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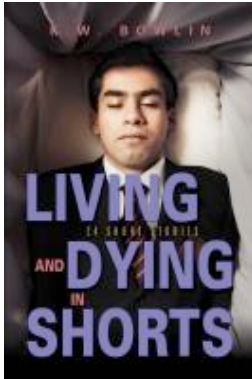
24 SHORT STORIES

AND

DYING

IN

SHORTS



*From a bleak border patrol in the Arizona desert (Borderline Minutemen,) to a dank cell in a Mexican prison (The Raindrops of Quintana Roo), to a wealthy man living off the grid who wakes to an unthinkable horror (Two Blinks), or events that define mob mentality (The Mob), Living & Dying in Shorts is a collection of 24 tales that provide a look into the unique, inescapable, and irreducible features of being human.*

# Living and Dying in Shorts

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# **Living & Dying in Shorts**

K.W. Bowlin

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First Edition

## The Christian

The Christian had lost track of time. He guessed the month was July, but didn't really care. Brass kept track of things like that. Brass needed to know who was coming and going. He simply embraced the suck and survived.

Now there were four men left in Bravo-1, the Christian, Burt, Drake and Top. The others were gone. Some left in Medevac's with glassy-eyed stares, some left screaming, some went AWOL, and others disintegrated in red-ball explosions. IED's tend to do that to a body of flesh and blood and bones. Brain buckets and nut guards were worthless when an IED exploded under one's foot. When a body blows straight up, it disburses like a garden sprinkler. Boots are surprisingly bomb-resistant; it's the warm, soft matter above the boots that doesn't take well to explosions that can punch thru armor.

The Christian lived the battle before he saw it, in murky revelation, in tales from short timers --- the single digit midgets and lifers who liked to play with a grunt's head. The same hyperboles told by every battle-hardened soldier since the dawn of weapons and phalanxes --- from the hills above Arbela to the woods below Cemetery Ridge.

He pictured the ground in his dreams, a divination of smoldering Humvee's and hard clay and burnt brick walls, and spent casings, and candy wrappers, and dead men on the field. Some of the visions were real, and some were grotesque abominations of reality that would only appear in nightmares.

O-dark-30 was as much an enemy as Haji on the move. Haji could be ambushed, but nightmares were indefensible.

Sleep meant a sure attack, insidious as an actual firefight, with screams for Medic and soldiers cursing and crying, and cluster bombs exploding, and men dying all around, and dark-room interrogations, and confessions to Reverend Stayton behind dark

curtains, and his deceased father staring over his stretcher, arms crossed, in a blank stare, shaking his head. He'd wake bathed in sweat.

.....

He heard Haji massing in the skeletal buildings across from Bravo's thin line. There were lots of them. They weren't quiet. They didn't have to be. They knew what they were facing, which wasn't much. They knew that if the GI's could have called in air-support they would have. The Company's interpreter had disappeared several nights earlier. He either left because he was afraid, or because he was taken --- Haji hated interpreters. He had seen what Haji did to their own, who they considered traitors.

The Christian crouched like a baseball catcher on a built-up platform in the crater of a 500- pound cluster bomb. He faced west behind a two-foot barrier of sandbags with both hands on the grips of a 50-Caliber machine gun. 50-Cals shot steel bullets the size of fingers that could punch holes through tempered steel. If Haji hid behind a car, it was like shooting him through paper. His was mounted on an M-3 Tripod. He had enough ammo to take on a company if they charged. He could hear them jabber in the still, scorching night --- whispers echoing across the barren field. The sounds moved closer --- the whispers and scurry of boots. Burt and Drake to his left were asleep, snoring.

He released the firing pin; pulled back the bolt connected to the barrel and sprayed a hundred rounds in a straight line across the buildings in front of him. The Hajis became silent.

"What are you doing?" Top shouted, from a bunker feet twenty feet away to his right.

The Christian didn't reply. This was his gig, and no Top was gonna ruin it. If it was gonna be *BOHICA* which stood for *Bend Over Here It Comes Again*, he was gonna escort a bunch of Haji's to heaven and let God conduct the eternity interviews.

Then he heard a Haji cry in a bizarre tone, higher than any sane man, with something more than anger or impartiality in it --- loud and steady, perhaps a prayer --- thin, frenzied, abhorrent, almost grieving. Soon Top was next to him --- he could feel his breath on his neck, and could smell the acrid chewed tobacco that Top spit every ten seconds.

“Who were you shooting at?” Top whispered, loudly.

