

Scowling Sergeant

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It's July 2018, and I had completed two jetlagged weeks of mandatory in-processing for my first Army duty station, Panzer Kaserne in Böblingen, Germany. I was assigned to the 554th Military Police Company as a medic; my rank was lower enlisted Private. I had a clean break from my civilian life and all its vices and a new, cheerful can-do mindset. I was excited to start my military career and be a part of my new Army family. The sun was shining almost as bright as my smile as I walked towards the main entrance of our company building to meet my leadership.

“Holy fucking shit, Private!” said a female Sergeant.

My blood turned to ice, and I stopped, reflexively going to the position of parade rest. I wasn't expecting to get yelled at and had no idea what I did wrong. The Sergeant, scowling deep enough to curdle milk, blocked the door. Her uniform nametape read “Richards,” and I recognized her as my Medic Section's Non-Commissioned Officer.

“You are not about to present yourself to our Platoon Sergeant looking like ass! Start pushing!” she ordered. I started doing pushups, the default corrective action of the military. Her grating voice was thin and reedy from years of smoking. She sounded like a cartoon character. She continued her tirade for another few minutes, her angry voice grating across my ears like a metal rake through gravel.

“Hold on,” she said. I looked up from the ground.

“Did anyone ever teach you to do your hair?”

“No-o-o,” I replied, scared.

“No, Sergeant. The hell do they teach you soldiers nowadays? Do a couple more pushups and follow me.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

She took me into the bathroom and taught me to put up my hair in a bun. It was the first time I ever had a Sergeant stop yelling at me and teach me how to fix an underlying issue. She left to find a hair sock and some bobby pins. In the mirror, with my hair down, I looked just like my mom. I fought back tears I thought the six previous months of training had buried and plastered on a smile when she came back.

“That’s good enough for now,” said Sergeant Richards. “I’ll help you get hair supplies at the PX later. Now, you are meeting our SFC, don’t you dare fuck this up. You are a Medic and need to always be at your best in front of this unit, our soldiers count on us. So help me God, I will send you back to Basic Training myself if you fuck this up.”

My meeting with our Platoons’ SFC didn’t go well and I planned to pack my bags during lunch. I had done everything she had told me to, but she didn’t know I had failed my Physical Training test I had taken during my in-processing.

As punishment, our Platoon Sergeant ordered me to do sit ups and pushups every time a higher ranking soldier passed by me, then took me outside to do some corrective action, a colloquialism in the military known as “getting smoked.”

Sergeant Richards was assigned to personally lead me in physical training for the next week. I felt her gaze bore through me as she smoked a Marlboro Light from the nearby designated smoking area, as I did situps in the dirt. I had to take the physical training test again tomorrow but I was convinced she would kill me before then. I used a smile to hide my discomfort as the corrective action continued. Gravel dug into my palms and gnats bit at my sweaty skin.

“Put those teeth on safe, Private!” said a Sergeant. I stop smiling. “Do you think this is funny?”

“Why the fuck you have to smile like it’s all sunshine and

rainbows outside?” asked another.

I’m dismissed and I run inside, fighting back tears as I shower and change into a fresh uniform. I thought I had outrun my storm clouds of grief and failure when I became a soldier.

“You’ve done it now,” said another soldier. They were helping me hide from the more sadistic higher ranking soldiers in my unit who went out of their way to have me exercise in locations like the stairwell, in doorways, by the dumpsters, or on the main sidewalk where everyone could see me.

“Sergeant Richards is going to eat you alive. She is angry enough to boil a tea kettle and now we have to hear her shriek like one until you get your fucking act together. If you don’t drink or smoke or dip now, you will be soon.”

I passed my physical training test the next day. I had a lot of motivation from several screaming peers who ran and did the push-ups and situps with me, but the individualized training still stood.

I took a moment to breathe as I followed Sergeant Richards to the school’s track. The dark mountain forest wreathed in mist was beautiful and I felt the grief unclench from my heart for the first time in months.

We set our phones on the bleachers and began warming up. SGT Richards had hardly spoken one word to me since yesterday and I was too scared to ask when she was sending me home.

I was surprised when she did the exercises too. I had expected her to stand on the sidelines and scream at me like a Drill Sergeant. Over the next hour, I was happy to learn I could outsprint her smoker’s lungs, but she could beat me at sheer endurance in push-ups, situps, and planks. Near the end I was panting but she sounded like a dying freight train. We finished, cooled down, and she lit up a Marlboro light.

“How many pushups did you do for your test?”

“Twenty-eight, Sergeant,” I replied.

“Jesus, no wonder you didn’t pass. How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven, Sergeant.”

“You look like a fucking highschooler. How are you only three years younger than me? There is no reason for you to be doing the bare minimum to pass pushups and situps when you maxed out the run. Do you go to the gym?”

“No, Sergeant.”

“Well you are now. Meet me at the gym at o’dark thirty every morning from here on out. Don’t be late.”

“Roger, Sergeant.” I was convinced I was going home in a box.

Over the next few months I adjusted to waking up in the dark, exercising, then watching the sun rise as I walked back to the barracks to get ready for work. My smile became less and less forced as I became friends with other soldiers in my unit and stopped having a heart attack every time someone called my name.

Sergeant Richards had me sign up for every free weekend event I could attend.

