

COLD DAY IN BRIDGEWATER

By Jerad W. Alexander

I don't know what I did, buddy, but dammit if my tooth don't hurt like pure hell. That one, that one right on the top row, far left side, second from last... just solid agony reaching all the way to my jawbone. It feels like it's alive, you know? The pain? Like it knows me. Like maybe we met in a past life, like maybe I pissed him off and he's come back to raise hell. Sometimes the pain will go away a couple of hours then trick me and strike like a hammered nail. I guess this is what that fellow meant when he talked about a ghost living in the machinery. And what's worse is I can't stop flicking at it with my tongue, and here I have to sit behind the bar all day playing with it, or trying not to, with snow falling outside and all, in late March no less. How the hell does it snow in late March? You tell me that.

Ruthie, that's my wife, she made me call the dentist this morning, but he was closed on account of the weather. It didn't make sense to call him anyway because Tyler, the asshat bar owner, has the cable company coming in today to hook up the two new flat screens he had put behind the bar. Of course Tyler can't be bothered to come in to cover so I can rest at home. I mean it's only his bar. The cable company said they'll be here between noon and who-the-hell-knows-when so I'm left manning

the place with my sore tooth and all until the usual night bartender, Sara or Megan, comes in and I can go on home.

Except for the Mexican cooks in the back, the bar is empty. The regulars won't trickle in until after five or so, for happy hour. In case you don't know, the bar is called Sharpe's Tavern, but I don't know any man named Sharpe and neither does Tyler as far as I know. The bar is tucked in a strip mall with a hair stylist and one of those manicure shops run by a bunch of Korean ladies who take a church bus to and from work every morning and night. Rene runs the cigar shop at the far end. The whole place smells like cedar and exotic tobacco. He's a fat old guy, older than me even, and was in the Army in... Vietnam, right? Now he looks like some Kentucky colonel with a white pompadour. Sometimes I like to sit with Rene and let him rattle on about politics for a few hours. He gets his blood up, red-faced and all, and he stays that way until about the time he closes up shop, hopping in his Oldsmobile and speeding off, cursing liberals and terrorists and gov'ment and whatever else is in the news and not to his liking. The next morning he'd just come in calm and start all over.

The whole strip mall is right across the highway from the Bridgewater bus station and

sometimes we'll get in passersby for a beer and maybe a cheeseburger or something before moving along. Every once in a while I'll get a wino or two in off the busses, or maybe a drunk redneck with bruises on his face or some burnt-out woman running from a beaten flinch in her eye. Most times I wind up chasing them all off. The homeless around know better than to even try the door. There ain't too many homeless, anyway. At least as far as I've seen.

I pull the cap off a tube of Orajel and rub it all over the gum next to the tooth. The bells on the door jingle as it opens and this fellow looks in the bar, half in the door, half out like, with snow blowing in around his feet.

"You open?" he asks.

"If that's what the sign says," I snap. I probe around the bad tooth with my tongue. I wave him in. "Don't let the heat out."

He steps in and the door shuts behind him. He isn't too tall, under six foot easy, but I can tell he's broad across the

shoulders and narrow-hipped, dressed in jeans with a black hoodie pulled back over a dark gray jacket and carrying a backpack over one shoulder. He sits down across from me and sets his backpack a chair over.

"How's it going, buddy?" I ask. "Get you something?"

He rubs warmth into his hands and asks for a beer. I pull a bottle and pop the cap. "You want a mug?"

He frowns. "No, thanks," he says.

He holds up a pack of cigarettes. "Go ahead," I say.

I dig up an ashtray and set it and the beer down on the bar in front of him. He takes a long swig. His eyes water and his lips spread across

his teeth as he sets the bottle back on the bar. I see that face a lot, that bubbly sting when the carbonation hits your throat. Best part if you ask me. It's like summer time, I guess. He nods and sets the bottle down and sparks the end of a Camel with an orange lighter.

I sit down in my chair. I have a nice tall barstool with a back on it I keep behind the bar for when it's quiet. The Orajel settles in and the tooth numbs a little.

"It's cold as hell out there," he says. "I thought it was March."

I nod and rub my cheek. "Good old 'global warming.'"

