

A FEW DAYS IN THE NAVY

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A FEW DAYS IN THE NAVY

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FOR SWIGS

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A DAY IN THE CAR

COULD IT BE THAT I WAS THE ONLY COWARD ON EARTH, I WONDERED.

- LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE, *JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT*

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, ANTHONY Doinel had come to the conclusion that he was a coward. He dared tell no one. This revelation is what put him on the road to U.S. Navy Officer Candidate School. He knew he had a problem and he had plans to fix it. *Taking action is courageous*, he thought. So invigorated was he with aggrandizing views of his future, he missed his exit. Continuing clueless in the wrong direction, his mind drifted to the past; *where did it all begin?*

* * *

During his sophomore year, the social pressure to constantly have a good time dragged him to a fraternity party with his girlfriend and some of their crowd.

He hated frat parties almost as much as he loved his girlfriend, Claire. She was his first love, and they had been dating for almost two years. She was short with olive skin, short dark hair, and enormous soft brown eyes that were capable of speaking. Although beauty is often contemporary, Claire's was timeless.

It was a ten-minute walk through the nineteen-degree air from the bus station to the frat house. The party was hosted by an unrecognized fraternity in their dilapidated home, in the middle of their school's charming Catskill

Mountains town. Anthony, Claire, and their friends entered through the kitchen—which appeared to have not been cleaned in months—and paid five dollars each for a red Solo cup. They made their way through the packed living room to get in line for the keg. Although it was below freezing outside, all the girls at the party wore miniskirts, thin blouses, and high heels. Claire was the exception, sporting jeans and a sweater, still looking better than most of her peers. The boys mostly wore ill-fitting jeans and pullovers. Regardless of attire, everyone was either drunk and acting the part or closer to sober and yelling conversation to one another over an eclectic playlist coming through scratchy speakers.

After filling their cups, the group migrated to a corner of the living room.

“So, do you know anyone here?” Anthony asked Sean, his friend who had insisted everyone attend the party.

“Not really.”

“Then why’d you wanna come so bad?”

“It’s a party, man. We’re in college.”

This place sucks, thought Anthony.

“Hey, I know her,” said Claire, pointing to a girl across the room. “Come say hi with me.”

“Sure.”

“She’s hot,” said Sean. “I’m coming with you.” Claire rolled her eyes.

The trio snaked their way through the crowded room to Claire’s friend, who was standing in the entranceway to the kitchen.

“Hey, Jess.”

“Claire! What are you doing here?”

“I’m not sure, really. This place kind of sucks.” Anthony was glad she thought so.

“What? Noooooo, it’s great here.”

“By the way, this is my boyfriend Anthony.”

“Hey, nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Sean.” Claire again rolled her eyes.

“Does anyone wanna smoke?” asked Jess.

“In here?” replied Anthony.

“Yeah, they don’t care.” Jess dug through her handbag. “I thought I had a joint in here... Here it is!”

"I'll have some," said Claire.

"Me too," said Sean.

"I'm good," said Anthony.

"Yeah, he's a pussy, he doesn't smoke," said Sean.

"Why do you have to tell everyone that? Can't I just say *no, I'm good?*"

"Geez man, I was just joking."

"That's not a joke though, that's just you volunteering information about me."

"Calm down," said Claire reassuringly.

"Yeah, man, this will actually *help* you calm down." Now Anthony rolled his eyes.

Sean and Jess began flirting. Claire was lighting the joint. Anthony kept glancing across the room. He noticed someone continuously leering in their direction. His name was Drew—he recognized him from a sociology class they had taken together freshman year. Drew methodically crossed the room and approached Claire, stopping in the very small space between her and Anthony.

"Hey, you wanna drink?" he asked as he offered her a red Solo cup.

"Uh, no thanks," said Claire as she raised her cup. She was visibly uncomfortable with Drew's proximity to her.

Suddenly, Drew leaned slightly forward and whispered something in her ear while lowering his hand and subtly caressing her backside. She immediately recoiled, and her large eyes darted at Anthony, who saw what happened and now felt frozen in time.

