

CHAPTER 5

BLIND AND BROKEN



My platoon in C-Co, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division. I'm standing at the far right, and Steven Smith is just to the left of me in the middle row. Standing next to him is Kevin Jensen, my gunner. The head just to the left of Jensen's shoulder is Philip Kopfenseiner. Vincent Winston is kneeling in front on the far right. Anthony Roszko is standing, second from the left. Mike Debolt is in the back row, fifth from the right.

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD (KAF), AFGHANISTAN. AUGUST 20, 2008.

“Aw, man, I knew we should have left earlier.” Austin shaded his eyes as he looked at the long line snaking into the KAF chow hall. We’d walked over together from the containerized housing unit we shared with another platoon leader. “I’m so hungry.”

We took our place in line, tucking ourselves into the thin stripe of shade cast by the semipermanent structure. The midday desert sun beat down. “Hey, are you guys missing anything from your trucks?” I asked. Both of our platoons were preparing to head out from KAF in the next few days. “We’ve got a busted radio that’s going to have to be repaired before we leave.”

He nodded and we began trading notes about prepping for the journey out. Slowly, the line moved forward. As we reached the hand-washing station, a cool breeze wafted out from the entrance. Once we crossed the threshold into the shaded, air-conditioned interior, we let out a collective “*Aabb*.” I took off my hat.

Austin grinned. “Smells like spaghetti.”

The mess hall was noisy with the voices of service members from all over the world: Brits, Canadians, contractors from Sri Lanka, Afghan interpreters, plus the mixture of accents of soldiers from the US. Long tables stretched from one end of the large cafeteria to the other. Allied soldiers and workers, wearing a variety of uniforms, were all digging in.

“Hold up—isn’t that Bauer? From West Point?” Austin said. He pointed to a young woman dressed in Aviation fatigues.

I squinted, trying to catch a glimpse of her face. “It looks like her. It’s ‘Emmy,’ right?” Austin nodded. “Hey—” I waved. “Emmy Bauer! Emmy!”

We pushed our way through the crowded tables. Emmy heard our voices and glanced up from where she was filling her tray. Her face broke into a wide grin. “*What?* Some familiar faces! Austin Wallace and Sam Brown! So good to see you guys!” She reached up and gave us both hugs. “Come sit by me once you have your food.”

“Yeah, we’ve got to catch up! Are you a pilot now?”

She nodded as she moved toward the tables with her tray. “Hurry up! I’ll fill you in!”

It had been over two years since we’d all been together at West Point’s graduation. “Didn’t Emmy join the Medical Services Corps?” Austin asked as we moved through the buffet. “Kinda badass that she’s a pilot now.”

“Maybe she’s doing MEDEVACs,” I mused. We pushed our trays along and headed over to Emmy’s table.

“Emmy Bauer,” Austin said, delighted. “Catch us up on what’s been happening since West Point.”

Emmy had just recently arrived in Kandahar and confirmed that she was serving as a MEDEVAC pilot. While we dug into our spaghetti, she told us about several harrowing evacuations that she’d participated in.

“No way,” I said, impressed. “You know, I almost joined Aviation. Hearing you talk makes me wonder if I made the right choice.”

“What made you do Infantry instead?” she asked.

I shrugged. “It was a close call. But I figured I could have the greatest impact as an Infantry Officer.”

She smirked. “You Infantry Officers seem to think us MEDEVAC pilots make a pretty significant impact when we’re rescuing your wounded asses out of the battlefield.”

I laughed. “Touché. But also—I didn’t want to get soft, joining Aviation,” I ribbed back. “You pilots get the cushy life. Always around hot chow, and real beds, and showers. Mandatory rest periods.”

“You say it like it’s a *bad* thing,” Austin retorted at me, his mouth full of spaghetti. “Now you’re making me wish *I’d* gone Aviation.”

Emmy laughed again. “Yeah, I’m not going to apologize for getting eight hours of sleep every night. You Infantry guys can sleep in the dirt and eat your MREs and feel plenty tough. Then, when one of your soldiers gets his leg blown off, you’re going to decide *I’m* the most heroic person in the Armed Forces when I carry him to safety. And trust me, you’ll be glad I’m flying on a full night’s sleep.”

"You know, there's a good chance we might be seeing you in the next couple months," I said ruefully. "Although I hope not."

