

A Thousand Yard Stare
By
Larry Pontius

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Larry Pontius
1060 South Sherbourne Drive
#208
Los Angeles, CA 90035
LPontius@gmail.com
512-659-9279

Characters

MARK, 24, a soldier, recently returned from a tour in Iraq

WENDY, 22, his wife

JASON, 24, his best friend

An IRAQI WOMAN, LEAH, mid 20s

MENDEZ, 24, soldier

Stage

A one bedroom apartment with a living room/kitchen combination, with a counter defining the space between the two. In one direction is the door to the bedroom, which leads to bathroom, on the opposite side is a small concrete deck, which over looks the park in the center of the complex, with a sliding door.

The apartment is furnished simply, and on the cheap side. An old couch. A seldom used dinner table. On the deck is a couple of folding chairs, bought at a yard sale, and a thirty dollar hibachi grill.

The space is defined by the doorways and light.

At certain times, the space transforms into Baghdad—the light should fill the stage, extending beyond the confines of the apartment.

Time

It's a small city in Central Illinois during the summer.

Notes

Time bleeds from one moment to the next.

MARK should never leave the stage.

Night. It's cooled off from the hot day, but the humidity lingers. The stars are out, twinkling the way that they do. And it's quiet. That's when the trouble starts...

Labored breathing.

In the distance... on the edge of a memory, half-remembered, between here and the horizon, an IRAQI WOMAN, LEAH, stands with two plastic bags of groceries.

An AMERICAN SOLDIER, MENDEZ, in full combat gear enters on the other side of the stage. He stands on the balcony looking in at MARK.

MARK lies on the couch in the apartment. He's wearing jeans, barefoot, and sweating. A scar on his chest. His eyes are closed, perhaps he's dreaming. He's struggling.

Slap. LEAH

Gun fire. Under fire, under-- MENDEZ

Slap. Slap. LEAH

Duck. Cover. MENDEZ
Against the wall. Call it in. Call it—

Slapslapslap. LEAH

MARK claws at his mouth...reaching in...

Explosion. That was a car. MENDEZ
Ears ring. Keep moving. Forward.
Move. Move. Run.
Aim. Fire. Fire. Aim.

MARK begins to pull out the bones and feathers of a bird.

Slapslapslap. Slap. LEAH

MENDEZ

Push. Keep psuhing forward.
Is that a reporter? What the fuck? Put down the camera. Take some fucking—

LEAH

Slapslapslap.

MENDEZ

Aim. Fire. Fire. Fire.

LEAH

Slapslap.

MENDEZ

Aim. Fire. Fire.

Like coming out of cool water, MARK sits up and breathes. Feathers and bones litter his chest.

HE looks at MENDEZ...he sees him, he really sees him.

From the bedroom:

WENDY *off-stage*

Mark?

MARK tries to control his breath, he looks off towards the bedroom, then down at himself. He pulls at the feathers and bones, collecting them.

MENDEZ turns and walks away.

WENDY *off-stage*

Mark? Honey? Where are you? Are you here?

MARK stuffs them deep into the couch. WENDY steps in, she's in a t-shirt and boxer shorts. She's relieved to see him.

WENDY

Mark?

MARK looks at her, confused. He's still coming up for air.

WENDY

I need to get up in a few hours. Come back to bed.

I want you next to me.

Please?

MARK doesn't move.

WENDY

Dreams?

MARK

I think...I'm awake now. I won't go back to sleep. I would only toss and turn.

HE isn't sure what else there is to say.

WENDY bends down and touches MARK. They kiss. WENDY plays with his hair.

MARK doesn't move.

SHE nods, kisses him, stands. She turns. Then. She smiles, awkward and forced, wanting to mean it, and disappears back into the bedroom.

The IRAQI WOMAN takes her bags and goes...MARK turns...but misses her. He presses the palms of his hands into his eyes. He pushes hard.

MARK reaches deep into the sofa and pulls out...the TV remote. He turns on the TV. It's the early local news. The farm reports. It's always the farm reports this early in the morning. Only farmers are awake this early in the morning.

MARK grabs a T-shirt off the pile of clean clothes on the chair and puts it on. HE heads to the refrigerator, opens the door and reaches deep inside.

Time bleeds into a late hot afternoon.

The sun is about an hour away from setting, and it burns your eyes, unless you turn your back on it. People are getting out of work, trying to make their way home, make it in time for dinner, but it's a clusterfuck, and hot, humid, and that's when your AC just won't work right.