He chuckles and swigs again.

"Busses jammed up?" I ask.

He nods. "They told me over there the roads were closed going west because of ice up in the mountains, so they have to wait until the storm breaks."

"That could be tomorrow, maybe the next day."

"I hope it isn't that long. I want to get home."

"Where's that?"

"Morgantown."

I rub my cheek some more. "Where you coming from?"

"I left out of Jacksonville early this morning."

"Jacksonville ... Florida?" I ask.

"North Carolina."

"Ain't there a Marine base down there?"

"That's right."

"You a Marine then?"

"Yessir."

The light shifts around him, or maybe it's just me. I don't know what it is. We don't get too many around here, but when you find out someone is a serviceman, I tell you, it's like the

*I spent almost thirty years
in Bridgewater and I know
just about everybody around
town. I don't know this boy.
I think a second about the
revolver we keep hidden be-
low the cash register next to
the old credit card swipe.*

scenery changes. At least it does for me, I guess anyway. To hell what you think if you don't believe that.

I pull out two more beers and set them down. "On the house."

He looks at me surprised kind of, his eyebrows up and his eyes warming. We shake hands.

"I'm Jim," I say.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. I'm Steve."

My tongue darts over my bad tooth and sparks a little twinge and makes my back tighten. Luckily the Orajel gets ahold of it before it gets too bad.

"Thank you for your service, Steve."

The bells on the door jingle and a tall brown-skinned guy wearing a Carhartt jacket and boots steps in with a satchel of tools. The bells rattle again when the door shuts. They were leftover from Christmas when Sara and Megan decorated the place. Don't know why they left the bells.

"You the cable company?" I ask.

"That's me."

"Well wipe those boots off before you come on back here."

He stomps his feet on the green doormat and gives the bottom of each boot two good wipes and walks toward the bar. I stand up and make sure he doesn't track in anything. I'll be damned if I have to clean up after the help. I spent almost thirty years in Bridgewater and I know just about everybody around town. I don't know this boy. I think a second about the revolver we keep hidden below the cash register next to the old credit card swipe.

"You're here early. Didn't expect to see you until the last minute."

"Yeah, had you first on my list," he says. His voice was deep, thick. He pulls out a clipboard from his satchel and flips a page.

"You need three televisions hooked up with full service?" he asks.

"No. Just two. Both up here behind the bar," I say, pointing with my thumb.

The technician mumbles and looks over his paper work.

"Says here three," he says. He taps his clipboard with a pen.

"Well, I don't care what your paper says. I was told by the owner we're only doing two behind the bar."

He looks down at his paper again. "It says here Tyler Hargrove placed the order."

My tooth rattles. I rub my cheek. "Look, I don't care. Do whatever the paper says; just don't track any mud in here."

The brown-skinned technician mumbles something about getting the cable boxes ready and leaves for his van.

"Wipe your feet again when you come back," I say.

I look over at the Marine. "You'd think they own the place," I say. The Marine looks up and blinks.

When the technician comes back, he carries three boxes and a large spool of thick wire. I watch him and make sure he wipes his feet. He looks like a damn Muslim, maybe.

"I'm going to hook up the back one first."

"Whatever you gotta do, buddy," I say.

The Marine drains the beer in front of him and reaches for the next one. I take the empty and toss it in the trash.

"You guys serve food here?" he asks.

"Sure do. Lemme get you a menu," I say. I reach over near the cash register and grab a menu and slide it across the bar in front of him.

"Thank you, sir," he says. He picks up the menu.

My tooth is quiet for the most part now and I hope it stays that way. I have the Orajel ready in case. I look out toward the back wall where the technician has started working. I watch him a minute, just watching, you know? I sit back down.

"You go overseas?" I ask the Marine.

“Yessir.”

I hold up a hand. “Easy on the ‘sir’ stuff.”

He smiles. “Thanks, old habit. But yeah, I’ve been over. Just come back, actually.”

“Oh yeah, where at?”

“Iraq.”

“No shit. What do you do in the Marines?”

“Infantry.”

I shake my head. “Damn, son. Hard core. You must be one tough sonuvabitch.”