"Our Battalion is standing up that new FOB Ramrod on the far West side of Kandahar," Austin explained. "So we'll be going out to the Maiwand district. We'll be right in the area where Kandahar and Helmand meet."

"That's a pretty hot spot, isn't it?" Emmy asked.

I nodded. "The intel on that area is that there's a lot of potential enemy activity. Guess that makes sense, given that it's the birthplace of the Taliban." I grinned, readying an attempt at humor. "So, you know...if you get a call for a MEDEVAC flight out there in the next couple of weeks, there's a good chance you're coming to pick me up."

She rolled her eyes at my joke. "Doubtful. I don't get called for Lieutenants. I get called for their soldiers: Infantrymen, at the tip of the spear. But I hope, for both your sakes and for the sake of your soldiers, I don't get called out there at all." She smirked again. "But if I pick up a soldier who's too tall to fit across the fuselage, then I'll know it's you, Sam."

"Ha!" I laughed at the thought. "Well—if you can't get the door shut, don't get pissed at me when a bunch of dust blows into the cockpit from the rotor wash. I know how you pilots hate to get dirty."

Her expression darkened. "I don't care about dust when I'm doing a MEDEVAC. I care about getting soldiers out alive."

KANDAHAR DESERT, AFGHANISTAN. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. NIGHT.

"There it is." The relief in the driver's voice was palpable. I felt the Humvee accelerate.

"Almost there, Sir," the medic said. "I can see the secure perimeter. Sergeant Roszko's waving us in."

By now, whatever sustaining power I'd experienced from the adrenaline had exhausted itself. It was hard to even hold myself up. I

reminded myself I wasn't about to die—if it had been my day to die, I would already be dead. But with every passing second, there was less battery power. My body was rapidly shutting down.

We braked quickly and someone wrenched the door open. Steven and Anthony, my two right hands, began pulling me out. The company medic was with them, calling out instructions. Steven was staring at my arms, then glanced at my face. “Shit,” Steven said under his breath. “Shit. *Shit, shit.*”

“Stop trying to do it yourself,” Anthony ordered me. “You need to let us help you right now.”

A few other guys ran up—soldiers I recognized from the route clearance unit. “I need a stretcher!” the company medic barked at them. One of them ran over to a vehicle standing by and pulled a stretcher off the roof line.

“Where’s Winston?” I heard Steven ask Anthony.

“Everyone’s over here,” Anthony said. Then he spoke to the First Platoon medic climbing out of the vehicle behind me. “I want you working on Kevin, Philip, and Mike with Doc Brun! Sergeant Medina is going to work on Lieutenant Brown.”

Two soldiers ran over with a stretcher. Steven and Anthony began lowering me down, and I didn’t fight them. I was incapable of doing anything other than following their lead. *My bed*, I thought wryly. *Putting me to bed.*

“Where’s Winston?” Steven asked Anthony again.

Hearing Steven’s question broke my heart. Winston was in Steven’s squad—he was one of his guys. At the mention of his name, an image suddenly blistered my mind: the Humvee on fire, the grenades exploding in the heat. Winston’s body still buckled in his seat.

Then I remembered Steven’s words that he’d spoken to me months ago: “All I care about is getting everyone home.”

It was a gut-wrenching thought.

The conversation had happened at Fort Hood, just a couple months before we deployed. I was in charge of leading some training exercises out at one of the ranges. Ahead of the training, I planned to spend a

day going out and evaluating the terrain of the range, recording grid coordinates for planning purposes, and figuring out where to put the different elements. I wanted to take someone else along as a second set of eyes, someone who had the insight to consider variables I might miss, someone to help take notes.

That was my excuse, anyway.

Really, I just wanted to have a reason to get to know Staff Sergeant Steven Smith better.

Steven and Anthony had both quickly established themselves in my mind as highly impressive individuals, guys who were worthy of my respect. Rather than try to throw my weight around as their platoon leader, I learned to lean on their wisdom. They were both more experienced on the battlefield than I was, with previous deployments under their belts. They often raised questions in our strategy discussions around points I'd never considered—a habit of questioning I learned to embrace, rather than get defensive about.

Plus, Steven was just a *good* guy. When I'd arrived at Fort Hood, I'd made up my mind to be the last person to leave the training area. There was always more work for me to do—and I figured it was important for my soldiers to see their leader demonstrating the same kind of work ethic I was asking from them. That was my resolution: to be the last guy gone.

