



Count Me In

Tedrick Philyaw

Graduate

Third Place

Area of Study: Business Administration

I.

The wind stirred about me as it carried across the San Diego Bay. I stood on the flight deck of the carrier, exposed to the open air, the rays of sunlight hitting my eyes and the panoramic view of the pier and tiny sailors below, departing the boat for a night in San Diego. Soon I'd be joining them. In a few hours I'd be relaxing myself.

The phone rang, and I knew who it was before I looked. He was already out, and I had just left. You could hear it in his voice.

“Where the hell are you? I've been at McP's for a while. Come through.”

I hesitated. McP's was close, I had no plans. Going there meant having a few drinks, hanging out. I'd go back to the boat later that night. It made sense, I did the logical next step:

“Count me in.”

McP's was erupting with energy. People, laughter, drinks, movement. I quietly shuffled my way through the crowds and groups to find my friend who called. When I saw him, and he saw me, we were all smiles. A drink had already been ordered and was waiting for my arrival. He was a true professional.

We continued to talk and laugh. As we drank, I started to buzz with a warmth that radiated from my head and crept down throughout my body. I was now a part of the collective energy within the bar that grabbed me when I arrived. We stayed for hours, and it was late. I looked at my buddy through glassy eyes and a numb face, and he smiled back at me.

“What are you looking at?” I said.

“I'm wondering if you're ready to go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“I rented a car, it's time to go. Go downtown.”

I stared at him. I was looking for the creep of a smile. A tinge of a joke. In those seconds the alcohol and the fun or his persuasion captivated me. I reappeared to reality no clearer than before as his question was repeated for the second time.

“You ready to go or not?”

I wasn't sure. I could hear the resonance of confidence in his voice and the surety of himself. Even with this, it made me feel no more confident in the decision I resolved to make.

“Count me in.”

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My shoes shuffled on the square concrete tiles as I made my way out of the bar. There was a hum— in the air, in my head. I felt in control. I hadn't stood for a while but my legs felt solid.

He emerged from the bar soon after. I hadn't noticed it while we were sitting, but it was clear our time at McP's was enough to change him.

“I'm parked around the corner.” His hand wavered in a pointed shape, moving like a dowsing rod to find the right direction. “On the left, around the corner. B Avenue. B avenue, I'm pretty sure it is.”

He turned and started walking. I followed, hardly a step behind his heels. The night air felt good. The decibels lowered as we walked farther from the bar. It was replaced by the low-drum noise of Coronado. Cars and people passed, the orange lights above dimly lit our path.

He pointed out the car: In between two palm trees was a Jeep. Its army green color looked dull in the shadows of light, and it sat quietly as we approached, awaiting its entrants. He passed in front of the car on the street side, and I waited for the sound of an unlock in the door before pulling the handle and stepping in.

I looked to the left at my driver. He was focused now. More focused than he had been inside. He stared down, looking into the white light of directions on his phone.

“Gaslamp Quarter. El Chingon. You ready?”

My arms reached outwards to reposition myself, attempting to get more comfortable with my decision. I responded to my friend, with a quiet nod and an apprehensive smile.

The key was turned and the gauges moved in their classic right-left motion. The engine caught its groove as a song was chosen, waiting to perform with its coordinator behind the wheel. An easy melody filled the air, and the light from the phone extinguished. I leaned back into the seat as he sped away, watching the streets and the lights turn into narrow lines as we made our way to cross the Coronado bridge.

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Spanish music reverberated in my ears from the Mexican bar. Blue-lit shelves of liquor were stacked upwards on the wall behind the barback, and pinkish lights slowly moved in random motions overhead. The colors cast my food and drink in a mix of shadows as people were drunkenly dancing and talking to each other. My friend himself moved back and forth to the music, putting his hands at his sides in a small rhythm as he continued to eat and drink. His carne asada plate was devoured, he was loose and free and flowing, clearly enjoying himself.

I could not have felt more dissimilar. The half eaten california burrito or the length of the night itself slowed my enjoyment down to a standstill. I was ready to leave, any longer and I knew the guilty enjoyment of my night would be cut short.

I had to yell over the noise, “Hey! Are you ready?”

“What?! Bro not even close.”

“Come on! I'm worn out, let's leave.”

He slowly shook his head with a smirk, “I’m not leaving! We are having fun!”

I looked at him. Then at people in the bar, the waitresses, the DJ and everyone fully in the moment. I reached into my pocket to grab my phone. The screen’s light cut through the shadows as I typed in the pickup location.

I glanced upwards. The outline of the keys was in my friend’s jeans.

Will he be good to get back?

The thought sat there between us. The Uber was two minutes away.

My car pulled up and I said bye to my friend. We looked at each other and smiled as his night continued, and mine ended.

