

The Brave Have Returned: *Inspired By Lance Corporal Jeffrey Lucey and Michael Sanchez*

By E.R. Sanchez

Thirsty. Headache. Where am I? Last thing I remember is phoning my parents that I'm back and heading to Instant Replay before coming home, called up Danielle too; she said to call as soon as I get home from the bar. After this third tour, I don't know.

The driver asks me which house is mine. I tell him it's at the end of this street and point at the house on the right. It has droopy balloons lining the entrance leading to the front door. We joke about the bartender telling him how to get to my house.

I blankly stare, while paying the cab fare plus tip. Bastard doesn't know a car can't protect you from shit. Exiting the cab, my boots make a splash, heart stutters.

—Dark-red spots appear. Puddles underneath each swollen body. Some too dry to splash, so I step around them, without nerves, because dark red plus the dry glass look of their eyes affirms they are deceased.—

As I pass the balloons, there's a welcome home sign on the door. It's white with red and blue lettering. The top right corner is unattached.

Taking out my Thousand Palms key chain, it's all I had to keep me company over there. During boring times, I'd just stare at the damn metal palm tree. Before the emotions invaded, I always ended up looking at the sky, hoping for my mom to yell from downstairs, 'breakfast is ready, Mijo!' A brother almost caught me crying on a patrol, so I taped my house key to the metal palm tree to keep the jingle from reminding me about home. I threw all my old photos away after the first day of my first tour. Memories make your courage tank empty too fast.

I walk in and see my parents sleeping. My mom's head is resting on my dad's shoulder. The television is turned on to the World Series of Poker. I rouse them after gently closing the door; I knew I should've come home right away tonight, but I just couldn't see them so soon. Maria and Alex must be asleep, Danielle too.

Writing Raw

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They rub their eyes and wait, staring dumbfounded. My mom's eyes begin to fill with tears. She puts her hands together against her mouth. Tears slide down her finger nails. I smile. My dad gives me a hug as if he could squeeze 18 months out of me.

My mom sits back on the couch. She turns to me and says, "Jimmy, I can't believe it's you. You look," she stares with gloss covering her eyes.

My eyes start to feel teary like the day I had to stare through smoke after a Humvee went down. I can't believe it's me either, with all my limbs. I smile again at my mother and give her a hug to let her know she's not dreaming.

—Am I?—

My mom doesn't let go for at least a minute. I pull away holding her shoulders at an arm's-length to tell her not to worry, because I'm not going anywhere. They're still surprised it seems, so I ask my dad for a beer. With shiny eyes, he smiles and says to Mom, "I tol' you he's the same."

She nods and does a sign of the Holy Cross as we walk into the kitchen. She says Amen and kisses her hand. I feel anxious.

—Not so fast!—

We sit around the wooden table after I let them go ahead of me. It has many discolored spots from hot pots and pans. I love sitting here and waiting for my meal as the spices make my mouth water. When I finish my Corona with a lime wedge, I tell them I'm tired.

Walking upstairs, I notice my brother has a sign on his door that says, "Proceed With Caution." My sister's door says, "Princess St." I shake my head and think about a sign for my door that says, "Iraq? No Questions."

My room looks like it did before I received news of my deployment. A red nylon Marine flag is on my wall. Some high school wrestling trophies are on top of the dresser. A picture of Danielle is still on my nightstand. I miss her small face. How she smiled before I left. How she cried when I departed. I love her loose black curls, the way they dance above her shoulders. Her light brown eyes, I should've brought her pictures with me.

Writing Raw

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I forgot I framed a photograph of the smoking Twin Towers. The flag I sent home is inside an ornate oak frame. I tried to clean the drops of blood off of the white and blue parts, but that was hopeless. I sent it home with a note saying, frame it, I'll explain later.

I turn off the lights and lie, staring at the ceiling, teeth clinched, cautiously closing my eyes.

—How the hell?! Scurrying sound comes from all corners. Deep breath, wipe brow, staring at ceiling, hoping to tire eyes, scurrying sound stops. Can't keep eyes open. Can't keep sweat off nose, darkness is the enemy.

