

## MEPS

“You’re gonna be fine,” says my recruiter.

“Okay,” I say.

“Seriously. All you gotta do is do what they tell you to do. That’s all you do. Don’t be late for nothin’, don’t give no crap to no one, just go through all your stations and drive on, hooah?”

“Okay.”

“You’re not gonna make weight, but you should pass tape if you use the Preparation H and stand like I showed you. If you don’t make tape, you just flash that waiver, nothin’ else they can say. You got that waiver, right?”

“Yep, got it.”

“For sure?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, you’re here.”

Army recruiter Staff Sergeant Wysingle pulls his digi-camo bedecked minivan into the parking lot of a 12-story Holiday Inn. It’s 5:30 p.m., and the parking lot is nearly empty. Two high-school age girls smoke just outside the front doors.

“Anything happens,” Wysingle says again, “call me. You still got my card, right?”

“Yep, got it.”

“You remember where you’re going?”

“Down the hall, past the pool, first meeting room.”

“That’s right, just go down the hall ‘til you see signs for the meeting rooms. Any questions before I let you out?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“Hooah. Everything goes good, you’ll be a soldier tomorrow. Don’t forget that Preparation H trick tonight, and give yourself time to rinse that crap off in the morning. You should make tape no problem.”

“Got it,” I reply, humiliated. I take my backpack from the seat behind me and get out of the minivan. Wysingle pulls away almost before my door shuts, and I have nowhere to go but past the high schools girls and into the Holiday Inn.

I’ve never been inside a hotel like this before. I’ve stayed in a few Holiday Inn Expresses, but they were pretty modest: three floors, basic comforts, no need for a restaurant or an elevator, indistinguishable from every other nice-but-not-fancy hotel in America. This one must be one of the originals. I’m in a lobby with high ceilings, a brass chandelier, a concierge desk, and a restaurant that appears to serve breakfast. For all of its apparent luxuries, it’s also showing its age in a big way. It’s poorly lit, the carpet is stained and cigarette-burnt, and a couple of phones in the payphone bank are missing their receivers. But what really gives the place a sense of history is the antique, musty, ‘dead Grandpa’s old suit’ kind of smell. The Dallas Holiday Inn may have been the big thing once, but not since GM stopped making cars with fins on them.

As big as the lobby is, it’s packed to capacity with clusters of teenagers and young adults. Many have their cell phones out; one plays a handheld gaming device, the descendant of my long-dead Nintendo GameBoy. One kid has a portable DVD player,

and several others are crowded around it watching *Full Metal Jacket*. Most of the kids look pretty fit, which heightens my stress level significantly. Despite my best efforts, I'm still way over the Army's weight limit.

As I apologize my way through the crowd towards the meeting rooms, I overhear fragments of conversations:

"...gets cold as a bitch at night over there. My brother's in Special Ops over there, and they do all their shit at night..."

"Do the guys have to wear boxers tomorrow? They said the girls have to wear underwear, and we're not allowed to wear thongs. But that's all I brought, so they'll just have to..."

"...heard that with my job, they let you pick your own duty station. That is so sweet. Anywhere in the world, man. Anywhere they have that job..."

"...room 823. My roommate hasn't showed up yet, so it's just me. I've got a fifth of Jack and..."

"I'm not gonna lie, man. I'm not. If they don't let me in, they don't, but I'm not lying about this. I'm gonna show 'em, man. I'm gonna show 'em. I'm not lying."

Every word I hear makes me more nervous. By the time I get through the crowd, the pit in my stomach has become a knife wound. I've wandered into a place I do not belong, and I would give almost anything to be at home, alone.

Despite my anxiety issues, my legs carry me down the hall and past the hotel pool to the meeting rooms. The first one has a sharpie-scrawled sign on the door: MEPS REGISTRATION. From outside the room, it sounds just like the lobby, but louder.

The meeting room is long and narrow, about the size of two hotel rooms. At the far end, there's a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall showing *The Expendables*, which is still playing in theaters. Three guys are on a couch in front of the TV, and five more are lined up behind it. A cluster of guys and another one of girls stand around talking. At my end of the room, a short, stocky guy sits behind a table with a couple of clipboards and some disposable DVD cases. He's talking to an Army recruiter about last night's basketball game. He glances my direction and slides a clipboard my way without breaking his conversation.

I find my name and room number, sign and date. As I slide the clipboard back to him, he turns his attention to me. "What's up, Hero? You want a copy of *The Expendables*? Still in theaters, I got it on DVD. Ten bucks." He gestures to the stack of unmarked DVD cases.

"No thanks."

"You sure, man?" He points to the TV. "Check out the quality, looks as good as you're gonna get at Best Buy. Give one to your girlfriend."

"No thanks."

"It's a good movie, man. You seen it yet? Tell you what, sit and watch for a while, and if you like it I'll sell you one."

"Sure," I lie, "I'll come back down once I'm checked in."

"All right, Hero. This your first time at MEPS?"

"Yeah."

"You clear on what happens tomorrow morning?"

"Sort of. My recruiter talked me through it."

