

Backwards Forwards Back
by Jacqueline Goldfinger

PRODUCTION DRAFT FOR URBANITE THEATRE, FEBRUARY 2023

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In Honor Of Our Family & Friends...

Nurse Lauren Stabler Fisher, Navy
Patrick Flynn
Howard Pardue, Sr., Cryptographer
Howard Pardue, Jr.
Chief Master Sergeant Charles Rennick, Sr.
Captain Charles Rennick, Jr.
AWF1 Charles C. Rennick
AWV1 Haley D. Rennick
A1C Verna Rennick
2/17 FA Bravo Battery Bulldogs
2 ID: "Second to None"

...& Everyone Who Has Served

“In 13-weeks I’d completely changed who I had been for the previous ten years. Before the treatment, 80-90 percent of my dreams were Iraq related. Now I can’t remember the last time I had one. I live in a completely different way now.”

-Jimmy Catellanos, Veteran, U.S. Marine Corps, to NBC News on his VR treatment

RUN TIME

70 minutes, no intermission

TIME

Today

PLACE

VR Therapy Studio

CHARACTER

-A Vet on the home front wearing street clothes

-Any Race, Any Gender Identity/Expression

-Feel free to change pronouns and other language to match the performer you cast

SPACING

There are several page breaks which spread out the space between scenes/moments. Since this play is in-progress, those page breaks are to give you space to write notes and thoughts.

SCENE BREAKDOWN

This play was written as a free verse epic poem without scene breaks. However, for purposes of workshopping and production, it might be a useful tool to breakdown the stream of text into scenes for the artists’ process. The Director of the first production, Co-Artistic Director Brendan Ragan at Urbanite Theatre, created this useful breakdown and he has given me the approval to share it with you.

Scene 1: Week One, First Line: I never wanted to try, to use this virtual reality B.S.

Scene 2: Panic Attack, First Line: They try to get me saluting at machines now.

Scene 3: Fourth of July, First Line: So, here’s, you want to know why I’m in VR therapy.

Scene 4: Fireworks, First Line: The kids aren’t in their seats.

Scene 5: Week Five/Bar Fight, First Line: So, it’s not as terrible as I thought it was going to be.

Scene 6: Week Six/Busy City Street, First Line: Next visit, week six.

Scene 7: Get it Together, First Line: Look, I’m not immune...

Scene 8: One More Round, First Line: Walking down the sidewalk. People.

Scene 9: Week Twelve/Certificate, First Line: When Janet and I were little, like little little.

Scene 10: Mac, First Line: While I was sitting in a padded cell, Mac...

Week One

(Combat Soldier in Civvies on the Home Front)

(VR glasses on the top of her head / ear buds dangle around neck)

I never wanted to try,
To use this virtual reality B.S. Because it means,
I failed.
It means, Fuck.
And they'll say, fuck what they say.

But if all the pills and talk therapy and still...
It worked for them, it should have worked for me.
Fuck it. This...

This exposure therapy.
This,
Experimental Mind-Fuck,
I told the Doc,
I don't want to go back to the War.
I don't care how many degrees hang on your wall.

And he says, "you want to get your family back?"

And I say, fuck you.

And he says, "Your choice.
But you're out of options, soldier."
You got the worst of the worst,
The most extreme-

And I say... fuck you.

So he says,
Trust. Me.

I say,
First time I heard that was from a girlfriend
Who blew me then cheated on me.

He says,
We'll start with the field
But we'll end-up at home, I promise.

I say,
doesn't it say to the world, I mean,
that I'm a, whatever,
A bitch who can't handle it.

And he says, "No."

And I'm not sure I believe him but
I want to see my niece and nephew again.
And my sister won't let me until...

Look, I served.
I served since I was 15
With my cousin's license, stole it off him
During the game at Thanksgiving.
And my older sister knew.
She saw me pull it out of his wallet.
She didn't give a fuck.
Janet never did anything for this country
Except get high and pump out a few kids.

The kids are okay. She may suck but,
Her kids, pretty great.
They like shooting games,
Like me, growing up.
I always send 'em the new ones for Christmas,
Birthdays, whatever.

Maybe they'll grow up to, whatever.
At 15, if they need a card to join-up,
I sure as shit will get them one.
Fucking kids.

