The boy lies on the couch studying, or more accurately, pretending to. Not that there is anyone to pretend for. Except for him the house is empty and has been for weeks now. His mind is wandering back to the blistering heat and unforgiving sun of the desert. Under his gaze, the pages of the book have disappeared, replaced by the never-ending undulations of the dunes. Abruptly he falls out of the daydream, so he goes back to reading the book and for the longest time his eyes focus but eventually, inevitably, his gaze starts shifting, losing its focus; the daydream is back.

He lies on his back, heels to his butt, looking at the pale blue sky. The sun makes everything look pale; to him the desert is no more than a monochromatic shade of brown as far as his eye can see. He does not know it yet, but eventually he will see different shades of brown in that sand. Upon coming home, he will at times miss the calm of those early mornings when the sun was just a bright point low on the horizon, the air still and cool, but for now this is as unknown and out of reach for him as the day he will leave this hell on earth. He tries to calm his breathing and swallows a gulp of water. He has already drunk a whole canteen in the last few minutes. The MOPP suit he wears days and nights now makes him sweat, and breathing is hard through the gas mask. Objects in the distance are hazy, their lines blurred, and people appear to be phantoms. He turns his head to the sides and sees that his unfortunate bunker-mates are not doing any better; they all breathe heavily and sip from their water canteens every few minutes. The boy thinks that “bunker” is a clear militaristic overstatement for a
trench four-foot-wide, two-and-half deep and twelve long. The sand is burning his back through the layers of clothes and protective gear. Every square inch of his body is covered in sweat. And he can feel the droplets running down his back and legs, and his socks have a swampy feel to them. Finally the long-awaited cry comes: “All clear! All clear!” The boy rips off his gloves and mask; the air seems fresh on his face, washing away the rubbery taste of the mask. He unzips the coat and for a minute enjoys the breeze cooling him off, then his sweat is evaporated and he starts to feel the heat again. Mechanically, he takes out a wet wipe and starts cleaning his mask; outer seal, inner seal, lenses, inside the shell and finally the outside. Slowly he gets up and resumes his walk.

The sun is lower on the horizon when he snaps out this time. He gets up, walks to the fridge, pours himself a glass of juice. He drinks it standing in the middle of the living room, looking through the French doors, enjoying his third-floor view of the neighborhood. The light has a crisp quality outside that soothes his soul every time. He wishes for some rain and clouds, but the upper eighty degrees weather feels good now.

Later that week, the boy is driving home. He has had a good day, spent it with his friends up in the city. He didn’t think of the desert today. As a matter of fact he has not thought about it much lately. The night is cool and the highway has been mostly empty so far and he does not expect it to change for the rest of his hour-and-a-half journey. His body feels good from swimming in the river early in the afternoon before he met with his friends. For once it is a good memory of the desert that comes to his mind. They had been on a convoy for five
days and were now headed home. The boy was riding in the back of a HMMWV that had left early for the midway stop at one of the desert’s few water-points. The gunny in charge of the convoy had promised the men a swim and a chance to shower. For most of them, including the boy it would be their first chance in days to wash themselves more thoroughly than with a baby wipe. The vehicles left the highway and turned into a dirt road stopping after a few hundred feet. Higher on the hill are Marines sitting in chairs under the shade of a camouflage net, one of them coming down after hearing the vehicles drive.

“You guys coming for water, gunny?”

“Yes, and I’d like to give them a chance to shower or swim.”

“No problem, just come up here.”

On the other side of the bluff, to the unbelieving eyes of the newcomers, was an irrigation ditch running into a reservoir, dug in the red dirt, the size of a football field its sides covered with reeds. For men who have just spent the last few weeks in the middle of the desert this is heaven. At once they started undressing, each making a pile of their clothes, protective suits, gas masks, and weapons. A wooden ladder took them from the path, halfway up the bluff, down to the water. The boy got in the water with the rest of them. It felt fresh; at first he just floated on his back, eyes closed, knowing that the water was soothing his body. There still seemed to be a layer between him and the water so he decided to swim to the other end, and after a few breaststrokes the feeling started to disappear. All the tension in his body vanished.