All at once his heart sprinted, adrenaline pumped, pupils dilated, and sweat poured. What seemed like one million thoughts and observations raced through his head in a single moment. *Is this guy a fraternity member here? Will his friends jump in if I do something? He looks pretty strong. Will he kick the shit out of me for pushing him away? Will getting my ass kicked in front of Claire be worse than doing nothing at all? Is he drunk? Does that even matter? No one else saw... Maybe just pretend you didn't see.*

Before Anthony could react, Drew read the disinterest in Claire's eyes, and stammered off. Anthony gazed into the void between himself and Claire, for what seemed like forever, until her eyes finally fell. In an effort to

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make it seem like he didn't notice, he began to make small talk with Sean, standing to his left.

Whatever was said in the ensuing mindless chatter would quickly fade from memory, but he would always remember his inability to act—because of fear—at such a crucial moment. Maybe the most cowardly of cowards would have simply fled, but his meager posturing—failing to act, then pretending not to have noticed—was pretty much the same thing; it was no use splitting hairs over that.

It's not that this one moment had been particularly catastrophic; Claire had been sympathetic enough to never acknowledge it, and she appeared to quickly forget. He had always marveled at her seemingly greater ease with applying selective memory; he wished he could forget that moment, too.

She would break up the relationship in the next three months. She had been with boys in high school, but she had been Anthony's first, so the break-up was harder on him.

As far as he was concerned, he was the only coward on the planet. Twenty-year-olds have a tendency to think that way. *How do I fix this?* he wondered. *Do I just go out and pick a fight?*

* * *

“Providence?” he said aloud as he read a mileage sign.

Fuck, he thought, *I missed my exit. Pay attention, you're gonna need to in training.*

After exiting the interstate, crossing an overpass and heading back in the right direction, he called his father.

Skipping pleasantries, his father answered, “Anthony! You almost there?”

“Yup,” he replied. “I think I'll be there in about thirty minutes.”

“You excited?”

“Uh, more nervous than anything.”

“Nah, don't be nervous. You'll do fine.”

“I'm not really worried about that, it's just, logistically, like, what comes next? Where do I park my car? Who do I report to? You know, just a million little questions like that.”

“Trust me, that’ll all be worked out as soon as you arrive.”

“Yeah, I guess so... I just can’t wait to get through officer training so I can start flight school.”

“Well, don’t get too ahead of yourself. You can’t learn to fly if you don’t make it through OCS.”

Why’d he say that? He just said I’ll be fine; now he’s warning me? “I just hope I’m not too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“For the war. Everything kicked off in Iraq and Afghanistan when I was still in high school. It’s 2008 now and I still got years of training ahead of me.”

“Well, you shouldn’t necessarily *want* to go into combat.”

“That’s easy for you to say; you’ve flown in both Gulf Wars and have seen your fair share of action. Grandpa too, in World War II.” Anthony and his father frequently debated, but it was always cordial.

“Yeah, I know better, that’s why I can tell you it’s not something you should want.”

“Well, doesn’t that, like, negate the point of joining the military in the first place? Shouldn’t a warrior—or *prospective* warrior in my case—*want* to go to war?”

“Ha, well, you got me there.”

“Yeah, come on, between Grandpa flying in World War II and you in the Mid-East, I feel like this is something I gotta do.” He was incapable of telling his father his real reason for joining. He knew the military were the experts at fear inoculation and was in desperate need of their treatment.

“Ha! You know I always encouraged you to do whatever it was you wanted. You didn’t need to join just because me and Grandpa did.”

“I know, but I *do* want to do this.”

“Is that why you went to school upstate for a degree in mass communications?” he chuckled.

For the first time in the discussion, Anthony felt he was now on the defensive. “Dad, I was seventeen when I went away to school. Not every teenager knows exactly what they’re gonna do the rest of their lives.”

“Well, if you knew just a little earlier you could have done Reserve Officers’ Training Corps and not had student loans to pay off.”

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Anthony felt even more defensive. “...Well, that’s neither here nor there now.”

“Listen, you probably won’t be able to call for a while, so while I got you on the phone, let me say good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you... When I can, I guess.”