Kids in the desert, the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan.
Guns in their hands by 12.
The desert doesn't allow for childhood.
Sands them down into baby adults quick.

Maybe that's what they see when they're jacked up,
Fuck the Americans,
Maybe they see us as a video game
Just the same way we see them.
But it's no damn game.

There was this one kid.
10? Yeah, maybe, 10.
Skinny like,
Not like the skinny you see in the U.S.
Here kids have skinny bodies but full cheeks,
Bright eyes,
Baby chub around knobby knees.

Over there, skinny means,
Skin stretched tight around tiny cheek bones, haunted eyes.
So this 10 year old,
Burn scars across his face like pimples that no cream can fix.
This kid, I had him out his house, on his knees,
In the white sand of a white house in a blindingly white courtyard
In a desert village that time fucking forgot.
And his ma is screaming at him in desert-ese from their doorway and
All of a sudden there's a shriek-crack from the sky and his house explodes.
Whoosh. Boom. Game Over. Family fucking fried.
He looks at me like death. Like hell fire. Like,
"I will be the last face you ever see, motherfucka'."

I release him but
He's got nowhere to go.
Before I can point him to the refugee camp,
He's gone.

(RE: headset)

This.
Nicest headset.
You know the military buys the best.
Top of the Line
VR headsets for training And for
Un-training, Not training?
Whatever the fuck I'm doing right now.
But can they invest in enough flak jackets,
Body armour,
For all of us? Shit no.
The numbers don't line up,
It's more important to Program
Than to keep us alive in the field.
I mean the soldier next to you,
He'd give his left nut,
Or Ovary or Whatever, For you. And you for him.

(slips into Drill Sergeant)

The soldiers ain't the problem. Shitmotherfuckershitmotherfuckershit.
The fuckin' politicians are the problem. Shitmotherfuckershitmotherfuckershit.
But you never see their ass out on the field, Except for a photo shoot. Shitmotherfuckershitmotherfuckershit.
Hooah! Shit.

(clicks tongue)

Sometimes, you know,
You know how sometimes in the civvies,
Your mom sometimes just jumps
Right out of your mouth. Sometimes,
The Drill Sergeant jumps right out of mine.

(snaps to attention)

Sir, yes sir.

(salutes)

(relaxes)

Biggest mouth in the army,
But he bores into your brain and suddenly,
You're sounding like him.

(short barking laugh)

(Drill Sergeant returns)

Platoon. Attention!
I joined up to do my patriotic duty.
My duty, and the high of being the Just.
The righteous.
Raining down,
God and Moses and the Plagues, Amen.
Bringing justice to those who should have,
But never had a chance at,
American freedom. McDonald's cheeseburgers.
Sleepin' in, watchin' the YouTubin' on Sunday mornings.
The great vast rolling Plains.
And the mini-marts full of water.
Water you could get anytime.
Water that means life.

I mean, especially in the desert, boys. Water. Is. Life.

(to audience)

Say it with me, Water is

(points to audience, "Life.")

Water is

(points to audience, "Life.")

Water is

(points to audience, "Life.")

Louder! Get the dick out your throat!

Water is

(points to audience, "Life.")

Shit, yeah.

You don't have water, You're dead.
A desiccated piece of meat. A steak dinner for Arabian vultures.
Oh, and a fat-tailed lizard called the Dabb.
A little Dabb will do ya'.
The Dabb'll eat you whole, from the inside out, looking for water.
Like an Afghani plague.
And be gone before I fuck your mother.
Shitmotherfuckershitmotherfuckershitmotherfuckershit.

(Beeping sound / from headset)

(Soldier notes it / does not put on VR glasses)

(Beeping)

(Beeping)

They try to get me saluting at machines now.

(Beeping Beeping Beeping)

Machines telling me where to, And what to,

Fuckin' beeping beeping beeping beeping beeping beeping

Fuck!

(Relents)

(Slides on the VR glasses / puts in ear buds)

Like dogshit in your yard,
This is an unwelcome intrusion,
But they won't process my monthly check
Until I do this shit, So.
I'm here.
I'm waiting.
I'm...
Back in the War.
The sound, booms, high whistles of missiles,
Scraping the desert sky.

(Begins to tense up, tries to ignore it.)

Yeah, see, I'm fine.

