

Anchor Moon

By
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I stood on the hard-packed desert sand in the hour just after midnight, observing with wonder the spectacle of the incoming airborne missile. A full moon shone overhead illuminating the cloudless sky and in the moments before the rocket appeared, I'd been thinking were it possible my friends and family thousands of miles away could be gazing at that very same moment at that very same moon on the brink of their own horizons, and if they were, might they find some comfort in it as a landmark of each our own special place in this world. I had no idea, of course, if that was even possible. As far as I knew, Saudi Arabia might have been on some other planet; that is not even the same moon overhead. That's how far from home I felt. I searched for encouragement in whatever places I could. The possibility the moon might bridge the gap between me and those I loved brought me some peace of mind, uncommon not only to the separation but in this fucked up mess altogether. Then came the missile.

It arced through the heavens, a long thin tube, a plume of orange, red and white, leaving no doubt to its origin, as if that mattered to those in its path. The trajectory suggested it was intended for somewhere south of Dragon Base on the outskirts of Dhahran, my home for the last five months.

Behind me and down the length of the waiting convoy, voices rose in alarm and astonishment. "Fucking-A," someone called out. "Jesus," exclaimed another. I, myself, the one in charge, was speechless.

Someone yelled, "Gas."

Gas. Gas. Gas. The newest idiom of our wartime existence. To many of us there'd never been a word spoken in that precise manner which bore so much angst or trouble, nor so automatic of a response. I looked over my shoulder at the shadowy figures standing beside their vehicles and already many of them were in various stages of donning their masks and protective chemical suits.

"There," my engineer Rodriguez pointed out. "A Patriot."

The Patriot interceptor sprang from the earth with amazing speed and precision. There was the sound of its rockets, as it launched not far from the base, but it was the image that captured my attention. The Patriot, an historical and technological marvel, darling of the news media and conveyor of citizen sentiment and reminder to all of everything that was right and just about the American involvement in the war.

The collision was a thing of beauty, a burst of light with so great a meaning that it raised in me thoughts of Armageddon. I reached toward my hip for my mask then remembered removing my LCE and dropping it along with the mask in the front seat of the Humvee, which at the moment was not where it was supposed to be, in the lead position of the convoy.

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I looked across the desert at the lights of the motor pool. Ten minutes before I'd had the discussion with my driver that sent the PFC scrambling to fill the tank with gas.

"What do you mean you forgot to gas up?" I'd said.

"I mean I didn't fill up with gas."

I had stood there then a moment looking at the young soldier and feeling a number of conventional urges but not one of them being to speak. For his part, the PFC, too, appeared short on that longing as well.

"Well," I'd told him, "I imagine we're going to need some of that if we're expected to cross this fucking desert, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Silver replied as he stepped around me and climbed behind the wheel.

In the seconds immediately after the missile impact, I gauged the distance to the motor pool at roughly seventy yards, a short enough distance to cover but leaving the road would mean loose sand and that would slow me down. Distance won out over sure footing and I took off running.

As a child living in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I'd had this reoccurring dream in which my body hovered just over the ground with some evil presence in hot pursuit and I'd be pumping my legs to outrun the danger but was unable to find any traction, the ground itself elusive, another enemy of sorts. Running across the desert, slipping in the loose sand, reminded me of this. It delivered in me the same fear and certainty that my efforts were useless.

As I neared the motor pool, voices called out. I looked and saw two figures standing in the lighted doorway of one of the larger buildings waving their arms. I ran toward them. My mind buzzed with the question of the scud's payload and whether or not the collision overhead would've prevented dispersal of any chemical or biological agent the missile might've had onboard.

My feet touched down on hard pavement and now with the ground my ally I hurried past the gas pumps and the Humvee and crossed the threshold of the door, stopping well inside. I leaned over to catch my breath, my hands resting on my knees.

"Neat, huh?" my commander, Captain John Miller, said behind me.

I stood straight and turned and looked. Miller and Silver were standing at the door, both looking up at the sky. I walked over to them. Silver glanced my way, his eyes apologetic, but also accepting of blame. But with the Captain so close the young soldier was spared any ass chewing. After all, our CO would likely argue, wasn't I the one who'd left my gear in the vehicle.

The three of us then looked back out the door where the night sky had returned to normal, and the moon right where I'd left it.