

AHMED THE TERRORIST

Ahmed, swallowed up in a broken recliner, Schlitz Malt liquor in one hand, the remote in the other, eyes glued to the TV hoping for the commercial of that red Sear's riding mower. First time he's ever seen anything that beautiful.

He's hidden away in this small town having arrived just under the wire on September 9, 2001 with a phony passport and all the documentation needed to be the one of thousands entering the country for a taste of the good life, freedom, and the American way—McDonalds, strip malls, zero down car deals, and more food in one store than he'd seen in his entire life.

Like other terrorists, he has an agenda, a mission; a suicide bomber with a cell phone carried at all times, waiting for the money, waiting for instructions, waiting for the "call." It's all set up. Sort of. Ahmed isn't the first pick of the litter. More like the sad runt with the lazy eye. Doesn't seem to affect his vision, but something Americans will pity. But fear works better than pity. That's what's taught at "Terrorist Boot Camp." Had to do something with him. As the nephew of the camp commander, and to stifle the shrieking of Ahmed's mother, Ahmed gets an assignment. The fact that Ahmed is lazy with no real ambition doesn't enter into the decision to send him to the States. The assignment—go to the states, bed down with the locals, assimilate into the community, and wait for the phone calls from his handlers in Berlin.

The end of the line for Ahmed is the Orlando International Airport. He gets off the flight, retrieves a small bag of personal effects and slides into the closest lounge. Has to find a community to move into. Needs to get a map.

He orders a beer even though he isn't supposed to drink, gets comfortable in a club chair way in the back and strikes up conversation with a lonely bleach blonde beautician. It doesn't take long to talk her into taking him home to her single wide on five acres, weedy, two broken down Chevy's up on blocks. Yup, he's likin' this. No more drills, no more training, no more target practice to be ridiculed over.

A week into it, a new life, there's WWF wrestling, stock car racing, and when the blonde's at work, porno from the video rental on Sebastian Street. Calls from home become a faint memory unless interrupted by a status check that forces him to lie. "Everything going good. None of them suspects. I tell them I'm from New York and offer them a beer. But I don't drink. Ever," he tells them reaching for another beer.

Ahmed dreams of that Sear's riding mower, the power, the wind in his face, grass slung to the side. Got sucked into the lust watchin' guys ridin' mowers from commercials on TV. Thinks about the guy next door, he's got a John Deer.

Got tickets to Daytona, wants to meet that famous guy, thinks he'll buy a hat.

Blonde's a lot different from the women back home. Criticizes, asks questions, but acting dark and moody seems to be what she respects and it gets her off his back. She's not the seventy-two virgins, but with a little Jack Daniels, she ain't bad.

He's learned to say "ain't" a lot. Tried chewin' tobacco, but swallowed instead of spit, and puked on the carpet.

He likes to sit in the lawn chair in the front yard and watch the neighbors fight in the trailer across the street, thinks he should tell the guy about the wrestling channel so he can tackle that woman right. Over-the-head body slams work good on TV, can't think of a reason it wouldn't work on that fat bitch with five kids. Where he comes from, if she wore that tube top, she'd be drafted a camp practice target.

Got hooked on Little Debbie Snack cakes. Gave him the trots.

Sneaks into the woods behind the trailer to pray, but can only manage twice a day.

Drove around and found a place they call mud boggin'—drivers in huge trucks with huge tires slamming into a mud hole at top speed. Some get stuck, some don't. The one's who do, get out and play in it.

Ahmed likes those trucks. One night when the place was empty he tried it with the Toyota. Had to walk home.

Picked up slang like *“asshole”* and *“shithead.”* Mixes 'em up to use 'em. When he tried them on the blonde, she smacked him in the back of the head and he bit his tongue. At home if she did that he'd... doesn't want to remember exactly what he'd be expected to do. Something Terrible. Woman infidel striking a... Doesn't matter.

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Hooked up with a couple of buddies, guys with old pickups, no tail gates, no back glass, dents and scrapes admired like war wounds. Knobby tires that leave deep ruts in the yard, a place to hold rain water for the hound dogs that ride in the back.

One guy's got a job, the other don't. Ahmed fits right in. He ain't got a real job, neither. Lives on the money wired from Berlin, intended for “supplies.”

Pretends he might know something about truck engines when they get together at a buddies house in a makeshift automotive shop made out of recycled greenhouse poles and gray plastic tarps. They pull the engine out with a come-a-long attached to the knobby limb of a hundred year old live oak tree. Got chiggers from the moss. Couldn't figure out how they got to his crotch. Made his balls itch for days.

Engine parts stew in gasoline held in Mayonnaise jars and coffee cans on TV trays littering the yard. No such thing as clean fingernails. On a test drive at three in the morning after rigging makeshift lights in the tree so they can bolt the engine to the frame, the three of them pile into the front seat to see how it's running.

