

“Then There Was Applause”

By CPT Mike Warren

It was the day of their mission and Chaplain Zimmer was showing Lieutenant Stone a video on his laptop. As he clicked “play,” a tiny dancer slid out from under her abaya, tossing it onto the floor like dirty laundry, and then unbuttoned her ACU pants, wiggling her hips until they slithered into a pile at her feet. Then the dancer pirouetted, her hands performing fluttering circles onto her bed, her eyes glancing over her shoulder, and her lower back curved so that her lacy panties filled the screen. She bent her knees, bouncing up and down to the rhythm of the rap song, her red hair unraveling from the Army approved bun until it wrapped around her shoulders as she spun her head back and forth shouting: “You want to love me,” in English and Aramaic. LT Stone turned off the volume and folded the screen.

“There’s more.” Chaplain Zimmer attempted to open the laptop.

“I get the point, Tom,” Stone said.

“Jenkins calls herself ‘Private Dancer,’ and posted her vids to Youtube, and blogged about everything we say and do, or worse yet, don’t say and don’t do.” He paced to the front of the tent, grabbed Stone’s rucksack like he was testing its weight, and then said, “She’s your troop. Talk to her.”

“You’re the Chaplain,” Stone said. “This seems like a moral issue.”

“It’s a morale issue as well and that’s your department. Look, I’ve tried. She doesn’t like ‘holly rollers.’”

“Holy crapper.”

“What?”

“That’s what they call you—the holy crapper. You remember when you dropped your Bible into those wooden latrines we made before we got the Port-a-potties? The story goes that before Jenkins started stirring the gasoline into the bucket of waste; she spotted the Bible and fished it out with her shovel. She strolled away from the latrine area and started washing it off at the water buffalo. Just about the time she read your name on the cover, Jenkins, and everyone around her, heard the whistling of an incoming mortar round. Before she thought to dive under the buffalo, the round impacted that bucket of crap. Your crap, and likely everyone else’s, splattered all over other soldiers who happened to be standing nearby, onto the Port-a-potties, and even reached some of the tents; but not a drop touched Jenkins.”

“I remember that day, but I never heard that story,” Zimmer said.

“You just never had someone to tell it to you.”

“Just talk to her about the videos.”

“What about her NCO’s?”

“Yeah,” Zimmer said as he winked, his teeth bared like he couldn’t shut his mouth. He always wore that expression whether they were getting mortared, learning of the death of a soldier, or finding out they’d be home in three months. “Command thinks they’re biased.”

“I’ll have her report here tomorrow.”

“You need to talk to her before your mission.” Zimmer looked down at his watch.

“That’s in ninety minutes. We’d better go to her.”

“All right, just let me put my stuff away.”

“What you got there—a care package?”

“A ‘don’t care’ package is more like it. Take a look.” Stone handed a tiny picture with a note written on a Post-it. Zimmer rubbed his fingers together as he plopped onto the folding chair, glancing from the photo to Stone’s fixed stare.

“I don’t understand,” Zimmer said.

“I called to talk to her about it but she changed the topic to life insurance. Life insurance, Tom. She wants me to sign these papers.”

“But this?” Zimmer handed the picture back.

“It’s her decision, she says. Her choice.”

“How long was she?”

“Five months.”

“Why?”

“Sacrifice was all she would say. Sacrifice.” Stone tucked the photo into the pocket below his nametag and patted it like it was a child’s head.

“You want to ditch the mission?” Zimmer asked.

“No. Sitting here sulking isn’t going to help.”

“You ought to go home.”

“Yeah,” Stone said. “We all ought to go home.”

“Male entering,” Stone said, as he and Zimmer ducked under the entrance to Private Jenkins’ tent. Neither of them had ever ventured into what was called “The Red Light District.” Typically, Chaplain Zimmer stayed at the chapel, the command tent, or his personal tent and Stone didn’t want to fraternize.

“Jenkins,” Zimmer said, “front and center.”

Red hair cascaded down her shoulders as she skipped into view. Her physical training shirt was wet from sweat and covered her shorts.

“Tuck that in,” Scott said.

“Roger,” her voice was raspy like a man mimicking a woman.

“Can we talk?”

“Not with him,” she pointed at Zimmer.

“I’ll wait outside.” The chaplain clutched Stone’s shoulder and whispered, “You’ll be all right.”

“Come get your Bible when you want, Sir,” she said to the Chaplain. He poked his head back into the tent. “I got it all clean and purified for you.”