“Be in the lobby at 4:30 AM for breakfast. Get up whenever you need to, but we strongly suggest no later than 4:00. At 4:30 you’ll line up for breakfast; at 5:15 you’ll start busing over to MEPS. Any questions?”

“Nope.”

He hands me a breakfast voucher and my room key. “Have a good one, Hero. You get settled in, come on back and get a movie.”

I key into my room, where the TV is already on. A tall and unusually skinny kid sits on the nearest bed, flipping channels and talking on a cell phone. I put my bag on the remaining bed, use the bathroom, and try to look busy, waiting for him to get off the phone so we can introduce ourselves. When that doesn’t happen after 10 minutes, I decide to explore the hotel. I bring my book, hoping to find a quiet place to read.

The halls are surprisingly crowded, almost as thick as the lobby, and every single person I see looks like they’re here for MEPS. I’m not the only heavy guy, but I see only a few people approaching my own age. I pass an open door, where a large group is gathered around a TV. From the sounds of gunfire, explosions, and trash talk, it sounds like somebody brought an Xbox, or whatever the latest equivalent is.

As I walk through the hotel, I see two muscular guys hitting on a girl whose thong is deliberately exposed. Three guys near the elevators are in a pushup competition. Shouts, curses and raucous laughter are a constant. One of every four people I see is texting. I’m still the oldest person around. I walk past the meeting room where I got my key, where *The Expendables* is still playing. I use my key to access the pool area (seemingly the only quiet room in the building), pull up a plastic chair and try to read, but I read the same page endlessly as my mind wanders.

My prom night jitters have escalated into the panic of a hunted animal. The words ‘*What the Hell am I doing here?*’ repeat again and again in my mind, in my own voice. I catch myself mouthing the words. I even imagine I can see them, zipping around my head like animated cuckoo birds that indicate concussion in old cartoons. *What the Hell am I doing here? What the Hell am I doing here?* I am simply too old to do something like this... too old and way too fat. Half of these guys look like football stars... and they’re just kids! I should just accept that I missed my opportunity to do something like this, missed it by ten years at least. Is this job even what I’ve been told? That poor kid downstairs said he gets to choose his own duty station... that has to be some recruiter’s lie. Have I been lied to? Once I sign that contract, how do I know I won’t just be guarding roads, or blowing up IEDs, or whatever else they tell me to do? How do I know I’m getting the job I was recruited for?

Almost without noticing, I lay my book down and stare at the water in the pool. I’m about to make a decision that will irrevocably shape my life. If I take the oath and sign a contract, there is no turning back. Do I go back upstairs and set the alarm for 3:45 AM, or do I call a cab, go home and pretend this never happened?

*What’s the worst that could happen?*

Go through 10 weeks of Hellish training, find out the job I signed up for was a lie, get sent to Afghanistan, fall prey to a roadside ambush, get captured by the Taliban, get my screaming head cut off on live television. And, scene.

*That’s a little melodramatic.*

It could happen.

*Okay, that's worst-case scenario. What's best-case?*

The job is everything I imagined. I'm one of a select group in a groundbreaking new field. I get in killer shape, make a little money, and use my currently-useless skills in the service of my country. The work I do saves lives, and my own life finally has some value.

*Isn't that worth the risk?*

...

*Plus, if I leave now, I'd literally be sneaking out in the middle of the night.*

...

*Pretty lame, right?*

...

*Can't argue with that.*

My decision to stay has calmed me down considerably. When I get back to the room, my roommate's still on the phone. *Let's get this over with.* I take my backpack into the bathroom, lock the door and strip down. I can't resist looking in the mirror, even though I know what I see will depress me.

Sure enough.

I open my bag and pull out a roll of plastic wrap and a tube of Preparation H. I pop open the tube and spurt half of the contents into my open hand. Hating myself, I rub the cold, smelly goop all over my gut, my love handles, and as far around my lower back as I can reach. I know I locked the door, but I check the handle anyway. *If that door opened right now, murder/suicide would be my only option. Nobody can ever know about this. Nobody, nobody, nobody.*

When I'm completely lubed up from my man-boobs to my junk, I oh-so-quietly tear off a long stretch of plastic wrap. Starting in the crook of one thigh, I wrap it tightly around my gut. I wrap myself several times more than I probably need to. A few inches of duct tape seals the deal. Every drop of the Preparation H is encased between Wal-Mart brand plastic wrap and hairy flab. In theory, once I wash my hands my roommate shouldn't smell it.

I wash up, get dressed, repack my bag and go back into the bedroom. The TV's still on, but my roommate's finally off the phone. "Hey," I say. "How's it going?"

"Good," he says.

"I'm Tom," I say.

"Mike." We shake hands. Mindful of the faint odor of hemorrhoid cream and the sound of crinkling plastic, I move very slowly and gingerly.

"What're you watching?" I ask.

"*Deadliest Warrior*," says Mike.

"Huh. What is it?"

"It's a show on Spike. Puts a ninja against a Viking, or a pirate against a Marine, or whatever, to see who'd win. You haven't seen it?"

"No. I don't watch much TV." Mike doesn't reply, so I lamely add, "Looks cool, though."

"Yeah."

We watch the mighty William Wallace prepare for his match with King Shaka Zulu as I think of something else to say.