The Christian responded with his eyes forward, “Top, I don’t believe they’re overly enthusiastic about approaching this position, I also don’t believe they’re jihadists, more likely the Nasiriyah soccer team. I think the suicide Rag-Heads are all used up. My dad used to say a cornered skunk was the safest animal in the barn, at least from humans. I got a lot of stink in this fifty, and they know it.”

“Listen son, embrace the suck and we’ll be *Oscar Mike* in the morning. Command knows we’re here; there’s a lot of shit going on up the north. Ali Baba’s decided to push back. This F-O-B ain’t exactly a top priority. Sit tight. We’ll be eating Rib-Eyes and drinking Budweiser tomorrow.”

The Top Sergeant patted him on the shoulder and crawled off towards Burt and Drake.

The Christian smiled at the thought of the two, asleep under sheets of camo, high on black tar like babies in swaddling cloth, impervious to Haji and the oppressive heat. You survived the battle by laying low. Men who had the temerity to fight usually got killed. Burt and Drake wanted no part of that, and they made their intentions abundantly clear.

*The Christian prayed. He did so most nights but struggled with focus. He’d start in on a steadfast admonition of his own actions and thoughts, asking God for a change of heart and supplication, and then his thoughts spun random, like the path of a fly to other distractions, of weather and food and comfort and pin-up girls, and rock and roll. He apologized to God for the stray --- got in a few*

*more forgive me's and then strayed again. He apologized for the apologies, returned to the prayer, and forgot where he'd left off. Then he prayed again in earnest. He asked for more forgiveness and strength and peace and comfort, and then he remembered the combat jack from a few nights earlier and prayed over that, because sin is in the eye --- as much as the act, and his thoughts were sinful and full of desire and temptation and hate and he remembered Reverend Stayton warning about confession, so he tried to cover every lustful thought and he strayed again after a minute, and was back on strip-steaks and Budweiser. He asked for forgiveness for the prayer itself and for his weakness and then dosed a Xanax and fell asleep behind the comfort of his 50-Caliber machine gun and Gods assurance of peace.*

He woke to the unmistakable clack, rumble and grind of a T-72 tank approaching from the east --- reassuring proof that God listened to the unfocused prayer he offered ten hours earlier. Top was standing outside of his pit, smoking a fat cigar with an M-16 cradled over his shoulder. One hundred yards away, the headless mutilated body of Bravo-1's interpreter was nailed to a cross propped against a clay brick wall. His body had been slashed repeatedly and his head sat at the base of the cross. *You Next* was written in red paint, perhaps blood on the cross beam that supported his arms.

"They're gone. That little 50-spray you sent last night must have spooked the hell out of em." Top said, and then stared to their left where Burt and Drake were coming down off the black tar, smoking cigarettes. "Burt, Drake --- get him the hell off that cross. I'll call it into C-Leader 1. They got burial rules we gotta follow for the Hajis. Charlie-Deuce will be here any minute and they'll take his body back to the FOB. Animals --- this war ain't about Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass whatever the fuck, or oil --- it's about cruelty.

Shiites, Sunnis, or Ali Baba's illegitimate son, I could give a shit, but who the hell does this to another man?" Top said, chewing more than smoking the nub of a cigar.



“Ain’t it about time we leave this shit hole?” the Christian asked, climbing out of the pit.

“Not today, son --- seems like we’ve been incorporated into the left flank of a defensive perimeter that runs clear to Nasiriyah.”

“Left flank --- what do we got --- four men?”

“We’re being incorporated into Charlie-Deuce,” Top said.

“Top, if this is so damn important, why’d they let us get so thin?”

“Son, you just embrace the suck and man that fifty. Word is they’re bringing in steaks and beer and mesquite charcoal.”

“We even got a full-bird colonel flying in today. There’s big shit on the way if they’re sending a full-bird. Full-birds ain’t known to venture this far in, not in this day and age. Communication systems are turning these battles into electronic games on laptop computers and satellite Wi-Fi’s. We are goddamn pawns on a big, goddam chess board.”

“Roger that Top.”

By noon, Charlie-Deuce was putting up a perimeter with two, T-72’s on loan from Division. The grunts had arrived and were set up at fifteen-foot intervals, digging pits and using sand bags where the natural fortifications were insufficient.

The Christian sat with his legs crossed, with a well-used Penthouse, centerfold missing on his lap. He used a camo-tarp, centered with a broom stick, for shade.

Top assigned him a private named Dick from Arkansas who would feed the 50 when things got heavy. One man could operate a 50, but things flowed smoother when a second soldier fed the 100-round belts of disintegrating metallic links that came packed in steel ammo boxes. The gun was air-cooled, but when the shit was heavy, the barrel had a tendency to overheat which required the loader to either pour water on it or piss on it to keep it functioning.

