

## The procedure for a death

When I found out that Paul had finally killed himself I sighed with relief. "He actually did it?" I asked.

Sam nodded. He walked over to his desk and started to put the files strewn about it into the cabinets before speaking. "Yeah, with pills. You know how he was always getting some from the MO for migraines. He just never took them. Now he's gone and ODed on mefenamic acid."

"Ouch." I had been to see the Medical Officer before. He prescribed mefenamic acid pills for all kinds of aches and pains. It was part of the army's efficiency, and also part of its incompetence.

"Yeah it wasn't pretty. Justin wanted to sneak a noonday nap. He found Paul in the bunk instead. His bed was soaked. Vomit and blood all over. That fucking retard. ODing on mefenamic acid? Why couldn't he have used sleeping pills like a normal psycho?"

"A nuisance to the end," I said. "I bet he knew we'd have to clean up all that shit."

Sam shook his head. "Nah, the MPs came already. Took the body and the sheets."

I should have known. The Military Police were shockingly efficient at their job. They didn't want word of deaths in the army to reach the civilian world. It was bad for morale.

"Warrant John wants you to put new sheets on the mattress though," Sam said.

"What?" I asked, "Why?"

"A new guy's moving in."

"You're serious," I said. "On a dead guy's bed?"

"Yeah, well. What's the army if not efficient, right?" Sam snorted.

"Why me?"

"Oh, you know, because you're his buddy."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Fucking Paul," I said. "Why did they have to pair me up with that dumbass?"

"Well, Andrew, like I've said a hundred times before: it's just your dumb luck. You should do it soon

though. Warrant John looks kinda angry."

"Yeah, obviously. The paperwork's gonna be a bitch and he's semi-literate at best." I paused. "Oh, fucking hell, do they expect me to do the condolences too?"

Sam looked up at me. He laughed. "I didn't think of that. Well, you're the trauma clerk. I suppose it's gonna be you." He looked back down at his desk, which by now had been cleared of pens and papers.

"Anyway," Sam said, turning off his monitor and getting up. "See you on Monday."

"Wait, where are you going?" I asked.

"Suicide SOP, dummy. The company gets the rest of the week off," Sam said. He was smiling. I had known that there was a Standard Operating Procedure for suicides. I had to write reports for them on a monthly basis, but they had never been from our camp before. Never been from my bunk. "There's a debriefing now. Don't tell anyone, don't alert the press blah blah. Warrant John said you don't have to go. He'll talk to you afterwards." Sam hoisted his knapsack onto his shoulder and gave me an ironic salute. "And next week, we each get free counseling if we want it." He rolled his eyes. "We should go for a few sessions. See if we can convince the MO to give us a few more days of leave because we were his bunkmates."

"Wait, so everyone in HQ is leaving?"

"Yep. Well, except for Lieutenant Kenny and Commanding Officer Dan. And you, I guess. Kenny's gotta do the manpower thing, you know? That's his job as S1. And CO Danny has to answer questions from Division. That'll be fun for him." Sam laughed. "I really wouldn't wanna be you right now."

"You're an asshole, you know that?" I said. He waved and left the office.

I stared at my computer screen. I had been looking at the duty roster for next month. Ten minutes ago, I was smiling at all those "Paul"s written under the Saturdays and Sundays. He had been given a lot of weekend duty because of all the trouble he had caused. Now those "Paul"s stared back at me like ghosts, fading in and out of existence. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. We'd have to plug those gaps with our

own names now. And I bet I knew whom they'd expect to pick up Paul's slack and cover his duty on account of his inconvenient death.

During the routine medical check-ups in Basic Military Training, the MO had diagnosed Paul with clinical depression. He had somehow got through the check-ups we receive before we could enlist. Because he had to fulfill the rest of his contract, he had received a downgrade in medical status and a new posting far from front-line operations. He was assigned to our battalion and to the bed next to mine. That made him my buddy.