(Tenser)

Yeah, see, I see it, I hear it but, I know, It's not there.

(Tenser)

I'm fine. You're fine. I'm fine. I'm,
Fine.
Fine.
Fuckin'.
Hell.

(Has a full out panic attack)

(As if in the middle of full battle-)

Down!
Harper, Get. Down.
Fucking newbie.
Fucking.
Reload, motherfucker!
Reload.
Harper, GET-

(Enormous explosion)

Fuck, Harper, goddamn fucking,
Fuck.
Why couldn't you just stay the fuck down?

(Heart races / cannot catch breath)

Stop the blinking lights, The, Fireflies, are Fucking,
Gunsights. Gunsights or maybe...IEDs?

(Loud frantic beeping / from the headset)

(Tears off headset)

Shit. This is,
This is fucking bullshit man.
Man, Doc, whatever.

(Wipes brow)

Sweating like a fucking fuck. I can't,

(Looks at hands / they are shaking)

Feel my hands.

Okay, okay,
I get your point. Maybe.
Maybe I,
Maybe, I could use a little. Whatever.

(Beeping stops)

(Gets ahold of herself)

A beep to tell me when to start.

A beep to tell me when to stop.

A beep to tell me what is real, and what is not.

Soon, they say, I won't have these dreams anymore.
Waking or Sleeping dreams,
Gone.
I don't believe them.

Fucking beeps.

A beep to get me up
Get me to sleep
Get me hard
Jack me off

Get me soft
Get me alive
Electric beeps and bring rule to my life.
Tell me I'm dead.

No, not dead.

Flatline is dead.

Dead is

Harper.

Is a fucking headless cunt of a newbie in the field.

Dead is,

When you take your hands

And wrap them around some desert terrorist's throat

And flatline is dead. Beeping is alive. I am alive.

And this, this thing, The beeping of this

(RE: VR headset)

Is supposed to, Make me, What?

They say it will make me, Help me,

Keep me from being

“Triggered.”

But I am a trigger.

I Am The Fucking Trigger.

Besides,

Doesn't being triggered just mean

Being Alive. Fully alive.

And so many soldiers don't want to do this,
This VR therapy,
Say its torture, to make you go back there.

And I agree,
But,
If this is the only way,
My last chance,
Then, fuck it,
I can do anything.
I can
Get.
Over.
It.
Because, it was just,
The fireworks,
And those kids, kids dressed in sandy brown,
Beige, Khaki pants, School issued,
I was told by the EMT that the color was,
Doesn't matter.
Fuck the EMT.

So,
here's,
You want to know why I'm in VR therapy?
It's not really because of my irregular heartbeat,
Or it is, but not entirely.
And it's not because of the field,
Not entirely, at least.

I got leave.
First time back in the States in years.
Back to the clean women and cold beer
And I went to see my sister's kids.
I mean,
My sister was there.
But she's a shit heel.
Really, I was there to see the kids,
Play some video games,
Take them to the Fourth of July thing at the park,
You know.

Regular civvie days.

And we were having a great time.

Took the 14-year-old to the arcade and played games
Until his hands went numb.
Let him win most of the games, you know,
Make him feel like a big man.
Like most of us,

We act how we feel.
So he's feeling like a big man,
Gives him some confidence.
He's a little short for his age so he's a little,
Won't say a shrimp, but
You know,
It's been taken notice of by bigger kids at school.
I tell the kid, fuck those other boys.
Body type like yours, perfect for the Air Force.
You'll be a fly boy in no time.
I gave him an Air Force cap.
That made his little chest swell. Then
Took the 9-year-old to the swimming pool,
Taught her how to dive.
She's a natural born fish.
Navy Seals watch out,
You gotta little girl gonna kick ya' ass.
Watch the fuck out.

That weekend was the Fourth.
Big parade, that shit, I don't like,
But the kids want me to wear my dress uniform.
So I get cleaned up.
Full dress uniform.
Spit shined shoes.
Gold buttons,
The whole ride.

Carry them down to the parade.
Buy 'em hot dogs.
Stupid shit but, you know,
Fun. Kid's fun. And then, you know.
Off to the baseball field for the fireworks.
Rockets red glare, and everything.
And...
There is this
Brass Band playing.
All those tinny notes.
I feel that tingle,
On the back of my neck, that tingle
I only get
When I think some shit's about to go down.