I couldn't do it. Steven always stuck around longer. I'd finish up the last of my work and start to head out, but when I walked by the squad leader area, Steven Smith would be in there—still working.

"Sergeant Smith," I called to him, the first time it happened. "You've got to get out of here, man. There's nothing so urgent to get done that you need to stay any longer."

He sat there and argued with me, justifying his tireless work. "No, LT—I've got to do this. I've got to do that."

I finally learned that it was pointless to argue with him, and I gave up my goal of being the last to leave. The last guy gone was *always* going to be Steven Smith. His work flowed out of the fact that he genuinely loved his guys, like they were his own family. He was intent

on being the most prepared he could possibly be, so that *they* were the most prepared they could be, and that collectively, his squad could accomplish the mission safely. It didn't take long for me to develop tremendous respect for him.

That's why some one-on-one time appealed to me.

"Hey, Steven. I could use a second set of eyes on the ground while I'm doing my leader's recon. Want to join me?"

It was an enjoyable drive out to the range. We chatted about a number of things—the upcoming deployment, our training, his experiences in Iraq. About ten minutes from the training location, he shared something that I often thought about afterward.

He spoke solemnly. "Sir, on my previous deployments, I was blessed to bring everyone home that was in my charge. My greatest fear with the upcoming deployment is being unable to do that." I glanced over at him. His expression was earnest. "That's really my only desire in this upcoming deployment—that I'm able to bring everyone home."

I nodded, absorbing the gravity of what he'd said. "So...your greatest fear *isn't* that you'd get wounded or be killed...but that you would lose one of your guys?"

"That's right, Sir."

His remark validated all the respect I'd already developed for him. "Well, I feel blessed to have a leader like you in my platoon, Sergeant Smith."

The memory twisted like a knife.

"I'm sorry," I gasped out loud. There was so much noise and activity all around me—the company medic shouting out for help and supplies, Anthony hurriedly unrolling gauze, a number of others crowding around me, staring down with horrified expressions. Steven hovered above me too, but he wasn't looking down. His eyes roved, looking at the soldiers who had just returned. Counting who was there. Registering who wasn't.

"Steven, I'm sorry," I gasped again. "I'm so sorry."

I knew Steven's worst nightmare had been realized. And for the

rest of his life, he would never get an opportunity to live the moment himself to see if he could have changed the outcome.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. Steven looked down at me, seeming to finally register what I was saying. My voice came out in a croak, but I couldn't say it enough. "Winston's gone. And I'm so sorry."

Steven looked at Anthony with dismay. Anthony nodded bleakly, confirming what I'd said. "I'm sorry, buddy," Anthony said. "We tried to get him out. There was nothing we could do."

Guilt overwhelmed me. I hated that I'd lost him—that Winston had died while riding in my vehicle. I hated that Steven was realizing his worst fear. I hated that I was hurt so badly I had to be MEDEVACed out.

In my mind, I was letting my guys down. I was failing them by not being strong enough to stay.

Sergeant Medina, the company medic, interrupted us. "The helicopter's going to kick up a lot of dust when it gets here, Lieutenant Brown, so we're going to cover your eyes." He spoke quickly, keeping his voice low and quiet as he began wrapping gauze around my head.

I tried nodding. Moving was hard—all my joints felt stiff. I didn't realize that, as my skin cooled, it had begun to contract, tightening itself around me like a vise. I had been freed from the blinding flames, but now, my body was becoming its own cage.

Lights dimmed with the first layer of gauze. I shut my eyes. A deeper darkness set in as the medic circled my head with a second layer, then a third. Blind once again.

Sounds sharpened. So did the pain.

And there was still that unbearable thirst.

"I need water," I said hoarsely. "Can someone give me a drink?"

"If we gave you a drink of water, it could send your body into shock." I could feel Medina cutting off my sleeves. "Water doesn't know where to go with a burn victim. It doesn't know where to start. The only way to hydrate you is with an IV." He ripped my sleeve up my arm. "Damn it." He ripped up the other sleeve and swore again in frustration. "Both of your arms are charred, Lieutenant."

I knew I would need an IV, and I knew it wouldn't work in my arms. I'd already thought this through. "My arms are burned but my feet aren't," I croaked. "Get my boots off. Cut up my pant legs."

