



2021

Heartburn

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Recommended Citation

Edison, Matt (2021) "Heartburn," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 36.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol2/iss1/36>

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Heartburn

Staff Sergeant Mayo strutted into the gymnasium. The overhead lights reflected off his head like a linoleum floor. He was all teeth and had the kind of smile that made housewives swoon and 17-year-old kids sign dotted lines. His years on recruiting duty for the Marine Corps had packed a few extra pounds around his waistline — too many late nights at high school basketball games sucking down two-dollar cheeseburgers.

But he didn't mind. Height and weight standards were flexible at his rank. And as far as the Corps was concerned, Mayo could burn the excess fat by finding new kids to send to boot camp. But recruiting wasn't just a way to pay the bills, it was a hunt — an expedition across urban terrain, open season and without bag limit. Mayo's experience had taught him that high school basketball games weren't just an ideal place for cheap meals and ogling single mothers — it was what the military referred to as a target rich environment.

He perched on the top of the bleachers and scanned the room. Like any good bird of prey, Mayo knew it wasn't the strongest or the fastest you zeroed in on. Those kids didn't need to be hunted. They willingly stepped into the lion's den the day they graduated and shipped out the same week. No, the ones you had to chase were the ones who crowded the bleachers alongside Mayo, watching the future CEOs and financial planners sink threes and wink at the prom queen.

Mayo kept his eyes on the game but used his periphery to observe the kids around him. The burn outs, druggies, hippies, goths, nerds, band geeks — whether they knew it or not, they all got the heartburn of desire every time the more muscular, more talented, or more privileged student had another opportunity handed to them.

Every morning these kids went to school and suffered the taunts of popular kids. And every night they rode cheap bikes to run-down homes on the outskirts of town, where their mother worked three jobs and their father was too fucked up to notice them. The only thing they had to look forward to was a box of Easy Mac and whatever was on basic cable that night.

They were easy targets. Mayo couldn't change that.

Browsing the rows of teenagers, Mayo skipped over the loners. It's not that they were too easy, it's that they were total wildcards. While one might brighten up and happily share personal details to a complete stranger — based solely off the fact that someone of clear importance had picked *them* over everyone else — it was just as likely that Mayo might get a *fuck you* followed by a cold shoulder. It was rare because the uniform demanded a certain respect. But if it was going to happen, it usually happened with the loners. And the denial never came until Mayo had already delivered his three-minute stump speech. The little shits always waited until the end and completely wasted his time.

No, groups are what you wanted. Groups presented a unique opportunity because you could flip through the different personalities and watch the social hierarchy at play. Say you walk up to a group of five and present yourself, starting with something completely unrelated to the military, of course. After all, you have to gain their trust. And there's no easier way to address, and then immediately dismiss, the kid's number one concern — "*this guy wants to recruit me*" — than to start off with something like "man, I don't know about you guys but this game is fucking lame (they love it when you curse), but my boss said I have to be here so I'm just killing time until I can get off and go fuck my girlfriend." Bam — you've snagged their attention. After that, it's a process of elimination.

The leader of the group will be the bold one. He'll joke with you and treat you like a friend, but there's no chance that kid's signing anything. Most of his buddies will follow his lead, egging him on and validating his responses with giggles and back slaps. But the second their leader loses interest, they

lose interest. But then there's that one kid — the target. He'll be mostly quiet, maybe crack a grin when the leader is accidentally funny. But when leader-kid says something truly idiotic, the target always presents himself by something innocuous — rolling his eyes, folding his arms, sighing, whatever. This might not mean much to most of you, but to a Marine recruiter, it's pure gold. It signals that the kid possesses two key traits every Marine needs: an ability to blend into a group and defiance.

The Corps has never and will never recruit robots who do exactly what they're told all the time. That was one of the few things they got right in *Full Metal Jacket* — you had to be smart enough to break the rules without getting caught.

Sifting through the scores of kids lining the bleachers, Mayo spotted the best group to attack. They were far enough away from the concession stands that he could intercept, but close enough to the bottom of the bleachers that he could make his approach look natural (It's obvious that you're trying to recruit them if you have to walk up the bleachers to get to them, after all). With the group acquired, Mayo played his other favorite game — guessing which kid he'd sign. After all, the hunt required a specific target. The trick was being ready to adjust if you swooped in only to discover the original choice was faster than you thought.

It didn't take long to find the kid in the group. He sat behind the others on the bleachers with his arms folded and was absent-mindedly watching the game while his friends laughed at a joke one of the dipshits had spouted off. This kid had Marine written all over him, he just didn't know it yet.