“You must’ve gotten here early,” I say.

“About 5.”

On the TV, modern-day Scotsmen take turns chucking a huge iron ball at an ice sculpture of a man’s face.

“Was the registration guy already selling pirated movies when you got here?” I follow up my amusing banter with a little chuckle.

“Yeah. I would’ve got one, but all I’ve got is a debit card.”

Time passes awkwardly. Shaka Zulu’s stand-in throws a wooden club at a leather bag of pig blood, which explodes.

“So breakfast is free tomorrow?”

“Don’t know.”

Due to the wooden club’s greater maneuverability, the computer analyst gives the edge to Shaka Zulu, and it’s on to the next event. *Maybe Mike’s just really into this show*, I decide. I stop talking, sit down and watch *The Deadliest Warrior*.

20 minutes pass with no further conversation. William Wallace finally bests Shaka Zulu in what looks like the fight of his life. Shaka gets his licks in, but his spit poison seems to have no effect at all, which costs him big-time. When the show ends, it’s Mike who breaks the silence. “What branch you doing?” he asks.

“Army,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I thought maybe you were Navy,” he says, with the tiniest hint of meanness in his face.

I’m confused for a moment, but then I get it. It’s a weight crack. *Nice*.

“Nope,” I answer. “Army. You?”

“Army,” he says at once. *No doubt he thinks he’ll kick the crap out of Basic. And maybe he will.*

“What’s your MOS gonna be?” he asks.

“My MOS?” I say.

“Yeah, your job. Like mine’s 88Mike. It means Driver. You know yours yet?”

“No, I don’t know the... code or whatever.” This is a lie, but I signed a confidentiality agreement.

“Okay, well, what do you want to do then?”

“If I pass the test, I’ll be at the Defense Language School learning Chinese for the next 18 months.” Another lie, but close enough to be plausible.

“Whoa! Chinese?” he says. I’ve regained the tiniest crumb of respect. “That’s gotta be hard as Hell.”

“Yeah, that’s what I hear.”

“Do you already know other languages?”

“Yeah,” I say, subliminally begging him not to go further.

“What ones?”

“Just a few obscure ones from Europe and Asia.” *Please, Kid, just shut up!*

“Like what?”

*Fine.* “Latin, Sanskrit, Vedic Sanskrit, Mycenaean Greek, and Ancient Greek.”

Mike’s eyes widen a little. “Whoa! You speak five languages, plus English?”

I shrug it off, trying to appear modest but really just uncomfortable. “Well, read and write more than speak, really.”

“What do you mean?”

*Effing shoot me.* “Well, they’re dead languages.”

“Dead languages?”

“Yeah. Nobody really speaks them anymore.”

“Then how’d you learn them?”

“You can still study them in college. I have an Associate of Arts degree, and half the books I read were in those languages.”

“Why wouldn’t you just learn a language people use?”

*Here we go.* “Actually, man, it’s really interesting. I mean, Latin was the language of the Caesars, of Ancient Rome. And I’ve read the Bible, I mean the original New Testament, not the translated, re-translated version that everyone else reads. Knowing these languages gives you a ton of insight into modern languages, modern thought. You look at the world differently.”

Silence, as Mike plays with his phone.

“I also speak some Europanto. You ever heard of it? It’s pretty cool, it’s this hybrid language a guy invented in Europe about 10 years ago. It’s a mix of a bunch of European languages like French, German, Italian, English, stuff you’ve heard. It simulates the way a foreign speaker will add stuff from their own language. It’s totally fun.”

“That’s cool,” mumbles Mike. I can practically hear his pulse slowing from sheer lack of interest.

Having established that my relationship with Mike can never recover, I stop talking, concede yet another failed social experiment, and pull my book out of my bag.

An hour later, I fall asleep to the sound of Mike texting.

*I’ve slept through the alarm, and Mike has left without me. The drill instructor from Full Metal Jacket kicks down my hotel room door, followed by 12 of the other recruits from the lobby. A couple of them have thongs showing. The drill instructor screams abuse in my face and makes the recruits do pushups as I eat a jelly doughnut, crying in my underwear and plastic wrap.*

The clock radio blares Whitney Houston. 3:45 AM. This is the earliest I have ever been awake, but I spring up immediately, nightmare firmly in mind.

I lock myself in the bathroom and take off my shirt and boxers. As quietly as possible, I strip off the plastic wrap. The sound and feeling of the cellophane peeling away make it impossible not to imagine myself as a summer sausage. I ball up the tacky plastic, throw it aside and face the mirror. Naked except for a sticky white film around my torso, I raise my arms and assess the results. Miraculously, the Preparation H seems to have had a slight slimming effect. I’m not ready for the red carpet, but I’m definitely thinner. Unfortunately, I also reek of hemorrhoid cream.

After the most thorough shower of my life, all my body hair seems to be goo-free. I cram the smelly plastic wrap in the bottom of the bathroom trash bin and cover it with a hand towel, toilet paper, tissues, and the half-empty shampoo bottle, which I leave open. I’ve been in the bathroom for more than 20 minutes, and I come out expecting Mike to be

shoving past me to get in, but he's still asleep with his head under the covers. After I shave, brush my teeth, get dressed and pack my bag, he's still there. I stand by the door for a moment, indecisive. Finally I try to wake him.