"We don't have time." I felt the tug of my shirt collar and heard the metal scissors begin to bite into the thick cloth. "Get me a Fasti!" he called.

I'd never heard of a "fast one." *What's a fast one?* "Listen, I have good veins, you can find one in my foot. Get my boots off." I tried to speak authoritatively, but my voice was raw and weak.

"I can't do that," he said.

"Yes, you *can*. Just do it!"

"No, sir, I can't do that. It's too risky." Around me was the sound of people tearing open packages. I felt Medina move so that he was hovering right over me.

"What do you mean, 'it's too risky?'" I wasn't used to soldiers disobeying my orders. "I wasn't burned below my knees. Just cut up my pant leg and put in the IV down there."

Medina was now pulling open my shirt, exposing my chest area which had been protected from the flames by my body armor. "I've got to use a Fasti," he repeated. I felt him touching the center of my chest, right on top of my sternum. Something cold pressed on top.

"Sir—" he hesitated. "This is going to hurt a little bit. Hold still."

The pressure changed as his weight bore down on that spot in the center of my chest. Something sharp shot into my sternum—a ring of metal pins. I gasped. "Hold still," he repeated. "That's the anchor." The pain was like having a cat dig its claws into my chest, but it was nothing compared to what followed.

As Sergeant Medina pressed down on the device, a large gauge needle punched a hole through my sternum. There was an audible cracking sound. It felt like getting shot.

He was speaking quickly but I could barely focus through the pain. "*—push a lot of fluid... Flushes out the bone marrow... Anchored medication delivery site... Right to the heart—*"

I struggled to breathe. “I’m not experiencing a great deal of pain relief.”

“Get me morphine!” the medic yelled. “We’ll hit you with intravenous morphine, Sir,” he said. “Give me five minutes.”

The pain in my chest was unbearable. The sound of boots running over. “We already hit him with a shot of morphine,” someone panted.

“Intramuscular?” Medina demanded. “That’s like putting a bandaid on a broken leg. You think that’s going to help? How much did you give him?”

“*Look at him!*” the other voice said. “What were we supposed to do? We were getting shot at, we couldn’t hook up an IV! He needed *something*.”

“How much did you give him?” the medic yelled. They began arguing back and forth—grams, dosage limits, adverse side effects. “You want to kill his respiratory drive on top of the smoke inhalation?!”

Someone knelt down. “LT.” It was Steven’s voice. “LT. They can give you just a little more morphine intravenously, but that’s it. You just gotta hang on through the pain. Helicopter will be here soon, and once we get you back to the airfield, they’ll have better stuff for you.”

In spite of the excruciating pain, Steven’s voice brought me back to the most pressing concern. *All I care about is that I bring everyone home*. “I’m sorry,” I said to Steven again. I could never say it enough.

Steven spoke firmly, but his voice was ragged. “LT, there was nothing you could do about Winston.”

That’s what made me feel worst of all. *There was nothing you could do*. There was nothing I *could* do, which was another way of saying *I could do nothing*.

“I’m sorry,” I kept repeating to Steven. The importance of the words pushed themselves past my dust-coated tongue, forced themselves beyond my cracked and swollen lips, bubbled out beyond the excruciating pain.

One of my soldiers had died; three more were wounded. And now—too destroyed to continue—I felt like I was abandoning my platoon.

I'm the first guy gone, I thought.

But then another thought countered the first, as though some larger Truth were pressing into me. *I was saved for a purpose*.

I wrestled, internally. If I couldn't stay and lead my guys—what purpose did I have? I couldn't answer that. I couldn't *begin* to fathom an answer.

Truth pressed again and a new thought bloomed in my mind. *The life I live is not my own*.

It repeated itself, the thought growing in power and clarity. *The life I live is not my own*. In the ash of failure, it felt like a seed of hope.

Maybe I couldn't imagine what was next. But maybe Someone could.

For a while, it got quiet around me. The medic might have told people to give me space. But the quiet made it hard to think about anything other than the pain. Not far away, I heard Steven speak quietly: "So...what happened?" I fixed my attention on his voice, hoping for a distraction that could distance me from my physical suffering.

