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## The Inspection

Dale Hanks

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Alloyistic Ambiguous Dixon is fully awake at 0400. He heads for the bathroom and splashes cold water over his eyes to erase the cobwebs. He's got to be sharp today. Colonel Robert E. Lee Winston, the Fourth Army inspector from Fort Hood, Texas, is coming to town. In exactly sixteen hours Private First Class Dixon will stand at attention in the Paragould Arkansas National Guard armory and be micro-scrutinized by this eagle-eyed colonel, a man said to be obsessed with brass insignia.

The full-length mirror on the bathroom door challenges Dixon to show Colonel Winston how a sharp soldier wears his brass. He dresses in his high-starched Class-A khaki uniform and stands at attention in front of the mirror. Are the pieces precisely in the right places? Are they shined to a high gloss? Does his belt buckle sparkle? Do his combat boots need more spit and shine? The mirror reflects the perfect uniform. He turns left and right for profile views. Looking good. Using a hand mirror, he turns his back to make sure the creases in his trousers and blouse are neat and crisp. Looking good, looking damn good. He removes his national guard uniform and gently returns it to the bedroom closet.

Back in his skivvies, Dixon puts on a pot of coffee and rips the cover from a package of doughnuts. The coffee is strong and hot, but the doughnuts are tough as cardboard and about as tasty. "Don't matter," he mumbles, "My appetite ain't so good anyway." He tosses the doughnuts and stands slurping his coffee at the kitchen sink. He looks out the window waiting for daybreak. He sways his coffee cup gently back and forth over the sink, singing "Love Me Tender" real soft, like Elvis. His shiny brass can match up with Elvis's sparkling outfits anytime. Yup. Looking good.

Right in the middle of Elvis' song, Dixon's eyes widen as he blurts out, "Oh my God, the colonel is gonna' ask me questions too. Hell, I forgot about that. How could I forget that? He's

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bound to ask us medics about first aid. Not to worry. I got that one covered: stop the bleeding, protect the wound, treat for shock. Lordy, I hope he asks me that one. Damn, ain't no tellin' what he's gonna ask me. What if he asks me to recite general orders? I never could remember that one. Oh my God, I hope he don't ask that one. Crap, this is awful. I gotta get outta' here, get my mind on somethin' else. May as well head on down to the shop, get to work, settle my nerves, and stop sweatin' all this stuff."

Dixon dresses in his other uniform, navy-blue coveralls with the name "Bubba's Body and Fender Shop" on the back. His left front pocket at heart level is adorned with the name, "AA Dixon." Bubba rolls his eyes and shakes his head in disbelief every time he thinks of the name, Alloyistic Ambiguous. Craziest damn name he ever heard of. In the job interview Dixon had told Bubba, "Don't blame me. It's my daddy's idea. He thinks a fancy name like 'at will help me in life. Daddy says that Ambiguous is Latin for a big man, meaning a big body and big brains, you know, 'biguous."

"Well, it's too much for me to process," Bubba said. "I'm gonna' hire you anyway and call you Double A. You know, like the batteries." The name sticks. Double A Dixon.

Double A finishes his coffee and heads out for work. He's thinking hard. "Maybe when I get to pounding them fenders on that Ford Crown-Victoria police cruiser, it'll get my mind off the inspection for a while, settle me down, calm my nerves."

He gets to the shop before Bubba and leans against a customer's pickup in the gravel parking lot to enjoy a smoke: a Camel, no filter. He takes a deep draw and exhales through his nose. "Damn, this is good. Would I walk a mile for one of these things? Hell no. Well, maybe, if push comes to shove. Damn. I wish Bubba would get off his ass and get on down here."

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Double A is finishing his smoke and flips the still lit buttsie on the gravel as Bubba drives up. Double A suddenly remembers his army training and retrieves the buttsie. He wipes the lit end off with his fingers and fieldstrips what's left of the cigarette. Tobacco flutters to the ground. He rolls the paper into a tiny ball and puts it into his pocket like a sharp soldier should. Bubba opens the shop. Double A picks up his hammering tools and gets to work on the police cruiser. Some dumbass rookie chasing a couple of teenagers for marijuana possession crashes the damn thing. "I'm glad they got away," Double A says to himself. "I hope they fire that no 'count rookie cop."

