

## Jarrett Kaufman

### The Muddied Pond or the Polluted Fountain

“Jolene,” Errol said. He sat on the bed, gazing at the window blinds lying on the floor.

She was awake. “What?” she asked. Her shoulder ached.

“You had a nightmare,” he said and went to the closet to remove his uniform.

He laid his duty belt on the bed. He picked wax from his ear. She said, “I—”

“You called Ed sh-sh-shaytan,” he stuttered. “What’s it mean?”

“Devil,” Jolene said, twisting the bedcovers in her hands.

“You called our so-so-son a devil?” Errol sniffed the wax on his finger.

“Did I?” Jolene asked. Her shoulder was throbbing now.

“Se-se-seriously?” he said. He stomped into the bathroom and closed the door.

Jolene heard the kids looting the kitchen downstairs for breakfast. Rita yelled, “Mom,” but she didn’t answer. She rested her back against the headboard. She’d felt like her mind was filled with black pits. It was an affliction that’d followed her home from Iraq a month ago. The last week of her tour was a blur. The memories she could dig out of those dark places — a raging fire and the bloodied faces of the dead — haunted her. Her troubles, they worried Errol. She knew that. She knew it just like she knew the nightmare last night had spooked him. It spooked her too.

Jolene had been asleep when a car backfired in front of the house. She rolled out of bed and crawled in a daze across the carpet to the window. She spied from behind the blinds she’d parted with her fingers. She saw a car she recognized — an old Toyota — parked in idle across the street. She said to herself it was a dream then looked out the window again but the car was still there. “No,” she said as she tore the blinds off the window frame and threw them onto the floor.

What she saw palsied her at the window. It was a tide of sand that crested at the dark horizon and buried the drab St. Louis neighborhood. Once the sand cleared, Jolene found herself sitting in a Humvee between Red, who was the RO, and a Syriac named Gabi who was the interpreter. SGT Ford drove and PFC Willis, the EOD, manned the UAF. She was staring out of the window at the moonlit village of Numaniyah while Gabi prattled on how it was a place that was cursed by ancient gods of Nimrud. “Red,” Jolene said. She grabbed his arm. “Is this real?”

Ford braked. The rutted road was blocked by a junked Toyota, and the road back out was choked with a trip of goats. SOP called for Ford to report to RB but the UAF was scrambled. So the squad established an AOR. Ford and Red secured the nearby haji shops as Willis inspected the car. Jolene, at the

Humvee's rear, covered Gabi. He was herding the goats. She took a breath to cool her jitters. She saw the dark move in the alley and blamed her fears on Gabi's yapping about fire cults and ziggurat blood temples. She called, "Gabi," but a blast of light blinded her.

When her sight returned, she saw no alley or car. "Gabi," she hollered.

"Jolene," Errol said. She felt a hand on her arm. She rubbed her eyes.

"Mommy?" Ed said, cowering behind Rita in the hallway.

"Shaytan," Jolene said. She lunged for Ed with a clawing hand.

"St-st-stop," Errol said. He was pawing her face. "It's me. It's just me."

"Errol?" she said. She hugged him. She said, "Is this real?"

By the hand, Jolene tugged Ed down the sidewalk. Rita was texting on her iPhone.

"Hurry," she barked as she rushed them to the school bus stop at the street corner.

Jolene piloted Ed and Rita away from the kids and the lingering parents. She knelt down. She considered telling them the truth. She wanted to explain how her memory was like fog, but she realized she could find no words to tell the truth of what she saw in that fog. So she told them what she supposed they needed to hear. She said she was fine. Then she hugged both of them.

Earlier she'd tried to confide in Errol about the nightmare as well. She'd really only sought his comfort. But he'd said he didn't have time for that "shit." He was dressing for work, squaring his officer hat griping how he still had to pick up Chet, his partner who lived across the street with his diabetic wife, Dixie, then beat the traffic and make roll call. "I can't," he'd said.

Jolene stood. She saw Dixie limp across the street, punching her cane at the ground.

"Boy," she said. "Errol seemed dog-tired. I fixed him a biscuit —"

"It was a nightmare," Ed said and licked snot off his lip.

The school bus arrived. Ed and Rita and the other kids began to board.

When Jolene spotted Ed in a window, she started. His eyes were black as soot.

"Oh, dear," Dixie said. She fussed with Jolene's frizzed hair.

"Ed?" Jolene said. The bus turned the street corner. It was gone.

"You need a cut, dear. Go to Great Clips. I'll give you the—"

Jolene huffed. She pulled Dixie's fat hand out of her hair and went home.