But I ignore it.
Because

What shit is gonna go down at a baseball diamond?

You know,
I try to be, to pretend that,
All their lights and cheers and freedom ringing,
Make us all feel safe.
Make me feel safe again.

Anyway, they tell us,
In the early days when we're back in civvies.
They always say,
"You feel something,
You pack it in and head home. Call the VA
A-S-A-P."

But I'm not one of those, you know,
I've never been one of those, even as a child,
One of those fucking
Cry-babies.
Momma used to say,
"Cry, baby.
Give me a reason to beat your ass. It'll be like a holiday for me."

(under breath)

Bitch.

(back to story)

So I tell them kids,
Stay here. I got to go to the shitter. But you just, Stay. Right. Here.

I head to the shitter.

Look at myself in the mirror, the one over the sink.

A picture postcard of patriotism.

A picture postcard, that's what folks want to see.

The best of us.

I splash water on my face.

The tingle goes away.

Right.

Here we go.

You're a civvie now. You're a civilian,

Almost a civilian.
Always a soldier, almost a civilian, and you're just
Taking these kids out for a good time. They deserve a good time.
You deserve a good time.

Let's go have a goddamned good time!

I turn to the door, grab the sticky handle,
Pull hard and a big gust of July heat hits Me in the face.
I smell spent ammo and taste sand. I stop, take a deep breath,
Don't ruin this day, motherfucker.
You ruin this day, maybe your idiot sister will
Never
Let you see the kids again.

You shove your hands in your pockets,
Put your head down and count your steps
You've always found counting to be soothing.
On the bus to school,
You counted stop signs while the Assholes bullied you from the back row.
In the desert, you count the number of lines of color on the horizon,
Magnificent colors in the desert sky.

That, they have over us.
So I started counting my steps back to the bleachers, To the smiling faces and drowsy babies,
And I look up and They Are Not There.

The kids aren't in their seats.

They aren't under their seats or around their seats
Or at the hotdog stand
Or at the ice cream truck.
Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.
My heart is pumping.
My breathing is short.

The tingling at the back of my neck has turned into
Stabbing sensations.
“Danger, Will Robinson, Danger!” I keep looking.
They aren’t back in the bathrooms
Or over by the playground. They aren’t.

And then I see - peeking out from a shrub –
I see the tip of Mac’s Air Force hat.
And the tip, the brim?
The brim, is sticking out of this huge shrub.
Behind the leaves there is a fierce,
Fierce rustling and I see shadows of sand-colored pants
And the scarred face of a 10-year-old boy.
I always knew he’d find me.

I see, I hear an IED explode behind me,
But I know it’s not there.
There’s nothing there, I tell myself.
I’m just remembering. But I Am In Control.
I am the trigger and the trigger rules.
The trigger is in control.
There are no IEDs.
There are my niece and nephew. They are real.
The fireworks beginning to light up the sky.
Those are real.
Two kids. Real.
Look for the kids.

Ignore the-
And another goes off,
I hear another go off, to the right of the shrub.
But when I look, nothing.
No smoke, No explosion
No guts of my bunkmate spread across the field like ground up meat.

Focus.
Motherfucker.
Focus.
I hear the sergeant scream in my ear,
Focus.
On the mission, solder.

So, I run over.

Reach in, searching for the kids. They're caught up, leaves, briars, brambles,
I pull out one of my arms and it is bleeding from scratches, from thorns.
I hear Mac screaming, calling out my name. I hear IEDs going off.
And the kids, the kids are stuck. And they are being attacked.
I hear is Mac screaming, and his little sister sobbing.

And what I know I saw was a weapon.
And I know the kids didn't have a weapon,
The other kid brought it with him.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see the flash of an enemy,
The eyes of the desert kid, scars across his face.
Who gives a baby an AK-47? Why can't he leave me alone?
Why do I see him in my dreams in my, and now, he is taking my kids.
He is taking, FUCK YOU.

Punch through the leaves,
Hear a squeal, blood drips from my fist.
I got him! I punch again, and again.
I let you live in the desert motherfucker.
I tried to get you help. I did the best I could.
My fist gets redder and stickier and stronger with his blood.

I fucking got the desert kid, I killed him.
I finally, killed him.

