I can't help it.

**Johnson**

Gas, gas, gas!

**Brown**

Jesus, I'm dying. Put your windows; air out this vehicle!

**Plansky**

Sergeant, are you crazy? There might be chemical weapons out there. The M-9 paper hasn't changed colors yet; but we can't be sure. There might be Mustard Gas, Blister Agent, Nerve Agent – biological agents – or, who knows what?

**Johnson**

My eyes are watering. I hope we get shot, so we don't have to breathe anymore.

**Brown**

Hope is not a plan, private. Where's the hot sauce?

**Johnson**

I used the last of it; we're out, sergeant.

**Brown**

Are you fucking kidding me?

**Rodriguez**

Whose job is it *a/ways* to make sure we have a full bottle of hot sauce?!

**Brown**

Combat is bad; being out of hot sauce is pure torture, private!

**Rodriguez**

I say we drive back to Saudi Arabia for hot sauce, right now!

**Plansky**

There is no way we can eat these MREs without hot sauce!

**Johnson**

Did anyone get the white cheese?

**Brown**

Yeah, private, I got the white cheese right here.

**Johnson**

Sergeant, I'll trade you my M&Ms – plus, a granola bar, for your white cheese. I'll throw in a package of dried fruit; and, the ham and cheese loaf.

**Brown**

Negative, private. Your weak attempt to trade your way out is failing miserably. As we all know, the brass bar is worthless; dried fruit means nothing; your package of M&Ms is puny; and, it is impossible to give away a ham and cheese loaf, even in combat. Anyway, I'm almost done eating my white cheese. You're SOL, private.

**Johnson**

You're always *done eating it!* It's the same thing back in Germany: REFORGER, Grafenver, Hohenfels – all of it! I am sorry about the hot sauce! I'm tired of flies constantly swarming our chow. I tired of sand jamming my weapon and crawling up the crack of my ass. It's everywhere: in my eyes, my ears, my fingernails, my teeth, my hair, my nose, my dick. I can't take it anymore! Do you hear me?!

**Rodriguez**

Private! You'll step on a land mine and kill us all!

**Johnson**

Leave me alone!

**Brown**

Hold him, Specialist! Fuck, Private! What's your problem? By your cowardly act of trying to commit suicide, you almost brought down your whole team. We're all terrified out of our minds. I wanted to shoot myself in the foot before the ground war started. But, it's like...who's that journalist that shot himself?

**Plansky**

Hemingway.

**Brown**

There was a man who could not handle his madness. A real man knows how to handle a fear, confusion, terror. Show bravery in the face of uncertainty, private. If not for yourself, then for your team, your country; and, your family back home. Private: The last thing you want to do is shame your country.

**Rodriguez**

So this means we're not going back for hot sauce? Way to go, private.

**Brown**

Lay off him, Rod.

**Rodriguez**

Yes, sergeant.

**Brown**

Listen: isn't Sergeant Smith's team from Texas?

**Rodriguez**

California.

**Brown**

California, Texas, *Canada*: it's all the same shit.

**Plansky**

I wish we were in Brooklyn, *New York City*.

**Rodriguez**

But, after this shit is over – assuming we make it out alive – we go back to Germany, to a country that hates Americans and spits on us. I didn't even get to take leave before we deployed. There's so much I miss about New York City: pizza, honies, bagels.

**Brown**

New York City. There's a bagel shop I always go to in Hell's kitchen, on 48<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>: Joseph's Bagel Shop and Deli. There's something about that place. They have the best bagels in New York City.

**Rodriguez**

Sergeant, you're wrong on this one. I know the best bagel shop in New York City. It's called Joey's bagels on 86<sup>th</sup> Street, in Brooklyn. The bagels at Joey's are twice as big as any in the city; and, half the price – hell ya.

**Plansky**

You're both wrong. Let me tell you something: If you're looking for great taste; plus, every kinds of cream cheese, then it's Joe's Bagel Shop in Brooklyn, near Brooklyn College. Those are the best tasting bagels in all New York City, forgetta' 'bout it.

**Brown**

Man, I'll be glad to get back home, with my woman. The first thing we're doing is going to the Village, to listen to some live jazz. That's about my favorite thing to do on a date, in the city.

**Rodriguez**

Naw, sergeant, take your gals up to the Windows of the World restaurant, at the top of the World Trade Center. At night, it's like seeing into forever.

