

# Sans Meds: Knowing You Don't Know

written by Nathan Hansen | September 25, 2015



Let's call him Jonathan. It isn't his name, but it's something that will have to do as I try to orchestrate the words to illustrate my admiration for a man.

Jonathan.

We met one year before the millennium. While people around the world gathered canned food, water by the gallons and paranoia-provoking discussions on Y2K, I was ushered into a new platoon in a new battalion in a new country – South Korea.

I was one day in country, a combat medic stationed at Camp Garry Owen, a few kilometers from the DMZ, and tradition dictated soldiers in the platoon treated the newbie to drinks. I hurried putting my gear together; ammo clips and canteens fastened to a belt and suspenders. Nuclear, Biological, Chemical gear checked and double-checked. Kevlar, helmet and jacket, SOP. I was more than a Boy Scout, therefore more than prepared.

Then my roommate, Danny, assured me there wouldn't be a war tonight. There wouldn't be any threats from North Korea, or any exercises putting everyone into drills. "There's never an alert the first night," he said. And we left the preparation for morning.

Upon the locking my door, again SOP, I turned to the humming of an ABBA song coming from down the hall. It was Jonathan, back to me, peering over his shoulder. "Does my butt look big in these pants?" he asked. Then he proceeded past me while I wondered whether to laugh or answer outright.

The question he asked was a simple way to break the ice, but regardless of the year we spent in each other's midst, I don't think I let my guard down enough to thaw. To put it simply, I wasn't there yet. And in that hesitation our relationship was one delicately balanced on debauchery and debate, and instinctual hedonism matched by intellect and budding consciousness.

In the time I knew Jonathan, I grew tremendously as a person. As a medic, under his tutelage, I earned the coveted Expert Field Medic Badge, something two-percent of military medics can say they have attained. With that achievement I also discovered compassion, the yin to the warring yang.

Aside from duties delegated to care for soldiers, I watched Jonathan exude an unparalleled leadership in and out of uniform. He directed sick call and handled triage, but he also danced with singers from the USO, entertaining the dozens of soldiers who whooped and hollered for an absent female energy.

During 24-hour shifts at the aid station, Jonathan sat at the computer and appeared to log in nightly medical files. At closer look, he was always working on a short story. Experimental fiction. "Hey, give me a sentence, any

sentence," he'd say. And when I did, he'd type every word and make a promise that he'd share the royalties on this work that was now partially mine.

One evening, Jonathan stood watch over me the night I decided to steal Thorazine and shoot a vial into my arm. When I went through a divorce and contemplated suicide, he stole a bottle of Prozac and gave me pharmacological advice to help lift my spirits. He understood and wanted to protect me, and as misguided as it might have seemed, we explored our friendship freely. However, despite my openness, it was Jonathan uninhibited, myself unsure.

I arrived to Korea entranced by the idea of service, but was awakened after weekend evenings in Jonathan's room listening to Pink Floyd in a haze of Marlboro smoke and reading Nietzsche under a red light. We were idyllic soldiers, but we also knew the game, that we must never let our womb of consciousness be penetrated by the poison of a violent ideology.

And we had our reasons. We both knew, but it was him that had the most to lose. He had a partner. Loyal. Waiting for him in North Carolina. I'll call him Tom. I chose to protect them both.

On the eve of Jonathan's departure back stateside, I remained in my room with the door locked. I had never been good with goodbyes, but my fear wasn't so much what was about to end but what might have started. He knocked and knocked. I cowered in the dark waiting for time to dwindle to his exit's certainty.

A month after Jonathan left, feeling less inspired and more bitter to a machine that did not nourish, I witnessed two men sitting in civilian clothes on a curb near my aid station. The evening before they had been discovered in a room behaving in what the military declared to be "unbecoming," not understanding that they were doing the very opposite. Nobody asked. Nobody told. And yet there they were, dishonorably discharged, discarded, former soldiers banished for an act of love.

Jonathan's secret was never discovered by the military. And in the end, fifteen years later, he's still with Tom. Fifteen years. A lot of time. A lot of time wondering about a knock at the door and whether to answer. A lot of time looking at the backside of a door.