(to the kid)

I tried man, I tried to leave you alive.
But you couldn't leave me well enough alone.

But then strong hands pull me up.
Throw me into the dirt, sit on my back,
Spitting grass out from between my teeth and slowly,

My senses...

My heart slows down,
The pounding in my ears recedes and I see...
Ambulance pulls into the park,
Moms huddle around keening children.

The curtain of mothers' part for the EMT and I see, I see the kids.

Holding hands.

Mac, a hand up to his nose, Once a perfect triangle,
Now his nose is smashed into a blob of purple and blood,
And his eyes find mine.

And they are scared.

He's scared. Of me.
His sister can't, won't?, look at me.

In her hand is her glitter baton with streams coming out of each end.
Her Glitter Baton with gold streamers.
What the fuck? That is not what, I saw, it's not.
I look back at the shrub,
Now torn down to the ground and there's
Nothing There. No weapon. No, anything.
How could I...? A glitter baton. A glitter baton. A glitter
A

Then, it hits me. What I've done. Why Mac needs an EMT. Why his sister won't look at me.

A patrol car pulls up, And the head for me.
And I know whatever happens, jail, what the fuck ever,
The real thing is I've lost the kids. How could they ever forgive me?

(Beep)

(Slowly puts on VR goggles)

Week Five

Preparing for VR therapy

Week two of exposure therapy. Sucked.
Week three. Sucked less.
Week four. Didn't suck.
They started shifting the stimuli
From small triggers to, you know, Bigger Things,
Bigger Homefront Things, I might encounter.

Week five. Cowbells.

I told them,
I'm never moving to the country, Doc.
Why a cowbell?

He says, "trust the process."

And, I don't say this 'cause,
The Doc. He's actually a nice guy.
I mean,
Nice for a military Doc
That also kicks your ass.

But slipping back,
Jumping back into battle when hearing a cowbell,
After so many weeks of doing better,
I mean,
Shit,
Failure.
Feels like a failure.
Why can't I just,
Others do it.
With meds, without needing,
Fucking, Machine Assistance Bullshit.
Why can't I?

I feel small.
I feel weak.
And even though
The Doc says,
And my friends say,
Whatever,
Incredible Hulk,
You're strong for seeing you got a weakness
And fixing it.
And in my brain, I know that's true.
But in my body and soul,
Where. It. Counts.
I don't.

So, G.F.I., Great Fucking Idea, that night, I go to my bar
Drink,
Darts,
Drink,
Pool,
Drink Drink
Flirt,
Drink Drink Drink

But then all it took was a nudge

Maybe it was an accident?
But really, Fucker knocked into me,
Wouldn't say "sorry."

Maybe I didn't give him a chance to say "Sorry."

Then it was fists
And pool cues
And then more and more jumping in
Until
Kicked out
Ended up throwing rocks at one another
From the gravel parking lot
Until we got bored
Everybody went home.

It made me feel good.
Feel strong.
The way Americans are supposed to be strong.
The way we are trained to be strong
And Patriotic
And Fucking Warriors for Freedom.

So I felt fucking strong all night
Into the next day
Until I went back to the bar...

And the bartender says, "Get Out."
And I ask, "Second home, second chance, Bud?"
He says, "No. If you can't control yourself,
You can't come back in here."

And my face gets hot.

And I go home.
And I feel weak again.
Feel, not strong.
Feel like,
Maybe I should fucking kill myself.
Maybe,
I just don't understand,

Won't ever understand,
What it means to be back.
To be strong here is not the same
As to be strong there.
Maybe I can't hack it.
An animal in human clothing,
Just,
Raging.
I would go back into the field.
But my heart it won't let me know.

(RE: heart)

Beats too fast.
Stay calm, Soldier. Stay. Calm.
I think, maybe, I should just disappear from this earth.
Easier than walking it, ashamed...

Then I see the picture of me and the kids.
Me and them, smiling and snow cones.
And I think, keep them at the front of your mind.
Keep them in sight.
Because this shit isn't all for you.
Maybe you will always be a shitty person.
But you can do something for them.
You can love them,
The way you should have been.
Then, your life will be worth something
Again.
Just keep them in your mind.

(puts on VR goggles)

Week Six

Next visit, week six.

I didn't tell Doc a goddamned thing.
But I kept the kids' picture in my pocket.