**Plansky**

If you want to make a girl feel real special, then take her to an off-off Broadway play: Twenty bucks, tops. She'll think you're all sophisticated. The plays mostly suck-ass; but since the theaters are dives, you can score some action in one of the corners. Generally, they turn out the lights, during the plays.

**Rodriguez**

I didn't know about that. What about off-Broadway?

**Plansky**

That's the same as Broadway.

**Rodriguez**

I've never been to a play on Broadway.

**Plansky**

They don't have plays on Broadway anymore, just musicals and Disneyland shit.

**Radio (Voice 1)**

Break, sir, I'm hovering above the target, at this time. There are POWs surrendering. They are waving white flags, exiting their bunkers. They're surrendering, sir. They're waving their arms high in the air.

**Radio (Voice 2)**

Pilot, this is Colonel Nash! You will shoot those individuals – those enemy soldiers – dead, right now! That is a direct order. Do you copy me? Shoot the Iraqi bastards!

**Radio (Voice 1)**

Mission accomplished, sir. They're all dead, sir.

**Plansky**

Did you hear that? They're murdering people.

**Johnson**

They should die grateful the MPs won't get them. What the hell are we doing here? Everyone knows President Bush and Cheney are oilmen, with lots of Saudi Arabian friends. Texas oil: that's why we're fighting this war, which, the U.S Congress barely supported. We hear it every day, on Rod's short wave radio, from the BBC. How are we supposed to fight and die in a war our country doesn't want us to fight? I'm tired of war!

**Rodriguez**

Hey, look, private: some white cheese. You still want to trade for it?

**Johnson**

Gimmi that. Sergeant, I am tired of fighting, for nothing! What has our country become, sergeant, huh?

**Brown**

I hear you, private. You're giving me a damn migraine headache with your politics.

**Plansky**

I know what you mean, sergeant; he never stops. Jesus, my head is splitting open. How long can a human being go without sleep, anyway?

**Rodriguez**

Common, sergeant, we got these fuckers on the run! 24<sup>th</sup> Mech and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne surround Baghdad; Apache helicopters are wasting Iraqis right and left. We're going to win this war and all go home!

**All**

Hooah!

**Plansky**

Hey, what's that, over there? It looks like a chow truck. That's our unit!

**Radio**

Break, Romeo Fife Tree, this is Juliet Aught Tree. Come in, over.

**Brown**

Juliet, this is Romeo, over.

**Radio**

Romeo, where in the hell are you, over?

**Brown**

We got lost, sir. Sorry, over.

**Radio**

I see your vehicle. We've found the chow truck and we're drinking warm soup. Through bizarre army logic, you have been promoted to the rank of staff sergeant, E-6. Congratulations; make sure you're not out of uniform! Holding the Metal of Honor pushed you above your peers in promotions points. And one more thing! Cease fire! Stand down; take off all your gear, to include your chemical weapons gear. The war is over!

[Music plays: James Brown's *I Feel Good*.]

### **Scene Three**

**Setting:** Rodriguez lights a cigarette on a dark stage, with the candle. Lights rise slowly, revealing the team standing, outside of their vehicle, shaving, etc. It is two days after the ground war.

**Johnson**

Congratulations on your promotion, sergeant. I always wanted to ask you what you did to be awarded the Congressional Metal of Honor.

**Brown**

So ask, you bonehead.

**Plansky**

Our sergeant jumped on a grenade, to save his team; blew his balls off – technically, he is a woman.

**Rodriguez**

Shut up, Plansky. Sergeant John Brown charged into a hornet's nest of enemy in Panama City to save two stranded, wounded, dumb-ass privates. Then, he shot his way back out; carrying the wounded soldiers to safety.

**Johnson**

Hooah. Is it true generals and the President have to salute you, sergeant?

**Rodriguez**

They salute the ribbon, not the man. Hey, Sergeant Brown has a German girl!

**Brown**

That's right, we're engaged. Her grandfather was a GI in World War Two. He was black.

**Rodriguez**

Good to go, sergeant; squared away. Does she cook?

**Johnson**

Did you meet her in Frankfurt, while you were partying in Sachsenhausen?

**Brown**

Does she cook? Hell yeah, man. Weiner schnitzels, bratwurst – forgetta' 'bout it. Let's go, everyone in the vehicle.

**Plansky**

She likes the schnitzels, huh?