“Y’all know we’re getting hit hard in the next few days,” Dick said, to the Christian who ignored him.

“Haji’s coming in force --- Sodomaniac’s got a burr up his ass and putting everything he has into this Persian shithole. They got good Intel. We’re thin and they know it. They know we got the highway fortified with a division which makes this flank most attractive --- in fact, I think we’re purposely thin to draw the rags into a kind of trap,” Dick said, sucking on a tootsie pop.

“How long you been in-country?” the Christian asked.

“Two months.”

“Ever shot a man?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s a strange site. I’ve seen Rags near explode when a 50-Cal bullet hits em. It ain’t a hole, it’s an explosion. When a 50-Cal hits a man’s chest, he ain’t got a chest no more. Last night I heard Haji forming and I sprayed a line across his position and Haji disappeared after leaving our headless interpreter nailed to a cross. Damned ugliest, most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen. Ever seen a man’s been decapitated?” The Christian asked.

“No, geeze, and I’m gonna slit my wrist if I have to listen to you all day. You got any smoke?” he asked.

“Nope, best I can do is some Xanax I got from Drake; puts you in kind of a stupor. I’ve found being in a stupor prevents you from doing stupid things like standing up and firing a weapon in the face of superior firepower. When the shit flies, you hit the deck, lay low and embrace the suck.”

“That ain’t exactly what they teach in Basic,” Dick said, now chewing on the sucker.

“True, it ain’t, but I’m still here, and I consider myself more effective alive than dead. Dead men don’t defend a position, only live men do.”

“Word is you guys lost almost ninety percent of your platoon,” Dick said.

“There’s four of us out of fifty,” the Christian said, snapping another beer.

“All dead,” Dick asked.

“Of course not --- half flew out on qualified wounds, between you and me, self-inflicted. Strategy goes like this --- in a fire-fight,

you stick up your arm holding a rifle and hope you get shot. It makes for a nice, general wound and an instant Medevac to white sheets and a horny nurse. Hell, between me and you, we had a friendly Rag posted on that rooftop yonder with the big antenna, firing an AK-47 back at our position. He was a helluva shot and sent a lot of our boys back to Bagdad with well-placed, war-ending arm wounds. Me, Burt and Drake got kind of an unspoken rule that in the future, if the doo-doo's stinking too bad, we'll keep an eye on each other and know what to do --- problem is --- Burt and Drake ain't exactly the best marksmen in the world, cause they're usually loaded on black-tar."

"You gotta be shitting me? What happened to your friendly sniper?"

"He might have been stoned, and got ambushed by Haji. Dick, this is the stupidest war you'll ever see, and it gets to a point where it ain't worth fighting."

"Why are you still here? You seem to have it all figured out," Dick said, in a condescending tone.

"I've seen so much death, I don't care. I hate those motherfucking rag-heads with a passion, and I've grown numb to dying, in fact, I might already be dead. Being here in this shit hole with a Cherry like you might be my purgatory. Only way I'm getting born-again is with a bullet in my head and a soft white light that leads me to God's alabaster penthouse in the sky. Truth is Dick --- I think God wants me here for this killing experience."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I ain't no bible thumper, but ain't it a sin to kill a man?" Dick asked.

"Not in my book --- it's an eye for an eye."

Late that afternoon, a Black Hawk roared in low and fast from the east, and set down behind the T-72's. Lieutenant Colonel Bud Waller "The Wall" stepped out with several lieutenants behind him in spotless camos and boots. The Colonel, well-known for his unwillingness to yield a fixed position called a meeting in a

makeshift command post of sand bags and tarps. Charlie-Deuce stood at attention when he emerged from the narrow opening.

“At-ease men; the enemy intends on re-taking Nasiriyah and have initiated several diversionary engagements to the north, however we have solid Intel that Nasiriyah is the target and the Republican Guard wants it as bad as they want sex with a feral goat.” The men laughed as the Colonel continued, “General Majid’s headquarters was there until we took it, and it is a major strategic crossing point of the Euphrates. The Iraq’s have a hard-on for it and they know we’re spread thin. Gentlemen, you are the left flank. While access through this pass will be strategically more difficult than the highway, we think the enemy will concentrate here because he thinks we don’t expect it. We know this, and are ready to unleash holy hell with the biggest, baddest barrage of air-support this war has ever seen when he crosses our line. Gentlemen, you are the bait, but be assured --- we are looking over your shoulder and will kick Hajis ass when he comes knocking --- any questions?”

Top spoke. “Colonel, who’s gonna be calling in the fire missions?”