Windows down, beers up, they whoop and holler down two lane country roads past mile after mile of pasture and small homesteads. Blow through the yellow blinking light at the intersection, stand on the brakes, slide sideways to a stop by a ditch and miles of bobbed wire fencing. Ahmed gets slapped on the back. Chokes some on his beer.

Diver spots cattle in the moon light, looks at his buddy and grins.

Over the fence, Ahmed watches his buddies scuttle behind a tree. Ahmed tries to navigate rusty bobbed wire, falls, shreds his pants and a good patch of ass, picks sandspurs from his hands and thighs.

Cow falls over. Damn, he missed it!

Buddies whoop and holler, pat each other on the back, drink more beer. Cow tipping, hell yeah!

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Handlers call his cell phone for an update. Get the bleach blond beautician instead. She hollers for Ahmed in the back yard, yells, *“His people are callin”*. She means those other New Yorkers. They think she knows.

She overhears Ahmed stressing out, speaking in what she now refers to as his crazy New Yorker accent that doesn’t even resemble English. Same thing she heard watching a movie about New York cab drivers.

He realizes he’s begging over the phone and kicks the cat. He’s never gonna leave that cell phone alone again. Comes up with a plausible reason for the woman and swears to ’em he’ll kill her first.

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Sittin’ on the tailgate of his buddy’s pickup, Ahmed stares down at the head of a dead deer slung in the bed. Six pointer, so his buddy said, not sure what six points are, more concerned with buddies huddled by the driver’s door in some secret discussion.

Was concerned, if not irritated with getting roused from a deep sleep at one in the morning when they rolled into the yard, running over the big wheel left by that annoying neighbor kid across the street—head lights flooding the

bedroom window, horn blowing some God-awful tune called Dixie—an anthem to these weird people in the woods.

Deer blood trails into the channels in the truck bed and drips just below the muffler tied on with baling wire. The secret discussion is making him nervous. He shifts the Remington 7400 semi-auto 30-06 from left hand to right—burnt gun powder still strong in the muzzle that reminds him of training camp, but bleedin' out is bleedin' out.

One of the buddies pulls out a tarp from behind the seat and throws it over the carcass. Grins at Ahmed like they're getting away with something good, mentions in passing about it not being deer season and they could all go to jail if caught with it. Tells Ahmed to ride in the back with the deer, sweeps the rifle from his hand and whoops and hollers. Ahmed takes it as some kind of war cry.

Racing through the night on desolate back roads, wind whipping his face, Ahmed dreams about that Sears riding mower and how he can't wait for the money from Berlin so's he can get him one. Headlights flash by goin' the opposite way, but damned if it doesn't turn around and start following 'em. Blue strobes light up surrounding fields and roadside ditches and Ahmed can feel the truck slow and pull to the side of the road. American law boys. "Counties" he remembers his buddies callin' 'em.

Even in the dark, Ahmed can sense the panic up in the cab and for some unexplained reason he slides over and sits on top of the carcass. Thinks about going to American jail and remembers hearing rumors at camp of "new guys" having to bend over bathroom sinks, but not sure why. Cops will want paper work, ID card, green card, who knows how much they could find out about him, and then suddenly realizes they'll pry into his business and start asking questions—who he is, where he comes from, why he's here, and now he wishes he had the rifle. Could take that cop out before he knew what hit him.

Plan B. Ahmed slits his left arm a good six inches with a screw driver stored in the truck bed for breakdowns. Sombitch hurts, but Ahmed clenches his fist forcing blood to run down his arm into the channel that mixes with deer blood. All he needs.

Maglite blinds him as the beam sweeps into the truck bed, pauses, settles on him again, his ugly wound. Ahmed smiles a fake, I love America smile. Doesn't speak. The less, the better. Cop steps up to the driver's door and Ahmed tries to listen in. Hears, "What happened to the fella in the back?" Everyone gets out, diver buddy with a look of half panic, half confusion.

Learned about these situations in camp and Ahmed holds the screwdriver up and his buddy suddenly gets it, God knows how, explains to the cop how Ahmed got carried away with the screw driver while trying to get the truck running. Dropped in a new engine, his buddy says, takes the time to talk a little shop with the cop. They're on the way to the clinic, Buddy tells him, they took care of him once when he got the clap. Cop seems to buy it, doesn't investigate under the tarp. From the expression on the cop's face, blood makes him squeamish. Does ask where Ahmed's from. New York, his buddy says. Good enough boys, have a good night.

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Calls from Berlin become fewer and fewer. From the news on Infidel TV, two head leaders from his camp have been bombed and killed. Ahmed is strangely excited, sitting with the phone in his hand. No one knows he's here, and for a brief moment he realizes the real possibility of owning that Sear's riding mower.

Has to get a job. Bleach blond hooks him up with a waitress friend at the Denny's and within twenty-four hours Ahmed's wearing a plastic shower cap and bussing tables.

Has to work along side women, hear their man problems, problems of things unspeakable in his home country. What is feminine hygiene spray anyway? ☺