**Johnson**

Hey, sergeant, can we go to the bunkers? We've got to get more stuff.

**Brown**

We're going back to the bunkers.

**Johnson**

Sergeant, are you really marrying a German woman?

**Brown**

I am getting married and getting out of the army. I've seen enough war and death for one lifetime. I can't take anymore of it.

**Rodriguez**

What are you talking about, sergeant? You know NCO stands for "no chance on the outside?"

**Johnson**

Yeah, if you leave, they'll farm us out to other platoons or headquarters.

**Brown**

I don't care about you guys.

**Johnson**

Man, these burnt bodies stink. They smell worse than Plansky.

**Plansky**

Fuck you, private.

**Brown**

At ease. It's peacetime. A New World Order; Let Freedom Reign! Man, those oil well fires are smoking up today. The wind never changes direction. This warm breeze is putting me to sleep. So what's everyone reading?

**Plansky**

*The Stand*, by Steven King.

**Johnson**

A librarian from Kansas sent me a goodie-bag.

**Rodriguez**

Did she send a picture?

**Plansky**

They don't have any *cameras* in *Kansas*, man.

**Rodriguez**

Librarians in Kansas are sweet, man. They have nice curves, big old tities; and round, tight asses. They have long, jet-black hair. They always tie it up tight, in a bun, when they're sitting at their desk. But, when they're in the back, stacking books, they let their hair down; and, shake it around a little. Then, then say, "Its time to read to the librarian; are you ready, papi?"

**All**

Stop!

**Plansky**

So this is what the journalists are calling the Turkey Shoot: beat-up trucks and cars, caught in a bottleneck. The girl force wasted them with farting A-10 Warthog tank killers. These conscripts were mostly Shiites, judging by their clothes and lack of uniforms. Hey, the Shiites are revolting, fighting their way to Baghdad. But perhaps these were the elite soldiers, since they were raping and pillaging Kuwaiti City. America sure is hegemony.

**All**

What?

**Johnson**

Does anyone have change for a seventy-five cent word?

**Rodriguez**

Professor Plansky has single-handedly broken the bank.

**Plansky**

That happens to be a word I heard a journalist say, by the name of *Dan Rather*.

**Brown**

And then he said, "America has routed the fearsome Iraqi Republican Guard from Kuwaiti City," which isn't what were seeing here.

**Johnson**

This sure as hell wasn't 'The Mother of all Battles.' Ever notice how battles are named weird? The Battle of the Bulge, for instance, is named for a battle I fought every day in high school.

**Plansky**

You mean the battle of the number two pencil.

**Rodriguez**

Private, it's not size that matters; it's the motion in the ocean.

**Johnson**

And why call them movements? It sounds like you're taking a shit.

**Rodriguez**

Oh! This morning I took the most amazing shit! It felt like a giant anaconda, winding through the deep jungle, out my asshole. I had to stand up, off the ground. I screamed for several minutes. It was amazing! My eyes were chris-crossed for an hour.

**All**

Wow!

**Plansky**

MREs will kill you, dead. Man, we have destroyed this country: All I see are burnt bodies, smashed buildings, starving children, rabid dogs. You've got to feel for these people – not the soldiers, of course – they were trying to kill us. But the people, man, Saddam is cruel to them.

**Johnson**

Man, fuck these people. They should build a big dome over the whole Arab peninsula; let everyone fight it out, until they're all dead. Then, we move in and set up McDonalds and Wall Marts.

**Plansky**

I'm talking as a person, not as a religious zealot.

**Johnson**

There he goes with big words, sergeant. I thought you were a Jew, Plansky. What do you care about Muslims?

**Plansky**

I am two-thirds Jewish.

**Johnson**

How can you be two-thirds a Jew? What'd you have: two Jewish parents plus one Irish milkman? It's impossible.

**Rodriguez**

Don't be stupid, private. What religion were you raised?

**Johnson**

Religion doesn't matter – except, over here, where everyone is an insane fanatic. What do you believe, Sergeant Brown?

**Brown**

To be honest, I'm thinking about becoming Muslim, after everything I've seen over here. I can see why religion started in this land.

[Brown pulls out his bottle of booze. Brown takes a big sip, passes the bottle to Johnson, behind him.]

**Plansky**

I guess you're becoming a Muslim tomorrow! Are open containers legal in Iraq? Jesus, it's only 1 in the afternoon.