Second week there, I wake, 0300, one of those bastards is gnawing my skin. Nocturnal, motherfuckers! Damn!

I hastily kick it off. It's holding my flesh in its mouth. It's the size of a Chihuahua with eight 6 inch legs. Big-ass nasty spider-head, screams as it runs away. It leaves a cyst-like lump on my leg. Lump explodes making red and green puss flow. The medic rushes over after I yell and scrapes hole clean. Wound too big for stitches. It has to heal from the inside out.

"Fucking Camel Spiders are everywhere!" —

I touch my face, legs, arms, and torso. You're in America. There is no American Camel Spider. They don't live here. They live in the dark.

—Unrolling sleeping bag, second week, one jumps out screaming, but misses. They hide eggs everywhere, I know it. Listening for more scurrying, house becomes silent as Baghdad with no electricity at 0200.—

After a deep breath, I head downstairs and open a Corona. It's 0430. Finishing the four in the fridge, I look in the cabinets for the rest of the twelve-pack. They're not there. I go to the garage, noticing Dad hasn't finished covering the beams in the roof.

Yes! I know my dad doesn't ever buy six. He loves Costco too much. I drink four more Coronas and feel good. I'd rather have Haji whiskey, an Iraqi bootleg. That shit knocks you on your ass. Then I look for a flashlight in the drawers. I walk back upstairs holding on to the rail and the flashlight and then collapse on my bed. I place the flashlight under the mattress and an

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Iraqi dog tag on my neck. I can't read Arabic, but I love this ta...

The spicy smell of chorizo mixed in eggs wakes me up. I sit in bed taking it all in as if my prayers every sandy morning were answered, as if passing out every night trying to figure out what this Iraqi dog tag says is worth it; it reveals nothing, and gives no closure.

My mom yells from downstairs, "Jimmy, breakfast is ready!"

Everything's almost prepared in the kitchen. She used to yell from the end of the driveway, so I'd be home for dinner. She looks honorable in her apron like a good soldier as if the only duty for the day was chow. The sink makes a slight whistle.

— She runs from stove. Moves quick to back door, readies bomb.

What'd I do?! I'm your son. I fought for you. All I want is freedom for my family, freedom for my friends, freedom for the future, freedom to live as we wish, I love America. Please!—

My face feels lathered with sweat. My mom is staring at me. She looks odd as if she just saw me teleport from here to Iraq and back quicker than a roadside bomb detonates.

—If there's a whistle, start to gather yourself. The bomb's faraway.—

Everyone comes to the table as if a peaceful meal is a guarantee. The corn tortillas are in the center staying warm in a towel. I haven't had tortillas in a year and a half, just MREs; I didn't want the memories in Iraq anyway.

My brother, Alex, starts by saying, "Oye, you look like those terrorists over there left you all serious, aye," as he snickers, shaking his head. I simply nod at him with a smirk. They're Iraqis, not terrorists. I hate Alex's black Dickies and gray Ben Davis shirt. He's waiting for an answer. I hate his shaved head; I wear mine with respect.

—Rick Bics head every morning before patrol.—

I didn't go through all that bullshit, so my idiot brother can wear a gang uniform, looking for wars to be a part of. Why? Alex was into baseball before I left.

"Nobody understands what's told to the vets," I finally tell my little brother, looking at my plate, blinking with the hope that it doesn't evaporate like a mirage. Alex looks at me oddly.

What? No recruiter ever tells you, when you go to war, you're walking along a one way street, and every sign says U-Turns are not allowed. Best thing you can do is, make sure you and your brothers get home safe when you're out there in the bullshit.

Alex grabs four tortillas as the plates are served. He gives me another side glance. Today's the first morning in 18 months that my body is not sore from desert patrol.

My little sister, Maria says, "So, you don't answer us no more, huh?" she stares and continues cautiously, "They messed you up, huh? At school, they say you guys come back all depressed and stuff like that," she looks serious as she finishes her statement.

