

## Bangana

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I commute to war five days a week in a station wagon the color of an egg. I count on ten minutes of traffic by the Dunkin' Donuts intersection. When I slam the car door, I count on the tree above my parking spot depositing a green scrim of pollen on my flight suit. What I can't count on is it being the same war. Most days I operate over Afghanistan, but I fly in Iraq too. I say flew, I say I fly, and unless  
5 you're out there winging around in an F-16 I don't want to hear a fucking thing about it.

I hear a lot about it. Hell, I used to dish a lot about it.

Because I was Air Force. Eight years flying real planes from real cockpits. We gave the drone operators such shit. Called the reach-back<sup>1</sup> crew geeks. Cubicle monkeys. Made fun of their video-game controllers. Their La-Z-Boy command chairs. We tore them apart if they used words like *serve*,  
10 or *deployed*, or *fly*.

But then I had Bug.

I didn't re-up<sup>2</sup>. We lived off Sean's history teacher salary while I got fat and Bug got born and big, and when it was time to go back to work I took a job flying Predators for a military contractor you don't need to know the name of but who pays me very well.

15 I was Airman Brennan. Now I'm Mrs. Brennan.

Or worse: Alicia.

Or worse: Mamaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

Forty-four hours of cockpit training. Then I was on the clock<sup>3</sup> for real. Flying. Surveilling. Directing strikes. In Paktika. Outside Khost. Kandahar. Jalalabad.

20 I'm a reach-back geek, and not even a military one. You can imagine the hell I catch for that. Going civilian. Going drone.

It's a week after Bug almost dies from eating holly berries that I first see Daddio.

In the comm room you've got two chairs like recliners. You've got controls that if you've ever played video games you can imagine well enough. A joystick does most of the work. You've got your  
25 screen, black-and-white, showing what the camera in the belly of your Predator is looking at. Above that, the GPS map. Right now, over Afghanistan, right on the Pakistan border. There's a US base not too far from this spot but otherwise the area is nowhere-ville, even for fucking Afghanistan. I'm monitoring a warehouse. There's been intelligence, we are told. Something's up with the warehouse. They don't tell us more. Just: this might be a meeting place. Surveil it. Covertly. *Covertly*. Captain  
30 fucking obvious.

So I'm hovering over the warehouse, and by I, I mean that I'm here in Virginia, my ass roadtrip-sore, hours into a shift, while over Afghanistan this four-million-dollar robot is running on a prop<sup>4</sup> and can hover another twenty hours without stopping so who am I to complain about my ass, really? [...]

35 There's a shitty little house not far from the warehouse. It's on my loop. The man who lives there, he has some goats. He has some kids. He has a wife who usually stays inside. His sons play soccer all day. One of them is good at it. The other one is too little, like Bug, to be good at anything yet. The man grows a plot of garden with what must be the hardest fucking vegetables on the planet. He has a little wooden fence, meant to keep the goats out, but sometimes the goats get in anyway. I can see just enough detail on my screen to tell you that sometimes he flails around in anger, but not today.

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<sup>1</sup> control room

<sup>2</sup> reenlist

<sup>3</sup> *on the clock*: at work

<sup>4</sup> propeller

40 Today he just slumps, like, *Those fucking goats. Eating my fucking garden again.* I don't know why he doesn't get rid of it or them or both.

This stuff doesn't sound important, but it is. Pattern of Life Analysis. Establish what's normal, so you can see what's not. Find the pattern, spot the divergence. Don't miss the cues. I make my rounds, away and back over the warehouse. I circle again. My guy is still there, looking at his ruined  
45 garden.

He looks up, shields his eyes with his arm. I can't see his face but I read his body well enough to know he might hear me. *Bangana*<sup>5</sup>, they call us. Wasp. He's looking for me, but I'm here in Virginia. He's hearing a sound even I don't hear. [...]

Daddio lowers his arm and goes inside. Which is probably normal. Which is probably what most people would do if they heard me buzzing above them. Or it could be something else. It could be that he's not happy to see me because he's got something to hide. Something buried in his garden. Could be suspicious. So I keep watching. I log it. I hover and I circle. Warehouse, road, shacks. Nothing. Warehouse, road, shacks. Nothing. Soccer. Nothing. Goats. A whole lot of nothing.