The buzzer blared, signaling the end of the quarter. As everyone in the gym stood to use the restroom or buy a snack, Mayo clicked his talons and dove toward his target. It was in these moments — the wind rushing past as he advanced on an unsuspecting victim, confident that he'd thought through every scenario, and certain another meal was only moments away — that he felt most alive these days. And strutting toward his target with that famous smile radiating and his head reflecting the gym lights, Mayo felt a twinge of heartburn that had plagued him for years.

No amount of Tums or gum or water could get rid of it. But as Mayo launched into his three-minute stump speech, he was confident that in only a few hours' time — after the game was over and he'd driven his shitty car to his cheap apartment on the outskirts of town, after he'd sat down to enjoy a bowl

of Easy Mac, and after he'd called his mom to ask about her day between her shifts at Applebee's — he'd enjoy a few moments guilt free.

The Morning After

She knew it was too early because he wasn't even awake yet.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, dicing tomatoes and scraping them off a plastic cutting board into a frying pan. The coffee pot gargled and the overhead light buzzed. She froze when she heard a clicking sound behind her but shook it off when the fridge kicked on. She grit her teeth and shoved a knife through an onion. She put the blade down and cracked two eggs into a bowl and whipped them with a fork until tiny bubbles formed around the edges. From down the hall she heard the bed creak. She held her breath and the swelling around her eye throbbed.

Her phone was at the very end of the counter to her left. The only entrance into the kitchen was behind her. It led to the hall, which led to the bedroom on the left and the living room on the right. There weren't any windows. She left the fork in the bowl and grabbed the knife and chopped the onions thinner than she preferred. She heard the bedroom door open. She adjusted the heat on the grill. She heard the approaching crunch of feet against stale carpet. She kept her back to the kitchen entrance. The footsteps stopped.

She kept her head down but eyed the reflection in the toaster. He was leaned against the doorway behind her and staring at the refrigerator. He adjusted a photo on the fridge door — a picture of him and his friend Mark in Afghanistan, held in place by a tiny Marine Corps magnet. Just as she started to wonder if he was ignoring her, he turned his head. Her eyes darted back to the onions.

"Morning."

"Hey."

She kept her back to him and felt light-headed. She took in a quick breath as quietly as she could.

"Can they see you today?" she asked.

"They don't open for another hour."

“What time?”

“Just after seven I think.”

“No, when do they open?”

“Oh, eight I think.”

She heard him drag a chair out from under the table and take a seat. She checked the reflection but couldn't see him. She tightened her grip on the knife and looked toward her phone.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“You promised me.”

“I know babe. They open soon.”

“Can they see you today?”

“I don't know. They get busy.”

“Do they take emergencies?”

“It's not an emergency.”

“It's not?”

The chair dragged across the linoleum. She checked the reflection but still couldn't see him. She didn't realize she had stopped chopping and had tightened her fingers across the handle. She couldn't hear him anymore but knew he had to be in the kitchen still. Wouldn't she have heard the callouses on his feet tapping against the floor though? Unless he was wearing socks.

Suddenly he was right behind her.

He draped his hands over her shoulders. Her blood stopped flowing. She bit her lips tighter together and felt dizzy. Her grip felt suddenly weak and she wondered if he could feel the sweat through her shirt. She told herself to remain perfectly still. She felt his breath against the back of her head — it smelled like whatever he had the night before and made her even more light-headed.

“Lots of guys have to wait forever, babe. There was that one guy who killed himself in the parking lot because he couldn’t get an appointment, remember?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m just saying. There’s lots of guys worse off who still have to wait.”

“Can’t you tell them what happened? Wouldn’t they see you quicker?”

“That happens to lots of guys. I didn’t even know what happened until I woke up, babe.”

“Doesn’t make me feel any better.”

He rested his forehead against the back of her head and buried his nose in her hair. The muscles in her neck finally loosened as she tilted her head away from him, taking the opportunity to adjust her periphery. She watched him lean back. His eyes were beet red. She could see him biting the inside of his lip. He let his hands slide off her shoulders and took two steps back.

“I’ll call at eight and tell them it’s an emergency.”

“Okay.”

“It won’t happen again, babe.”

“Okay.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

He turned and left. She listened to the crunching of the carpet get quieter. She let out her breath and felt the countertop vibrate. She saw “Mom” flash across her phone’s screen, walked over, and hit ignore — seven missed calls in the last five minutes.

I’ll call back after eight, she thought.

About Matt Eidson

Matt Eidson is an author, journalist, and essayist pursuing his master's in English at the University of North Dakota, where he also works as a graduate teaching assistant. Matt is a former United States Marine with tours to Iraq and Afghanistan. He is also the current State Representative for District 43 in Grand Forks, North Dakota.