"Mike."

Silence.

"Mike, it's 4:15."

Mike breathes deeply once, then nothing.

"Mike! Get up, I'm leaving."

Not a grunt. *There's no way he didn't hear that last one.* I reset the alarm for 4:20, shoulder my bag and leave. As I walk towards the elevator I feel a little guilty, but a little gratified, too.

*Shouldn't have called me Navy, asshole.*

I crowd into the elevator with five other guys and one girl. Nobody says anything; somebody smells of liquor. We pour out of the elevator into a stream of other MEPS people, all headed for the restaurant. A little "CLOSED" sign bars our way, and we wait. A hotel employee passes a clipboard around for us to sign.

At exactly 4:30, a lady takes the sign away, and we enter the buffet line. It's by far the most extravagant hotel breakfast I've ever seen: scrambled eggs, thick bacon, sausage, breakfast potatoes, biscuits and gravy, fruit, juice, milk, coffee. I can't help but think of every fantasy story that has a spread like this... it invariably turns out to be a trap, and everyone who partakes gets turned into a pig or a pastry or something. This visual makes my decision not to indulge a little easier. Sad but proud, I pick up a small cup of yogurt and leave the buffet line.

I sit at an empty table for four along the edge of the dining area and watch the other recruits choose their seats. The restaurant fills up, but the other three seats at my table remain empty. My yogurt's long gone by the time someone approaches my table. It's a woman.

"Anyone sitting here?" she asks. She's small, thin, and mousy-looking, with glasses, too-tan skin and a long, lank ponytail. She also seems very friendly, and I'm delighted to see that she's even older than me: early forties at least.

"Just you, if you like," I say.

"Thanks. I'm Maryann." She holds out her right hand, and I half-stand as I take it. I've always thought it was polite not to squeeze a woman's hand too hard, but she has no such qualms about squeezing mine, and I'm left in the uncomfortable position of having the weaker grip. We both sit down, and she starts to eat.

"Ever done this before?" I ask.

"Nope, first time," she says. "You?"

"No. This is all new to me. What branch are you here for?"

"Army. You?"

"Army."

"Do you know what you want to do?" she asks.

"My MOS, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I'll be a kind of linguist," I say.

“Oh, that’s cool!” she says, and seems to mean it, God bless her. I take control of the conversation before we get too deep into the subject.

“What’s your MOS going to be?” I ask.

“25Mike. Multimedia Illustration.”

“Really!” I say, legitimately interested. “I didn’t know they had something like that.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it. But even if I had to do something else, I’d be here. I’ve wanted to enlist my whole life.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Wow. That’s great. Honestly, I never really pictured myself here.”

“I would’ve enlisted a long time ago, but I had kids, and I was on my own and everything, so it wouldn’t really have worked out. But my kids are on their own now, and I figured if I’m gonna do it I better do it, you know? I’m not getting any younger, you know?”

Unfortunately, she was right. The maximum enlistment age is 42, and this woman had to be pushing it. “That’s really great,” I reply. “Good luck.”

“Thanks! You too.”

We pass the remaining time with small talk; she’s excited and does most of the talking, which is good for me. After 15 minutes, a soldier enters the restaurant. He wears a desert camouflage uniform, store-new boots, and the wide, flat-brim hat that makes elementary schoolers think of Smokey Bear and everyone else think of a drill sergeant. He stands silently in the entryway, letting us see him, and all chatter drifts away from him like dust. The nameplate on his right breast pocket says BENTLEY. When it’s completely quiet, he starts to talk:

“Good morning!” he barks.

“*Good morning...*” we mumble back.

Bentley rolls his eyes and sneers. “Wow. Let’s try that again. GOOD MORNING!”

“*GOOD MORNING!*”

“In ten minutes, five buses will pull outside the front doors of this hotel! When they arrive, you will all be on the curb waiting! You will wait on the buses; they will not wait on you! Is that understood?”

Unintelligible grunts of assent: *Yes Drill Sergeant, Hooah, Hoo-Rah, Yes Sir, Hell Yeah...*

“You will not be coming back here, so bring all your belongings! You will form five groups, divided alphabetically by last name: A through D, E through I, J through N, O through R, and S through Z! Is that understood?”

*Yes Drill Sergeant, Yes Sir, Sergeant...*

“You have five minutes!”

I’m nervous again, but it’s different now. It’s too late to bail. For better or worse, my path is set, and it leads to the curb outside, where I will get on a bus.

I excuse myself to Maryann, and walk briskly to the bathroom for a last-minute drain. When I get outside, there are nearly 200 people lined up. As promised, Drill Sergeant Bentley and another drill sergeant organize us alphabetically. When we’re in our groups, they start roll call.

“Aaron, Timothy!” shouts Bentley.

*Here.*

“Sound off!”

*Here!*

“Here what, Hero?”

*Here, Sir!*

“You call me sir again, Aaron, you’ll regret it! Do I look like an officer to you?”

*No, uh... No!*

“Damn right! I work for a living! You will address me as ‘Drill Sergeant!’”