In times of war, we would have to account and watch out for each other. In effect, we were the smallest nucleus in a big ball of molecules. If the battalion were scattered by artillery shells, our officers were down and we were all separated from each other, Paul and I were supposed to be a self-sufficient unit of two. We always knew who was in charge, and who was in charge after that, and after that. That was supposed to give us purpose, to know the chain of command right down to the last two soldiers. Even the last one. That made us more than just scared, directionless soldiers in a sea of enemies and bodies. Someone was always in command. I often told Sam, or anyone who would listen, that if it had come down to that, if we went to war and it was down to me and Paul, I'd shoot Paul and fend for myself. Now he went and killed himself for me, and I didn't even need a war.

The walk to the bunks upstairs was long. I had to go against a stream of men coming down the stairs dressed in civvies, ready to leave for their week of mourning. "Hey, Andrew," Steven called out to me. "You were his bunkmate, right?"

"Yeah," I said. Behind him, I could see Justin walking down the stairs behind them. I examined his face. It looked like it normally did. Like Justin had a secret he thought was funny and didn't want to tell anyone what it was. I wondered what my face would look like if I had been the one to find Paul in the bunk.

## The procedure for a death

"How did he die?" Steven asked.

"Messily," Justin said. Everyone turned around. Justin looked at them and grinned. He had never been the best soldier, but now, everyone wanted to hear everything that he had to say. "The MPs just finished asking me questions. It was like a fucking interrogation. Those fuckers. They think they're all high and mighty just because they have that extra armband and fancy helmets at parades."

"I heard he snuck a gun out of the armskote and blew his brains out in the bathroom."

"Nah," Justin said. "Pills. He died in bed."

"Pills? That's it? What a pussy," Steven said. "If I were gonna kill myself, I'd steal one of those grenades we use for practice, run into S1's office, pull the pin and say, 'Hey, sir, fuck youuu.' Boom!" Everyone laughed. "I'd sacrifice myself for you guys. No more Lieutenant bloody Kenny yelling all the time." He grinned and slapped a few high-fives. "Hey, do you two get extra leave for being his bunkmate?"

"I dunno," I said and looked at Justin. He shrugged. "Do we?"

"Yeah, I think you do. Lucky ass." Steven turned to the guy on his left. "So how about it, Dave? Kill yourself next week? Give me a few more days off?"

Dave laughed. "How about I kill you instead and give you a few more eternities off?"

"Hey, guys," I said, "do you mind moving? I gotta go put new sheets on his bed. Warrant John's orders. New guy coming. Wanna help me, Justin?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Right. I think I'm just gonna pack up in the office and go home. You have fun though. Going home after that?"

"Nah." I sighed. "I'm trauma clerk." Everyone winced. "Yeah, well. I'll see you guys next week."

Being trauma clerk wasn't that bad. It's not like I had to deal with the hysterical parents like CO Danny did when he paid them a visit to break the news. I generally just wrote reports of serious injury or

## The procedure for a death

death in our division and sent a fruit basket and a "Get well soon" card to the hospital (in the case of serious injury) or a bouquet of flowers and a "We're sorry for your loss" card to the parents' home (in the case of a death).

When I had first started, I had accidentally sent a fruit basket to a pair of bereaved parents along with the "We're sorry for your loss" card. I had never seen Warrant John so angry before. He had not been able to form full sentences. "Death. Flowers. Not fruit. Inappropriate. Are you... fucking dumb?" Well, it wasn't like he could form full sentences at any other time anyway. Later when he had calmed down, I pointed out that at least I hadn't sent a "Get well soon" card to them. I received an extra weekend duty for that.

I never understood why we couldn't send fruit with a death. I always sent white lilies. Flowers were useless; the pervasive smell of the bouquet would constantly remind them of their loss. Lilies smelt like death to me. I thought parents might appreciate a fruit basket more. At least they could eat the fruit. A way to occupy their hands when all they wanted to do was sit and stare blankly at each other until it had finally sunk in.

The deaths and injuries were never heroic. We weren't at war. We were training to wait. All the deaths and injuries I had processed were a motley collection of suicides, accidents, and training mishaps. Once, a helicopter had come to evacuate this guy to a hospital because he had a really high fever. He was strapped to a stretcher. The helicopter pilot had approached the landing site from the wrong side and the propeller had sliced off a huge chunk from a tree. It had come crashing down on that poor idiot who couldn't do anything but struggle in his binding. I'd hate to have been him. Strapped down while a giant trunk of doom descended on me.