“Keep it,” he said, his bared teeth presented in response to her smile. Stone thought he also heard, “You need it more than me.” But he figured that Jenkins didn’t hear those last words as she smiled at him, lifting her gray shirt high above the waistline of her black shorts, and then tucked the gray edges into the black.

Stone wasn’t all right. Jenkins had the body of a dancer with strong legs, a petite torso, and a slender face fully framed by red hair. It was a wonder to Stone that she joined the Army rather than take up modeling or cheerleading for professional sports. Some had said she enlisted to escape abuse, others because she wouldn’t have to strip any more, but what Stone most believed was that she knew she’d be the center of attention.

“What’s the word, Sir?” She asked. “You and the preacher come here to save my soul?”

“I’m here because of the video.”

“You watched it?” Her eyebrows touched as she wrinkled her forehead. “You did. Now you’ll burn in Hell like the rest of us.”

“I’m not here to preach at you,” Stone said. “Just want to talk for a minute.”

“Come on in.” Her arms swung toward lacy curtains decorated with a sparkling sign, “Welcome to the Jungle.” “You like my video?”

“Everybody likes it.” He sat in a chair she had decorated with unicorn stickers and said, “That’s the problem.”

“It was.” She stopped and followed his gaze. His eyes were enraptured by a nearby picture of her in a bikini holding a toddler.

“Tabitha,” she said. “I left her with my folks. They can’t afford her.” She sat on her bunk in front of him, her hands gently rubbing her thighs as she spoke.

“Don’t you send money home?”

“Yeah,” she stuttered a bit, and he wondered if she was going to cry or was only pretending to. “Dad’s business tanked, he’s gone bankrupt, Mom’s got medical issues, and we ain’t got nobody else to help.”

“What’s that have to do with.”

“I need the money,” she said, moving to the edge of her bed and placing her bare foot on the leg of the unicorn chair.

“How do you get it from this?” Stone pointed at her laptop.

“Sympathy,” she said, touching her lips with her finger. He imagined he knew what that meant having heard her name whispered under hushed voices, and her image on the screens of laptops quickly shut as he approached.

“LT Stone,” a voice came from outside the tent.

“Yeah?” Stone jumped up.

“This is Specialist Scott. We got sixty minutes till start time. You told me to remind you.”

“Huah,” Stone said and then looked at her. “I’m not sure if you should still go with us.”

“I do something illegal?”

“Well, no, but it’s not the Army we want others to see.”

“I love seeing them kids, Sir.” She shot up and stood so close to Stone he could feel the heat of her breath. “Please, don’t screw me over.”

“If you come,” Stone considered the foolishness of bargaining even as he said, “you owe me a few minutes to talk about, well, sin.”

“Ain’t you a sinner?”

“Born and bred,” he said. “But after the mission, I want to talk about grace.”

“Later, then.” Her smile would forever remind him of loss.

SPC Scott waited by the Humvee with the rest of Stone’s battle rattle. Private Jenkins reported a few minutes later, stuffing her hair up into her helmet, and dragging her vest and weapon along behind her. Staff Sergeant Lloyd had assigned four soldiers to each of the six Humvees. The last one had room for two more passengers, the translator and the child from the orphanage. Scott was the LT’s driver; Jenkins sat directly behind Stone, with Private First Class Lawrence to her left behind Scott. Jenkins looked like she didn’t belong with her helmet pressing down on her hair, the lip of it nearly eclipsing her eyes, her vest almost engulfing her, and her M16/M203 grenade launcher dwarfing her as she held it at the ready.

The convoy to the orphanage was quiet with Iraqis waving salutes in the Soldiers’ direction, children running alongside as they passed by with windows zipped down and arms

waving in return. Musaf, the interpreter, and Jaleel, the orphan ride-along, joined the convoy as they headed away from the school the soldiers were rebuilding into the city to buy enough scholastic supplies for 150 kids.

Along the way, as they skirted past uniquely ornamented mosques, Pepsi signs written in English and Aramaic, a Catholic church without a highflying cross, and cars older than many of the Humvee's passengers, the soldiers talked while Stone listened. He smelled the sweet fragrance of Jenkins' shampoo as she pressed forward in her seat listening as if she was hearing her winning lottery numbers being announced on TV. He imagined feeling her warm breath on his neck. He wanted to remember it that way, anyhow.