He shakes his head and looks down. “No, no. Nothing like that. I just showed up. I do appreciate it, though.”

“Ahh, hell. I figure any guy that goes over there is a hero, I don’t care what they did.” I mean that.

The Marine looks at me over the lighter flame as he sparks the end of another cigarette. His eyes are large and flat... cold even, but only for a moment. He takes a drag and knocks the first ash into the tray. He sniffs and runs his thumb under his nostrils. “Nothing quite like that, but I appreciate it, though,” he says.

“Where at in Iraq were you?” I ask.

“Ramadi.”

“Is that close to Fallujah?” I’ve always heard of Fallujah and Baghdad on the news. Those were the rough ones, I hear.

“West of Fallujah. Not too far.”

“You see any action?”

“Some,” he says.

He keeps his eyes down on the menu, his elbow resting on the bar, the cigarette perched up, its thin smoke drifts skyward.

“Man, sometimes I wish I was your age,” I say. “I was madder’n hell after nine-eleven. I wanted to crack skulls. Everyone in town did. And you get to do it ... go over there and do right by us. We’re all proud of you boys.”

“Thanks,” he says flatly. He looks up. “You a vet?”

“Me? No. Thought about joining. Missed the draft by about a year. Went to school instead like a dumbass. My dad was in the Army in

World War II, fought in Italy. My uncle was in Korea but he was in the Air Force. My wife’s daddy was in the Marines, though. He fought in the Pacific somewhere.”

He nods and looks back at the menu. My tooth makes its presence known, just a slight touch but nothing significant ... an echo, I guess.

“None of my folks are veterans. I’m the first one,” he says.

“How long you been in?”

“Three years.”

“What are you, a sergeant?”

“Corporal.”

The Muslim-looking technician finishes in the dining area and walks to the bar. He hands me a remote. “Back ones are hooked up,” he says.

“All right.” I look toward the TV in the back and flip the channels back and forth and check the guide. I can’t read it this far away.

I wink at the Marine. “We got any dirty channels on here?” I ask

The technician smiles. “No. Not this time.”

“We got news channels?”

“That you do have. All the major ones,” he said. The technician walks up behind the bar and it makes me nervous, a rise up the spine whenever someone crosses the threshold. This is my area. I run this side of the bar. No outsiders allowed. It’s just a habit I have, you know? He goes to work getting the other two televisions ready.

The Marine drops the menu on the bar. “I think I’m ready to order.”

“All right, what do you want?”

“I’ll take the Manhattan steak you’ve got here—”

“How do you want it cooked?”

“Rare,” he says. Man of my own heart. “And I’ll take the baked potato, loaded.”

“Sounds good,” I say. I punch in the order in the register and look through the food service window into the kitchen. Hector and Martinez sit on their keesters on some empty milk crates

over by the washbasin. Hector and Martinez is what I call them. When the kitchen computer chimes, Hector stands with a hand on his bad left knee, or what he says is his bad knee, and washes his hands in the basin. After he finishes he goes to work. Martinez stands, too, but he's doesn't have much to do except wash the pots and pans and silverware as they come through. They're good ole boys for Mexicans. Good workers. They bust their asses for that pay.

I sit back down in my stool and cross my arms. "Should be ready in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

"No problem at all," I say. "So are you a 20-year man?"

"Me?" the Marine asks with a thumb pressed against his chest. He laughs. "No. Not me. I'm doing my four and getting out."

"Well, you oughta give it some thought," I say. "Good benefits to be had in the military. Retirement, medical, dental, all that. Stuff don't come cheap."

He nods and looks down. "That's true."

"And hell, it's a damn job," I say. "Can't get a damn job in this country that ain't been taken up by some illegal."

"I figure I'll go to school," he says. "I kind of wouldn't mind teaching maybe. I don't know."

"No, sir. Take some advice from an old man. Stay right where you are. Don't leave. Don't move. Save yourself the trouble. Ain't nothing but problems. Got illegals taking jobs from good hardworking Americans, taxes run crazy, people on dope ... hell, son, you're living the good life."

The Marine chuckles and shakes his head. He takes another swig of beer and mashes out his cigarette.

"Maybe," he says.

"I'm telling you," I say.