**Brown**

Give me that bottle. Watch out for US Air Force craters on the highway; it's getting dark. We don't want to drive in a crater and die like Sergeant Jackson's team, the day after the war ends. Let's see: Atropine, pra-li-o-dox-ide. That doesn't sound too good for you. Ah ha: Valium!

**Rodriguez**

What are you doing, sergeant?

**Brown**

Whoa! There we go: Valium and Jack.

**Plansky**

Sergeant Brown, you have major issues.

**Johnson**

Didn't the Lt say to not do this?

**Brown**

You're all a bunch of chicken-shits.

**Rodriguez**

The sergeant happens to be an ingenious mastermind. Let me try some of your medicine, doctor. You're last private, because you're from New Jersey.

**Johnson**

Hey, man, don't house the fucking shit.

**Brown**

Whew! Holy shit, man, does anyone feel that?

**Johnson**

I'm gonna fall out of this vehicle in a second.

**Brown**

Men, I thought you all performed brilliantly in combat. The fact that we were lost was not our fault; everyone was lost in this war – taking pictures of the incredible orange-red artillery flashes, filling the sky like fireworks; MLRS rockets, firing their little white rocket-doves of Lord Jesus Christ into the colorful night sky. Soft glows of exploding howitzer copperhead rounds – effervescent illumination. Beautiful, awesome, slowly setting sun: yellow, orange, deep, blood red. Eye of God, watching it all transpire, while his evil children are playing, killing, destroying. Booms pounding softly in your chest...boom...boom...boom. Combat is so...beautiful, man. Hey, what's that: smoke? Drive over there, specialist!

**Plansky**

No way, sergeant, we are not going to the oil well fires.

**Brown**

God is in the fire. I can ask Him why He created the red sky.

**Plansky**

I'm driving back to camp, right now.

**Brown**

Everybody calm down. That's an order. Everything I say is an order. We are going to the oil well fires. Now, let's go, damn it.

**Plansky**

Sergeant, we're almost out of gas. What about Lieutenant Hall? This situation is becoming hazardous. Therefore, I do hereby relieve you of your command, effective immediately! Sergeant, are you asleep? Did you hear me?

**Rodriguez**

Plansky, you are not relieving our sergeant of command!

**Johnson**

What are you guys talking about?

**Plansky**

He wants to go the oil well fires. I'm going back to camp.

**Rodriguez**

I say we go do it! We've done lots of crazy stuff before. We're Americans, damn it, not pussies!

**Johnson**

I think we should radio the Lt.

**Rodriguez**

*At ease, private!*

**Plansky**

Don't be a fool, private. But, I want to get back to camp. I have a bad feeling about this. The war is officially over. We're not operating under combat ROE anymore. I do not have to follow his orders to my death.

**Johnson**

What's ROE?

**Rodriguez**

Jesus, private, you are a dumb fuck. You've just been through a war and you don't know what ROE is. Anyway, I guess it couldn't hurt to advise the platoon sergeant of our present situation; that we'll rally up at camp, tonight, after we finish our bottle of Jack and Valium.

**Johnson**

Specialist Plansky, can you please tell me what ROE is?

**Plansky**

Rules of Engagement.

**Brown**

What the hell you guys talking about?

**Plansky**

Nothing, sergeant.

**Brown**

We are going back to the bunkers, to get more stuff.

**Plansky**

A minute ago, you wanted to go to the oil well fires. You're not thinking clear-headed.

**Brown**

I can do AN-Y-THING I want! Let's go, damn it. We'll fire off all of our remaining ammunition, clear customs into Saudi Arabia, go the fuck home. We'll shoot up the Russian tanks. I'm done trading the Shiites, for their booze. They've got everything now: rations, gas, water, stinger missiles, PVS-7 night vision glasses – fuck. I like the Shiites. Rod, did you mail all of our war booty?

**Rodriguez**

I mailed it to my grandmother's house in Brooklyn.

**Brown**

You didn't send any body parts, did you, like those boneheads in 24<sup>th</sup> Mech?

**Rodriguez**

No, sergeant.

**Johnson**

Sergeant Brown, don't we have enough Iraqi stuff? I'm getting hungry. I want to eat a warm meal at the mess truck, tonight.

**Brown**

Shut up, private. Eat an MRE.

**Johnson**

Yes, sergeant.