Specialist Scott asked Jenkins and Lawrence if they knew why he went home only three weeks ago. They said, "No," so he proceeded to tell them his story:

"My wife, Becky, was sick and pregnant, so they sent me home back in April. We'd been here only about six weeks and I didn't want to leave, but she never complains, and well, she was crying all the time. This was right before I was assigned to the school repair duty, so I didn't really know you guys yet. When I got to the States—you know that Budweiser commercial where everyone's clapping as the Soldiers walk down the airport—that's what happened. I felt proud. Someone took my picture. Somebody bought me lunch and I missed my ride.

"Becky was expecting me home by noon, only I missed the rear detachment's van. They were there at eleven hundred. I was eating and lost track of time, so they left, figuring I had missed the flight or something. It was weird being in that airport, being home again and yet not really 'home.' I was so excited I didn't think to call anyone. I just found a cab and headed home.

“Don’t show up empty handed,’ I thought. So, I asked the driver to stop at a Wal-Mart and shopped for my wife and for my future newborns. I figured I had all the time in the world, only I didn’t know what Becky was going through when she called Rear D and they told her I wasn’t on the flight. I imagine she panicked and that was what started her hyperventilating. She’d been doing it for years whenever she got upset, only now it was worse with her being pregnant and all. She couldn’t muster enough voice to call anyone and instead jumped in our car and headed for the hospital.

“It’s ironic that the entire time she’s speeding down the road like a maniac headed for the hospital, I was at Wal-Mart buying her roses, a card, some chocolates, and a silk nightie. She was hit head-on by a semi about the same time I finally thought to call Rear D. When I got to the hospital, it was bad. She wasn’t moving, but she was breathing. Her eyes were shut and blackening, her legs broken, and her heart was beating out of control. They told me I got there just in time to make a decision. The twins wouldn’t live if they didn’t get them, but if they went in, she might not survive the surgery.

“I just looked at her face and I knew the right answer. Her choice became mine. The kids are with my Mom now. I had to come back, to tell you guys about what happened to me. You see it was then, when I made that decision, that I finally understood the meaning of sacrifice; the meaning of love.”

Stone had paid attention though the conversation wasn’t for him. He listened to Jenkins sniff, wanting to turn to see if she would wipe her eyes, but unwilling to be so intrusive. Instead, he stared out the window at the expressionless faces and listened to her tell Scott, “Later,” when he asked if she knew what love and sacrifice meant.

As SPC Scott finished his story, Stone ordered him to stop on the side of the road, near the shops but away from the marketplace on the south side. The other Humvees pulled in behind while the Soldiers filed out and prepared for their mission.

Stone stopped Specialist Scott before he got out and said, "Sorry about your loss."

"You ever lose anything precious to you, Sir?" He asked.

"No," Stone said, though he continued to carry the picture in his pocket. "Why?"

"It feels better to share pain," Scott said. He walked around to the Lieutenant's side of the Humvee and then said, "Sir, I still have faith in God and in what we are doing. I have hope every day knowing that one day, I will see my wife again for all eternity. That's what keeps me going. Knowing that in the end, we will all hear the applause of angels."

Jenkins and Scott volunteered to remain behind to guard the Humvees while the rest of them headed into the markets. Stone realized later it was a mistake to bring Jenkins and then worse, to leave her with the vehicles. It was a lesson he'd never forget; guilt he'd forever carry.

"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

The minister's monotone voice was contrasted by the soft sobs of a young girl in the arms of her grandmother. The sun was descending into the west; its glare behind the pastor shadowing his stern chin robotically moving to the beat of an inaudible drum. His didactic sermon was received by soft sobs and shuffling shoes from less than a dozen family members, friends and soldiers. LT Stone's green uniform was stiff against his chest, his tie too tight, and his beret unable to block the glaring sun.

“Would anyone like to share a few words?” The minister asked. Stone knew he had to speak, to tell the story, to tell the truth; but he would wait if another would speak first. The family—the parents and the brother—sat in the only chairs with their chins resting on their chests, tissues simultaneously raised to their noses, while the few friends spun their heads, looking at one another with forced frowns and hands that seemed bound inside their pants’ pockets. The soldiers stood straight, their rifles shouldered, while Stone, the lone officer, stared the minister in the face until he felt the soft hand of a child slide into his grasp.

“If there is no one, then I would ask you to bow your heads in prayer,” the minister said.

The little girl touched his pant leg like she was feeling a familiar fabric and smelling a scent she loved. Her red hair bounced on her shoulders as she lifted her arms up at him and shouted, “Mommy.”