On the balcony, stands JASON, loosened tie, dress pants.

JASON

Seriously, you'll do it?

MARK turns from the refrigerator and looks at JASON like he hasn't seen him in a long time.

MARK

Jason? What are you...? Do it?

JASON frowns. Then.

JASON

The job. The job, Mark. Hello? You'll do the job?

MARK

Yeah. Jason. Yeah.

MARK grabs a couple of beers. HE heads the porch and hands one to JASON.

JASON

Tight. That is so fucking tight. I've already cleared everything with Ted.

MARK sitting

Ted?

JASON

The boss. The owner's son. He loves it. Loves it! You'll see. It's a great idea.

HE takes a swig from the beer.

JASON

It's going to be so easy for you... You know all kinds of shit about cars. You got pretty eyes.

MARK

My eyes?

JASON

You got pretty eyes. Ladies love the eyes.

MARK

You didn't turn fag on me while I was gone, did you?

JASON

Whatever. You're going to drive the women crazy. All those 40 something women, coming out all alone to the lot, these women who have nothing better to do than to work out their tight little bodies, coming to buy a big old Lexus...and then they see you...an American hero.

MARK scratches an eye.

JASON

Oh, man. Those Cougars are gonna go nuts, their panties will get so fucking wet.

MARK swigs from his beer.

JASON *laughing*

Dude, those women are freaks. They know shit women our age don't.

Again, MARK swigs from his beer, finishing it.

JASON

It's true. Absolute freaks. I gotta beat them off with a stick. Seriously. This is like the best thing. Ever. The Duo Magnifico back together again! Can you start tomorrow?

MARK

Can you get me another beer?

JASON

Already?

MARK

I'm thirsty.

JASON smiles, opens the screen and goes into the apartment.

MARK reaches over and pushes the screen door shut.

JASON

It's an easy job, Mark. People come to you, all you gotta do is talk. You can make money and get hot women. What could be better?

MARK

Beer.

JASON opens the fridge, pulls out two beers. He sees something. He pulls it out. It's a small box.

JASON

What the hell is this?
What's this box in the fridge?

MARK turns and looks. Pause.

MARK *simply*

My medals.

JASON

Really? No shit.

MARK
Yeah.

JASON
And you left them in the fridge?

MARK isn't sure what to say.

JASON
Dude. You're weird. Can I look?

*MARK wobbles his head.
JASON opens it up. It's the most amazing thing he's seen.*

JASON
Holy shit. Holy shit, Mark. This is pretty cool. Can I...can I take it out?

MARK shrugs. JASON pulls out a Purple Heart.

JASON
Purple Heart. Very nice. And. Is this? Oh. Shit. Oh, yeah.

HE pulls out another medal. JASON is lost looking at it. HE makes his way back outside. HE hands the beer to MARK.

Would you look at that? The Bronze Star. The Fucking Bronze Star. Did you get to meet the President?

MARK is silent.

That woulda been cool. That would, woulda been...very cool. To meet the President. Do you get to meet the President when you get the Bronze Star? I don't know. Bravery. Individual bravery. A fucking hero. This means...it means, Mark, you're a fucking hero.

Weighing it in his hand, eyebrow raised...

It must be real bronze. It should be. It should be real bronze. It would be fucking cheap if it wasn't real bronze. It's not like everyone gets one. It's not like the Purple Heart—everyone gets the Purple Heart.

MARK
Only when you get shot.

JASON
What?

MARK

You get the Purple Heart when you get shot.

JASON

Well, yeah. Sure. Anyone can get shot.

MARK

It hurts. To get shot.

JASON

Alright. Ok. The Purple Heart. It's ok. I mean, it's...I couldn't get shot. It takes...I'm not saying the guys that get the Purple Heart don't deserve it.

MARK

They got shot, Jason.

JASON

Yeah, yeah, I know. But. It's not the Bronze Star, Mark. That's what I'm saying. You get the Bronze Star when you really do something...when you do something kickass. When you do something...shit. I don't know. You're a fucking hero, Mark. That's what I'm saying. You're a bonafide American Hero. G. I. Joe. Kung fu grip mother fucker.

MARK

That's what it said on my discharge papers. Kung Fu grip mother fucker.

JASON

I'm just saying, you're a hero—

MARK

Yeah. I know.

MARK is silent. JASON gets it.

JASON

Alright.

JASON hands the medal back to MARK. Silence. They drink beer.