He looks away and I can tell he doesn't agree. I don't get these kids. They've got the world right at their goddamn fingertips (Ruthie forgive me), the whole future laid right out, no trouble

at all, and they just want to toss it away. I don't understand. None of my damn business though, I guess. He'll learn, but it'll probably be too damn late.

The Marine plays with his cell phone, flipping his thumb up and down on the screen, lost in electronic light. The black technician fiddles with thick cables behind the televisions. The Mexican cooks bang pots. The grills hiss grease static in the back. Snow falls outside, drifting by the front door, sometimes landing on the glass to melt and run in hard wet streaks.

I sit on my stool and cross my arms over my sweater. The heater kicks on and blows warm air. I shut my eyes and drift off a little ... just a little. Just a rest, something peaceful. It's nice to just close your eyes sometimes and breathe.

Something tocks hard against the counter near the food service window and I snap awake. My jaw snaps shut and the tooth explodes with pain, oh goddamn pain, motherf— I sit up in my stool as if zapped with a cattle prod. My hand goes for my jaw and I stand.

"Sorry about that," the cable guy says. He picks up a screwdriver from the counter.

I moan and reach for the Orajel and drop the cap and leak the medicine all over the tooth and gums. Oh for Christ sakes where in hell is Megan or Sara, where in hell are they? I just want to go home and get in bed and sleep and wake up sometime after the dentist does whatever-the-hell he wants. Pull it out. I don't care. Just get rid of the damn nuisance. The Marine watches the technician, and for a second, I don't know... maybe his lip curls up, kind of. Maybe. Maybe he'd like to kill him.

Hector rings a bell and a plate of food appears steaming at the window. "Oh to hell with you and your goddamn bell." (Sorry Ruthie.)

"Chupa mi verga," Hector mumbles.

"What?" I ask. Hector walks away from the service window. I know he said something smart. I can always tell. I ain't got time for this. Man, I wish I could fire people. I need to talk to

Tyler.

I grab the plate and set it in front of the Marine. I set down silverware folded inside a napkin.

“Need anything else?” I mumble through clenched teeth. He shakes his head. The bastard doesn’t know how good he’s got it. Free dental and all...

The Marine spreads butter all over the inside of his baked potato, loaded as it is with bacon and cheese and whatnot else. He pulls the tinfoil back with the tips of his fingers and mashes the whole mess with his fork, mixing it, chopping up the skin with his steak knife.

“I’ll eat the steak last,” he says.

I shrug. What difference does it make to me?

My tooth settles down to a light dull throb. I look at my watch. The girls aren’t due in for another hour or so. One more hour and I can go on home. One more lousy hour.

That clumsy asshole Arab technician finishes getting the televisions

sorted. He cleans up and hands me the clipboard.

“You have to sign for this,” he says. He looks over at the Marine a second then back to me.

“I didn’t order it. Go get Tyler to sign for it.”

“Sir, I can’t leave without a signature of some kind. I’ll have to take out all the equipment.”

“What happens if I sign it? Doesn’t that make me responsible for it?”

“No, it just means you acknowledge we were here and we completed the order.”

Everybody always wants you to sign something. Always trying to get over on someone. “Fine,” I say. I snatch the clipboard

and sign it with his pen and jab him in the stomach with it. He looks down at the clipboard like a stranger then looks up at me. He takes the clipboard and hands me a copy of what I guess is the work order. I don’t take it. I point to the bar instead. He sets it down and pauses. I watch him and flash on that thirty-eight over by the card swipe. You think the Marine would help? Finally... he turns away.

“Take care, man,” he says to the Marine.

The Marine jumps up and I’ll be damned if he doesn’t make for the door. He stands there, and I swear, he holds the door open for the damn guy.

“Thanks,” the technician says.

“Yeah, see you,” Steve says softly. “Be careful.”

“Well, it might get messy sometimes, but we’ll get the hajji bastards for you. Send a couple of Army and Marine divisions up from the coast toward Tehran ... nothing to it,” he says.