I ask the Doc, how many more weeks?

And he says, "There's no timeline.
With PTSD this extreme, we just don't know.
But maybe when we get done here
You can see your family again."

If my sister says it's okay,

So I say, let's do this shit.

(A beep)

(headset on)

(A beat)

Right now,
I'm walking down the sidewalk
Of a busy city street.
There are cars honking,
People accidentally running into one another.

A fire alarm blares suddenly from a building.

(attack pose)

And people stream out of the building,
Fire licks the sides of the brick wall,
Fire that consumes the wall and,
In my mind,
The image is transformed to
Fire consuming the outside of Tank 464,
The tank that took a missile,
The fire that boiled my grub mate Ginger alive.

But that's not what's on the VR.
Come on, man, just focus on what is on the VR.

It's an office fire.
A building fire.
There is no tank.
You are on an American soil.
Breathe.
And back away.
Just breathe.
And back away.

Yes, I see it now.
I see the VR picture.
No tank.
Just a building on fire.
And the firetrucks have come,
And the fire fighters save the civilians.

Just watch them save,
Just see the lights on the trucks revolve,
Not desert flares,
But just firetruck lights.

Doc says to notice the details.
Focus on the reality of the details.
The details will keep you alive,
Keep you from harming yourself or others.

Don't jump to conclusions.
Your senses cannot be entirely trusted yet.
Your thought process cannot be entirely trusted yet.
Maybe one day,
But for today,
Focus on the details
And trust them.
They will show you the reality you inhabit.

(A beep)

(Takes break from VR)

And just like in the desert, Doc says take frequent breaks
And drink lots of water.

(Drinks from water bottle)

Look, I'm not, Immune,
As Doc says,
To the irony that I'm learning to live in the real world
By interacting with a fake one.

But,
At least, in the fake one,
I can't hurt anyone.
Or myself.

That night, after the fireworks,
After I pounded Mac's nose to...
I thought about killing myself.

I had plenty of time to think.
In Jail. In a padded cell.

I just thought,
Am I gonna end up like Tara who beats her wife now?

We all passed the exit exams
And tests
To try and assure that we
Could “integrate”
As Sarge called it,
Back into society.

But integration doesn't
Account for
What happens next.
Integration is like,
Here's a housing stipend to get you started,
Good luck.
Here's a new suit. Here's a,
Whatever. It doesn't matter.
Vets are Twice as likely to commit suicide,
Than the Civilian Population.

Then the guard opened the door
To my neat little padded cell.
And my sister Janet stood there.

I couldn't believe it,
After what I'd done to her kids. She stood there,
And the Guard said,
You are free to go.
She's not going to file charges.

So, I thank the Guard.
Shake his hand.
He salutes me.
Turns out,
He's an Ex-MP, two turns in Iraq.
When he shakes my hand, he holds it
A second too long,
Long enough to look into my eyes and say,
Get it together, soldier,
Before releasing my hand.

I salute and say,
“Sir, yes, sir.”
And follow Janet silently out of the building.

I trudge silently behind her.
Trying to figure out what to say,
Trying to figure out, what is fair.
What is just.
When you pound
An innocent person's face in,
And the innocent person is their child.
We walk a few blocks in silence.
I tap her on the shoulder.
She turns to me in
A cloud of cigarette smoke.
And I say,
"Hit me."

“What?”

“Hit me.
Hard as you can.
As many times as you want.
I won’t fight back.
I won’t call for help.
Just. Hit. Me.”

“I’m not going to hit you.”
“You should.”
“Fuck, B,
When has hitting made Anything
Actually
Better?”

“I’m not bullshitting you, Philosopher.
I just, you deserve to hit me.”

She smokes. She looks at me. Contemplating, I guess,

Then walks me the VA Center.
Points to the front doors,
Says,
“Go.”
Says,
“Stay.”
Waits for me to approach the doors.
Says,
“I’m not fucking with you anymore,

And neither are my kids.”

Waits. Says,

“Go the fuck on in.
They are waiting for you.
I made you an appointment.
If you want to see the kids,
Have a chance that I will even think about letting you
See the kids, this is what you have to do.”

On the other side of the glass doors, I turn to nod goodbye,
But she’s already gone.