“We got eyes in the hills and drone surveillance 24-7. Lieutenant Bill Sherbert will be in command. His father and I fought together in the Mekong Delta in 73.”

The Christian turned to look at Top who exchanged his glance. Lieutenant Sherbert was baby- faced and puffy and appeared to be about 19 years old.

After a cursory inspection, the Colonel flew away, and the tank crews pulled out two Weber Grills, and Charlie-Deuce had Rib-Eyes and fresh corn with butter, and cold beer.

The thermometer in Lieutenant Sherbert’s Humvee read 103 Fahrenheit at 9 PM when the company moved to its defensive positions. The Christian estimated the Companies strength at about 150 men consisting of three Infantry Platoons and one Weapons Platoon that included two squads of heavy machine guns and three

squads of 81-mm mortars. With the T-72 tanks on loan from Bravo Company, the flank appeared solid.

Confidence turned to anxiety when an old man tethering a goat and three young boys appeared out of the west. The man looked distressed and nervous. When he passed through the line, the Christian overheard him talking in broken English to Lieutenant Sherbert and two Butterbars who stood nearby.

"There is a sea of Republican Guards approaching from over those hills," he said pointing a boney arm towards the west. There are thousands; I tell you thousands, of men. They say they will kill every last American and leave a trail of heads to mark their path."

Top, who was standing by, spit and said, "Bullshit, they do this every time. They send a *Humper* like this through the lines with stories of mass armies and it's usually a Company at most. I'd be surprised if Haji has 500 men over those hills."

"No, I speak the truth. Believe what you will, they are as numerous as locusts. Some are carrying poles with heads of American Soldiers. This is Satan's army, now let me pass, God be with you."

"Second Lieutenant Briggs, you got anything from Com-Sat on this?" Lieutenant Sherbert asked, staring through binoculars at the hilly terrain in the distance.

"Bill, I gotta a bunch of static on the line. They might be jamming us or we've got receiver problems."

"Geeze, we got a trillion dollar army and can't make a goddamn phone call?" Sherbert cursed.

The night grew silent as a well-kept secret, and a new-moon sliver brought out a million stars set against a matt-black sky as satellites vied for attention on their fixed orbits. The only lights that showed across the Company's crescent position were from cigarettes that glowed like fireflies.

"I didn't get your name," Dick said, to the Christian who was reclined against the back of the berm with his eyes closed, mumbling

verses he'd memorized since he was a young deacon at the Mount Vernon Pentecostal Church.

"It's cause I didn't give it to you," he said, with his eyes still closed.

"What are you --- some kind of Jesus freak?" Dick said, without the malice the words could have implied. "Why do they call you The Christian? You one of them *turn or burn tongue talkers*?" he continued.

"They call me The Christian because I carry an old NIV bible in my pack."

"What's an NIV bible?" Dick asked.

"It's just a modern bible with scriptures made easier to read. It's all in the translation ---first, it was Hebrew and then Greek and then the English got hold of it and they threw in all the thou arts and thou shalt not's and the thines and wherefores and so on. God didn't speak like that then and I don't believe he'd speak like that now. He'd probably say "get out of my site before I aerate your sorry ass with this 50-Cal death machine."

"So you don't have a name?" Dick continued.

"You can call me Christian," the Christian replied.

"Jesus Christ, how'd I get stuck with someone like you," he said, now becoming agitated.

The Christian sat up and opened his eyes, "You can thank your lucky stars you're in this pit with me, because, Dick --- I'm a survivor, and you will soon learn that survivors make intimately better conversationalists than dead soldiers. Now take a look at that position to our right. Those boys got that *alert* look's gonna get them killed. They got no business with their heads above the bunker. Across this field, we'll receive ample notice when Haji decides to make a move. Right now, those two fools are just heads waiting to be sighted in. No, first order of business is don't make yourself a target. That includes staring above a sand bag with a cigarette in your mouth like those num-nuts. Next, if you're likely to be overrun, get your ass out of Dodge as quickly as possible."

"You mean run away like a coward?"

“No, I mean run away like a man who’s got a solid grasp of the reality at hand. Brains only work when they ain’t disintegrated by a Rag-Head bullet. Trust me when I say; these Rag-Heads know who we are and the potential for destruction we carry --- without us grunts having to make a stupid macho statement about never falling back, or death before dishonor and all that horseshit. Dick, I’ve seen what these assholes do to men they capture and trust me when I say, you want no part of that.”

“So I’m in a hole with a goddamn coward?” Dick said, spitting.