Steve sits back down. The bells jingle furiously against the door as it shuts. I sit back in my stool and rub more Orajel on the tooth with my finger. I put one television on ESPN and mute it and make sure the words show up at the bottom of the screen. The other one I click to the news. Some fellow in a suit with glasses and good haircut rattles off— “just

can’t believe the administration is going to allow some unknown organization just take over the country after the people there have tossed out the dictator. It seems the administration doesn’t care much for the safety of our country to just allow some extremist organization to move in and influence politics in the region.”

The camera switches to some brunette looker in a blue dress— “Ok. So you’re suggesting then the administration take military action, or perhaps stronger diplomatic action? What action are you advocating?”

The two heads come together. The Poindexter speaks— “I’m saying the administration should

not allow extremist elements to take over and threaten the growth of democracy abroad. The administration has been weak on this point specifically...”

I nod. I like it. Something about it sounds right. Can't let the bastards spread. We need to protect America and better to do it over there than here.

“We oughta just bomb them all back to the Stone Age. Every last one of them. We're gonna have to eventually anyway,” I say. My tooth flares up a little, then dies.

The veteran has a mouthful of food. He swallows and slugs back beer.

“Who?” he asks.

“All those countries over there. Those Middle East countries. They say they don't support terrorism and all, but we both know they want to destroy America,” I say. I believe that, too.

He picks his teeth with his tongue behind closed lips. He takes another swig of beer.

“Where do you wanna start?” he asks.

“Hell, I don't know,” I say. “Where do you think we should start?”

He looks at me flatly. “How about Iran?” He softly burps into a fist.

“Yeah,” I say. “They pretty much run the whole thing, don't they?”

The Marine shrugs. He cuts into his steak. Pink liquid runs along the knife and the prongs of the fork. He lifts the piece. Steam trails up from the slice. He eats it and chews slowly. He nods and speaks from the side of his mouth.

“Good steak.”

“How hard you figure that'd be?” I ask.

“What?”

“Iran.”

He pauses a moment then squints and shakes his head. “Oh, easy as hell, as far y'all are concerned.”

“You think so?”

“Well, it might get messy sometimes, but we'll get the hajji bastards for you. Send a couple of Army and Marine divisions up from

the coast toward Tehran ... nothing to it,” he says. He gestures with his steak knife. “We'll use airpower to bomb the shit out of them. Hopefully we get their leadership in the first round. Those boys are awesome, though. They'll pull it off,” he says.

“Who? The Air Force?” I ask.

“Hell yeah the Air Force, and the Navy and Marine pilots, too. Those boys are like surgeons with butcher knives. They don't miss much.”

I lean in and put my elbows on the bar. My tooth doesn't hurt so much anymore.

“Pretty cool sight watching them bombs hit?”

“Hell yeah it is. You can hear it coming before it hits. You can even see it, too. And when it hits, man, it sends out a shockwave that blows right over the ground and you can feel it in your chest. We always cheered when they dropped one. And the helicopters, too ... Those mean fuckers — excuse me, sorry — those guys are nasty as heck, man, just laying out tracers and rockets. It's a sight to see. You could probably find some video on the Internet if you wanted.”

“How long you figure Iran would take?” I ask.

“Maybe a month or two. We might have trouble at first with their army, but my boys are good. I mean, we can do some real damage. I'm talking total destruction, and we don't miss much, either. Oh sure, we might get a civilian here and there, maybe a kid, which sucks, but to hell with it, right? What difference does it make, right?”

I sit up and place my hands on the edge of the bar. “Well... I don't know,” I say. “We shouldn't be killing civilians, right? Like kids and whatnot. I mean I'm not much for Muslims and all, but I don't know about killing kids and all.”

He brushes me off. “Don't worry, we'll pay them. In a lot of those countries a dead goat costs more than a dead person, anyway.” He hovers over his plate and slices off another piece of steak. He chews and swallows it. He laughs. “I mean, they're not really people. Not in God's

eyes, anyway, right?"

My tooth sends pain into my jaw and across my gums. I don't know how I feel anymore about this boy, you know? He snaps his fingers and looks and points up into the air, registering an idea.

"We'll go to Pakistan, too. Get those bastards straightened out finally. Maybe to Syria and Egypt. Heck, Saudi Arabia, too. North Korea? Why not?" he says. He chomps another large hunk of steak into his mouth, biting hard with a snarling smile.