Double A pounds away on the left front fender. Pounding metal brings his favorite John Phillips Sousa's march to mind: Oh, the monkey wrapped his tail around the flagpole, la-ta-dah, la-ta-dah. Wham! He is humming Sousa and grinning like Cousin Otis's mule eatin' briars. Sporadically, he breaks into Sousa with a fierce "Yeah!" as the hammer smashes metal. When he wields that four-pound hammer, he is, by God, in charge, and don't you forget it. Hammering the hell out of a busted car body levels the playing field in his contest with Colonel Winston.

And when Geraldine pisses him off, he feels better after slamming the crap out of what's left of busted windshields. God, he loves the sparkle of pulverized glass particles flying through the air. He swings a three-foot crowbar like a baseball bat. He pretends to be Stan Musial, the great slugger for the Saint Louis Cardinals. Wham! "Take that, Geraldine! Cut me off for a whole month just because I was dancin' too close to Zona Faye Claxton at the Moose Lodge. What the hell. Ain't no big deal. With tits like Zona Faye's got you can't get that close anyway. Damn, Geraldine, a whole month!" Bam! The windshield is finished.

Double A is thinking serious now. "Oh my God. What if Colonel Winston's wife has cut him off, too, leaving him in a bad mood? Who knows? It can happen to anybody, anytime. It's

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Murphy's Law. If a thing can go bad, it will. And at the worst possible time. And what could be a worse possible time than tonight for the inspecting officer to be in a bad mood. Just my luck, dammit. Murphy don't bullshit you. Mrs. Winston has cut the colonel off at the worst possible time. I know it. Deep in my bones, I know it. To hell with you, Mrs. Winston. Old bitch."

Jaysus, Murphy is really after Double A's ass now. He can feel it. The Law is watching his every move, waiting to grab him by the balls at the worst possible time. "What if my truck won't start when I head out to the armory tonight? The sumbitch is actin' up lately. Even if it starts, a black cat is bound to run across the road just before I reach the armory. I can see the little scumbag now spewing out a vapor trail of bad luck right in front of my path.

"Man, I don't know didley-squat about all them new terms the instructors keep throwin' around—stuff like jungle warfare, insurgency, guerrillas, napalm, Agent Orange. Never heard of such stuff. If the colonel asks me about that crap, I'm done for.

"Hey, wait a minute. I do understand jungles and guerrillas but he prob'ly won't ask me about that. He'll ask me about insurgency, whatever in the hell that is. And Vietnam, wherever in the hell that is. The battery officers all been talkin' about Vietnam. Vietnam, ever since we out-shot the regular army troops with our 155s last summer at Fort Sill, they say we're on the Pentagon's short list for deployment to Vietnam. God, if the colonel asks me about where Vietnam is all I can say is, 'Sir, I ain't got a clue, but I have heard of it.'

"Oh my God, I've lost weight worryin'. My cartridge belt is gonna' be so loose it'll hang down over my hips like John Wayne's holster. I ain't gonna' have time to tighten it up either. The first sergeant is gonna' be pissed. I can see his beady eyes staring a hole clean through me. I shouldn't have waited until now to tighten up the belt. Maybe I can slip by the armory on the way home and take care of that little detail."

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“Yo, Bubba,” says Double A. “I need to take the afternoon off. We got inspection tonight at the armory and I ain’t quite ready. I’m gettin’ worried.”

“Double A, you been thinkin’ too much,” says Bubba. “Folks what don’t think too good ought not to think too much. Your mind been dwellin’ too much on negatives. Geraldine says you worry too much, too, says you’re a pessimist, says if you don’t get that stupid inspection over with soon, you gonna’ worry yourself to an early grave.”

Double A says, “What the hell does she know about worry? She ain’t never been inspected, ain’t never had a single worry in her life. She thinks her juicy little thing is trimmed in gold. You put a gal like that in charge of pussy and they get right uppity. She don’t worry about nothin’ ’cause she thinks she owns the world.”

Double A heads out for his one-bedroom, cinder-block house past the armory. The armory is locked. A sign says it’ll reopen at 1800 hours. “Dammit. Now I ain’t gonna’ have time to fix the cartridge belt.” He leaves the armory heading for home. His belly is churning. He hopes there are still some Tums in the medicine cabinet. With the luck he’s having, though, there prob’ly ain’t none left. He pulls into the gravel driveway and parks his pickup under his prized Sears Special Galvanized Carport. He walks quickly to the bathroom. Dammit, he’s right. Ain’t no Tums left. Murphy’s Law is running rampant. Maybe he can make do, stir some baking soda in a glass of water.