Stone bent to a knee, knowing the eyes of the crowd were now upon him, and lifted the child to his chest, her face so close he could smell the peanut butter on her breath. The prayer stopped at “in Heaven;” there was silence, and all eyes focused on him. They wanted to know what happened. He could see it in their stares, in the slight nodding of their heads, and in their applause as one by one, beginning with the grandmother, they beckoned him forward with a clapping crescendo.

“Private Jenkins was a soldier,” Stone said. “She did her duty. She died for her country.” He wanted to tell them her story, but the sequences seemed disjointed; the memories mixing with imagination. Her life seemed to intertwine with his own; this funeral with the memorial service only a few days before in a country so far away. So he remained silent with the child in his arms as the minister finished his prayer. But he knew the story.

“Come home,” Tabitha said as LT Stone attempted to return the girl to her grandmother.

“Yes, come tell us about Brianna, please,” Mrs. Jenkins said.

Stone checked his watch, tapped his hand against his coat pocket and said, “I got a plane to catch.”

“She never told us much. Just that she loved us.”

“She had pictures of you all over her personal area,” Stone said.

“Lord, she never said much,” the grandmother said.

“Come.” The girl tugged on Stone’s hand with both of hers. He followed the family to their car and then followed them in his rental to their place, almost without thinking, never once considering the time he’d lose.

They offered him the couch and he sank into its leather embrace. Tabitha went to her room for a nap following a pat on her head from LT Stone. With a cup of coffee in hand, and the attentive ear of Jenkins’ parents and a brother she never mentioned, LT Stone told them what seemed to him the truth; the story he came home to tell.

“You know the story of Abraham and Isaac? How God told Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice, to test the patriarch’s faith? Well I imagine Abraham must’ve felt mighty confused by all this. Why would he offer up the gift that was promised him? Would God raise Isaac from the dead? All we know is that Abraham marched his son up that hill, bound him up with rope so he wouldn’t get away, or so the father wouldn’t see the boy as his son, then raised the knife to heaven and prepared to strike at the one he most loved. We know the strike never came: but what if it did? Would Abraham feel the guilt of murder or the pride of obedience?”

The family shrugged. Mr. Jenkins began to speak but held it. LT Stone pointed with his finger at a picture of Private Dancer in her bikini holding Tabitha in her arms and continued:

“You know the Muslims believe Abraham’s story just like we do? Only the son doesn’t represent Christ and God doesn’t bring Him back to life. I imagine a Muslim father strapping a vest to his son comprised of broken ceramic, marbles, rocks, and shards of glass all over wires bound around three pounds of C4 explosives. The father’s mouth twists into a beaming smile while his son silently prays to Allah.

“‘You have made me proud,’ the father says and kisses his son’s hairless cheeks. ‘You will make God proud, as well.’

“Once bound to his mission, the son advances towards his target. She is still a hundred meters away and yet he thinks he can smell her shampoo. With each trudging step he stares intently at his target, remembering his training, remembering her image burned into his mind. She is the enemy and represents everything that is abhorrent to God. The children gathered around the beautiful American girl move away from her while women beckon with swift hands and men back the crowd away with arms flared to their sides. Their eyes are affixed to the martyr, the sacrifice offered for the glory of God.

“The son turns to face the soldier, her eyes scanning sporadically from the crowd to the unarmed man. In one hand she holds her rifle, but in the other is the tiny hand of a child. A little girl with green eyes and a loose fitting hijab, naively smiles up at the son, unaware of the danger, unresponsive to the silent prodding of the crowd. The son turns from the girl to the soldier, thinking to look the devil in the face before he sees the face of God.

“Her bright eyes strain to see beyond the man standing in front of her. Tufts of red hair protrude out from under her helmet like blood dripping down her face. Her trembling hand holds her rifle high as her other clings tightly to the child. The son looks into her eyes and he sees the

reflection of himself, sweat running down his brow, his greasy hand shaking behind his back, and on his hairless face, a smile like he was staring into the face of an angel.

“‘Show me your hands,’ she says in a language he can barely understand. He can’t stop smiling, feeling a sense of joy like he’s about to change. He harmlessly drops the detonator, holds his palms open before her eyes, and backs away one step.

“Only the father is watching from the window. He presses the call button on the cell phone and his son, your daughter, and the helpless child disappear into eternity. The crowd applauds; the father praises God for the death of a sinner and the glory belonging to his only son.”

The parents stirred, the mother cried and Mr. Jenkins said, “Enough.” LT Stone left the steaming cup on a stand by the couch and returned to his rental car, his hand lightly tapping the picture he still carried in the pocket below his name. He didn’t even look at his watch, didn’t worry about calling home, knowing that there would always be time.