What's the use? You don't want to hear about burqas in the sand. All you care about is how tight your shirt is against your breasts, and if your ass sticks out so you can resemble Kim Kardashian. She used to be so innocent. Just a girl asking me dumb questions, now she wants to ask real questions. She wouldn't last a second if they put her in a burqa with sand intensifying the heat. She'd fall all day, burning her palms.

My dad looks at her and my brother, "Oye, just let your brother eat. He just come back, you know."

My mother finally sits and asks, "You know what I saw on the news while you were gone?" I hope Maria gives an answer.

My dad replies, "Jimmy, tu mama's talking to you."

I have ears. I lost my gung-ho after three months in. Every order, at first, I was quick to do, but now, fuck it. I do it all as I bitch.

"What happened, Mom?" I ask in a loving tone.

"You know, el Papa?" she looks at me expectantly.

I nod and say, "Yeah, que paso?" I never mixed my languages over there. We're all Americans in Iraq.

"He went to Turkey for the first time in a long time," she says it as if it's breaking news and continues sorrowfully, "que triste, some people were not happy, porque they didn't want the Papa to visit," she gets a real hopeful look and says, "May God bless them," and does the

sign of the Holy Cross.

I dryly answer, "Yeah, it's very sad." God only helps those that help themselves.

My dad gives me an appalling look and harshly says, "Talk to your mom. She wants to talk. For one year we can't talk, why you can't today?"

I glance at everyone at the table, 18 months to be exact. They look like they're waiting for an answer. I look down at my plate and start to speak plainly to my food, "You have no idea. It's just not that easy, I don't know, it's just not that easy," they look sad and surprised.

I try to please them, "W-while I was in Nasiriyah,

— Boy lying on ground, bleeding from chest and head, clutching small American flag, screaming at sun for help. I stop convoy, scoop boy up, and run to safe alleyway.—

I found a flag. That's the flag I sent home. The frame looks perfect. Thank you."

Everyone is silent.

My sister mutters, "So, you just found the flag like that or something, but," she continues clearly, "Jimmy, didn't you send it like the time before?"

"Yeah, I just found it one day."

Staring at my plate, punk politicians love war being shown as some kind of memento collecting vacation that everyone is going to survive. The Kevlar vest protects all the vitals, so if your head makes it, you live. The lucky are dead. Everyone on the way back was saved to live with no legs, burns to the bone, brain injuries, or no arms, and so many other things. The dead and the wounded enter the airport between 0300 and 0500. My Alive Day, October 17, 2005. In the kitchen, everybody is quiet enough to hear each other chew.

—Silence conquers 16 hour flight. After crew turns off lights, I can't sleep. Darkness is enemy. Iraqi faces covered in sand-speckled-blood appear behind eyelids. Smiling then dying, dying then smiling, smiling then dying, I just want to pass out.—

The phone never rings. Danielle knows the truth about me.

Everyone runs off to do their own thing after breakfast, so I ask my dad for the keys to the truck and some cash, drive to Save-U Liquor to buy two 40s of Old English 800, a tall boy of

Miller High Life, and a bottle of Southern Comfort for the night.

I return home and the family car is gone. My brother is sitting there wasting away in front of the television playing a war video game. Alex turns to me and says, "What's it like in the bush, aye?" His eyes are bloodshot, probably smoked a blunt outside.

"What bush, tonto?" What the hell do you know about the bush? Hasn't he ever looked at a fucking map? I was in a desert. He'd never have the patience to wait for an enemy's ammo to empty before a counter-attack while shaking off those bastards of the night.

"Call Of Duty is dope, fool, you better answer it, aye!" he yells to the television, annoyed, because he can't avoid getting killed by the digital Nazis. I despise his exuberance.

Most of my brothers spent boring times playing PlayStation or XBOX. Soldiers getting excited over simulated warfare, dumbasses. Others felt professional in the lights over the volleyball court. It was as if we put a bull's-eye on the court for the enemy. I love them, but seriously. According to them, my full name is Lance Cpl. Jaime "Real Talk" Gonzalez. During those same boring times, I ordered all the books I never had time to read; Amazon helped my escape. My favorite ones were *A Passion For Wisdom*, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, *Empire*, and *Pablo Neruda: Selected Poems*. I could never finish Danielle's poem.