Double A is still three jittery hours away from reporting to the armory. He goes to the living room and selects a cue stick from the wall. The cue-stick shelf and a pool table, the only items in the room, is another thing that pisses Geraldine off. Ain’t no place to sit. He knocks a few balls around. This seems to help his gut. He leans over the pool table and stretches his arms straight out on the smooth surface to test his innards. He gently pushes his midriff against the

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side of the table for a belly check. No discomfort, gut's better. Uh-oh. The eight ball is staring him straight in the eye. There ain't no doubt about it. He is flat out behind number eight. Damn. Murphy has picked one helluva' day for his rampage.

Double A puts the cue stick up and twirls the eight ball into a side pocket. May as well get my uniform on now. He heads for the bedroom closet and gently removes his spotless Class A uniform. He carefully dresses making sure not to bend his knees and run the risk of stretching his trousers crease. He stands in front of the full-length mirror for a final check. Looking good. A soldier this sharp deserves to be a corporal.

Double A scowls at the thought of Murphy's eight ball warning. Never should have picked up that cue stick in the first place. He swigs down a Pabst Blue Ribbon longneck to settle his nerves. He is fully dressed and ready to meet his fate at the armory. He heads out the door to his pickup and takes off for the armory. "Oh my God," he thinks. "I shouldn't have had that beer. What if I need to pee while standing in ranks? What if I can't hold it and pee all over myself? Even worse—what if I fart while bringing my rifle to port arms? I done it twice't before just practicing. Oh my, oh crap, what'll Colonel Winston say then? Prob'ly slap me like General Patton and rip off my stripe."

Double A drives to the armory in misery and checks in with the first sergeant to collect his M-1 and cartridge belt. He mills about with other troops and tightens his cartridge belt. He goes over and over in his mind some of the questions Colonel Winston might ask: First aid, general orders, insurgency, Vietnam, napalm, jungles, guerillas. It's all making him dizzy. "Oh my God, what if I get my thumb caught in the breech when I open the bolt. I've done it before. Got me an M-1 thumb out of it. Swelling lasts three days. Crap. Oh Lord, what if I drop my rifle

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when the colonel hands it back to me. Jaysus, this is too much. Let's get this show on the road and get it over with."

The first sergeant leaves the battery commander's office and takes charge. Fall in! Double A takes his place in ranks with the third platoon. "Damn," he thinks. "This is worse than waitin' for a root canal. What with Colonel Winston being in a bad mood and all, he's sure to be after my ass."

Double A cuts his eyes toward the second platoon for a glimpse of the inspecting party. "Oh my God, they's four of 'em: Colonel Winston; Lieutenant Colonel Burkett, battalion commander; Captain Baxter, battery commander; and Captain Hanks, S-2 on the battalion commander's staff. Oh Lordy, here they come. Now they're beginning to assess the shortcomings of my platoon. The inspecting party slowly works its way through the ranks. Double A is in the last squad, rear row. He can see Winston, but the colonel talks so softly, he can't hear the questions. Damn, he wonders, what the hell is he askin'?"

"Holy shit, here he is." Double A's time has come. You couldn't penetrate his behind with a greased ten-penny nail and a ball-peen hammer. Just one more soldier and he will be face to face with Colonel Winston. Colonel Winston moves smartly to his right and confronts Double A. Double A brings his rifle to port arms smartly and opens the bolt with authority. "Hey, looking good. Didn't catch my thumb in the breech." They both look each other over. "Hey, Colonel Winston might be over his bad mood. He actually looks like a nice old guy. About fifty. Trim. Tanned. Pleasant face. Square jaw. Hair and mustache a nice shade of silver." Puts Double A in mind of the kindly father in a TV sitcom. Double A's tight sphincter relaxes.

Colonel Winston snatches Double A's rifle and casually examines the barrel. In a quiet voice he says, "Soldier, have you ever heard the term, 'insurgency?'"

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“Yes, sir.”

Still examining Double A’s rifle the colonel says, “Soldier, have you ever heard the term ‘guerrilla?’” Double A’s sphincter is fully relaxed now. He’s got that one down pat. He is confident now that, like Elvis, Murphy has left the building.

“Yes, sir,” says Double A.

“Soldier, what is a guerrilla?”

“Hit’s a beast sir. They live in jungles.”