**Brown**

Rod, did you mail that Russian pistol I found to my address, in New York City? That baby's mine.

**Rodriguez**

Yes, sergeant.

**Brown**

Glad to see someone's following orders.

**Rodriguez**

Sergeant Brown, are you all right? The combat we saw, that'll stay with me my whole life. I'll look at veterans in a whole new light – Vietnam veterans, especially. Why don't we go to the bunkers tomorrow? I know why you want to go to the oil well fires: to try and understand the red sky; but you have to realize combat is over. I am drunk and high; but God is not in the oil well fires. The devil might be in the fire. In our present conditions, we better not shoot off our remaining ammo. Let's get back to camp, so the private can eat his warm dinner.

**Brown**

We are going to the bunkers.

**Plansky**

I want to get back to camp.

**Brown**

What the fuck's going on here, a mutiny? I want to load up with more war booty before we go home. I want more money. Don't you guys want free money?

**Rodriguez**

All right. Let's make another bunker run.

**Plansky**

All right, sergeant, let's go to the bunkers.

**Brown**

I knew it. Let the money do the talking. Hell, they're right over there. Come on, let's roll. I want to get underground, where it's cool. It must be a hundred and twenty degrees. I can't hear myself think. Drive slow, Plansky.

**Plansky**

What for, sergeant? We're in the middle of the fucking desert.

**Brown**

Just drive slowly! I have a headache.

**Plansky**

Is this slow enough?

**Brown**

Fine!

**Plansky**

How about this area? We haven't been here yet.

**Brown**

Stop the vehicle. Everyone get out. You men go check out that bunker.

**Johnson**

Sergeant, can we leave our weapons?

**Brown**

Leave your weapons in the vehicle. No one is going to get them out here.

**Johnson**

All right, sergeant.

[All four move sluggishly, still drunk and high. The Iraqi suddenly runs onstage; and, slits Plansky's throat. In the confusion, the Iraqi is able to stab Rodriguez, from the back; and, Rodriguez goes down, not dead; but dying fast. Johnson attacks the Iraqi head-on; but the Iraqi overpowers him. Meanwhile, Sergeant Brown picks up his .45; but he can't shoot; or, he will shoot Plansky. Brown maneuvers around, as he tries to take aim. Brown trips once. Finally, as Johnson dies, Brown has a clear shot; and, kills the Iraqi.]

**Brown**

You killed my team! Rodriguez? Plansky? Johnson? I have to call for help. I don't even know where I am.

[Kara enters, carrying a plastic bag, full of Chinese food containers.]

**Kara**

Here's the Chinese food. I brought extra hot sauce. I know how much you like hot sauce.

**Brown**

You're going to die.

**Kara**

John, stop it! Put down the pistol! It's me, Kara. The soldier is gone.

**Brown**

You stay here, until I return.

[Brown quickly exits.]

**Kara**

Hello? I need the police. I've been attacked by my husband.

**Act Two**

**Scene One**

**Setting:** Brown is shackled by his wrists and ankles, on three stage boxes. He is in a VA hospital mental ward. Dialogue begins while the house is still dark.

**Brown**

Nurse, remove these shackles! He's here, in the room! Team, get in here! Hear him laughing at me? He chased me through the park. I hid my pistol in the park. I am sorry I let you men down.

**Plansky**

Do not fear, sergeant. Enemy will not approach.

**Rodriguez**

In the darkness, the enemy cannot close.

**Johnson**

Focus.

**Brown**

The darkness is the enemy.

**Plansky**

The red sky is evil.

**Rodriguez**

Are the nurses sexy here?

**Johnson**

How' the chow, in this place?

**Brown**

You guys are not real. I am alone.

**Plansky**

You are not alone.

**Brown**

I am alone.

[Exit Johnson, Plansky, Rodriguez. Dr. Zinn enters.]

**Dr. Zinn**

Good morning, Mr. Brown. I see the nurses have removed your restraints. If you'd simply comply with taking your medications, there'd be no need to wear the shackles.

**Brown**

I don't care if I have to wear the shackles, because I am not swallowing any pills! I had to swallow pills in the war. That's why I have Persian Gulf War Syndrome.

**Dr. Zinn**

John, I have good news: Your wife is going to sign you out, today.

**Brown**

I haven't seen Kara since I got here. My home phone is disconnected.

**Dr. Zinn**

Is it?