"You wait and chew gum for the tension. Hey, you know video games geeks are designing computerized military vehicles?" He shrugs me off as if he doesn't care. No one cares. Danielle hasn't called. I mumble about the CIA's website listing America as a Federal Republic with a socialist democratic ideology, nobody even notices that even the CIA tells us, the people stand by the American ideology not reality, shaking my head in disgust. Everyone just wants to be entertained. No one understands. Soldiers will only need a joystick, a computer, and a room for taking a big fat grump in the future.

In my room, I dial Danielle's cell phone number, as my heart bangs against my ribs. Each ring makes me anxious. She picks up, "Jimmy?"

"Y-yeah."

"Hey, I was wondering if you were home, because your mom called me last night."

Writing Raw

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“Yeah, I’m home.”

“So, how are you doing?”

“Good, just real tired.”

“Jimmy, I’m running some errands. Can I give you a call in like a couple hours?”

“Yeah,” I say dryly.

“Okay, great, talk to you then, sweetie.”

I hang up and take a swig of my 40. Whatever, do what you want to do, I’m busy.

I wait next to the phone; it never rings. After drinking the two 40s, I guzzle the Miller High Life. The phone rings, but no one tells me to pick it up. I sip out of the Southern Comfort bottle as I head downstairs. Standing behind the couch, staring at the television, I see a preview of a news story. Maria and Alex glance at me. Maria giggles on her cellular phone. The broadcaster says we should’ve seen all this coming. Years too late, the preview hints about Cheney and Scooter Libby writing a report in 2000 about us needing a new Pearl Harbor. Alex changes the channel. Thank you.

I head back to my room, fuck you, you, conspiracy thinking fuckers. I’m no idiot. I entered one year before 9/11. All I wanted was my ROTC. Fucking broadcasters, they should report about the social impact of having every fucking billboard show Angelina Jolie holding an M16. What the fuck is that about? M16s are not a fucking fashion accessory.

Lying on my bed, I take out the dog tag and drink a swig out of my Southern Comfort bottle. Staring at the tag, I can’t stop thinking about the M16 not being an accessor...

Shit. Where am I? As I touch my skin, I realize that I’m naked in a hospital gown. There’s a big VA on the wall. My family must’ve dropped me off. Shit, I can’t believe I passed out that hard. I must have blacked out. I knew they didn’t want me around anyway.

The doctor, she says I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Does she know? Do my parents know? Does everyone know about the “human switch?” Did I tell them I turned it off in Iraq? I hope I told them that it’s the only way we can survive, you don’t call 911 over there, and it’s infinitely harder to turn it back on, become just a civilian, dialing 911, waiting and waiting

for help.

She gives me Klonopin, Ativan, and Haldol. She must think I'm crazy, because she stopped talking to me. She says to my parents, "Jimmy can't be accepted into any PTSD units until he agrees to get his substance abuse under control, and he's also going to have to pay a copayment, because the injury is a non-service connected condition. Unfortunately, he qualifies to be in one of the lower priority groups." My parents look speechless.

All I can think of is my first drink of the day. Drinking is going to have to get private.

Every day, sleep leaves me feeling as if I just got home. Is this all life is now, a 6-pack down by 10 a.m. each day?

I lost my appetite. It is the start of winter and I haven't touched my uniform since fall. I've worn blue jeans, a red Hanes t-shirt, and blue and white Adidas shoes every day, adding cigarette smoking to my repertoire between beers. I went to college classes, but it's hard waking up at 7 a.m. after passing out from 40s or cheap liquor. Plus, the place is full of assholes.

The last day I went, this guy named Professor Sellonsky is showing us "old metaphors" in English class. The fucking idiot writes "foot of the bed" for describing the bottom of the bed, then he put up there "Redneck" for describing some Americans, his last example is "Wetback." I almost jumped out of my chair and fucked his ass up. Punk bitch thinks you can say shit like that because you're educated. Fuck you, Sellonsky, pieces of shit like you say that all the Arabs are terrorists. You people still think it's okay to mess with Mexicans like that. I guarantee you, he would never dare put the word "Nigger" up there. Fuck you, asshole, you know what's right and what's not. I put my life on the line for fuckers like you. Maybe I'm the idiot.