A DAY AT OCS

EITHER ONE'S A MILITARY MAN OR ONE ISN'T.

- LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE, *JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT*

“What the fuck?” Anthony murmured to himself as he repeatedly failed to iron a proper crease down the sleeve of his khaki uniform.

“Doinel, those look like shit, get your shit together!” yelled Scott, a fellow officer candidate.

“What the fuck does it look like I’m doing?” replied Anthony, holding a cheap iron in one hand and a can of heavy starch in the other. All he was missing was an apron.

An improper crease on a uniform seemed like a minor infraction, but there was a lot at stake. Too much negative attention from the drill instructor—attention from an improperly creased uniform, for example—got an officer candidate labeled a “shit show” or “soup sandwich,” sometimes the two were combined to “shit sandwich.” Shit sandwiches did not get through OCS, they washed out. Anthony’s manhood was on the line, how could he see combat, ending his cowardly streak for good, if he couldn’t even get through OCS? All his time and effort thus far—only a few weeks—would have been for naught. More embarrassing would be the endless explanations required for friends and family that knew he left for the Navy. The thought of telling each individual person, maybe groups of two or three or four at the most, that he had been sent home, was unbearable. Even more unbearable than the apron it felt like he was wearing. This kind of a panic was normal at OCS,

caused from something as innocuous as not knowing how to sufficiently iron creases into shirt sleeves.

At OCS, everyone went by last names and nobody could get Anthony's right, it was pronounced "doe-nell." That didn't bother him, but it was French, which some people enjoyed poking fun at since the French government was not fully supportive of the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and this did bother him. Thankfully, most of the people that attended OCS were not keen on the ethnic origin of surnames. Scott's first name was Royce. Since his first and last name were both first names, Anthony frequently called him by the wrong one.

OCS is where Anthony also first met Franklin. Franklin shared a room with Royce, directly across the hall. Franklin was one of the many officer candidates from the South. His full name was Franklin Andrew Joshua Jensen III, but insisted everyone call him Tucker.

"My grandfather said he wanted my mama to have one more child, which was me, and Grandpa's name was Tucker so everyone calls me Tucker."

"Then why isn't either your first or middle name Tucker?" asked Anthony.

"Well because Franklin Andrew Joshua is a family name; that's why I'm a third."

"And so is Tucker, apparently."

Anthony was confused how anyone could have four names on a birth certificate but go by none of them. Most of the Southerners he encountered had some sort of overly complex name scheme, and required all around them know the specifics of it. Anthony could care less how anyone pronounced his last name and he loved to call Franklin Franklin because of how much it bothered Franklin that he wouldn't call him Tucker.

While Anthony continued to iron his uniform, Franklin asked him something about the SCC.

"I don't know what that is."

Franklin was mystified. "You don't know nuthin bout college football?!"

"No Franklin, I don't. We've been over this."

"Well then who's your favorite team? And it's Tucker!"

Anthony was livid. "I just told you I don't pay any attention to college football, so why would I have a favorite team? And why would I call you Tucker anyways? We go by last names here."

“Just answer me this, LSU or ‘Bama?” Franklin was reveling in the opportunity to talk about college football, even if it was with someone who didn’t know or care about it.

“On top of not giving a shit about college football, which you are repeatedly failing to comprehend, I did not attend either of those schools, so how could I answer, and why would I give a shit!?” Anthony was almost irate, “And why do you even care, didn’t you go to school in Florida?”

“That’s right. UWF baby!” stated Franklin proudly, as if this somehow absolved him from fully answering the question.

Anthony was annoyed with himself at getting so frustrated with Franklin. The sleep deprivation and constant ironing and cleaning must have been wearing on him.

* * *

OCS was located at Naval Station Newport, nestled along the eastern shore of the Narragansett Bay. There were no longer active duty ships at NS Newport, only a myriad of training commands and two mothballed aircraft carriers remained. The buildings the officer candidates inhabited were dormitory-style, not too dissimilar from the dorms of the low-tier New York state college that Anthony recently graduated from. Here at OCS, however, his room had a view of the bay and the Newport Bridge. He drove across that bridge in his crummy 1994 Saturn when arriving at NS Newport, and couldn’t wait to cross it again. Newport was a perfect example of the Navy’s superior duty station locations, now only if he could actually enjoy it.