II.

Excitement cruised over my body as I noticed the familiar profile of our surroundings. We cleared the beautiful orange and brown Sunset Cliffs before banking left around the tip of Point Loma; to our right the white water broke over the Zuniga shoals as we made our slow, ceremonial welcome back into San Diego Bay. I looked out from the open hangar bay doors with a few people from my shop as we finished lunch. Our ship crawled slowly through the green tinted blue waters. Keeping its distance from us was a small sailboat, its bleached white canvas taut in the breeze, skimming in the opposite direction of our industrial giant.

Today the crew was owed a night on the town, but it was a quick turnaround, and the directive from leadership was that us sailors must stay on Coronado base, captain's orders. It was an attempt at a quiet night.

Regardless of authorized locations, I heard the adventurous plans of what people in my shop were going to do, and how they were going to do it. Movies, golf, fishing, the beach. Regardless of the activity, the tried and true would be present: drinking.

The boat was tugged into the pier and dropped its anchor. I had no plans finalized, but I was going to put on civilian clothes anyways. As I finished changing into my blue Levis and a thick cotton shirt, my friend appeared from the corner of my bed with a smile on his face.

“What’s the move?”

“I didn’t have anything...just wanted to get off the boat.”

“Buddy I got a plan for you: put on your damn shoes, meet me on the pier outside. Let’s go to the Package Store. They got alcohol and I heard they are ready for us, overstocked and everything.”

“What the hell do we do then? We have to stay on base.”

“There’s a little park close by. Sand volleyball, picnic tables. A damn gazebo! We can just chill”.

I looked at him as I grabbed my other shoe to finish getting ready.

“Let’s have an early night. I don’t want things to get crazy.”

“Buddy you need to relax! Are you in or out?”

“Whatever bro, count me in.”

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For a brief moment I felt clear and sober. My head slowly rotated and I was able to take in my surroundings. I was sitting across from my friend, the wooden table was distressed on my fingertips below. I noticed the arrangement of beer cans and a few handles of liquor between us. To my right sailors drunkenly hit a volleyball over a net like a late night b-movie of Top Gun. Past my friend in front of me there were people tossing a frisbee, each holding a beer in hand as the sun finished setting and night began.

My eyes refocused on my friend, and I knew he had surpassed any feeling of drunkenness I currently felt. I could see a slight sway in his movements. Him smiling at the loud country music being played in the near distance, and I watched his compulsive repetition of sips he took from his drink. I looked at our bounty, and although we had a bit of beer left, finishing that was a non-starter. I wanted a calm night; it was time to head back to our metal home and sleep everything off.

“It’s time to go,” I said. “We need to head back.”

“Absolutely not.” His grin widened as a finger tapped each bottle remaining in our case. “I got 2 beers here, at least. And it looks like you got 4.”

“Bro we are not gonna make it,” I said with a purposeful half smile. “How about this? Let’s leave this shit here. Go get some food from McDonalds to soak this up. Then we can walk back to the boat.”

He grinned. He was a big boy at heart. “Deal. But I’m taking another beer with me.”

We weren’t the only ones drinking tonight. Walking the half mile to our destination was like another journey within itself. Groups were half-dragging drunken sailors in the general direction of the boat. I heard the sound of at least three individuals throwing up, and in the distance we saw someone rear back and punch a big metal trashcan, the echo of anger and likely pain moving around us in the dim streets. I looked over at my friend as he took another sip from his beer. I hoped his state wasn’t anything close to this.

We arrived at McDonald's. Compared to everyone else, I felt almost sober. Walking up, you could hear people hollering across the restaurant: the line was out the door, and the sound carried throughout as people spiraled around the establishment. It was hard to tell if this was an overcrowded bar or normal fast food.

It felt like the wrong place to recover, but we stood there regardless. I told him, “as soon as we get our food, let's eat it walking back.” He nodded in agreement, content and perhaps unaware, with his drink still in hand.

We were near the front entrance, and I could hear the small chirps of the kitchen as sailors shuffled too close to the counter, waiting for food and drinks, drunkenly laughing and eating with a carefree pace. Suddenly I felt a hard shove on my side. I landed right into my friend, and we both hit the railing opposite of us from the aggressive movement. Whipping around, I stared at somebody I didn't even know, and he looked back at me with glossy, bloodshot eyes.

“Are you alright?” I said, looking at the stranger. “Are you good?”

As soon as I finished speaking, my friend started himself.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Why the hell you pushing us?”

Our assaulter stared at us before seeming to regain consciousness. He looked between my friend and me, then put his hands up in an apologetic protest. I spoke immediately when I recognized the gesture.

“It's alright, we're good man.”