*Here, Drill Sergeant!*

“Baker, David!”

*Here!*

“Jesus Christ, Baker! Did you hear a damn word I just damn said?”

*Here, Drill Sergeant!*

And so on. After a few minutes, only three names were unaccounted for. “Any of you overachievers know a Jeffries, Paul; Kerr, Jason; or Whitehead, Mike?” asked Bentley.

Silence. Bentley looks back down to his clipboard. “Jeffries is in room 809; Kerr is in... oh, Hell. Sergeant Chavez, go up to room 809 and get these numbnuts out of bed. They’re not down here in five minutes, they’ll have to find a ride, we can’t wait on ‘em. Jeffries and Kerr, 809.” The other drill sergeant heads quickly inside.

Bentley continued. “Okay, how about Whitehead, Mike? Room 622?”

622 is my room. “He was up there half an hour ago, Drill Sergeant,” I say.

“Who said that?” asked Bentley.

“I did, Drill Sergeant.” I raise my hand.

Bentley walks over to me and stands so close his hat nearly touches me. “Was he awake or asleep?”

“He was still in bed, Drill Sergeant.”

“Huh.” Bentley stares at me, obviously unimpressed. “And you thought you’d just leave him there, huh, Hero?”

“No, Drill Sergeant, I tried to wake him.”

“Not too hard, though, I guess.”

Any satisfaction I felt at Mike screwing himself is thoroughly wiped away, and my face burns with shame. “Not hard enough, Drill Sergeant.”

“We don’t have time to get him now. You just screwed your buddy.”

“I didn’t mean to, Drill Sergeant. But he’s not my buddy.”

I immediately wish I could take back my idiotic words, but they’re already out there on the ether, damning me. The look on Drill Sergeant Bentley’s face is a look of pity, directed at someone he believes might be too dumb to understand something vitally important. He gives a little sigh.

“What branch you going into, Hero?” he asks quietly.

“Army, Drill Sergeant.”

“Private, come here.” Bentley leads me away from the herd into the parking lot where nobody can hear. I feel everyone’s eyes on me, and I’m once again regretting my decision to be here. *Too old, too fat, and now too stupid.*

Bentley addresses me in a voice completely unlike the one I've heard so far: not loud and intimidating, but low and serious. "Private, listen. Army does everything as a team, and I mean everything. Any soldier you find yourself standing next to, he's your 'battle buddy.' And you screwed your buddy back there. When you go through Basic Training, you won't be alone, ever. You approach a drill sergeant with a question, you make a phone call, you take a piss, you're gonna have a battle buddy with you. That way nobody gets lost or hurt or left behind. Your battle buddy needed to be down here at oh-four-thirty for breakfast, and you knew that. You should've woke him up. And if he wouldn't get up, you should've pulled the covers off him. And if he still wouldn't get up, you should've whupped his ass and drug him downstairs. But you left him, and now he's gonna have to do this shit all over again, if his recruiter even lets him. In the Army, you look after your battle buddy like you're him and he's you. Understand?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"You volunteered to serve in time of war, and I respect that. But you're older than all these other guys, and you've got the weight to worry about, and you might have a tough go out there. You're going to have to look out for the guy next to you, so that he'll look out for you. Follow me?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Hooah. Fall back in and let's do this."

Five minutes later I'm on a bus, humbled but wiser.

It's still dark out, and cold. The bus ride begins in perfect silence, but a group of guys just in front of me get chatty about ten minutes in.

"What are you doing?" asks First Guy.

"What, you mean in the military?" answers Second Guy.

"Yeah."

"I want to be a Seal, but if I don't get it I don't know."

"I'm doing Intelligence."

"What kind?"

"Data Analyst or Interrogator, either one."

"You must've got a good ASVAB score, right?"

"Yeah."

Third Guy chimes in here: "I had to take that bastard three times. I killed it last time, though."

"That's cool. What are you doing?"

"UAV operator."

"Is that like the drones?"

"Yeah, they're called Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. It's like the bombing mission on Modern Warfare."

"Oh man, that's awesome."

Fourth Guy: "You guys ready for the physical?"

"Yeah, I guess," says First Guy. "It's just a physical, right?"

"Yeah, but they check out your ass and everything. Touch your toes, Baby."

Third guy: "So what? We had to do it for the Wrestling Team at my school."

Fourth Guy: "Nobody's touching me, man. Exit only."

"If they have to, they have to."

Fourth Guy continues: “Check it: If you drop a deuce and don’t wipe, they won’t touch you.”

Groans come from all around me. Fifth Guy, seated next to Fourth Guy, drops his head and shakes it, humiliated on Fourth Guy’s behalf. “Oh, bruh,” he says. “I can’t believe you just said that, bruh.”

“What?” says Fourth Guy. “I’m telling you, it works!”

“That’s something you don’t say on a bus, bruh. Now half this bus knows you got a dirty crack, bruh.”

Nobody speaks for the rest of the trip.