Having been at OCS for several weeks, so far none of it felt like military service. There was no obstacle course, they didn’t wear dog tags, and they never learned how to shoot guns; though they did get their heads shaved. Most of their time was spent obsessively ironing uniforms, cleaning things and places, and getting ushered around in formation from one classroom to another.

They also had to eat everything with one hand, and with a spoon. Items that were supposed to be eaten with a spoon were easy to eat; items that were not supposed to be eaten with a spoon were not. Most people normally

love steak and cheeseburgers; however, when served for dinner at OCS, the average officer candidate could only manage about three bites with his single hand-operated spoon before they were ushered out of the galley to whatever was in store for them that evening. All non-galley food was strictly off limits. The crime of an officer candidate caught with extra food seemed comparable to getting caught with a brick of cocaine in the real world.

Although they frequently went to bed hungry, they never went to bed thirsty. Anthony was quickly learning that the military runs on fear. Senior ranking personnel fear what their subordinates will or will not do, and junior personnel generally fear unfavorable orders from their seniors. In the case of never going to bed thirsty, senior personnel in charge of OCS were afraid of officer candidates becoming dehydrated during routine vigorous physical exercise. The Commanding Officer vaguely ordered that officer candidates stay hydrated throughout the day. This deconstructed into a requirement that all officer candidates drink over a gallon of water with each meal, before morning PT, after morning PT, and before they went to bed every night, as well as various other times throughout the day. Years later, remembering his time spent at OCS, all Anthony could recall was constantly having to urinate. To make matters worse, officer candidates were not simply allowed to go to the bathroom when required. If they were marching, they would have to wait until they finished marching. If they were in class, they had to wait until class was over. If they were standing around, they had to wait until someone told them they were finished standing around. The result was an almost constantly bursting bladder. Before lights out, officer candidates would stand outside their rooms with a full canteen of water and were required to guzzle the entire amount. Occasionally, someone would throw up from guzzling too much, some even wet their beds. Wetting the bed—not from being afraid, but from someone else being afraid you weren't hydrated—was also not what he expected.

Anthony wondered what he should be afraid of. So far in life, he'd been pretty good at being afraid. His only current fear was not achieving his goal. He wasn't a ferocious guy, there was no lust for blood and he couldn't see himself in a conventional soldierly military role; that's why he was at *Navy* OCS. He was average height, barely weighed one-hundred-and-fifty pounds, could care less about sports, and had an affinity for 80's new wave, watching

movies, and reading history. Instead of fighting on the ground, he would follow in his family's footsteps and fly. Flying appeared to be a much more aristocratic form of combat, an image he desperately desired. The surest route to combat in the aviation world was to fly jets, so jets became the goal. The problem, he had heard, was the leviathan competition to select jets. Merely wanting it more, he thought, would be enough. After all, the stakes were higher for him, his manhood was on the line.

Before he could select jets, other disappointments had to be endured. When weekend liberty was finally granted, there was a curfew permanently in effect that mandated all officer candidates return to base by 2300, precluding the possibility of hooking up with any of the girls that attend Salve Regina University, just down the road. On the first weekend off, Anthony made out with a chubby girl that he thought went to Salve Regina, just so he could have a "hook up" story to tell his friends when he went home on leave after commissioning. He loved the idea of looking dashing in his working *blues* uniform—commonly known as "Johnny Cash's" since they were all *black...* not blue—and wooing a girl. He also loved the idea of the term "hooking up" since there was substantial ambiguity in it. Hooking up could mean sleeping with a really beautiful girl, even though she was chubby, but what it really meant was that they only made out because there was a curfew.

* * *

As Anthony finished his crappy ironing job on his khakis, his roommate, Hicks, hurriedly entered the room and stashed a small bag behind his mattress.

"Yo, what's in the bag?"

"Don't worry about it."