Roszko's deep voice responded, though I couldn't catch everything he said. "Mushroom cloud...crazy bright, blinding... Thought *we'd* been hit at first... Then we realized it was them."

Lying there on my stretcher, I tried to imagine the scene through Anthony's eyes as he described what he'd seen. "We reversed... Opened our doors and jumped out... I stand up and I look... One person running... Flames from his boot all the way up... Entire body is on fire... I knew it was Lieutenant Brown... I see Kevin Jensen climb out of the top—he had to unclip himself... He's running... Arm and his leg is on fire... Debolt gets out of the driver's side and drags Philip out..."

Steven asked a question, which I couldn't hear. "No idea, man," Roszko responded. "No idea how the LT got out. I just saw him running."

The remark confirmed my memory of being violently lifted up inside the vehicle—then suddenly being outside of it, for no apparent reason. Everyone else had climbed out. How had I ended up out of

the vehicle without anyone helping me? *Could that have been some sort of supernatural intervention?* I wondered.

My thoughts were interrupted by an unfamiliar voice. “Can I help you, Sir?” *That’s not one of my soldiers.* A vague face swam into my mind. I made the connection: it was the Drug Enforcement Agency guy who had been assigned to join our platoon after we’d arrived. He’d tagged along on several missions, taking notes about the opium trade to pass back to his superiors at the DEA.

He spoke again—apparently to me. “Sir. Is there anything I can do for you?”

The question irritated me. *I’m covered in third-degree burns, in excruciating pain, my medic just punched a hole in my sternum, and I lost the soldier who was the heart of our platoon. I’m not going to be able to stay with my soldiers. We failed to complete our mission.* What did he think he could do for me that would help at that point?

Then, I had an absurd inspiration. “Yeah,” I said, grimly. “There is something you can do for me.”

He paused and waited. “Well, what is it?”

I tried licking my lips, tasting dust and ash. “I want you to take a picture of me,” I said.

He let out a fast breath. “Uh, Sir...you look pretty bad right now. I’m not sure that you really want a picture of this.”

This irritated me even more. An hour earlier, I was the guy that everyone took orders from. Now, I couldn’t even get this DEA civilian to snap a picture. “No, I really do. You asked what you could do. I told you, take a picture of me.”

“Sir...I’ll take a picture of you,” he said. “But before I do, I have to know—why do you want a picture?”

I didn’t have the wherewithal to break down any complex emotional processing with this guy. Even short phrases were a challenge.

“I want a picture of what I look like when I’m being a bitch.” I couldn’t help but crack a smile—which hurt.

“Okay, Lieutenant. If you say so.”

Why did I want a picture? Even I didn’t fully comprehend the

reasons behind my request. But beyond what I could articulate, I sensed that what was happening to me on that stretcher—lying there, blinded by gauze, in the dusty sands of the Kandahar desert—was a defining moment of my life. This night, this very hour, was the threshold of the “Before” and “After.” It began in the moments right after the flames were extinguished, when my certain expectation of death gave way to impossible hope: the realization that I wasn’t going to die and the understanding that I had been spared for a purpose that went beyond me.

“Before,” the journey had been predictable: if I put in this effort, then I would get this outcome. I was at the peak of human performance for a young combat leader. Highly autonomous, influential in leadership, operating from a place of command and control. “Before” meant the power to influence and dictate outcomes. God was my co-pilot, the benevolent force that blessed me so long as I threw up my obligatory prayer for protection before each mission.

“After” was unknown. Forget my ten-year goals; I had no idea what the next ten minutes would look like. “After” was surviving in real time: enduring every next moment of pain so intense it seemed impossible to withstand. “After” was being physically crushed, permanently scarred. It meant total blindness: I could see nothing around me, and I could see nothing in my future. It meant slipping into a life of wrapped gauze and forced IVs, where I was a passive participant in a whirlwind of circumstances beyond my control. I did not get a voice. I did not get to bark orders. It was a version of life that I could never have imagined—and so far, it was a nightmare. There was no escape, no way to wake up. No ability to influence or direct it.

God, in the “After” was an overwhelming force. He was Lord, Maker, Creator—One I was wholly dependent on, fully surrendered to. Before this God, I was weak, wounded, and traumatized.