JASON

You prick. When I heard that you got...shot. That was...hard. Crazy. Just. Crazy. To get that call. Wendy...man...she was just...She took it pretty hard. She was...she was really afraid....

MARK again is silent, he continues to look off...

JASON

What was it like? You haven't...I haven't heard any stories. I thought when you got back you'd have lots of stories. My grandpa had lots of stories of Korea.

MARK looks at him, his eyes narrow.

JASON

So...tell me...tell me something good. What was it like? Were you like Schwarzenegger? Blasting the bad guys?

MARK

It doesn't happen like that, Jason.

JASON

That's what I want to know.

Silence. A hush. Then.

MARK

It was like...every war movie, every video game all at once. Loud, noisy, fast.

JASON

Oh. Ok. Um. Any little...you know...funny stories?

MARK

Funny stories?

MARK finishes his beer. HE gets up and heads into the living room. JASON follows.

MARK gets a beer out of the fridge, pops the cap off, throws it into the sink. HE drinks.

MARK

I'm no good at telling stories.

WENDY walks down the hallway, in her dental uniform, carrying two bags of groceries.

MARK

Do you want another beer?

JASON

Nah.

WENDY struggles to get the door open, and comes into the apartment.

JASON

Oh, hey, let me—

JASON grabs a bag and sets it on the counter. WENDY puts the other one on the counter.

WENDY

Thanks.

JASON

Looking good, Wendy, looking good.

JASON playfully throws an arm around WENDY.

WENDY

Stop it. I look awful. I didn't sleep well last night.

JASON

Oh, I see a little military action, eh, Mark? Did you take her from...behind?

The joke fails.

JASON

Right...I should go.

WENDY removing the arm

Yeah...

JASON

So...? Tomorrow?

Taking out his car keys.

MARK

Tomorrow. I don't...Jason. I don't.

JASON

Alright—

MARK

It's just. You know. I think I should—

JASON

Alright. Sure. No problemo, man. Take your time. The job's always going to be there for you. Next week?

MARK

Next week.

JASON nods, then goes to the door.

JASON

Later, Wendy.

WENDY

Later, Jason.

JASON goes, WENDY continues to put groceries away.

MARK

Let's order out.

WENDY

We can't order out every night.

MARK shrugs.

MARK

Come on get a beer.

WENDY decides. SHE opens the fridge.

WENDY

How much beer have you had today?

*WENDY pops the beer, throws the cap into the sink and comes outside.
MARK gives her the chair.*

WENDY

What did Jason say?

MARK

You know what he said.

WENDY

Are you going to take the job?

MARK

I told him yes. But...

MARK doesn't say any more. WENDY lets it sit for a second. Then.

Ok. Alright. That's fine. Just... WENDY

Pause.

Everyone is going to Mother Murphy's tonight.

Everyone? MARK

Yeah. WENDY

That place sucks. MARK

You love that place. WENDY

When I was sneaking in in high school. MARK

Everyone is going to be there. WENDY

So? MARK

I want to go. WENDY

Fine. MARK

You'll come with me. WENDY

I've already had a lot to drink, you know, Jason was over— MARK

You don't have to drink when you're there— WENDY

I don't want to see those people— MARK

Those people?
WENDY

It's a dump—
MARK

I'll call them, we can go somewhere else. You should get out.
WENDY

I don't want to go anywhere else—
MARK

Then let's go to Murphy's—
WENDY

Shouldn't you be at home? You have work tomorrow.
MARK

Work?
WENDY

Yes. Work. You have work to do tomorrow. You aren't being responsible—
MARK

Responsible?
WENDY

LEAH walks in from the distance, again, carrying her plastic bags of food.

You have patients to take care of—
MARK

I clean teeth!
WENDY

It's a good job, you need to—
MARK

I'm twenty two years old! I don't NEED to do anything. I want to go out and see my friends, have a good time—
WENDY

GOD, will you just shut up, just shut up. I just want some peace! Christ Almighty, I can still hear gun fire, every time you open your mouth it's like a mortar blast going off in my
MARK

head. I just need some time, alright, just...I want peace and quiet so for the love of God, shut the fuck up.

WENDY turns and goes into the bedroom, slamming the door. She turns and leans against the door, beginning to cry.

LEAH

Slap. Slap, slap.

*The world slips. A sense of falling. A hush.
LEAH crosses into the apartment.
MARK presses the palms of his hands into his eyes.*

LEAH

Mark.