Unlike most of the officer candidates at OCS, Hicks had prior time in the Navy as an enlisted sailor. While active duty, he obtained his bachelor's degree and applied for every commissioning program available to enlisted personnel. OCS was his last choice, but he was willing to do whatever it took to get out of the enlisted ranks and become an officer. Hicks was very fit for his age, although most of his body was scarred with embarrassing tattoos, so common amongst sailors. He was of average height and, because of his prior

enlisted service, was a little older than the rest of the officer candidates. He spoke with an Oklahoma drawl and seemed to have a sage, backcountry wisdom about everything.

He never missed an opportunity to remind Anthony that OCS was *not* what the real Navy was like. “There’s none of this marching bullshit all over the place,” and “You don’t get needle-dicked about every little thing like you do here,” he would say.

Anthony loved to hear this from Hicks, and asked him about the “real Navy” whenever they had time to talk. Hicks’ wisdom validated Anthony’s hope for a more authentic future. Although the two were in no way connected, Hicks’ stories about the real Navy managed to reassure Anthony that his goals would be achieved.

Most naval officers commission through the Naval Academy or ROTC at a civilian academic institution, the remainder are commissioned through OCS. There are always a handful of officer candidates at OCS with a prior enlisted background, like Hicks, but the vast majority are bored civilians or college kids that had a late-blooming burst of motivation. Just as the military wasn’t what Anthony had envisioned, being an adult is also far from the perception most have when preparing to graduate from college. Life quickly becomes underwhelming for many young, disenfranchised men, and some women, so they turn to the military, where they will also be—as Anthony quickly learned—relatively disappointed.

If these college graduates were smart and did their research, they realized they could apply to OCS and join the military as an officer. In a rush to join, some applicants would wander into the nearest recruiting office, only to be swindled into enlisting so they could fill a recruiter’s quota. Unlike Hicks, this was a small portion of the prior enlisted officer candidates at OCS; guys with college degrees who joined the military for whatever reason, not realizing their education could secure them a congressional commission, rank, and better pay. They would complete several years in the enlisted ranks *then* apply for OCS. Rather than acknowledge their misstep, most staunchly defended it, saying something like, “I wanted to know what military service was *really* like first.”

Later that night, he put on his one pair of clean sweats that he slept in every night, took his extra blanket out of his locker, and laid down on his

made bed. All beds were required to be made and folded with precision hospital corners, measurable to one-eighth of an inch. Drill instructors would occasionally barge into officer candidates' rooms and measure the folds. If they were off, they would flip the beds over and trash the rest of the room; in order to avoid this most officer candidates slept on top of already made beds and adjusted them in the morning, rather than remaking them every day.

Anthony could hear Hicks fumbling with something, he thought maybe he was jerking off, then Hicks whispered, "Yo, Doinel, here you go," as he tossed a bag of Oreos across the room.

"Where the fuck did you get these!?"

"Don't worry about it."

"No, I *need* to know." Although the answer was irrelevant, Anthony felt that he really *did* need to know.

"A buddy from my first ship back in the day works on the other side of base, he stands outside the window of the empty room down the hall and tosses me shit occasionally."

Just like the Commanding Officer was afraid of officer candidates becoming dehydrated, officer candidates were afraid of what drill instructors would do to them if they were caught with extra food, especially something completely taboo like Oreos. The fact it was a desert food made it seem extra dangerous; had it been a chicken wing, Anthony thought, it wouldn't be as bad.

In an environment dominated by fear, no one ever had any real initiative, how could anyone when they were constantly afraid? In spite of this, here was Hicks, defiantly eating and sharing off-limits food with Anthony. The stakes were high, too. In addition to potentially getting caught by a drill instructor, there were several fellow officer candidates that would have turned Hicks in if they found his secret stash. Technically it was an "honor violation."

There were two ways to be courageous at OCS, either by ruthlessly following the rules or by defiantly breaking them. By doing neither, Anthony was unknowingly still trundling forth on his path of inaction, but he was able to observe that most of the rule followers were still afraid while the rule breakers, like Hicks, didn't seem to be too troubled by their actions.