Colonel Winston cocks his head sideways and leans slightly forward toward Double A.

“Come again, soldier.”

Double A senses that the colonel has a hearing problem, so he turns up the volume. His loud explanation reverberates through the deathly still building bouncing from wall to wall and from the ceiling to the floor.

“Hit’s a beast, Sir. Got long hairy arms that reach down below his knees. Pounds his big hairy chest with both hands, jumps up and down, and grunts, ooh, ooh, ooh like this.” Double A acts out these movements hopping up and down a couple of times to make sure the colonel understands the nature of the beast.

Colonel Winston says, “Oh, I see.”

The colonel hands Double A’s rifle back to him and slowly turns his vacant eyes toward Lieutenant Colonel Burkett. Colonel Burkett turns his empty stare toward Captain Baxter. Baxter slowly turns his blank face to Captain Hanks. Captain Hanks slowly turns his puzzled face and sees 100 soldiers standing at ease with white knuckle grips on their rifles. Their mouths are twisted in all kinds of odd shapes. Some are rolling their eyes and grimacing at the ceiling. Other eyes are tightly shut while their drooping heads gently sway from side to side. Still other eyes are

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producing giant tears tumbling down their owner's cheeks. Many of the troops' shoulders are vibrating like a worn-out washing machine. Some are gritting their teeth so hard you can almost hear it.

A peculiar energy builds up pressure that is dangerously close to exploding. An eerie silence fills the armory like the calm before a storm. Agonizing tension gripping the troops is at the breaking point. Pandemonium lurks darkly beneath the surface. Like a gentleman's control over a gas build up in polite company, the thunderous force trapped inside the troops is suppressed only by superior discipline and silent prayer.

Colonel Winston moves quickly to the next soldier, but he asks no questions. He pauses briefly, takes the man's rifle, makes a cursory examination of the piece, and continues the same rapid procedure for the remaining eight soldiers in the battery.

The inspection in ranks is finished. Lieutenant Colonel Burkett says to Captain Baxter, "You might want to have a word with Dixon."

"Yes, sir."

Baxter turns to the first sergeant. "Sergeant, get Dixon in my office. On the double."

"Yes, sir."

The first sergeant grabs Double A as the rest of the men head out for the rear parking lot whooping and hollering like school is out for summer. The lot is filled with cigarette smoke and raucous laughter. Some of the men are doubled over holding their bellies and shaking their heads from side to side. Others are reared back facing the full moon and howling like lost coon hounds. One soldier from Double A's squad is in a grassy spot flat on his back screaming with his arms and legs stabbing violently at the sky. Gradually, the noise subsides for a bit. Then the men look

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at one another and pandemonium breaks out again. Double A's description of the enemy in the jungles of Vietnam is too rich to let go.

While bedlam is reigning outside, Double A reports to the battery commander.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Captain Baxter gets straight to the point. "Dixon, what's this crap about goddam gorillas?"

"Sir, I don't know what you are talking about."

"I'm talking about this goddam gorilla garbage. Dixon, if bullshit was butter, you'd never have to churn. You sound like a bullshit salesman with a mouth full of samples."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't follow you."

After a deep silence, the terrible truth stabs the battery commander straight in his gut. Dixon is absolutely serious. Captain Baxter shudders and slumps in his chair. He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling pleading in a faint whimper, "Why me, O Lord? Why me?"

Quickly recovering his composure, Baxter speaks in a soft, apologetic voice.

"Well, Double A, never mind. I'll get the first sergeant to discuss it with you later. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Double A snaps a sharp salute and heads out for some beers and barbecue at the Dixie Pig. Geraldine is waiting at the bar sipping a Bud draft and softly humming "Everybody's Somebody's Fool." Double A glides into the Pig with arms outstretched toward Geraldine, his feet lightly spinning like Fred Astaire teasing Ginger Rogers with a soft-shoe routine. The dance ends with a flourish at Geraldine's bar stool. He takes a deep, exaggerated bow. She rolls her eyes and exhales a cloud of Marlboro smoke toward the ceiling.

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“Well, soldier boy, how’d it go?”

“I tell you what, sweet thang, your lover-boy was some kinda’ sharp tonight. I can see them corporal stripes a’comin’. He couldn’t help but admire my shiny brass, and I answered ever’ question he asked. I was a ten tonight, little darlin’. You oughta’ give Ole Double A at least two weeks’ credit for that.”