That had been a fun report to write. I convinced Warrant John to send a fruit basket instead of flowers along with the "We're sorry for your loss" card that time. I didn't think the parents wanted to see more

plants.

I paused when I had reached the bunk and my hand was on the doorknob. Unlike many people in the army, I wasn't superstitious. I knew I wasn't going to come across Paul's ghost haunting the room. And, anyway, Paul's ghost would probably still be threatening to kill himself. But I wasn't sure what to expect. I mean, I knew what the room would probably look like. His mattress would be bare, standing out amidst the procession of beds with white sheets neatly pulled straight every morning. His locker would be open, the MPs would have emptied it of its contents. Evidence, or to give to his parents or something. I just didn't know what I expected to feel.

The first time I met Paul was the day he had been assigned to our bunk. We knew someone had finally moved in with us because he had dumped his stuff on the bed, but he only showed up later that night. Justin and I were laughing at one of Sam's impressions of Lieutenant Kenny's conniptions when we heard a timid knock on the door. We turned to see a skinny guy standing in the doorway. He seemed unsure as to whether he should enter. "Hi," he said. "I'm Paul. I suffer from depression."

The three of us looked at each other. We didn't know what to make of that. "Hi, I'm Sam," Sam said, "I suffer from idiots."

"Hi, I'm Andrew," I said, "I suffer from syphilis."

"Hi, I'm Justin," Justin said, "I suffer from... women's suffrage." Sam fell to the floor laughing. I looked at Paul amidst tears of laughter, he seemed scared of our loud laughs.

"Hey, Paul," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Where were you today? You can't just dump your stuff on the bed. Warrant John checks up on our bunks every once in a while. I put your stuff in your locker for you."

"Oh, okay," Paul said. "I was waiting in S3's office for my posting. I'm gonna be S1's PA. What's he

like?"

"Lieutenant Kenny?" Sam said, "Oh he's a real fun guy. You're really lucky."

Paul looked relieved. "Oh that's good. The officers in my previous camp were horrible to me." I looked at Sam and shook my head. I was feeling a bit sorry for Paul.

"Just do everything S1 says as quickly as possible," I said. "It's easier that way." Paul nodded.

Later that night, Paul asked me about my treatments. "My treatments for what?" I asked.

"For your syphilis," he said.

I stared at him. "I don't have syphilis."

"But just now you said you suffered from it."

"Oh." I laughed. "I said syphilis because it sounds so silly. We were just making fun of you. I mean, who the hell introduces themselves like that?"

"But I do have depression," Paul said. "Sometimes I feel like killing myself."

"Yeah, I think we all can relate."

"No," Paul said. I couldn't decide if he were fervent or earnest. "I really feel like killing myself sometimes. I just thought I'd warn you first. I know you're supposed to be my buddy, so I thought you should know."

He would go on to say variations of the same thing for over a year. If the day were too hot and he had been out doing an exercise, he would come back and fall into his bed, rubbing his nose into the pillow while sniffing and saying, "I want to die. Kill me now." Sometimes at roll call after lunch, he wouldn't be there. Warrant John would send me and Sam to look for him. He was usually in the bathroom, sitting on a toilet seat with his head in his hands. He would refuse to move. When we reported back to Warrant John, he would ask which bathroom Paul was in, and then stalk off to yell at him.

## The procedure for a death

At first, we thought that he might actually kill himself. So whenever he went missing and we were sent off to look for him, we speculated freely on what state we might find him in. Perhaps with his wrists sliced in the shower. Or dangling with a sheet around his neck in the bunk. Sam's favourite was Paul frozen in the cookhouse freezer. Mine was his body lacerated amidst the concertina wire. But he was always hale and hearty when we found him. Well, hale, anyway. He was never really hearty. After a while, his pronouncements of death became part of the routine and we didn't think much about them. We just sort of expected him to turn up dead one day. We laughed about it, but I was just glad that Justin had been the one to find Paul and not me.