I’m just starting to nod off when we arrive at our destination: an eight-story government building in downtown Dallas. With direction from Drill Sergeants Bentley and Chavez, we pile out of the buses and line up on the sidewalk near the front doors. The sky is still entirely black, and we are all freezing as we wait. 15 minutes pass with no information. Drill Sergeant Bentley eventually goes inside and comes back out with another drill sergeant, whose nameplate reads “HARRIS.” Drill Sergeant Harris stands between us and the entrance and addresses us in a booming voice:

“Good morning!”

*Good morning.*

Harris’s eyes roll melodramatically. “Let’s try that again. GOOD MORNING!”

*GOOD MORNING!*

“Welcome to the Dallas Military Entrance Processing Station, which we call MEPS! Here you will all be screened to determine if you are fit for military service! Before we do anything else, everyone knows you will be receiving a drug test today, right?”

*Right.*

“Right, what?”

*Right, Drill Sergeant!*

“And that if you have drugs or drug paraphernalia on you, that is not a good thing for you, right?”

*Right, Drill Sergeant!*

“Okay then, moving on! You are also not allowed to carry weapons of any kind! Is that understood?”

*Yes, Drill Sergeant!*

“I will now repeat what I just said! You may NOT carry weapons of any kind into this facility! This means firearms, knives, nail clippers with blades attached, brass knuckles, knives, pepper spray, stun guns, knives, tasers, knives! DO NOT try to bring a knife or anything else that resembles a weapon into this facility! If so, you will be escorted outside and will not be allowed to continue Military Entrance Processing! Is that understood?”

*Yes, Drill Sergeant!*

“Are there any questions about what constitutes a weapon?”

Silence.

“So nobody’s got any of that crap on ‘em, right?”

*Right, Drill Sergeant!*

“Hooah. Okay, enter the building single file, starting with this line here.”

Just inside the front doors is a security checkpoint almost identical to an airport’s. One after another, we place our backpacks and purses and gym bags on a conveyor belt, empty our pockets, walk through the metal detector and have our paperwork and IDs checked. The line moves unbearably slowly. I’m one of the first through, but the last guy in line won’t make it inside for over twenty minutes.

I’m through the checkpoint and collecting my backpack when there’s a commotion behind me. Drill Sergeant Harris is yelling at one of us: “Jesus Christ, Hero! Jesus Christ! Were you not standing out there with everybody else? What did I say? How many times? Did you miss the first, second, and third times I said no weapons? Since when is that not a weapon? Jesus Christ, look at that thing! I wouldn’t have needed the metal detector to spot that damn thing! You know what? Get outta here. I could have you arrested for trying to smuggle a weapon inside, but instead, you get to go back on the street and call your recruiter at zero-six-hundred and tell him you’ve been banned from Dallas MEPS for being a dumbass. Get the hell outta here!”

By 6:15, I’m sitting in a classroom with 19 other potential recruits, half of them girls. Each of us has our own one-piece desk, and a small white tube wrapped in clear plastic sits on each one. Except for the mysterious tubes, this could easily be a scene from my old high school: the hot girls sit together and talk, half of the guys sleep with their heads on their desk, and the rest of us wait to be told what to do.

At 6:40, a young but stern-looking nurse comes in with an armload of paper. “Good morning.”

*Good morning.*

“You should all have a white tube on your desk,” she says. “You’ll need them in a few minutes for the breathalyzer. Do not put them in your mouth!” she adds, forcefully. This strikes me as unusual guidance, but as I glanced around the room I saw that several people were already sucking on them.

“Everyone here knew there was a breathalyzer today, right? If you’re drunk, save yourself a long, tedious day and excuse yourself.”

*Drunk?* I think. *Seriously? It’s 6:30 AM.* But to my surprise, a girl walks sulkily out of the room. The nurse doesn’t seem surprised.

“Does everyone have your packet they were told to bring today? Remove the contents of your packet. When I call the specific item you will hold that item up and place it back inside your packet.

“Recruiter’s paperwork.

“Medical records.

“Driver’s License.

“Birth Certificate.

“Social Security Card.”

One guy didn’t have his birth certificate, another didn’t have his medical records, and they were asked to step out and see someone in the clerk’s office. Now there are 17 of us.

“I’m passing out a form all of you need to fill out. Do not fill out the form on your own; we will fill it out together. Who needs a pencil?”

The nurse passes out forms and pencils and takes us through the form step-by-step on the board. When the top part is filled out, it basically states our basic personal information and that we know what's expected of us here.

"When you leave this room, you will all go through a series of processing stations. Each station has a waiting area, where you'll be spending a lot of time today. Take a number outside each station entrance, sit and wait for your number to be called. If you miss your number when they call it, you will have to get a new one and wait again. Does everyone understand?"

"Your list of stations is listed below. A lot of other people have to do these stations too, and to keep things moving you will all do them in a specific order. Please go to each station in the order on your sheet unless a doctor specifically instructs you to do otherwise. Does everyone understand?"

"Everybody report to Station 7 for your blood test. Good luck to all of you. Please keep the white tubes out of your mouths." All of us get up and leave the room, wandering around until we find Station 7. I take my number and wait with the rest.