Now the boy turns off the interstate and enters the highway that will take him home. He remembers sleeping on the hardwood floors in Kuwait and can
almost again feel the pain in his back upon waking up after a night on those. He looks at the clock and sees that it is already past 2300. Finally he turns into his street and parks. He gathers the few things he brought to the city with him and removes the laundry mall from the trunk. He double checks that all the doors are locked and walks briskly towards his staircase and up the two flights that take him to the third floor. He holds the laundry basket against the door while he retrieves the keys from around his neck. In the dark he walks to his room at the end of the corridor and drops the basket. On the way back to the kitchenette, he locks the front door, and sees that someone left a message on the answering machine.

“Corporal Jones, this is Corporal Pensky. I have bad news; you need to call me back as soon as you get this message. My number is ....” Worried, he picks up the phone and dials.

“Hallo, this is Tom.”

“Hey, this is Corporal Jones. What is the bad news?”

“Lcpl Jette committed suicide.”

The boy walks to the fridge; from the top he takes the bottle of José Cuervo. He pours a double shot in a glass, goes back to the couch, stares blankly at the TV, and start sipping on it. Images of Jette float through his head, chatting under the stars in the desert, smoking cigars back in Kuwait, and swimming in California. Each of those hundreds of memories is a little jolt of pain going through his body. The glass is empty; he stands up, staggers a little and goes back to the fridge to pour himself another tequila. He sits back on the couch and watches TV for a while longer while drinking. When he is done he turns the TV
off, brushes his teeth and goes to bed. But sleep escapes him; he tosses and turns in the queen-size bed that he occupies by himself now. Finally the boy lies on his back and quits stirring. He cries quietly, the tears just rolling off the sides of his face and onto the pillow as he finally falls asleep.

Sleep has escaped him for three nights. It has been a rough couple of days. He keeps trying to understand why. All he remembers though is a smile, a joke, or a word of encouragement. He is at a loss, the feel of which is physical at times. He does not understand, but can he? He feels angry with himself for missing the signs but were those signs or is his memory playing tricks on him? He does not know. The feeling of guilt is strong and omnipresent. Sometimes he feels that he is sole responsible for what happened, for missing the obvious clues. Occasionally he rationalizes that he was not the only one to know him, or the closest one and that someone else could have, should have seen the clues, but the guilt does not go away. He is not fully aware of all those thoughts, for now the boy only feels them.

The boy is on the couch, restless. The feeling of guilt is not as strong anymore but the memories of Jette keep haunting him. He has been exercising hard to tire his body enough in order to sleep at night, but even that does not always work. He gets up from the couch, walks to the bedroom, and puts on his running shorts. He fumbles a little to find his shoes but finally discovers them under a pile of dirty laundry. He stretches a bit and goes out the door, headed for the woods. It feels good to exercise; he starts with a slow jog and gradually picks
up the pace until he reaches a brisk run. His legs warm up, his heart speeds up, his lungs catch up with the acceleration and he feels that he could run like that for miles. He can feel the sweat forming on his forehead, a couple of miles later and it’s dripping in his eyes. Images of Jette keep coming but while the boy is in motion they do not hurt as bad. As the miles go by he can see that eventually the pain will go away, or that he might just get used to it. He has run full circle and starts walking to cool down now. He stifles a yawn. He climbs the stairs and enters the flat. He goes straight to the shower then back to the college book. Running has, as usual, brought him inner peace.

A few weeks later, the boy is still on the couch again, reading. This time he hardly pauses between the pages. His gaze still wanders once in a while but not for long. When he daydreams now it is mostly about his upcoming vacation, the pleasure of having nothing to do for a while but enjoy himself. The daydreams still take him back to the desert but not as often anymore and not as vividly. Not that he has forgotten or forgiven, but one could say that he has accepted and brought closure. He knows that when he wakes up tomorrow the sun will be bright and that he will be free.