Whenever my dad gives me extra cash, I get the good stuff; EKV, a German beer, strongest in the world, over double the alcohol content of Budweiser. I didn't start my homework for a month, because I hoped they'd call me back to Iraq, but that never happened. My room is home.

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Danielle just wants to be friends. She told me she still cares about me, but she's seeing somebody else, blah, fucking blah. Fuck, her. I love my cigs and alcohol. Cigarettes are just to keep my hands busy now. Every day, my loves grow deeper.

My mom yells, "Jimmy, come downstairs and help con el mouse!" When I go to help, I can't stop from shaking my head. She's trying to give this critter privacy, as it struggles on the trap, by putting it in an old coffee can. She's worried about it, because the mouse is about to die. I put my arm on her shoulder after it stops struggling. Death is so quiet. My mom is so honorable, so pure hearted.

It's the day after Christmas. Mom gets invited to visit my aunt at her new house in the Mojave Desert. She asks me if I want to get out of my room, so I tell her thanks and then respectfully remind her that I never want to see the desert again. She does the sign of the Holy Cross and then asks God to help me. She loves me so much. I wish God would help me feel comfortable, I really do, Mom. After New Year's Day, she leaves for a week. My brother and sister are in and out during their winter break. My dad works all day. There aren't distractions.

I feel strange on the downstairs couch.

—Where're my brothers?—

I spend days staring at the television screen searching for them in the vast colors of Iraqi desert roads. So many colors, I wish the screen was a window.

—No noises!—

I blink as my brother walks by me, but I'm done trying to be social. It's too hard for me and too easy for him. He makes my brain hurt.

My sister shrieks as she walks upstairs with her friend.

—Iraqi woman in white burqa screams inside screen as TV covers with bloody sand. Each granule glistens in sun from behind screen. Burqa begins to dark redden while she slightly pulses. Staring at screen, she slowly rests. It all disappears. —

Distractions!

Maria walks back downstairs. She looks at me for too long.

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– Where’s my gun?! White burqa can’t trick me again.–

She cautiously says, “You know, Felicia?”

No but I say, “Yeah, why?”

“Well, we became friends like last school year, and her brother is a Marine too.”

“Oh.” Who fucking cares? I’m looking for my brothers. Does no one give a shit?

“Jimmy, don’t get mad, but he was saying he fought in Nasiriyah too.”

Disinterested, I say, “Uh-huh.”

“Well, he said he knew all the guys, and...he...he doesn’t know you.”

I stay silent and stare. She stares back. I feel her eyes could be getting teary.

–Where’re my brothers? They’ll tell you what happened. They’ll tell you I was there.

They’ll tell you it’s a real war like the others. They’ll prove that motherfucker is just lying, just spreading propaganda, and just trying to get in your pants. Fuck anyone who disagrees. Fuck that guy for his bullshit. I lived it. I lived it! They’ll tell you why he tells you that. I still love him though. PTSDs are the black sheep, because it would ruin our Commander-in-Chief’s approval rating. They’re lucky. I miss them. The way we laugh, hug, high five, and talk trash to each other after our successful missions. They’ll tell you about the IED. They’ll tell you how the insurgence can time each one perfectly.

Whole convoy, vulnerable. One Humvee flies like a Tonka truck, smoke comes forward as we blink. Someone says, “Shit.” I can’t take eyes off smoke. As we ready to exit, the next Humvee in front explodes. As my hand moves door handle, eardrums hurt, darkness.–

I blink and answer, “Don’t believe your friend. I saw what I saw.”

“Okay, jeez, you don’t have to get all weird.”

She walks upstairs. I stare at the television.