Bug was at day care when he decided to crawl off to the border of the playground and start eating  
55 holly berries, which, it turns out, are poisonous. The ladies who worked there all wore clogs, had tattoos of fairies and dolphins, had lost their ability to speak like adults. But that day care had the best record in the county. I did my research.

In UAV training we watch footage.

A man climbs onto the roof of a building and lights a cigarette. Just like that, four other men join  
60 him.

A man in an empty lot is holding a tube. Mortar.

A man digs in the dirt not eight miles from a US base. There are more than ninety ways to activate an IED. Cell phone. Radio. Pressure plate<sup>6</sup>. Fucking garage-door opener. Beeper.

Suspicious, suspicious. Red flag, red flag. [...]

65 A week before he ate the berries, I picked Bug up from day care. I was carrying him to the car on my hip. That holly bush next to the playground was full of birds making a racket, rustling the branches like it was alive. Red flag, I thought. Suspicious. Bug cocked his head and watched the bush. But that was it.

We analyze actions. Communicate analysis to the military, via chat rooms mostly. Sometimes with  
70 radio, headset linkups. We communicate to the military because we ourselves aren't armed.

We're just watchers, eyes in the sky.

The military are the ones with the Hellfires. The military are the ones who turn hole-digging guy and cigarette-smoking guy into small, pixelated balls of fire on my screen. Into roving clouds of dust. We're directing kills on enemy combatants. *Directing*, not executing. Which means we're the ones  
75 who suggest, recommend, that they do it. [...]

At home I find Sean on the couch, Bug asleep across his lap. The room is a fucking mess with a bunch of made-in-China micro-cars scattered across the carpet.

"How long?" I say.

Sean looks at his black rubber watch. His arms are freckled and slightly furred. "Five minutes," he  
80 whispers.

"He's seemed okay?"

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<sup>5</sup> (Pashtu) buzzing wasp

<sup>6</sup> *pressure plate*: mechanism that activates bombs

Sean nods.

85 I sit with them on the couch. I curl into Sean and he alternates stroking Bug's hair, which hangs in his face, and mine, which he tugs from the collar of my terrible fake-ass flight suit. Sean's fingers go deep in my hair. He leans in and bites my ear gently. I mentally reenlist in my family, re-upping us again. [...]

Daddio is at it again. Garden-digging. His sons are playing soccer. [...]

Meanwhile, a car pulls up at Daddio's house. He stops digging and goes over to it.

"Dave," I say.

90 "I'm on it," he says.

Two couples get out of the car. Each couple has a teenage boy with them. Everyone greets each other like old friends. They head inside. Daddio waits.

"It's nothing," Dave says. "They say it's nothing."

85 But I'm not sure. Daddio stretches, pushes up his sleeves, and stares at the sky before he dribbles his son's soccer ball all the way into the house.

100 When I get home with takeout, Bug is running the hallway loop, wearing a white pajama top with cars on it and no pants. His fat legs carry him fast and he clutches his hands in fists and motorboats his mouth as he runs. The kid's got tactically sound avoidance strategies, and you know where that comes from. In the kitchen, Sean is lying on the floor, a half-eaten plate of mac and cheese on the table.

"He was almost eating. And then I was in pursuit," Sean says from the floor.

He doesn't ask how my day was. I blame his high-horse teacher friends. They all read the same article in the same fucking magazine and now they think they know all about what I do and what's wrong with it. [...]

105 "These things are impossible to foresee," is what the smiling doctor told me, patting my hand, which I didn't like at all. "I see kids in here swallowing stranger stuff every week. Magnets. Miracle-Gro. Pets."

110 He was trying to make me feel better, but all that meant was there were a hundred other poisonous things I'd failed to notice that were just waiting for Bug to swallow them and wasn't I unfit for duty until I could foresee every fucking one?

"He'll be just fine," the doctor said, and patted me again. That's when the waterworks<sup>7</sup> started. I sat down in a yellow plastic kid's chair and let them. How can I explain how it happened? How Airman Brennan became Alicia became Mama became a woman gratefully squeezing the life from the hand of a skinny man from whose stethoscope hung a small bear?

115 The way I love Bug is a fucking red flag if ever I've seen one.

120 We're up there watching the normal nothing. The goats are nowhere to be seen and Daddio is in the garden. His littler kid misses the soccer ball his brother sends him, so it rolls away. Daddio goes after it. He dribbles the ball back to his sons in a wide serpentine, showing off, then kicks it good. His son misses the pass. Daddio goes nuts. He flails his arms and points at the house. He pushes the kids inside. I circle away. Damn, I think. Give it a rest, Daddio, the kid doesn't have all his motor skills yet.

