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Who's Laughing Now

June Forte

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Who's Laughing Now? June Forte

I scaled the utility gate, hand over hand, to the top. I dropped into the motor pool. The guard, a corporal, and I switched every two hours between the motor pool and the barracks. He hadn't been waiting at the gate eager to pass off the clipboard and get back to the warmth of the building. The gate jerked against the chain that locked it to the post all the while I climbed it. Something was wrong. He should have heard me coming.

Motor pool guard duty was a joke among the troops. In the late '70s, the biggest threat to Fort Carson was fallout from a Soviet nuclear attack on NORAD. Only a couple of barrack drunks would try to steal a Vietnam-era truck. The missing guard carried our only weapons: an eight-inch wooden night club and a clipboard. I crept farther into the lot.

I crouched to see under the trucks and spotted the guard's legs. The rest of him was hidden behind the far side of a truck. He leaned against the passenger side, knees slightly bent. Was he sick? Injured? I made my way around the truck. The guard was jerking off. It was twenty degrees. The crunch of my boots on the gravel startled him.

I made a record climb over the gate and fast-paced it back to the barracks. He called to me, "Hey, come on back." Bastard, another reason to hate motor pool duty.

I told the sergeant on duty what happened. He grabbed the gate key and headed to the motor pool. I called my husband from the office. "Ask to see the staff duty officer," he said.

The sergeant returned. "Go back to the motor pool."

"I want to talk with the staff duty officer."

"No, you take this up on Monday with the captain. Go back to the motor pool."

"Only if you escort me back and forth for the rest of the night. And keep that guard away from me." He agreed. The guard and I continued our two-hours-on, two-hours-off schedule.

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On my next turn in the barracks, the sergeant left the office to check the upper two dormitory floors. While I was there, the staff duty officer wandered in. "Anything going on?"

I told him what happened. He took meticulous notes and asked questions. He went upstairs to find the sergeant. When he came back, he sat across the table from me.

"I'm an attorney in the judge advocate general's office." He wanted me to know that this would most likely be a 'she-said, he-said' situation. "Hard for you to prove. I'll write the report. Good luck." He left for the motor pool to talk with the other guard.

The sergeant never said another word to me that night. I'm sure he thought I called the staff duty officer while he was upstairs.

On Monday, I was summoned to the company commander's office. I naively thought I would retell my experience and get some sympathy. When I reported, the first sergeant followed me into the captain's office. They double-teamed me. No chance to tell my side of the story.

The captain held up some papers. I couldn't tell what they were, maybe the staff duty officer's report. He threw the papers on his desk. "What I'm going to do is issue an Article 15 against you for sneaking up on a guard in a compromising position."

"The guard was merely urinating," said the first sergeant.

"First Sergeant, I've been married for enough years to know the difference." The captain dismissed me.

What just happened? By the time I walked back to my office, I was in full sob. One of the journalists, Specialist Devon, a giant of a man, grabbed my arm when I entered. "What happened? Tell me what happened." I made it into the front office. Amid my now-gathered coworkers, I managed to snivel out my encounter with the company commander.

Devon went red in the face. "I'll break some knees."

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“You’re my hero, but no kneecapping. I’ll handle it.”

That afternoon, the senior Public Affairs NCO, Master Sergeant Carl Martin, and I were alone. “I knew that captain in Panama. He hung out in the brothels and roughed up a few of the women there. He’s got a problem with women.”

At home that night, my husband Fred, a retired air force colonel, said, “If he gives you an Article 15, ask for a summary court-martial. He’s trying to intimidate you. He’d look the fool citing you for sneaking up on another guard who obviously was not doing his duty. Regardless, the ball’s in his court. Wait and see if he does anything.”

On Friday, Headquarters scheduled a readiness drill at the barracks. I gathered all my equipment and snaked through the check stations: equipment, legal, medical, training qualifications. From the back of the room, the guard and his buddies watched me. He turned to the soldier next to him and pointed. They all laughed. They kept their snickering going until I passed them on the way out of the building. I stopped. “Keep on laughing.” I walked into that drill room still nursing hurt feelings. I walked out angry.

The guard and his friends turned into the impetus. My target switched to the captain and the first sergeant. Besides Specialist Devon, I had other options open to me, including General Forrest, the Fourth Division Commander, whom I met with weekly. I decided to put my trust in the chain of command. I had an opportunity to find out if the system worked. If it didn’t, I’d ultimately make my way up the chain to General Forrest.

I got on the battalion commander’s calendar the next day, by just saying I had a personal problem I wanted to discuss.

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When I showed up, the colonel ordered me to go back out and knock on his door and formally report to him. I hadn't experienced that level of rigidity since Basic Training. I don't know if he had a heads up on why I wanted to see him. If he did, he didn't let on.

"Specialist Forte reporting, sir." He allowed me to enter. A woman master sergeant stood by his desk. I explained what had happened at the motor pool and how the company commander and first sergeant treated me. As the story progressed, he and the master sergeant exchanged glances and an occasional eyebrow lift.

When I said I made a lot of noise climbing the gate, the colonel asked, "Isn't there a key to the gate?"

"Yes, sir, I asked for the key. The CQ told me to climb the gate."

I told them that shift duties included ensuring every truck was locked and checking the inside of trucks through the windows. "I do that every time. It helps the time go faster and helps me tolerate the cold."

"There's a guardhouse out there."

"Yes, sir. But it's locked." I told him how cold it was because women weren't issued the same clothing as the men.

"What?" The question was directed at the master sergeant.

"Males are issued artic parkas and sleeping bags, and wool uniforms. What Specialist Forte is wearing right now is all she's got. Thin cotton fatigues and jacket."

He asked if there was anything else I wanted to tell him. I did. I told him that I rechecked a truck I checked twice earlier that night. There was a magazine on the passenger seat opened to a graphic centerfold, more explicit than *Playboy*. If it had been there earlier, I would have seen it.

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The truck was locked tight. I wrote down the license number. I handed that piece of paper to the colonel.

“Sir, this is less about the incident in the motor pool than about the way I was treated by the company commander and the first sergeant. If this can happen to me in my thirties, what chance does an eighteen-year-old woman have?”

“I'll look into this and get back with you.”

The following week he sent word for me to come to his office. He had read the staff duty officer's report and talked with him as well. He interviewed the Sergeant on duty that night, the guard, the first sergeant, and the company commander. He tracked the truck license and discovered the truck belonged to the company commander and the guard just happened to be his driver.

He had one last question. “Could you believe that the guard was so intent on what he was doing, that he probably didn't hear you and didn't intend for you to see him?”

“Yes, I could.”

“I think that's what happened. He's not getting away with it, though. I took a stripe from him for dereliction of duty. From now on, motor pool guards will have access to both the gate and guardhouse keys. As for the captain and first sergeant, I'll deal with them shortly.”

The company commander and the first sergeant were replaced at the same time soon after. I'm confident they left with career-stopping evaluations. I assumed no one at the barracks found it funny.

The colonel took them out because it was the right thing to do, and for a partly personal reason. I learned later from the master sergeant that my final words touched his heart. The colonel had an eighteen-year-old daughter.

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I did eventually relate my chain of command journey to General Forrest. He appreciated knowing the system worked. I'd like to think he sent a salute to the colonel.