(A beep)

(Slides on the VR headset)

The neighborhood park. A familiar scene.

But brighter, more...
The wind caressing cheeks, warm.
The breeze is a welcome touch this time.

Take a deep breath to relax and realize,
I am relaxed. Neck muscles loose. Fingers uncoiled.
My heart rate slow and steady.

Enjoying a stroll that feels like ease.
Feels like comfort, like it’s good to be in the world again.

The birds sing a sweet song, high and light.
I don’t want to run. No, I don’t feel the need to run.

I stand, sunlight on my face, and listen to their song.
Embracing it, bathing in it.

Laughter spills from the playground, and without thinking, I smile.
My face feels like, cracking marble;
A statue chiseled out of rock a thousand years ago that has
Finally split apart, falls to the ground.
There is still heaviness but it is the weight of joy.

Suddenly, the blast of a fire alarm.
I flinch. I tense up. My shoulder seizes,
My neck tightens, but I breath deeply, intentionally.
Focus on the details, son.

Flame licks the side of a brick wall.
I walk around the corner, away from the heat,
I taste the grit of sand in my mouth,
But I know that I am here.
I am, finally, here.

(Beep)

(Removes gear)

(Physically and emotionally exhausted)

(Drinks from water bottle)

(A beat)

(Picks up headset / clicks button on side of it)

Let's go again.
I can do one more round

Before my session is over. I got this.

(Puts gear back on)

(Beep)

Week 12

No VR headset / no earbuds Solder holds piece of paper

When Janet and I were little, Like little little,
You know, ages 8 and 10.
We invented a team called the
Big Sister Little Brother Dream Team of the Stars.

(jokes)

Yeah, catchy, right?
We were a team of superheroes who
Launched missions of
Daring deeds,
Miraculous rescues,
Mistaken identities, and
Many guest appearances by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

We could run like the wind,
Fly, Swim, Jump, Catch, Throw, and
Beat the lights out of anything in
Our way.
I kept up the fight.
Janet, just, couldn't.
Se always was
The sensitive one.
Or, as Doc says I should say,
The more sensitive one.
Because sensitivity can be a strength.

So maybe...
Anyways,

(RE: paper in hand, reads it)

This certificate is awarded
Upon successful completion of
Step One of Virtual Reality Treatment as Certified by

(stops reading)

Signed, dated, the whole deal.

There's even a little gold seal with
A single gold star in the middle of it.

Doc says that it is important to
Celebrate
The little things in civilian life.
The little steps, as well as the big ones.
Because the secret to success on
The Homefront is
Putting one foot in front of the other,
Smiling,
Holding someone's hand,
Enjoying the rain,
Not fucking people up for no reason.

So. Mac.
My nephew.
His face comes to me in dreams now.
Better than the other thing,
But still pretty much a dumpster fire.
Not because of what he did,
He never did anything wrong,
But because of what I did to him.

After Janet dumped me at the VA,
There were a shit ton of drug tests and shit.
I mean,
Until they knew it wasn't, I wasn't, unreachable.

Mine was a kind of mental break but
Hopefully
One that we can fix, In steps,
For periods of time, And then,
Possible relapse,
And back to the Doctors.
For the rest of my life, probably. If I'm lucky.

Those that aren't so lucky,
The ones that take all the
Pills booze bullet in the mouth step in front of a truck.
Whatever
Choice of control for an out-of-control mind.

Those folks,
Are the unlucky ones.
The ones who can't Make it back
To the Doctors
Before the past devours them.
I'm lucky, I know.
VR Therapy is working, So far.
And I've got a sister who knows
When to bring me back here.
When to call the Doctors
When I can't,
Or won't.

Maybe she's not such a
Dumbass after all.

Maybe there's something to her tenderness.
And to her kids I, I want to show them this.
This certificate. I want,
If they will see me,
And that is

All Their Choice
Because I Fucked Up
And even with PTSD as A,
Whatever,
Reason? Excuse? Penumbra? It's still no excuse.