The rest of the day is an exercise in patience, as we run a gauntlet of doctors, nurses and lab techs that herd us from station to station. Almost the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> floor is one long room divided up by partitions like a conference hall. Each station has its own little territory and a mini-partition between the doctors and the waiting area; a take-a-number ticket dispenser and a digital counter on the wall mark each entrance. After 25 minutes at Station 7, a civilian lab tech gives me a breathalyzer and draws blood. Another 30 minutes at Station 6, and I pee into a cup for Specialist Wilkens. After an hour passes at Station 5 I start to suspect there's nobody inside this one, but finally the line gets moving and after another 45 minutes I get my dental screening.

They feed us a quick box lunch in a makeshift cafeteria. I look around for Maryann from breakfast but don't see her. Afterwards I take a seat outside Station 4 and wait for my vision screening. Soon the seat next to me is taken by what has to be the fattest recruit here. His tapered haircut suggests an attempt at a military style, except his bright blonde hair is much too long on top, giving his head an exaggerated, cartoony look. His neck, arms and legs are massive, his gut protrudes over his belt a bit, but his distinguishing characteristic has to be his bulbous ass. I feel guilty for thinking it, but he bears an unmistakable resemblance to giant diaper-clad duckling Baby Huey. I doubt anyone else here ever saw a Baby Huey cartoon, so he's at least spared that humiliation. *Thank God this poor guy didn't grow up in the '50s.*

There are lots of seats open at this station. Huey almost certainly sat next to me because I'm the oldest and heaviest... probably looking for a friend.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," says Huey. "How's it going?"

"Oh, you know. Doing what they tell me, same as everybody else. You doing okay?"

"Yeah."

"My name's Tom," I say.

"My name's Stephen," says Huey. We shake hands.

"What branch are you doing?" I ask.

"Navy," he says, sounding a little unsure.

"Cool. Do you have a job picked out?"

“My brother’s a Religious Program Specialist, I thought that sounded kind of cool.”

“No kidding?” I say. With a job like mine, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised there are such a wide variety of jobs offered here. “Is that like a chaplain?”

“I’m not sure. He says you don’t handle weapons or anything... you’re like an assistant or something.”

*This poor kid doesn’t have any idea what he wants to do.* “That’s great, man. I hope you get it.”

“Yeah, me too,” says Huey. “Do you know what you’re doing yet?”

“If I get through today, yeah. It’s a language thing.”

“That sounds cool.”

“Yeah, I hope so.”

Huey seems like a sweet, well-meaning kid, but neither of us is especially gifted at making conversation. After five minutes of both of us struggling to think of something else to say, I quietly turn back to my book. Half an hour later, my number appears on the screen. As I get up I turn to Huey and say, “Good luck, man,” and I mean it.

“Thanks, you too,” he says back.

After the vision screening comes hearing; after hearing, the dreaded physical, where the pants come down. Despite the warnings of this morning’s Dirty Bus Guy, I escape unmolested. After the physical is the final Station: The Weight/Height/Event Station. This station is on the other side of the building, in an actual wing away from the maze of partitions. At the end of a hallway, a room with double doors has a sign on it that simply reads ‘Males.’ There’s no ticket dispenser or digital counter at this one, so I go in.

This is the room I’ve been dreading for weeks. Inside are about 10 guys in their underwear, lined up in front of a scale, with another five guys disrobing. Thankfully, they’re not quite as buff and beautiful as I expected, but I still feel pretty old and fat in this company.

I don’t know how he got ahead of me, but near the back of the line is Huey. Poor Huey looks even more ridiculous in his briefs than he did earlier. His ass simply commands attention, drawing the eye like an A-list celebrity. A thin sheen of sweat covers his hairless pink skin, and not a single muscle is visible through the flab. One look at him is enough to tell anyone that there’s no way in Hell he could possibly meet the height/weight standard, and everyone in here sees it. My insecurities are washed away by my pity for poor Huey: Failing the height/weight station means everything else he did today will be for nothing.

I strip down to my underwear and get in line. A guy that comes in after me has neglected to wear underwear. One of the two civilian examiners in the room insists he strip down anyway. Bare-ass naked, he’s given what appears to be an overlarge shower cap, but is in fact a pair of paper underwear. A lot of guys get a good laugh out of it, and I’m grateful for the distraction... for my own sake and Huey’s.

After fifteen minutes, Huey gets onto the scale. The examiner looks at him with a disgusted look on his face, looks at the scale, and writes down the number he sees.

“Get down offa there,” he growls at Huey. The other examiner brings over a measuring tape. “Lift up your arms and stand normal.”

Huey is clearly not standing normal. He’s flexing his neck muscles and sucking in his gut so obviously that one of the other recruits laughs. The examiner isn’t amused.

“Damn it, I said stand normal! Let your breath out! I said let it out! Hero, You ain’t doin’ yourself any favors here, I promise you. You don’t stop bullfroggin’, I’m sendin’ you outta here anyway, so you might as well relax!”

Huey lets his gut out bit by bit, until the examiner finally puts the tape around his waist. They record the number, get a number for his neck circumference, and consult a chart on their clipboards. Huey fails.

The examiner pulls Huey into the corner and appears to give him a lecture. The way Huey takes it, I start to think he’s been here before... maybe more than once. After the lecture, Huey walks past me to collect his clothes. He gives me a sheepish little smile, and I try to give him an encouraging one back. I don’t see him again.