–Camel Spider sits on TV staring at me. It screams then runs into television. Screen turns black and then reveals me waking up, bandages all over my skull. I’m talking to the nurse. She always tells me same thing. She says no one else survived and I’m in Germany. I always hope she says something else, but October 17, 2005 will always be my Alive Day.–

I glance at the mirror in disbelief.

My face is sharp. It's sunken. Eyes look as if they are mimicking gravestones. My black beard is straggly. I'm tired. I haven't gotten laid since before I left Iraq, can't even jack off, can't even take a comfortable grump. Camel Spiders chew on my dick when I close my eyes. The shower nozzle is hell. Darkness is the enemy.

My mom's gone. Good, she's become too suspicious about my devastated cries for bloated friends, faraway heard whistles, screaming, begging, wounded children, the rest I hope to never remember. Where's my alcohol?

I catch her and Dad staring at the Iraqi dog tag around my neck all the time. They don't understand. I do respect the value of death. I wear it with pride for the man.

My dad returns from work and asks, "What you doing sitting in the living room todo solo staring at the TV?"

I turn to him and say, "Waiting."

"For what?"

"I wanted to ask you if anyone watered Mom's vegetable garden."

"You were here all day, I think Maria did it, que no?"

I jump on his lap, "Papi, I just want to water garden for you like good boy."

"Okay, pero... okay... you can water it, Mijo."

"Where's the hose, Daddy?"

"A, aaaaa... esta in the garage, Jimmy, you okay? You know I don't like the sun to crack it. You okay, Jimmy? I don't know, maybe it's good. You used to water it when you were a boy."

"Si, Papi, yo se," I give him hug, "but I'm hungry for some Taco Bell too. I want twelve tacos with hot sauce Fed-Exed!"

He leaves.

Alone! I go to bathroom and shave like I was going to job interview. I grab chair, Corp flag, pictures, and take out spotted flag from its frame, and then go find garden hose.

I unroll red flag of the Corp on garage floor, placing spotted American flag next to it. I

place rectangle flags, long side by long side, in center of cement floor beneath a beam then turn to the pictures.

One is square. It's my family portrait before first deployment. All of us are smiling. I place large portrait on center of flags. I stare at my battalion photos. In family crest, everyone is dead or done to the new me. I place brothers in a circle around flags and portrait, finishing family crest. I attach a note to Iraqi dog tag and place it in center of crest on top of portrait. The note says, "I feel like a murderer but never committed murder. The dog tag is for an honorable man, an Iraqi man. Tell this Iraqi man's family I'm sorry for ruining their future. I'm sorry for making his son grow up without a father. Tell them, everyone, I wish them luck in creating a government better than America's Federal Republic. And to you guys, I am sorry for not being a better son and sibling. If I knew it was going to be like this, I would've done it all different. I'm sorry, it doesn't matter anymore, please, don't worry anymore. The human you love died in Iraq. The human still loves you and will always love you, all of you. Do not ever question that. Love for you and country cannot conquer how uncomfortable I feel. I'm sorry. I love you all. Semper Fi."

After standing on chair, I place knotted hose under chin. I check if it is securely tied to beam and then tighten it some more. I yell out, "Oorah!" and then dive in with arms held out laterally while pointing toes toward center of family crest.

The garage door begins to open, casting a shadow on a hot chrome grill, stealing its shine, sending the shine back to the sun.

The End

E.R. Sanchez bio: E.R. Sanchez has published poetry and non-fiction, most notably with Red Fez, Zouch, Examiner, Ray's Road Review, Poetry Super Highway, and Corners of the Mouth Anthology. His debut novel, *Remedy*; a tale about an all-American, conservative businessman and father, who struggles to

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hold onto the American dream in the wake of a recession that finds him jumping into California's Green Rush, was recently released by Fried Potato Press. Foreword Clarion Reviews said, "*Remedy* leads the reader moment by moment through a harrowing experience that is as surprisingly exciting and humorous as it is dramatic and heartbreaking," and Kirkus Reviews said, "Jack Gram is no Walter White, but his entertaining devolution into the world of drug manufacturing is a decent hit of pot-lit." More information is available at www.FriedPotatoPress.com.