"Brennan," Dave says. "You seeing this?" And that's when I realize that there are four cars rolling up to the warehouse and I've still been thinking about junior-league soccer. I misread his response; Daddio could care less about the incomplete pass. He heard the cars. That's why he sent his kids inside.

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<sup>7</sup> tears

125 It happens fast. We loop in<sup>8</sup> the military guys. Everyone stands around together, people in  
different offices in different cities all looking at the same feed, my feed. Observe detect identify  
neutralize. I've done two of the four. There are seven guys total who get out of the cars and head  
into the warehouse. Of the seven, they ID three of them as targets authorized for preemptive strike.  
Each of the three of them is, as the Justice Department might tell you, *a senior operational leader of*  
130 *al Qaeda or an associated force*. Info and a request go up the chain. An armed Predator is ready to  
move in. We're awaiting word. We're watching my feed for the right moment. And then I notice  
Daddio, headed for the warehouse. He jogs. He goes inside.

"What is he doing?" I say to Dave.

135 The military guys ask me if I've seen any evidence of this individual engaging in suspicious activity.  
What can I tell them about him?

And I want to tell them that Daddio has been at war with his goats. That his one son is really lousy  
at soccer. That the other one will be okay. That his wife never leaves the house. But all I say is, "The  
man spends a lot of time digging in his garden, sir," because I can no longer tell whether this is  
suspicious, or not.

140 "Digging?" they say.

"Yes, sir," I say.

"Weapons cache?" they say.

"Vegetables, I think, sir. His kids play around in there. So vegetables, most likely."

"Digging," they say.

145 Is there a weapons cache beneath Daddio's garden? Almost certainly not. And I could say more. I  
should say that I don't think Daddio is a senior operational anything. But honestly? It doesn't matter.  
Daddio doesn't matter, in this equation.

Authorization comes through. The armed Predator goes in. Lethal fire authorized. Nearest  
friendlies out of range. Checked. Rechecked. Missiles away.

150 The warehouse flashes bright, the fire starting in a ball then working up, billowing large. It shrinks  
back, still burning, and then it's all dust and smoke. You can see the walls collapsing in silhouette  
through the cloud. As everyone else watches to see if any squirts<sup>9</sup> emerge I am watching the cloud  
roll over and around Daddio's house.

155 A figure emerges from the warehouse. It could be any one of the eight. They launch a second  
Hellfire.

There is so little I can tell Sean, but it doesn't really matter because he always knows. Knows enough,  
in his way. He can tell from the sound of my key in the lock. The clink of its teeth in the bolt different  
on certain days. He can tell from my face. In the kitchen, Bug is sitting, banging a plastic shovel on the  
floor again and again.

160 Bang bang bang!

Sean takes care of me. He is good. But then, he tests me. Sean says: "The victims of those strikes  
are faceless. The public never knows who's being killed, or where, or why." I know he has read this  
very sentence in a magazine.

"I see their faces!" I say. "How are they fucking faceless when I'm seeing them?"

165 Bang bang bang!

Sean shrugs.

Let's be real: Sean doesn't really want to see that shit. No one does.

Bang bang bang! [...]

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<sup>8</sup> *loop in*: (here) involve

<sup>9</sup> person fleeing the first hit

170 We do one last circle of the area. The warehouse is just rubble. A team has already been through for  
the bodies. I circle. The garden is totally fucked. Too close to the Hellfire radius, the little fence is  
burned and there's junk from the explosion scattered over the ground like confetti. And who's here  
for the party? The motherfucking goats. Nowhere to be seen yesterday, smart as shit. Now one of  
them is lying in the junk, peaceful. The other is eating something. Mouth smacking open and closed.  
175 The last charred bit of Daddio's plants or a piece of soccer-ball rubber. It doesn't matter. Goats will  
eat anything. I circle. Sometimes you just can't keep the goats out. Daddio's house is standing. One  
wall is blackened, but it's up. I don't see anyone. His wife must be inside with the kids. Unless they've  
left already. Everyone's leaving. Tomorrow, I swing. Tomorrow, I'll be over Fallujah.

(2014)