I looked over at my friend to make sure the apology was felt by all parties, but it was too late. He was in motion. I watched the bottle originate in the air, swinging in an arc from the right side of his body. The middle of the bottle landed on the forehead of our aggressor's skull and cracked on impact as my friend dropped it.

I felt my hands lurch forward, wishing to stop what had already happened. I could see people now looking at us from inside the restaurant, wondering what the hollow thump and

fracturing noise was, likely putting the pieces together as someone lay incapacitated on the ground in front of us.

I turned and looked at my clearly pissed off, and extremely drunk, friend. “We gotta get the hell out of here. What’s wrong with you?”

I grabbed him and we pushed ourselves out of line, running on the backstreets of base in the direction of the large carrier looming nearby. We put some distance between us and that shattered bottle then slowed down to not draw any more attention. I turned towards him, pissed.

“Why’d you hit him? People there actually knew us too! It wasn’t clear that it was an accident?”

“He pushed us first. That’s why I hit him. That’s his problem.”

“He was apologizing! I had the situation under control!”

“His fault bro. Not mine.”

I looked at my friend; I could feel my frustration and betrayal about to spill into my words. I wished for the night where the gazebo sheltered our indulgences, where the table propped up our unbroken bottles. He stared back with an empty expression while I spoke.

“This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. We were going to get food, sober up. I tried to take care of you man. You gotta fix your shit right now. We are going to walk back to the boat and be done with this night. Let’s go.”

He walked slowly. Not in the direction of the carrier, but back towards the little park where our day had begun. I took a deep breath of the air, now alone. I composed myself, composed my thoughts and watched as his feet moved away from me, crunching on the asphalt below. His gait seemed intentional, and I hoped that it was his body reflecting on the words I had spoken.

I was close to the carrier and could feel the pull of its steel hull and spinning radars bidding me to conclude my long night. Its dull lights and peaceful strength beckoned me to my bed, as I felt satisfied that what I said was truly enough.

III.

I've replayed these nights more times than I can count.

His smile when I walked into McP's, the Jeep in between the two palm trees. The keys in his pocket as I left.

The apology that came too late. The bottle mid-swing. The frustration in my words.

Which night mattered more? The one where I was silent? The one where I spoke?

My actions don't guarantee a result. I made decisions. And the world continued anyway.

IV.

My eyes slowly opened, and I recognized my surroundings. I was in my bed on the boat. My body felt tired and my brain felt like it was being compressed. I did a quick inventory check: I had my phone, my wallet, even some crumpled receipts. The only thing I had lost was my memory.

I got ready for the day, took a shower, brushed my teeth. I even changed into a fresh pair of coveralls, the uniform of the day. Soon our carrier would be underway again off the Pacific coast.

I made my way down the steep ladderwell and into my shop. I made my coffee and set it close to my desk as I made my rounds. I moved throughout the shop, saying good morning to the others who had good nights.

My last stop was my supervisor. When our eyes met one another, hers were red. I could make out the enlarged blood vessels, and the puffiness on the outer edges. Her lips turned slightly upward in my direction and I returned the favor, an attempt at minding my own business.

“All Hands, All Hands. All hands meet in Hangar Bay 2 with the Commanding Officer,” blasted on the 1MC shipboard announcement system. I quickly departed from my supervisor, got a few sips of my coffee, and exited the shop to see what the announcement was from the highest ranking person onboard.

We walked in a silent stream. Sailors flooding out from every nook towards the central point on the carrier in Hangar Bay 2. We were placed in makeshift rows. Normally we are forced to be in orderly lines, but the only requirement today was to listen to the message in silence. The noise from conversation, laughter, and questions settled down naturally. Then it went quiet.

The Commanding Officer stepped forward to address his crew.

The words were arranged carefully, prescribed and precise. He spoke of an incident. A sailor had fallen from the aircraft elevator. He was getting back on the boat for the night. He was drunk. Medical staff on board and on base responded immediately, but he had serious injuries. He was taken to a local trauma center. He died several hours later.

The words passed over us and exited the open bay doors. I could hear an exhale, a snuffle. A silence snaked about our rows, and no one spoke. We looked forward until he was done.

I knew who it was before the name was said. I recalled seeing my supervisor’s eyes, her attempt at protection in knowing the relationship we had.

His name was said, and it fit exactly in the space that was waiting for it.

The Commanding Officer finished. We were dismissed. The movements of individuals could now be heard as we departed silently, returning to our workplaces.

In a few hours we'd depart San Diego. I'd feel the ship's anchor being pulled in, and the slow and steady movement of the carrier from the tugboats as we were pulled out of the bay.

No one asked me who I had been with the night before. No one asked what I had said.

I stood at the edge of the flight deck as distance was placed between us and land. We were headed back out to sea. The wind stirred across my now wet eyes, the same way it always had.