

CONJUNCTIONS: A Web Exclusive

Soldiers

Porter Fox

The soldiers marched off the TV screen in two columns. There were thirty of them dressed in desert fatigues. They barely fit into Frank's living room. They were sunburned and looked tired. Two wheeled a mortar and another balanced an RPG on his shoulder. A colonel led the platoon with a .45 in his hand.

What are you doing here? the colonel asked.

Watching the news, Frank answered.

Who are you with?

I live here.

The colonel inspected Frank's apartment and the newscaster chattering on the TV. Frank reached for the remote. The colonel kicked it aside. Frank put his hands in the air and the colonel tucked his pistol into its holster.

Don't be ridiculous, he said. You're obviously with us.

The colonel walked to the window and peered through the blinds. The soldiers stood at attention. Frank was relieved they hadn't tracked sand into his apartment. He'd just bought new rugs and had the walls painted. Since his promotion, he'd been trying to elevate his standard of living. He'd bought a new couch and TV and even curtains to match the slipcover.

The colonel sat on the couch and took his helmet off. He told the soldiers to stand down. They lowered their guns and stretched their necks. The colonel rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers along the armrest.

I went for beige so it wouldn't show the dirt, Frank blurted.

It's lovely.

The colonel glanced at his watch and let out a long sigh. He looked like a soldier from the

movies: square jaw line, close-cropped mustache, broad, muscular shoulders. He explained that he was in the middle of a sensitive operation and that he'd like to stay until dark. Frank said that that would be fine. He was a patriot after all, he added. He showed the soldiers to the kitchen sink and they lined up politely on the white tiled floor to fill their canteens.

This filter reduces 99.97 percent of microbiological cysts, Frank said.

Do you get *Playboy*? one of the soldiers whispered.

Who won the World Series? a skinny private with bulging eyes hissed.

When the last soldier returned to the living room, the colonel asked if they could nap for a few hours. His troops had been marching for days, he said. Frank said that would be fine and offered his bed to whoever wanted it. The colonel barked an incoherent order and three young privates raced to the bedroom. The others unrolled their mats and lay on the floor.

Can you command them to sleep, too? Frank joked.

Don't be an ass, the colonel said.

The colonel closed his eyes and rested his feet on the coffee table. When he started to snore, Frank reached for the remote and turned on a hockey game. An hour passed, then another. Streetlights filled the apartment with orange light. The colonel stirred. Frank turned and saw him staring at the door.

Expecting someone? Frank asked.

Where *are* we? the colonel whispered.

The family room, Frank whispered back.

The colonel pulled his jacket around his shoulders and shivered. A soldier snored in the corner. Another near the kitchen muttered and flinched in his sleep. Blue and white shapes flashed across the TV. The colonel cleared his throat.

We were in the south, he said, outside a small city called Amara. The choppers dropped us at a brick factory. Our orders were to seal off the southeast quarter of the city and await further instructions.

The colonel waved his hand in front of his face, inspected it, patted his arms and legs. Frank turned the TV off and fetched him a glass of water. The colonel eyeballed it suspiciously, then drank it.

It was the strangest thing, he said. The city was surrounded by mud walls and power lines. We sent two platoons around to the south. I led the other from D company in from the east. My men were green, but they'd been trained well. We established a position inside the wall and

secured a small house at the end of the street. Two privates rammed the door, but when we followed them in, there wasn't anyone inside. We crossed the street and entered another home. Same thing. We searched a dozen more then swept the entire quarter. There wasn't a soul in the city.

Sounds like your lucky day, Frank said.

Hardly. I assumed the other platoons had proceeded to our rendezvous point, but when we approached the mosque in the center of city, they were nowhere to be found. I tried to hail them on the radio, but they didn't respond. The satellite connection was down too, so we couldn't check with central command. My men were exhausted from the heat so I set four sentries at the entrances and told the rest of the soldiers to get some sleep.

Frank got two beers from the refrigerator and handed one to the colonel. He refused it, then shook his head, took it off the coffee table and tipped it back.

I spent the night pacing under the dome, he went on. I'd taken an interest in Islamic architecture and was surprised to see the mosque was built in classic Umayyad style. It had a hypostyle roof and an enclosed courtyard. The tile work was decent but had obviously been redone. I paced off the arcade, the entrance, and the circumference of the dome. I tried to explain the significance of the place to one of the sentries but he just stared blankly at me.