Yet I also wasn’t alone. This God had saved me—and, as part of the deal, had apparently set me on a path that I could not foresee or predict. It was a life that no longer belonged to me; I couldn’t find any redemption in all of it for myself. But the simple miracle of survival

gave me confidence that I wasn't in this alone, and that there *was* a reason behind it. Dependency and trust had been thrust upon me; I'd been forced to accept this surrender. Somehow, bizarrely, that was comforting. It was a strange, awful, painful, beautiful new reality.

And in the same way that parents want to capture photos of their newborn child, I wanted to memorialize the beginning of whatever *this* was. I wanted to capture the moment I emerged from the dust of the ground, when the breath of life filled my nostrils, when I became a living soul. The "After" signified the starting point for the rest of my life.

I wanted to be able to refer back to this moment—not just in my memory, which seemed dangerously unreliable at the moment—but with tangible evidence. A photograph.

And, perhaps, morbid curiosity was also at work. How bad *did* I look? Was it as bad as I felt? Was it worse?

"You want to see?" Without waiting for an answer, the DEA agent lifted the gauze around my eyes and thrust the screen of a small digital camera into view.



Waiting for the MEDEVAC at the HLZ. This is the first photo of me after being wounded.

The person on the stretcher was hard to detect, initially. Underneath a shiny green army thermal emergency blanket, you could just barely make out a dirt-colored face emerging out of it. Only the gauze stood out—a bright, white rectangle in the midst of a nearly monochromatic jumble of gray dirt, gray stretcher, gray head, gray face. As my eyes focused on that white rectangle, I began to see it stretched across the vague shape of a human head. The hair looked dusty—devoid of color. A streak of red blood signified the parting of a mouth. Sand on the side of the face was crisscrossed with streaks. There were shiny patches of pink on the chin and cheek, the plasticky sheen visible even underneath the coating of dust. Next to the face, an IV tube snaked out from beneath the blanket.

Looking at the picture, I decided I didn't look nearly as bad as I felt.

The low din around me was suddenly broken by the rhythmic thrum of the chopper. The DEA agent dropped the gauze and patted it back over my eyes. "Looks like your ride's here, Lieutenant."

I felt dust pick up around me. The noise of the whirling blades seemed to churn up my own panicky questions. I was about to leave my soldiers for good—I was going back to the US. What would happen to them? What was the status of Kevin, and Philip, and Mike? How badly were they injured? Would Steven and Anthony be okay? How had the mission resolved? Did Austin's platoon make it out?

I couldn't ask and I couldn't see. The questions would remain unanswered.

I heard shouts to get ready. Wind picked up—I felt the blanket on me whip up, then someone tugged it back down. The chopper grew louder, nearly drowning out all other sound.

Abruptly, I felt the jolt of being picked up and carried on the stretcher as the thunderous noise grew still louder. I heard a clang of metal against metal, then something solid slid beneath my back. Yells—nearly impossible to hear over the noise of the whipping blades—then, a lifting motion. I imagined the helicopter rising above the floor of the desert, curving in a wide arc toward the KAF airfield. Yet—even after getting airborne—nothing eased up. There

was still the overpowering noise, still the rotor wash sweeping in terrible wind.

A yell from the pilot—hard to hear. “*Why’d you—the door—take off?*”

Yells back. “*Patient—too tall—hanging out—what are we—?*”

“SIR! SIR?” The flight medic leaned close over my head to yell in my ear. “Sir, can you please bend your knees so we can shut the door?”

With an effort, I managed to bend my legs.

Someone shut the door. Things got quieter and less turbulent. Next to me, I heard murmured greetings from Kevin, then Philip, then Mike.

“Hey, LT.”

“We’re with you, LT.”

Dimly, it occurred to me that their voices seemed to be coming from above me, a sign they were sitting up. That meant I was the only one who needed a stretcher; they had been able to move into the chopper on their own power. The thought brought relief. Suddenly, I felt so tired.

“Who is that?” A woman’s voice spoke from the cockpit—a familiar one. “Who is that on the stretcher?”

Kevin responded. “First Lieutenant Sam Brown, Ma’am!”

She swore. “Fuck! Sam Brown?! Hang on, buddy!”

I tried to remember how I knew that voice—it seemed to belong to a recent memory, but also connected to a different time. Who was it?

I could feel myself slipping away and welcomed the approaching unconsciousness. I gave up trying to place the voice. It didn’t matter.

Everything “Before” was already a lifetime ago.