

S.W. Campbell

## Ten-Hut

It's a special occasion so Delaney of course makes her Jello syringes, her specialty. Her roommate Kim helps, though Kim doesn't really know Tony that well. The two work the whole evening before, mixing the Jello with vodka and pouring it into the big syringes used by veterinarians for large animals. The finished syringes are placed in a deep green bowl with the needleless tips pointing upward, and then the bowl is placed in the refrigerator. Delaney is good at such things. She knows exactly the right amount of vodka to add to keep the Jello's consistency.

We all begin arriving around five o'clock. Tony is already there and like clockwork each of us who come in the door pause and give him the up and down. It is surprising how different he looks. The shaved head was expected, as was the general look of better fitness, but it is a little disconcerting to see him wearing his army boots and camo pants, a knife on his belt. It just looks out of place amongst everyone else in their civilian attire. Nobody brings it up. They just pause, give him the up and down, and then do their best to pretend that there was nothing at all slightly off putting about any of it.

There are maybe twenty of us or so all together in the apartment. Tony's closer friends come to give him a last hurrah. They gather round, the women hugging him and the men shaking his hand and at times pulling him in for the half hugs used to show the acceptable amount of affection beyond the usual clasping

of palms. Chip bags are opened and beers are passed around, for a moment filling the world with the noise of fizzy metallic clicks. The Jello syringes are brought out of the fridge and are quickly grabbed up by eager hands who slam plungers, slurping Jello into hankering mouths. For a moment it's like all the other times, but of course such things never last. They are all here for a reason, and it is inevitable that polite conversation moves in that direction.

“How much longer until you ship out?”

It's Jeremy that breaks the ice. He's always been the more curious sort, and one of the last to notice hinting clues such as one's attire. The entire room goes quiet as it listens. For a moment Tony stares down at the beer in his hand and his face goes blank, but then life restarts and he speaks with the serious air of someone doing something of great importance.

“Another week. I'm going home to see my parents a bit more and then I need to be ready to go on the 15th.”

Jeremy nods and smiles.

“Do you know where your headed yet?”

The blank look again, then the jerk back to the present tense.

“Iraq.”

The apartment goes silent again, an entire roomful of brains buzzing with the same thoughts shoved into the forefront by hearing the word out loud. Eyes in every head find something else to look at. Jeremy bites his lip, wrestling under the weight of his own question.

“Well, thank you for your service.”

Tony gives a little smile and he grows before our very eyes and stands taller than all the rest. Other people repeat the mantra, and it swells into a toast from the entire room, beers and Jello filled syringes held high. Tony beams, stands to attention, and salutes. Everyone laughs. People break back into little groups of conversation. Everyone given something else to talk about except for Tony. Monica smiles at him as she unconsciously twirls her hair around a finger.

“I hear it’s not as bad as it was there, that things are getting better.”

You can almost see Tony puff out his chest. His voice sounds lower than normal.

“Well, things are still pretty dangerous. Maybe not like when Fallujah was hot, but there’s still plenty of places I don’t think anyone would want to be alone.”

Dominique nods.

“Still people dying every day.”

Tony’s free hand unconsciously reaches down and touches the knife on his belt. He gives a little smile.

“I mean, sure, but nothing like it used to be.”

Monica and Dominique nod their heads in unison. Monica reaches out and touches Tony’s arm, for a moment gripping the new muscle.

“You just be safe, okay.”

Tony smiles at her and nods his head in thanks. The pair move on and new people come to take their place. The conversation repeats itself, the beginning differing as it will, but the ending almost always matching word for word.

The last of the syringes is finished off and empty beer cans sprout across the apartment. Jeremy picks one up that's still half full and shakes it above the crowd.

"Hey, who left this wounded soldier?"

Everyone flinches as one, and all eyes shift onto Tony again. He stands there, silently for a moment, then starts talking to Delaney again as though nothing has happened. Someone opens him up another beer. The conversation begins its cycle again. Nicole sucks her lips back against her teeth and stares at Tony's chin.

"You just be safe, okay."

Tony laughs, a loud drunk laugh that spreads across the room.

"They're the ones who ought to be worried about their safety."

Things go silent again, but then someone raises a beer high up in the air.

"Damn straight man."

Tony throws his arms forward and waves his fingers back in the universal sign of come and get some of this shit.

"I'm ready to go over. I want to go over."

A couple of people cheer, a lot of others stay silent, unsure how to react. Tony pounds his fist into his chest.

"The Army has put me into the best shape of my life."

Someone lets loose a catcall. People laugh. Tony drops to the ground and starts doing pushups as fast as he can. People hoot and holler. Kim rolls her eyes and goes back to her bedroom. Tony is still doing pushups when she comes back out and leaves the apartment. The noise begins to die down. The spectacle is

going on too long. A growing discomfort begins to pervade the room. Tony is the last to notice. His face shiny with sweat, he rises back up. Somebody hands him another beer.

Many begin to actively avoid Tony. Others begin to give reasons why they need to go. Most give him hugs before they go, many repeat the mantra of well being, but not all. The more people that trickle out the more annoyed Tony seems to get. He leans up against the counter, drinking beer with a sudden ferocity. It feels like being in the presence of a strange pitbull. Dominique walks up to say goodbye, a forced smile on his lips.

“It was good seeing you. Be safe, okay.”

Tony lets out a deep belch.

“I’m going to kill one of them fucking ragheads.”

Dominique’s eyes widen. He unconsciously backs away.

“Okay.”

Tony pulls the knife out of his belt. He holds it up between them.

“I’m going to kill one with this knife. I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to stabbing one of those sons of bitches.”

Delaney comes to the rescue. She grabs Tony’s arm and leads him back into her bedroom. Monica follows to offer her support. The knife still in his hand, Tony prowls the confines of the bedroom like a caged animal. His breathing is heavy. Monica looks scared. Delaney is better at hiding it. Tony punches the wall with his free hand. Not hard enough to break the sheetrock, but loud enough to be heard outside the bedroom. Nobody says a word. Tony stops and stares at the rows of photos Delaney has tacked to a corkboard. People smiling at barbecues, people laughing in bars, a group sledding on a hill. Jeremy sticks

his head in to see if everything is all right, but Delaney quickly pushes him out and shuts the door. Tony sits down on the bed. That's when he begins to cry.