Maybe he was scared, Frank said.

We were *all* scared, the colonel snapped. There's nothing more terrifying than a moment of quiet in war.

The colonel glared intently at Frank. Frank smiled back. There was a loud crash outside and the colonel rushed to the window and unholstered his gun. Frank stood behind him. A van had rear-ended a car at the intersection. The drivers were yelling at each other in the street and a small group had gathered. A police cruiser arrived and two cops tried to disperse the crowd.

I don't know how you live with it, the colonel said.

What? Frank asked.

The terror.

It's a pretty boring neighborhood.

No order, no hierarchy, the colonel mumbled.

I don't think I know a single person on this street.

It's impossible for a system to exist if the parts are not willing to do what is required of them, the colonel said. The arrangement of the whole hangs in the balance. There's no limit to physical

possibility, dishonesty, desire.

Frank nodded. The colonel sighed. Then he went back to the couch and picked up a magazine.

I would like a nice meal, he said.

I have frozen pizza, Frank replied.

I was thinking of venison Metternich, with grilled apple, port lingonberry sauce, and a Steirerland. Red.

We could go out.

I will not leave my men.

They're asleep.

Irrelevant.

You're the only armed people on the block.

The colonel flipped a page in the magazine and squinted at a photo.

How far is it? he asked.

Frank leapt off the couch and grabbed his coat from the rack. He'd been so busy with his job he'd lost touch with most of his friends. He hadn't gone out to dinner with anyone in months. And never with a decorated war hero. The colonel hesitated then carefully stepped over his men. He stopped in front of a full-length mirror, looked at his fatigues and shook his head.

I can't go out in this, he said.

Frank found a gray suit in his closet and gave it to the colonel. The colonel looked at it skeptically and took it to the bathroom. Frank was taken aback when he reemerged. The colonel had slicked his hair to the side and washed the dirt off his face. Even though the pants were short in the leg, he was a dead ringer for Errol Flynn.

They took the elevator to the lobby and Frank hailed a taxi. He held the door for the colonel and told the driver to take them downtown. The colonel gazed out the window as the cab whizzed past rows of gleaming high rises and blinking neon signs.

How long have you been over there? Frank asked.

The colonel didn't answer at first, his mouth slightly ajar as they bounced through Chinatown.

I have no idea, he finally said.

They got out in front of an Austrian restaurant near the financial district. A doorman greeted them and held open two brass-plated doors. Frank had been to the restaurant once with his boss, but couldn't remember what he'd ordered. The colonel's face lit up when he saw Metternich on the menu. He asked the waiter for the apple and lingonberry sauce on the side and nearly gasped when he spotted a Steirerland on the wine list. Frank ordered the veal and when the waiter returned with the wine, raised his glass.

To new friends, he chirped.

And old enemies.

The colonel slid his arms forward to protect his plate as he ate. Frank cut his veal into bite-sized pieces and watched him. When the colonel finished, he pushed his plate to the middle of the table and crossed his arms over his chest. Frank mimicked him and the colonel signaled for the waiter to clear the dishes.

The food seemed to wake the colonel up, and he told Frank stories about places his division had been and sights they'd seen—black things flying through the air at night, sandstorms that destroyed entire bases, animals that could swim through sand.

Frank was thrilled by the tales. He'd gotten a job straight out of college and never had a chance to travel. The buildings he spent most of his time in were gray and dreary, and his mind was so cluttered with spreadsheets and billable hours at the end of each day, he had difficulty talking to people. When he told his boss the week before that he was ready for a new challenge, his boss answered: How about finding a new job?

He said that! the colonel bellowed. His face was flushed from the wine.

That he did.

I'd have him court-martialed! What the hell does he think makes you tick? Why does he think you spend your hard-earned money on those beautiful carpets my men are sleeping on? What the hell does he think my troops are fighting for?

Liberty? Frank guessed.

Individuality!

The colonel flagged the waiter and ordered two cognacs. The waiter brought them and he raised his glass.

To different worlds, he said.

To violent worlds, Frank replied.

It's not so bad. We've accomplished some things over there. Synchronicity, for example.

I feel like I've spent my life navigating a landscape I don't understand.

You have to orient yourself. Locate a landmark.

I've become content with the smallest achievements.

Lee said victory was being able to continue your way of life.

I couldn't tell you one thing I honestly care about.