**Brown**

Why is she coming, now? How long have I been here? Doctor, I am not ready to leave.

**Dr. Zinn**

You've been here six days.

**Brown**

Doctor, I don't want to leave this hospital. I can't go outside. How can I work? Why is my wife coming now, when she hasn't contacted me for two weeks?!

**Dr. Zinn**

John, what about the rest of your family? I believe you said your mother was unreachable; your father, what happened with him?

**Brown**

I don't want to talk about my family or my father.

**Dr. Zinn**

You must have some feelings for your father. I thought you might give me some details.

**Brown**

I have no feeling for my father – none! Doctor, please, let me stay here longer. I am begging you. I have faced my problems; it doesn't change things.

**Dr. Zinn**

John, you do not suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There *are* veterans here who truly suffer from PTSD – Vietnam veterans. True, you witnessed some horrific events; but instead of dealing with your problems, you choose to self-medicate with alcohol, which trigger your delusions.

**Brown**

Listen to me! I am a changed person. I never had any problems before the war. I saw combat before, in Panama. Something has clicked up here. No one seems to understand me; no one seems to care. I am an American war veteran; doesn't that account for anything? I served my time; why can't I enjoy my life?

**Dr. Zinn**

John, you can lead a normal life. Not all war veterans experience difficulties; in fact, many transition smoothly into civilian life.

**Brown**

All war veterans deal with the trauma of combat, every day. I feel America has used me and then abandoned me.

**Dr. Zinn**

You arrived here, escorted by the police. John, you are only a few steps away from destitute. Listen: I wish you could stay here, long-term; but the fact is we can't afford that kind of luxury to every veteran that comes through our doors. Shouldn't we reserve our resources, so that we can serve those veterans, who are most needy?

**Brown**

This is crazy! I am being kicked out of a mental hospital.

**Dr. Zinn**

How would it feel, to consider it as transitioning in to the real world?

**Brown**

How am I supposed to go outside, when the sun goes down and the sky turns red? I have tried to explain. You think you know everything because you read the New York Times; and, some lying journalist, miles from the action, tells you the whole story, with pictures. I see why war vets never talk about their experiences, because of idiots like you! I want to talk to my wife!

**Dr. Zinn**

She will be here, shortly.

**Brown**

Doc, please, I am begging you to let me stay here. Don't do this to me.

**Dr. Zinn**

John, I understand it has been hard for you to adjust to civilian life; and, that you harbor guilt over the loss of your team. But, don't you think it's important to understand that there is no way to control fate? Your team died during an enemy attack. Shouldn't you face this fact; and, move on with your life?

**Brown**

You make it sound so simple. I haven't told you everything. The truth is I ordered my team to leave their weapons in our vehicle. They died, defenseless. It was my fault they died. It wasn't an *enemy attack*. The war was over; and, we were searching a bunker for money because I ordered them.

**Dr. Zinn**

Soldiers die in all types of unfortunate accidents. War is a horrible thing; but it is necessary, so that society can continue to function; so that you and I can have a job and a life. Honestly, John, as a professional, I don't have a choice. Aren't you happy that your wife is coming to take you home? Goodbye, Mr. Brown.

**Scene Two**

**Setting:** Lights rise. Kara and Dr. Zinn enter.

**Dr. Zinn**

Kara, before we go see your husband, I'd like to speak with you a moment. Your husband was brought to us by the police, extremely intoxicated and violent. He believes he suffers from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

**Kara**

He has gotten steadily worse, since he left the army; and, we moved to America.

**Dr. Zinn**

Are you American?

**Kara**

I am from Germany. We were married when he was in the army.

**Dr. Zinn**

I see. Has your husband had problems with alcohol abuse, in the past?

**Kara**

Yes. But doctor, I have to tell you something: I am scared. I cannot be his wife anymore. I have made changes, in my life.

**Dr. Zinn**

Well, you are still married; and, you must sign for him.

**Kara**

But, doctor, he threatened to kill me with a pistol. He is dangerous.

**Dr. Zinn**

Ms. Brown, your husband is stable and must leave this facility; but it does not have to be with you. I can arrange for hospital security to escort you from the ward to the hospital exits. He will be shown to a separate exit.

**Kara**

Yes, I would feel more comfortable that way.

**Dr. Zinn**

It is no problem at all.