My tooth aches and burns. I snort a little. "I don't know... sounds like it might be a bit much." I grab a rag and start wiping the bar down.

"Shit, no," he says. "We can manage it. We're made to order. You guys want us over there, we'll go. We'll go over there in rotations, just like we do now. Seven months over, seven months back. I dunno, maybe some guys will have to stay there longer, but we'll build big bases with McDonalds and Burger Kings with shopping malls and swimming pools and Wednesday night salsa dance lessons. Ship over Toby Keith and we'll have concerts. Keith is still touring, right?"

"I'm not even sure—." Where the hell is the night bartender? Is it Sara tonight or Megan? Maybe it's Megan. I wipe the far end of the bar.

"It doesn't matter," he calls to me. "We'll find someone else. You just make sure we have plenty of ammunition and chow and keep the pay rolling in and we'll kill anyone you want, any of you." He waves around the empty bar with his steak knife.

"To be honest you don't want us back here, anyway... too much trouble. We like to drink and fight too much. At least a lot of my friends do. We're better over there."

He points to the cooks lounging in the back and takes another bite of steak. "In fact, they can come with me. We can sign them up right today. Just take them down to the recruiting

office and get them to sign on the line. Hell, I bet they don't even have to sign anymore, just leave their mark or something. It's probably just a checkbox on a form now, anyway. They can probably sign up online."

I stand turned partly away from the man and look up at the television. I figure maybe the news'll have something on the Powerball. What's it up to now? Four-hundred million? Five? Boy, I tell you, me and Ruthie could use a piece of that.

"But don't you worry about us, though. We're good. And I mean it, too. We'll get the job done. You guys just relax and watch it all on television. You just watch it all and watch us go to work and we'll get you guys what you want, all of it, every last little bit. We'll carve out whole cities. Just burn them right to the goddamn ground. Ever see what white phosphorus does? How about a tank shell? Well... no matter, we can do it. Just come on in with the money and get schools built up and hospitals. Get the people sorted out and on our side with soccer balls and textbooks," he says. "It's easy."

My tooth pounds. I rub in more Orajel. I turn to face the Marine. He looks at me, eyes wide and alive, clicking fires. The corners of his mouth are turned down in a smirk, maybe. Or maybe he's just sick, or about to get sick. The light vanishes from his eyes, like maybe he's sad or something. Tired, maybe. I don't know. But anyway, I never asked for all that. Who wants to hear all that? I don't want to hear all that. I look back at the television.

He saws off another piece of steak. He rolls it around the brown and pink juices. He looks at his watch. "Lemme go ahead and get the check if you don't mind," he says.

"Sure thing, buddy." I hustle to the register and punch up the orders minus those free beers. The bill prints and I tuck it into a black fold and slide it next to him.

"Whenever you're ready." Hopefully now.

He finishes his steak and beer in silence and lights a cigarette. He watches the television with smoke drifting across his face. Or maybe he doesn't watch it; maybe he just stares at it like I sometimes see Ruthie do when she's thinking about other things or watching *Jeopardy* and doesn't know the question. He looks at me then flares his nostrils and exhales smoke in a long heavy sigh and mashes his cigarette out in the ashtray. He pulls his wallet out and sets it on the bar then stops.

He smiles and holds up the bill.

"Tell you what. We'll do everything I said. No problem at all," he says. "All you have to do, though, is take care of this bill."

I blink. I blink again and look at the veteran, his face flat and serious, eyes hard. My tooth aches and my lips part to say something, maybe,

but I kind of just want him to leave. I ain't got time for this... another crazy kid. I have to see them in here every weekend about.

His face breaks into a grin. He laughs lightly. "No, no, I'm just giving you a hard time, Jim. I got it," he says. He opens his wallet and lays down a pair of fresh green bills. I breathe and sort it out at the register and lay the change down.

"Keep the change. Go get that tooth fixed," he says.

"Thanks. I will," I say. "You take care of yourself."

The Marine doesn't say a word, which is perfect. He smiles and turns and walks out into the cold with snow sticking to the glass, the damn bells on the door handle jingling.