Don't sweat it, son. We're all looking for the same thing.

Happiness?

Relevance.

The colonel swished his cognac and took a swig. He looked anxiously around the room.

So ... This is America? he finally asked.

Yes.

These people, Americans?

Most likely.

The colonel scratched his head. He took a mint off the table and put it in his mouth. Then he leaned forward over the table.

I must have fallen asleep just before dawn, he said. When I woke, sunlight shone through the windows. The whole platoon was up looking at the minarets. I told them to form up and two young men came through the eastern entrance. They were wearing dishdashas and black-and-white headbands. The boys searched them and I had our translator ask how they got past the sentries. They said they hadn't seen any and that they'd been told to give us a message.

What was it? Frank asked.

A small seashell.

Why?

I don't know. We searched it for writing or a symbol of some kind but there wasn't anything.

It was just a simple helix shell. The translator asked if it was supposed to mean something and one of the men said, not really. It was a common shell. You could find them everywhere.

Did you ask where everyone in the city had gone?

They said they were waiting for us outside. We secured the stairs and there they were. The whole city, just like they said. There must have been fifty thousand people in the streets. Our sentries stood at the foot of the stairs: Evans, Albertson, Tatigian, Moretti. They'd taken their helmets off and had their heads bowed. I asked the man what everyone was doing. He said they'd come to pray for us.

The colonel scratched his head and stared across the room. Frank flagged the waiter and asked for the check.

There are certain ways things are supposed to go and certain ways they're not, the colonel said.

It sounds like you did what was asked of you.

You have to do more.

Like what?

You have to conceive of a way that things should be. Then make them like that.

Like in a painting?

More like a dream that you control.

Things happen the opposite of how I want in my dreams.

You must appoint a moment for your rational mind to take over.

Something stronger takes over first.

That's the dream. You must learn to contain and control it completely.

Like a robot.

Like a machine capable of imagination.

The colonel went silent again. Frank paid the bill.

Remember this, son, the colonel said as they stood to leave. There are only a certain number of things you can *do* in your life.

Outside it was raining. Two cabs waited on the street. They got into one and headed uptown. At Forty-second Street the colonel asked the cabbie to drop him at Grand Central Station. When they arrived, the colonel got out, looked at the clock hanging over the entrance and walked inside. Frank watched him for a moment, then paid the fare and followed.

The colonel marched through the concourse to a large map of East Coast routes. He traced the colored lines with his finger and consulted the corresponding timetable. Then he went to a ticket window.

Spare a few bucks? he asked, turning to Frank.

Where are you going?

Getting a lay of the land.

How?

South. To start.

What about your men?

They know what to do.

Are you coming back?

That depends, he said.

Frank opened his wallet and handed a wad of bills to the colonel. The colonel bought a ticket and looked up at the display board. Then he shook Frank's hand.

It's been a pleasure, he said.

Where are you going to stay? Frank asked. How are you going to eat?

This isn't my first tour, son.

The colonel clapped Frank on the shoulder and set off toward a row of escalators. Frank watched him disappear down one and asked the ticket agent where the train was headed. The agent said he couldn't release that information and Frank ran to the gate. He peered down the stairwell but couldn't see anything but the polished tiles of the platform. He started down the escalator then thought better of it and scrambled back up. A woman wearing heels and a mink wrap approached.

Are you coming or not? she grinned.

Where are we going?

Chattanooga.

Frank watched the woman descend. There wasn't another soul in the station. He looked around the empty hall and waited. The train left. Frank stayed put. He'd never seen the station so quiet. He gazed at the constellations painted on the ceiling and the chandeliers encircling the room. A few hours later the first bleary-eyed commuters arrived. By seven the station was full.

Frank waited until eight fifteen then joined the throng. The crowd swept him across the hall, up the stairs, through the revolving doors and into the brilliant light outside. The air was cold and smelled like roasted chestnuts. Horns blared. A helicopter thumped overhead. Frank started walking south. At the intersection he crossed the street and picked up the pace. His office was only twenty blocks away. With a little luck, he could still make it on time.

[Porter Fox](#) writes and teaches in Brooklyn, New York. His fiction and nonfiction have been published in the New York Times Magazine, the Believer, Outside, Narrative, and the Literary Review, among others. He is the editor of [Nowhere](#), an online literary travel magazine, and is working on a travel narrative set on the coast of Maine.

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