**Kara**

Doctor, I have tried very hard to help him; but I am just his wife. He must help himself. I told him the Veterans' Hospital could help him. Why doesn't America take care of its veterans?

**Dr. Zinn**

Kara, I understand how you feel. I see this kind of thing, all the time. In fact, I work closely with a non-profit agency, which helps homeless veterans. But, grant money is limited these days; and, we simply can't do anything to jeopardize non-profit agencies from receiving their federal funds. That is really all that matters. Wars cause casualties on the home front, too. But, we have to resolve this situation. Let's go see him.

**Kara**

Yes, doctor.

**Dr. Zinn**

How are you today, Mr. Brown?

**Brown**

Nothing changes. Kara, you're here.

**Kara**

Hello, John.

**Dr. Zinn**

Your wife has come to sign the paperwork to release you from the hospital.

**Kara**

John, I have to explain. Doctor, I would like a few minutes alone, with my husband.

**Dr. Zinn**

Yes, of course. Goodbye, Mr. Brown. Mrs. Brown, please meet me by the nurses' station.

**Brown**

What a minute! You can't just kick me out of here.

**Dr. Zinn**

Mr. Brown, we are here to receive you; but you can't malingering at this facility any longer. We are all taxpayers. We all must work.

**Brown**

This is not how America is supposed to work!

**Dr. Zinn**

If you don't calm yourself down, I will call security and you will be restrained.

**Kara**

John, a lot has happened.

**Brown**

Why didn't you come to see me while I was stuck in this place? I thought about you every day. People in here are really crazy. I'm not crazy.

**Kara**

I know you're not crazy, John. I'm glad you got help here, at the hospital. And, I want to still be your friend. I hope we can stay in touch.

**Brown**

What are you saying?

**Kara**

I have moved all of my things out of your apartment. And, I have a lawyer. I am filing for a divorce. I am sorry, John. I have no choice. I have to move on with my life.

**Brown**

Please, Kara, don't do this to me. Your life is good because of me. I gave you the chance to leave Kirchgöns.

**Kara**

I know you have helped me; and, I thank you.

**Brown**

We are man and wife. We can get help, some counseling.

**Kara**

John, you are stuck inside your own mind. You never let me inside. I have to face reality. You had my love; but you don't love me, anymore. The gas is not working in your apartment. There are still some microwave diners in the freezer.

**Brown**

I love you, Kara. Don't you remember when we were married? It was a beautiful day and there were so many flowers. The soldiers in my unit were dressed in army blues, carrying shining steel sabers. What about our baby? What about our future? We were going to be a family.

**Kara**

With what money? It's too late for us, John. I don't want my child to be raised by someone like you.

**Brown**

What is that supposed to mean?

**Kara**

I had an abortion.

**Brown**

Why did you do that, Kara? You can't kill something alive inside of you! That life was going to replace all of the death in the war. You have taken that life from me! You say you're religious. You're a murdering bitch!

**Kara**

Meine Mutter hatte Recht mit dir, du bist nicht gut. Du tust gar nichts, um dir selbst zu helfen. My mother was right about you! You don't frighten me, anymore. You are pitiful.

### **Scene Three**

**Setting:** It is winter and Brown is homeless. He has been living on the street for several weeks.

**Brown**

Get down, for Christ sake! Get down, before you're blown to fucking hell! In-coming! Man the sixty; get another box of ammo A-S-A-P!

**Vietnam Veteran**

Whoa. It's me: Your buddy, from First Cav.

**Brown**

Oh. How's it going?

**Vietnam Veteran**

Same as always.

**Brown**

I was trying to sleep. It's too cold to sleep.

**Vietnam Veteran**

You know, you ain't hearing a word I'm saying.

**Brown**

What are you talking about?

**Vietnam Veteran**

I told you a thousand times to put something underneath your box. You don't listen good. You think this is all joke, don't you?

**Brown**

No.

**Vietnam Veteran**

I got to deal with assholes all day long; and, then I run into *punks* like you. Let me tell you something: Today, I seen this lady picking up her dog's shit in the park with a plastic bag. She dropped her New York Times. She saw me in the bushes. She tells her dog, "Look, fluffy, that man is so disgusting." I'm disgusting? She's scooping up her dog's shit with her fingers! She's the same one who spit on me and called me 'Baby Killer' when I came back from Nam. You got any smokes on you?