The rule followers only did so out of fear, while the rule breakers were able to overcome fear. This was the first real act of courage Anthony saw in the few weeks he had been at OCS, and he loved it. Hicks was added to his list of non-cowards. The prior enlisted guys were generally seen as having street credit; since Hicks trusted him with the secret Oreo stash, he felt that he too now had street credit, and was less cowardly by proxy. Lying in bed and eating Oreos was the best night he had at OCS, even better than making out with the chubby girl who he thought went to Salve Regina.

ANOTHER DAY IN THE CAR

CURIOSITY HAS PROVOKED NOT ONLY THE FIRST FALL BUT THE COUNTLESS ONES OF EVERY DAY OF OUR LIVES.

- E. M. CIORAN, *A SHORT HISTORY OF DECAY*

“THANK GOD!” YELLED ANTHONY TO NO one as he accelerated across the Newport Bridge. He could see NS Newport in his rear view mirror and was glad it was staying there. It was sad that a place as beautiful and historic as Newport would become synonymous with such a negative experience; hopefully new experiences in Pensacola would be different. Being from Long Island, New York, much of Anthony’s family and friends had relatives living in Florida, either as part time snowbirds or full time New York dropouts. To most New Yorkers, Florida meant Naples, Palm Beach, Tampa, Disney World, and Miami. Unbeknownst to Anthony at the time of his drive south, Pensacola was not Naples, Palm Beach, Tampa, Disney World, or Miami; if anything, Pensacola was Alabama. With the exception of an occasional family vacation, he had spent all his life in the Northeast, and although beginning flight school was exciting, he semi-loathed the thought of moving to the South. Everything about the culture and landscape down there felt overbaked, but he planned on arriving with an open mind.

After the excitement of receiving his commission and leaving Newport waned, he called his father.

“Anthony! Congrats on commissioning. We’re fellow officers now.” This made Anthony enormously proud.

“Thanks, and yeah, it feels pretty good.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be there, you’re gonna find out soon enough that the military is not too good at keeping a schedule.”

“I bet, how’s the deployment extension going?”

“Shitty, but enough of that. Are you excited about starting flight school?”

“Yes, I can’t wait actually.”

“Good. Just be careful down there.”

“Oh, I know. And as I’m sure you do too, safety is drilled into our heads constantly.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, Anthony.”

“What’s up then?”

“Listen Anthony, like a lot of small towns outside military bases, there’s not a lot going on in a place like Pensacola. A lot of the local girls see young military officers as their way out.”

“Nah, I don’t think that’ll be too much of a problem, I’m not looking for anything serious.”

“It doesn’t matter what *you’re* looking for, Anthony. They can pick you out a mile off.”

Rather than heed his father’s advice, Anthony became excited by it. He didn’t plan on becoming anyone’s meal ticket, but certainly intended on using this alleged attention to his advantage. He spent the entirety of his time away at college in two long term relationships; as soon as the first one ended another began, thus missing out on the promiscuous hooking up that was a supposed cornerstone of going away to college. If what his father said was even remotely true, it sounded like he would have an easier time.

When pursuing local girls, he was going to have to compete with Royce and Franklin, who he had resigned to just calling Tucker by this point. The three of them were going to split an apartment. Since they were all prospective flight students, Royce proposed the idea of living together toward the end of OCS. Anthony liked Royce but couldn’t stand Tucker, however, living with the two of them would be better than living alone. He had yet to realize that in addition to competing for girls, he would also be competing with them in flight training as well.

During the drive, Anthony registered that flight school was where he would begin training with the recent ROTC and Naval Academy graduates. *What would the other students be like*, he wondered. At first, he assumed the

ROTC guys would be the most normal, then quickly realized that they committed themselves to joining the military during their senior year of high school, which sounded almost outrageous. Thinking back on how immature he was at seventeen, the thought of making such a monumental decision at that young of an age seemed strange. If that was odd, than how bizarre would the Academy guys be? Those guys attended one of the most prestigious schools in the country. He envisioned every male Academy graduate to look like a Ken Doll, be capable of throwing a football over a mountain, and probably have a dad who was a senator. The females that attended OCS were typically less than stunning, which resulted in giving little thought to what the female ROTC and Academy graduates would be like.