While I was sitting in a padded cell, Mac was having
Reconstructive surgery on his face.
He was ...
Fuck me.
Eight hours, in surgery.
The kid was a champ.
A heavy weight title level, Champ. No kid should,
Especially a kid I love,
Should have to deal with that shit.
He spent almost two weeks in the hospital,
Then weeks of therapy and
Learning how to breathe again,
Through his new nose.
His face,
His bright, amazing, Full of wonderment
And beauty
And life
Will never be the same again.
I told Janet to email me pictures,
But she said, she didn't want the image of Mac,
Fucked up like that,
She didn't want it to get in the way
Of my treatment, my therapy.
Janet said,
I didn't need to see,
It wouldn't help.
In fact, it might hurt.
I told her not to be stubborn,
But she insisted.
Then I asked if she could put Mac on the line.

I wanted to apologize.
I needed to, but she says, Mac is, going to take a little more time.
But Sarah wants to talk.

There's a rustling and Sarah's sweet baby voice
Comes on the phone.
She sounds a little scared.
I hate that she sounds scared.
She says, "Hi."
I say, "Hiya, kid. I need to apologize.
I accidentally did,
No, no excuses. I did a bad thing.
It was really bad and really scary,
And I'm so sorry.
I'm so so sorry.
She says, "You're at the doctor."
"Yeah, the doctor,
For a while,
The doctors going to help me make sure it
Never
Happens
Again."
"Why do does a doctor have to
Teach You that?
Didn't your mom teach you that?
Didn't your teacher?
You're a grown up. Why..."
And she begins to cry,
And I want to smash the phone,
But I know that if I do,
It will only scare her more.
And she's scared enough of me.

Janet gets back on the phone,
She says, "She just needs a little break."
"Sure, of course, I didn't meant to scare her, Again."
"It's, well, it's not okay,
But it is going to be okay. They're going to understand,
One day. They're going to, I'm going to help them.

I know that we don't,
You know,
Really connect,
As Sibblings. Not for a long time now.
But these last few years,
I've tried to clean it up,
Since Jason left.
For the kids, you know? And I think,
We just need to... I don't know but,
You're a hero.
We always talked about, Dream Team heroes, right?
And you actually,
You went out and did it. So, I just, I really, think,
We'll just,
Figure it out, okay?" "Okay."
And we both hang up the phone.

And I do my therapy.
And she talks to the kids.
And Mac heals.
And they do their therapy.

And I do mine.
And do my therapy.
And do my therapy.
And never miss an appointment.
And then the Doc says, Congratulations!
And well-done!
And you're off to a great fresh start!

And while I know he's trying to be
Supportive, useful,
I feel like,
How fresh can it be? I'm still me.

Then today, he gives me this certificate,
For completing the first step of my journey.

I call Janet to tell her.
And she says, she'd like to see me.
The kids, well, they think...
They'd like to see me, too.
I tell Janet,
"I don't want to scare them."
And
"Do you think they can ever forgive me?"

And she says, "I don't know. But all we can do is try."

What they don't tell you or your families,
Is that the training to come back home is just as hard as basic.
Maybe it is harder?
And this training is for the rest of your life.

So I take the 52 bus to South Road.
Change at South to Lime Hill and then walk
The half mile up the dirt road
To their house.
It's a cute house.
It's one of those faux log cabin dealies.
A playhouse out front.
A swing from an oak tree on the side.
I hear a cow moo. Fuck. Doc was right.
There's even a creek out back where the kids play.

After Jason left, she wanted a new start for herself.
For the kids. It looks like she found it.

(RE: certificate in hand)

I brought the certificate to show.
I thought,
It might be easier,
Right?
Because you get certificates at school, and so kids get it.
For the kids to understand...
It means something. I don't know.
I just, I need them to know,
I'll never hurt them again.
And I'm going to work like hell to make sure I never hurt anyone again.
In recovery, we remind each other B.F.B.
Backwards Forwards Back.

That's how recovery goes.
Sometimes you slip
Backwards,
Then you've got to work to move
Forwards
And then you'll slip Back again.
It's a tango of the will,
It will challenge your spirit.
Your body. Your sanity.
But it's a dance worth doing.
Because it ends with you getting your life back.

(Beat / Pause / Deep Breath)

The front door is bright green.
The color of faith, renewal.
Sarah has drawn a "Welcome" sign in crayon
With daisies which is her favorite flower.

Nothing from Mac but, he's probably just too old to make a homemade sign, right?

(Deep Breath / Reaches out a finger)

(We hear a doorbell ring)

(She stands / waiting for an answer)

END OF PLAY