“I will be damned if you sit in your barracks room and become an alcoholic. You are in a foreign country for the first time and this is an opportunity of a lifetime. You will travel if I have to drag you out kicking and screaming to run to Schloss Solitude. It’s only a forty minute walk from Panzer Kaserne!”

I soon became the Better Opportunity for Single Soldiers liaison in my unit. The program ensured single soldiers or geographical bachelors or bachelorettes had a peer group they could hang out with and a safe travel group to see the sights of Europe with. With them, I saw more of Europe than I ever had of the US.

During morning predawn runs, the winding mountain roads would be full of sheep and cows as farmers rotated their fields with herding dogs. Endangered frogs sung loudly, then went silent as they pulled their legs inward and closed their eyes, pretending to be leaves as we rucked past.

In my freetime, I explored the wooded German countryside, hiking Ancient Roman cobblestone trails, their colored mosaic broken where modern repairs had been done. Wildlife rich forests sheltered castles on every mountain peak as foxes screamed at you until you left their territories. Wild boar and deer, all fairytale tiny compared to their American cousins, would flee the heavy tread of hiking boots, disappearing silently into the Black Forest. I traveled to neighboring countries with my new Army friends and my grief took a backseat to the joy of exploring new wonders.

I also learned more about Sergeant Richards as we continued going to the gym. She was from Phoenix, Arizona and had joined the Army for a fresh start. She had a small family, a grandma, mother, stepdad and brother. None of which explained the scowl or anger.

“Well, no wonder you ran away,” she said, when I told her about my life in Indiana, my fourteen biological siblings and nine stepsiblings. “Your father was planting children instead of corn.”

“I have a question, Sergeant,” I said, during a rest between sets.

“It’d better not be stupid.” I wasn’t sure if it was so I blurted it out.

“Why haven’t you sent me home yet?”

Her expression changed out of a scowl for the first time I had known her.

“It was a fucking joke! Holy shit, you thought I was serious? Oh my god, wait until I tell everyone at the company!” She started laughing and I smiled. Her laugh didn’t sound like a cartoon char-

acter, it was genuine and rich as if she didn't use it much. By the end of the day everyone in the unit had heard the story.

“Good job, Schlep. I haven't seen Sergeant Richards this happy in a while,” said a soldier.

“Aren't you a little ray of sunshine for Eeyore's rain cloud,” said another.

There was a notable change in her attitude as we neared Thanksgiving break. She seemed a little less angry and the scowl faded when we sat together in the office. It would reappear as soon as we were disturbed but less and less it was directed at me. She took an interest in my family and listened politely as I rambled on about them for a solid hour.

“It's going to be hard this Thanksgiving,” I said, winding down.

“Why?” Sergeant Richards finished off her third Monster energy drink of the day. It wasn't even noon yet.

“My mom died in 2016 around Thanksgiving from cancer and I can't take leave to be with my family this year,” I said.

“Why don't you come over to my place?”

“Ok.”

I was glad I wouldn't be alone with my grief again.

Thanksgiving rolled around and she picked me and my bottle of Malibu up and drove to her apartment ten minutes away. The countryside was beautiful. Yellow mustard flowers were in bloom and the cold would soon send them to seed to be harvested. The apartment was beautiful too. It had a marble staircase with replica Greek vases in nooks and metope carvings on the walls.

“It's like a castle,” I said.

“Cleaning it sucks. All residents are on a roster and take turns mowing the grass and cleaning the common areas like the laundry room,” she replied. She unlocked her door. “Wait, have you not been in one of these before? Of course not, you live in the barracks. Let me give you the tour.”

She started with the door which had a weird system of turning the key a set amount of times to unlock the deadbolt. All the windows had built-in garage door style shutters, a kitchen, a bathroom with a tub big enough for two people, a master bedroom, and a living room bigger than my barracks room. It was easy to ignore the black mold behind the fridge and the handful of prescription bottles on the counter.

“The landlord paints over the mold every so often and those are my antidepression meds that make me piss out my asshole. Here, let me mix you a drink, I used to be a bartender,” she said. I was glad for the subject change. I didn’t think it was polite to tell her to put her meds away in her own house even if they brought back bad memories and made me uncomfortable.

We sat down on her sofa and watched a movie. The alcohol soon kicked in and I started crying. The grief around my mother was still a raw hole in my heart. Sergeant Richards politely ignored my crying until I hiccuped to a stop.

“I know how you feel,” she said quietly. I was wiping my nose on the inside of my t-shirt collar. “My father committed suicide on my birthday.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied. I tried not to choke on my snot. “Do you need a hug?” She turned to look at me.

“Ew, no, gross! I have more tissues, you could have just asked. Why did you use your shirt? Ugh, it’s running down your chin. Go wash up!”

I cleaned up and then passed out on her living room floor as she started another movie. The next afternoon, after we had Doner Kabob from a Turkish food truck, and were sober, she drove me

back to the barracks.

“Schlep, you remind me of myself when I joined five years ago. You’re the reason I get out of bed in the morning and I don’t want to disappoint you as your noncommissioned officer. Don’t ever lose that smile,” she said.

“I won’t, Sergeant,” I promised.

“Good,” she said. “You’d better start carrying tissues around, that was disgusting. Oh, and go get some vitamin D pills from the clinic, the sun will disappear for the next six months. I don’t want you to get seasonal depression.”

I now had a military family to help carry my grief and the means to help others. I carried my smile, a contagious ray of sunshine, through the entire winter.