MARK

I had a dream.

LEAH

Yes.

MARK

You can't be here.

LEAH

I had to come. To see you.

MARK

Me?

LEAH

Of course.

MARK

You can't—

LEAH

But I am. I've walked all this way. So many miles to see you. Across the desert.

Time bleeds as lights blaze. Bright, hot. Sand and baked dirt. This is BAGHDAD. Some time ago. The sounds of cars, people.

MARK

What are you doing here? You can't be here.

WOMAN looks at him. MARK tries again. Speaking slower.

You. Can't. Be. Here.

Pause.

Move along. Please.

LEAH

I am waiting for my brother.

MARK

You speak English?

LEAH

So do you.

MARK

I'm. Well. Yeah. I'm an American.

LEAH

I studied.

MARK

Oh. Oh. Right. Ok. Yeah. I was just. You know...you can't be here, right now.

LEAH

I am waiting for my brother.

MARK

You need to go back inside. The streets... Curfew.

LEAH

It seems safe enough.

MARK

You don't understand. This isn't—I'm not...asking. It's an order. We've been ordered to get everyone off the street. Curfew.

LEAH

And if I don't obey?

MARK

What?

LEAH

If I don't obey your order, what are you going to do?

MARK

This isn't...you don't have a choice. It's for your own good. This is for your own protection.

LEAH

I have lived here my whole life. I know this city better than you.

MARK

I'm equipped.

LEAH

Of course you are.

MARK

I'm just trying to help.

MENDEZ appears.

MENDEZ

Hey, Barnes!

MARK

Mendez.

MENDEZ crossing to MARK

What's going on?

MARK

Just talking with...um...

MENDEZ not expecting much

How are you, ma'am?

LEAH

I am well.

MENDEZ

?

MARK

She speaks English. She studied. And she's waiting for her brother.

MENDEZ

Barnes, I'm not trying to date her.

LEAH
Is there anything the matter?

MENDEZ
Do you live in this neighborhood?

LEAH
Yes. I do.

MARK
I informed her of the curfew and asked her to go back inside.

MENDEZ
I'm Corporal Mendez.

HE offers the WOMAN his hand. SHE does not take it.

MENDEZ
What is your name?

LEAH
Leah.

MARK
Leah?

MENDEZ
My sister's name is Leah.

MARK
How did you get the name Leah?

LEAH
It is in the Bible.

MENDEZ
No fucking way.

MARK
Really?

MENDEZ
Married to Jacob.

LEAH

You're Christian?

MENDEZ

Yes. I am.

I totally didn't expect to meet a Christian in this Godless part of the world. I thought everyone would be...you know.

LEAH

What?

MENDEZ makes a turban gesture. Then, nicely...

MENDEZ

Muslims.

LEAH

Are you sure we're in the Godless part of the world? Christ came from the Middle East, we are only 800 kilometers from Jerusalem. How far away is the United States?

Silence.

MENDEZ

Oh. Snap.

LEAH

Excuse me?

MENDEZ

You can pick 'em, Bucky.

MARK

Bones.

MENDEZ

Well. Ma'am. You have a nice day. We're here to protect you. Bucky. I'm going to go around one more time, meet you at the gate?

MARK

Yeah.

MENDEZ

Finish this up.

MENDEZ goes.

A hush. Baghdad begins to slide away.

MARK

Ma'am, I really need you to go inside.

LEAH

You know nothing of my country, of my culture.

MARK

Listen—

LEAH

You listen. My family and I waited for years for someone to come and get rid of Saddam—

MARK

And we did—

LEAH

And now we have letters mailed to us demanding that we convert to Islam or they will kill us and burn down our houses. It is our neighbors who are the ones who write these letters. They look just like everyone else. The people who were our friends have become our enemies.

MARK

We are doing the best that we can. It's not the best of situations. What do you want me to do?

LEAH

Are you a Christian?

MARK

I guess.

LEAH

Guess?

MARK

I was raised...

LEAH

A Christian. Then as one Christian to another. Turn on the power for the whole day. Get the water running. Open the schools. I want to feel safe in my own neighborhood. Now, excuse me, while I go to find my brother, because, as I have been told, there is a curfew.

She picks up her bags, and turns to go. She stops, almost like she is trying to remember what happens next.

LEAH

Was it like this? Did I really say those things?

MARK

Yes, you did. And you took your bags and walked away.

She walks away, into the distance.