"Why can't Paul just be... discharged or something," I asked one day. We had just come back from an obstacle course training session and instead of climbing over the low wall and continuing on to the swing trainer, Paul had stood on top of the wall and looked down, as if he were on top of a building instead of a seven foot wall. He had refused to budge. Even when the instructor had yelled at him and forced all of us into push-up position until he came down.

Warrant John sighed. "Because he hasn't done anything really bad yet. And he doesn't want to voluntarily end his contract even with his depression. Don't ask me why."

I asked Paul. He shrugged. "I don't have anywhere else to go." He looked at me with teary eyes and I could guess what he would say next. "And, anyway, you're the trauma clerk. You know there isn't a better place to die than in the army." I left it at that. I hoped that he wasn't serious.

The room looked exactly like what I expected when I opened the door. What I hadn't expected was the smell. A sourness that made me wrinkle my nose. I looked at the bare mattress. There was a two-colour stain on it. Some spots of blood, and then a greater dampness surrounding them. No one would want to sleep on that. But I didn't want to go all the way to the quartermaster's branch to requisition another



mattress. What if they expected me to lug it back here by myself?

"Sorry, new guy," I said as I flipped the mattress over. It looked brand new. Something fell to the floor as I adjusted the mattress. I leaned over and picked it up. It was Paul's dog tag. We were supposed to wear these so that if we got blown up they could collect the dog tags instead to identify us. Trauma clerk really wasn't that bad. I couldn't imagine being the guys rooting through limbs and blood for dog tags. I imagined all the MPs looking at Paul's body without the dog tag; it was like looking at something incomplete. I stared at the dog tag, at his identification number. I tried to imagine that there was some meaning in his death. But there really wasn't.

The truth was, there was no meaning in his death or any of the deaths I had written reports on. They just happened, as they did outside of the army as well. I never understood who exactly was sorry when I sent those "We're sorry for your loss" cards. I didn't like it when people apologised at funerals. I didn't care about the dead guys. If anything, I felt bad for the parents, for the people still alive. I guess people say these things and send useless flowers because they are part of a greater rite; some performance that we are trained at from young so that when it comes to our turn to grieve, when our minds are at a loss of what to do, our bodies know how to move by rote. Then we invest our movements, our actions, with meaning to fill that sudden gap, that sudden loss.

But what rite would be suited for Paul? I sighed and put down the dog tag and then I performed the ritual that I repeated at the start of every month: I took new sheets out from the plastic bag at the bottom of my locker, making a mental note to get a new set from the quartermaster's branch, and made his bed.

Sometimes, during bunk inspection, when Warrant John was feeling particularly mean, he would flick a coin above our beds. Our sheets were supposed to be so straight and stretched that the coin would bounce. I picked up Paul's dog tag and flicked it above the bed. It landed smack in the middle and didn't bounce. "Oh, Paul," I said as I picked up the dog tag and pulled at the corners of the sheet to flatten the

## The procedure for a death

indentation. You always think dog tags are meant to be worn around the neck, but no one did that. It could choke you while you were crawling around the mud of a tropical jungle. Or the string could snap and the dog tag would be lost. You would just be a nameless body in a common grave then. I wasn't sure what to do with his dog tag, so I put it in my pocket along with my own.

I went back down to my office. I didn't have any information yet for the report, so I looked into Paul's file for his parents' address. His parents were listed as deceased. I heard a noise and turned around. Justin was sitting on the floor behind his desk. "Hey," I said, "Dude, you okay?"

Justin looked up at me. He shook his head. "I dunno," he said. "I never expected... I mean. You know how you're trauma clerk. It just always happens. You tell us the weird stories. Like that helicopter one. We laugh. But why isn't this one funny? I thought, you know, that you or Sam would be saying something horribly inappropriate and I would laugh."

I sighed as I sat down next to him. "Want me to say something horribly inappropriate?"

He nodded.

"His parents are dead. It says so right here," I said. I dropped the folder into his lap. I could feel the dog tag dig into my thigh. "Can you believe we've never asked him about his parents before? You know what this means?" Justin shook his head. "Get up," I said as I stood up and pulled him to his feet. "This means I can go home early."