

# Podcast

by Martyn Sullivan

The recording was buried like cursed old gold deep within the internet, nestling beneath pop-up adverts and auto-loading distractions warning ‘turn away now!’ We had pulled it down and stretched it out ready the night before the drive. The memory of it is crisp, and I can hear it in the dark.

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My friend and I share a favourite comedian, an edgy, depraved, debauched and shocking performer, although in truth he doesn't say anything so despicable, it's only filthy jokes and dark humour. Like almost everyone today, he has his own podcast upon which his comic friends turn up as guests, up-and-coming nearly successful comedians will appear, his manager too, he shills dubious products and makes light of the grift, that sort of territory. The assembled company talk nonsense together, get drunk, and share the tall tales they have told on air before. There is an ever-growing collection of in-jokes, you feel included and rewarded for having learned the argot. And now and then he will take the time to talk to someone much more interesting. On our way to a long weekend of camping, we listened as he sat down on tour in Amsterdam with an American ex-pat comic to swap tales and, of course, drink.

Straight in. The ex-pat used to be a black site guard—a bleak military facility that didn't officially exist inside of the internal fence line of a more standard base located deep inside the Iraqi desert—sometime around 2003 during the second war, the war of WMDs, occupation and

regime change. He and his unit were complete fuckups, trainee artillery that couldn't do maths, they didn't understand compass bearings or coordinates and were rated useless. Embarrassments to the entire army training programme. And they didn't care. They absolutely failed every aspect of their training and were given the choice of either going back to the start of it all with the next intake of recruits and learning again how to lace their boots up or they could go with the friendly officer they had never met before to be guards at a facility processing enemy combatants in Iraq. This was all well before anything like Guantanamo Bay was known about. The ex-pat was one of a bare handful who took the smiling man's offer and moved out on schedule on the last day of training. The others preferred to stay in infancy.

Days later, he found himself within the aforementioned facility that didn't exist. He and his fellows were the lowest of the low on site besides the unfortunate prisoners, and they were forbidden to talk to either the intelligence operatives, the western nations' special forces teams, or the detainees themselves. Their time was spent sleeping or performing one of three major duties: peeling potatoes and other group food preparations—it quickly turned out this was the highlight of the deployment; secondly, dragging prisoners from their cells and into, and then back out of, interrogation suites; and finally, standing guard outside of the interrogation rooms where either the special forces members would brutalise the detainees physically or the CIA and their counterparts from Britain and France would find ways to break the enemy mentally and emotionally.

I listened as the ex-pat recounted a shift on guard where he observed a British special forces team returning to the base with a high value target, an Al Qaeda operator that intelligence had indicated as being the trigger man who killed a young British soldier on patrol during the occupation with a sniper's bullet. The SAS, as that was who they were, dragged the man into one of the vacant cells and then spent the next three hours beating the detainee and carefully inflicting injuries upon his body. For three hours. And for three hours the ex-pat stood guard outside the cell, in the heat, with nothing to do other than listen to the increasingly red meat inside turn to shreds, doggedly staring ahead as the captive whimpered

close by and inevitably fell into incoherent howling, unable to plead for mercy or scream defiance through the trauma.

He described how he thought the soldiers deliberately broke most of the bones in the man's body before at the last possible moment, when any more violence would have led to an actual killing, instead handed the detainee over to the camp for medical treatment and to begin the official interrogation process, the wounds sustained being written up as entirely received during the capture. I remember glancing at my friend driving our van, he looked as equal parts horrified and fascinated as I was, we both murmured "fucking hell" to the other. Neither of us were going to be the one to turn it off, although now—a mixture of ashamed and sickened—I wish that I had.

We listened as the corruption of the black site guards began, duty turning into acquiescence and ambivalence, then into collaboration just to get through the posting. We heard how at the start of the posting, the snatch squads of terrifying special forces soldiers who behaved as if they were composed of nothing but living metal and fury dragged in actual suspected terrorists, men who perhaps had shot and bombed civilians and western forces, and how the commandoes later returned with these men's brothers and fathers—who must have known what plotting if any had taken place—and then the local gangsters who perhaps had sold these terror operatives new weapons, fresh explosives or loaned them money, and then the men's neighbours who might have seen something. Finally, the men's sons.

The ex-pat described how an Australian soldier with the physique of a body building gorilla dragged an eleven-year-old boy into an interrogation cell and then spent the next hour screaming angry English at the child, eventually leaving nothing but a puddle of wet bloody flesh crying into the room's concrete floor. Carefully, the ex-pat gathered the boy up and silently deposited him back into his cell. There was no authorisation of concern or kindness, but the action of the older male body hoisting up the crushed child made me think of unspoken words, needed and assumed, language barriers, unregulatable warmth crossing over uneven systems of flesh and I wondered what comfort could the naked possibly take from a brush with camouflage cloth.

It bothered me more and more that it was never revealed what happened to any of the men and boys taken out of Fallujah, Basra, and god only knows wherever else. No indication that they were released or that they were tried and punished for whatever could be pinned on them, or even quietly murdered in our name. They could have been moved on to an official prison that we became familiar enough with to be outraged at the very mention of. They could still be there under another rotation of idiots who could not complete their basic training.

After dinner one night, while the ex-pat cleared waste and emptied bins, a CIA officer thanked a SEAL for unleashing an attack dog when he did during a capture, it had bitten off an insurgent's face and saved the officer's life. The SEAL grunted, shrugged, and reported that his dog had indeed defecated out a perfect Iraqi eyeball earlier—the stalk still attached, he then tossed some meat to said monstrous dog—all brown angles, and maw.

At the time, before and after the drive, I happened to be attending some sort of blended counselling and therapy for entirely unremarkable reasons. I didn't feel the need then, or rather I didn't feel that I had permission, to say that in the hours after listening I have never felt more nauseous for such a sustained period, and that I've never been so frightened as from the severe possibilities of being so abruptly torn away from a life, whether life goofing off in an Arkansas training camp failing to launch explosives correctly or from a life in Basra wondering whether my father and brother would ever come back.

Four years later. Life is better than ever, except that I can't stop thinking about the podcast—my culpability for listening, for being in some way entertained by cruelty, by a war crime. I remember months later telling my friend that it was the most disturbing thing I had ever listened to. I recall him nodding and just quietly replying 'yeah.' No arguments or discussion like we normally have over films, albums, comedy sets, or even the details of old deeds from two decades ago and how we each remember things differently, just mutual acknowledgement that we are worse and a little less for what we heard. The dreams have only come a handful of times, but once they never came at all, and now they fall once a year, once a month, twice,

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maybe a third. I find myself standing, peeling potatoes, and staring down into the trashcan as a perfect eyeball stares back incredulous.



MARTYN SULLIVAN is a short story writer from Swansea, South West Wales. He enjoys hiking, growing chilies and spending time with his cat, he is also working on a novel. He can be found on Twitter @ribenademon