A few minutes later and it’s my turn. I stand on the scale. One examiner measures my height as the other one records my weight. As expected, I’m well over my max weight.

“Come on down,” says one of the examiners. I stand to the side like Huey did, lift my arms and stand still as the measuring tape is put around my waist. *Let’s see what six months of running, one week of starvation, two days of dehydration and half a tube of Preparation H do for you.*

After my waist they tape my neck. They check the chart, and finally one of them says, “28 percent. You pass. Barely, Hero. Take a seat over there. Don’t get dressed yet.”

I am giddy with relief. I’ve run my ankles and knees into the ground, starved myself, thrown away my dignity with that stupid Preparation H trick and stressed myself out in every way, but it hasn’t been for nothing. I sink slowly into a chair and take in a deep breath as the tension in my neck and shoulders recedes. *I’m going to pass this thing. I’m going to enlist today.* For the first time in weeks I feel excited at the prospect.

A few more guys get on the scale after me. Everyone except Huey passes. The examiners take us through a series of unusual events, which we do in our underwear:

Line up with hands on our hips and kick out hard with one leg repeatedly. Then the other leg.

From a standing position, fall sharply to your knees.

Speed walk across the room and back, two at a time.

Sprint across the room and back, two at a time.

Get into a deep squat and jump as far as you can.

Walk on your knees, feet tucked in behind your butt.

Crouch down as low as possible and duck walk around the room, single-file in a circle.

Stand up straight and make little circles with your arms.

Hold out your hands palms-up and make a fist repeatedly.

Hold out your hands palms-up and touch each finger to the thumb, one after the other, repeatedly.

When everyone has completed all the tasks, one of the examiners puts us in two lines and addresses us together: “Congratulations on completing all the physical tests and examinations required for eligibility for military service. For those of you who have not passed your ASVAB yet, report back here at 0600 tomorrow morning. For those who have a passing ASVAB score on file, report to the clerk’s office by the elevators for your pre-enlistment interview and job selection.”

I'm one of the first ones to find a seat in the front office, but there's already quite a line. The clerk's office looks like I would imagine a busy newsroom: noisy, crowded, with a dozen messy desks lining the floor. Every desk has a clerk behind it and a new recruit in front. After 40 minutes against the wall, I'm called over to a desk of my own.

"Afternoon, Hero, how you doing today?" asks my clerk, a middle-aged black man with a laminate that reads 'Walter Green.'

"Better now, sir, thanks."

"Outstanding. Let's have your paperwork... let's see..." Mr. Green goes through all my documents, ensuring I brought all necessary paperwork from my recruiter and that I hit every station today. "Outstanding," he says again. "You're all ready to go here. Do you know what job you'd like to do?"

"Yes sir, I was recruited as a 98-F."

"98-Foxtrot..." He types something into the computer. "Huh. I think you must be thinking of something else, Hero. There's no such thing."

"It's still in development, sir. There's a document on the back from my future Commander that should explain everything."

Mr. Green finds the document and reads it. After a moment he says, "Okay, Hero. Looks like your job's already waiting for you. Since it's not in the system yet, you'll technically be a 98-Golf for a while, which is a Cryptologic Linguist. Your people can straighten it out when you get to your duty station. That sound good?"

"Yes sir, that sounds fine."

"Your contract's printing now... Look over it and mark anything that looks out of place."

The contract prints and I read it carefully, signing each page. As I sign the final page, Mr. Green shakes my hand and says, "Congratulations, Hero. You're America's newest soldier. Report down this hallway for your swearing in."

I enter a room very much like the first room this morning, with one-piece desks, a dry-erase board and an American flag. 11 other people are seated already... I'm pleased to see that one of them is Maryann. She looks on the verge of tears, and gives me a big, broad smile as I come in. I take a seat in the back.

Nobody talks, moves, texts or reads. Everyone just sits, eyes forward, and waits. After 10 minutes, a Marine comes in. I don't recognize his rank, but he introduces himself as Major Hamilton.

"You folks ready to do this?" he asks.

*Yes, sir.*

"Anyone here have parents who served?"

Eight or nine hands go up. "Bet not too many of 'em volunteered in time of war though, did they?"

A moment's silence, then a few mutters of assent. "Yeah, I didn't think so. I didn't either. There wasn't a war going on when I signed up. Well, that's what you're doing. You've volunteered to pick up a rifle and serve in time of war. That's a great thing. No matter what you done before now, no matter why you're here, you should all be proud for what you're doing. You get to boot camp, you're gonna have sergeants in your face all day everyday, saying you ain't tough enough, you ain't good enough, and you ain't worth a crap. It's their job to tell you those things, to get you ready. But don't you

believe it. Those sergeants are proud of you, and I'm proud of you, and your country's proud of you.

"Stand up, raise your right hand and repeat after me."

As one, the room stands up sharply and raises its right hand.

"I, state your full name..."

"Do solemnly swear..."

"That I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States..."

"Against all enemies, foreign and domestic..."

"That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same..."

"And that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States..."

"And the orders of the Officers appointed over me..."

"According to regulations..."

"And the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

"So help me God."