**Brown**

No.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Civilians don't understand what war does to a person, how it changes them. It's hard transitioning to civilian life, man, from killing mother fuckers. There're a lot of vets on the street, man. You know that.

**Brown**

The hardest thing is not saying “fuck” every other word.

**Vietnam Veteran**

You got that fucking right. What’s wrong with you?

**Brown**

Nothing. I mean; Kerry, my wife and all, she’s gone. It was my fault. She’s always mad, slamming cabinets – scares me to death. I was going to take care of her; and, the baby. I was going to be a father.

**Vietnam Veteran**

A father, huh? I had a son once. But, I’ve lost track of him. I don’t know where he is anymore. I mean, I try not to think about it – too fucking painful.

**Brown**

I’m wanted to raise my child right, not like my father raised me.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Look, buddy: Women is idiots. You got your freedom. You don’t need a thing. There’s no bills, no responsibility, nothing to worry about. I wish we could get something to drink tonight. Help take the edge off; you have any money?

**Brown**

No.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Me neither. Fuck! Hey, weren’t you a staff sergeant in the army, soldier?

**Brown**

Yes, sir.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Don’t call me sir, I’m a sergeant; I work for a living.

**Brown**

I’m sorry, sergeant.

**Vietnam Veteran**

I was assistant squad leader; until, one night, when I was working point man, I heard an explosion behind me. The enemy always let the point man go past; because they know the whole squad is not far behind him. It wasn’t an explosion; it was a whole platoon of enemy Viet Cong opening up, all at once, on my squad. My platoon was gone in seconds, torn to shreds; little pieces of flesh and blood were all that was left of those Americans. I ran away, back to camp. I see them at night, buddy. I try to hide; but they

still find me. They start by whispering. Then they speak my name. Fear is what eats you brain on the street. Fear from them watching you. You feel them watching. The only thing left is your feelings, just like you're working point. You're mind is gone. You stop catching yourself because your mind is gone. Are you listening to me?

**Brown**

I'm sick of fear. I saw my team killed. I killed the enemy soldier who killed my team.

**Vietnam Veteran**

Yeah? Well, I probably killed fifty mother-fuckers – or more. I still think about all of them dead bastards. I can't think about it. I can't do it.

**Brown**

I don't want to listen to this.

**Vietnam Veteran**

You're a coward, just like me.

**Brown**

Why don't you leave me alone?

**Vietnam Veteran**

You're living with the curse of your dead buddies, aren't you? Admit the truth. You hear them screaming in your ears, don't you? You see them in your nightmares, don't you? You think you're the only one?

**Brown**

Leave me alone!

**Vietnam Veteran**

That's right; you're a coward, just like me. Your country doesn't want you anymore, because you failed her. You are not even an American citizen anymore. You have no home. You have no country.

**Brown**

I have failed. I am a coward.

**Vietnam Veteran**

I need to rest a while, before the cold hits. You can't sleep – well, *I can*. I don't want you around here, anymore. Get lost!

**Brown**

But, I got all my old stuff in there. I built this space; it's mine.

**Vietnam Veteran**

I'm giving you 10 seconds to permanently vacate this area of operations, soldier!

**Brown**

But, I got my stuff in there, man!

**Vietnam Veteran**

I am taking all of your stuff; consider it mine. Now, don't get me angry. One. Two. Three. Four...

**Brown**

I am not leaving my stuff behind! Why are you doing this to me? We're Cav scouts. Those things are all I have left of my life. I have to have them with me.

**Vietnam Veteran**

I'll do whatever the hell I want! Now, you heard me, soldier: move out; un-ass this A/O! Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten!

**Brown**

My things are all gone! No! Soldier! The sky is blood red. Seek protective cover and camouflage, soldier. Get into a bunker, where it's cool, underground. Get to your team, help your buddies. Fight for your country. Leave me alone, you bastard! Team! Get in here, help me! Where is my team? What is your name? No! You won't chase me in my dreams. Your evil won't ring in my brain! No more nightmares! It's all a lie. The truth is I felt pleasure, watching life leave you, in a death rattle. I can't believe in myself. I don't believe in anything. It's all lies – all of it! My soul has left me.

*“And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free  
And I won't forget the men who died, and gave the right to me  
And I'd gladly stand up, next to you, and defend her still today  
Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA!”*

[Brown puts the pistol to his temple. There is a gunshot, over the sound system. All lights simultaneously go black.]

The end.

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