“Dick, can I call you Richard --- Richard, you might think that would elevate my displeasure with your stupidity and ignorance, but I attribute it to your lack of experience and faith in the U.S. Army, and therefore I can’t take your rants as well thought out, because in fact you haven’t witnessed what I’ve witnessed.”

“You turn tale on me if it gets heavy and I’ll shoot you,” Dick said.

“No Dick, there you go --- first thing you learn in combat is to shoot the enemy, not your own comrades.”

“I won’t tolerate a coward, no sir I....”

The Christian was on top of him with a knife tight against his throat. “Dick, you use the word coward one more time and I will smile-cut you from ear to ear. Is there anything about that statement you don’t fully understand?” he said, pressing the razor edge against the stunned private’s neck below the Adams’s Apple.

Dick nodded frantically, and the Christian released his hold.

“And Dick, now that we’ve had this discussion if you so much as move one foot outside this pit, I will neuter you, and turn your head into an IED. We clear on that soldier?”

“You’re crazy man.”

“You might be right Dick.”

There was a cry from behind their line. “They’re coming men!”

Mortars began exploding all around as gunfire from buildings across the field raked their position as bullets zipped overhead with their familiar crack as they broke the sound barrier. Dick went to the edge of the berm for a better view and the Christian yanked him

back. "Damn fool, they ain't coming yet. You're gonna get your head blown off."

Men on either side were opening up a solid line of fire in response. Gunners on both tanks were firing their machine guns and the tanks began opening up their cannons on the hills to the west. In under a minute, the roar of A-10 Warthogs could be heard approaching from the East and soon tracers began finding their marks in a deadly barrage of air support. The incoming whine of artillery fire also filled the air as bombs began dropping all around Charlie-1's fortifications.

But there was a problem --- the artillery was being called in too close. A bunker to their left with ten men exploded sending body parts and weapons in every direction.

"Damn fools, must be amateurs calling these fire missions," The Christian shouted.

To their right, one of the T-72's was lifted off the ground from an artillery explosion that struck directly behind its tracks. The crew tried escaping through the top hatch when another friendly landed on the turret.

The carnage intensified as the enemy began lobbing the severed heads of dead GI's using rudimentary sling shots. In the moonless darkness, the heads appeared like bowling balls bouncing in from the distance.

The battle cry of thousands of soldiers began to grow louder from the attack they faced.

The Christian crouched below the lip of the berm and spoke in a slow, measured tone, "Dick, the Rag's probably recorded those screams at a soccer event last week and are playing them through impressive speakers --- still, in light of the current poorly executed fire-support we're receiving, it is my educated and experienced opinion that we leave this post immediately before we get blown to Bagdad by our own fucking fire."

The Christian raised his hand up high as if he were about to deliver a sermon and shouted, "Can I get an amen." He repeated this several times and after the third exhortation, a shot fired from Bert



K.W. Bowlin

and Drakes position, missed his arm and hit Dick squarely on the left side of his face, killing him instantly.

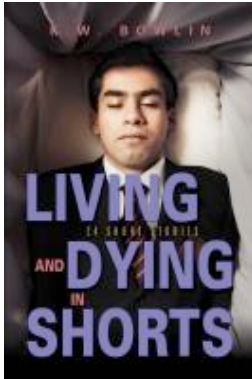
Oblivious to Gods confusion and misread intention, the Christian shouted again --- “I said --- can I get an amen brother!” this time holding up both arms for dramatic affect and waiving the NIV bible, which was promptly shot out of his hand.

Doubting and cursing the effectiveness of Burt and Drakes fire, he crawled out of the back of the pit and started running for the rear, not a minute too soon as another friendly fuck-up exploded in the pit behind him sending Dick’s body parts and the barrel of his trusty 50-Cal flying over his head. More Wart Hogs came screaming in from the east dropping their ordinance in a hail of deadly fire and he heard the screams of what sounded like a thousand men coming from Haji’s position.

Top was crawling away on his knees to his left and was attacked by five Haji’s who stabbed him repeatedly with knives.

Under cover of the new-moon darkness he continued east --- away from the battle --- his Gomorrah, where he found sanctuary in an abandoned, roofless building that was once a church. Purgatory, heaven, or hell, he slept peacefully beneath the alter.

The END



*From a bleak border patrol in the Arizona desert (Borderline Minutemen,) to a dank cell in a Mexican prison (The Raindrops of Quintana Roo), to a wealthy man living off the grid who wakes to an unthinkable horror (Two Blinks), or events that define mob mentality (The Mob), Living & Dying in Shorts is a collection of 24 tales that provide a look into the unique, inescapable, and irreducible features of being human.*

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