Valerie A. Smith

valeriesmith25549@gmail.com

The Cadet: 4484 words

The Cadet

"I regret to inform you, Cadet Salter. You have failed to meet expectations and are being honorably discharged from The United States Military Academy."

I recognized Captain Johnson as soon as I stepped in his office and stood at attention.

"Cadet Salter, reporting as ordered, Sir," I saluted. His reputation of being aloof made me queasy as I stood in the open door.

Captain Johnson was one of the few black officers stationed at West Point to teach and assist the Cultural Affairs Seminar, a recreational club mostly participated by cadets of color. He was dressed in class-As, a light green, crisply ironed shirt over dark green uniform pants. His matching cap lay flat in a rectangle on the metal desk.

"Come in, Salter. Have a seat," he said, motioning me into the room, holding back a grin as I felt my way into the chair. It matched the desk, faded yellow and scratched, but the dark green vinyl cushion seemed unworn. Captain Johnson lifted a single sheet of paper that was scattered among other papers on his desk. He held it at an angle towards me, using a pen to point out my name at the top.

"Cadet Salter, you know that each cadet has three grades: military, physical, and academic."

"Yes, Sir," I responded automatically, leaning in to scan as much of the document as I could.

"Your grades here are not that bad," he said, pointing to my physical grades. "Just a little bit below average."

Two years of sit-ups, push-ups, and two-mile runs flashed before my eyes. For a moment I thought I was going to be one of the overweight cadets taking PE for summer school, but I would have known that by then. I was already in summer school.

He was smiling broader and I caught myself smiling back. After all, I was still pretty physically fit.

"However," he shrugged, "your military grades are much lower." The chart described how I had started that academic year with thirty-five demerits from the previous summer training for being caught on one piece of furniture with a member of the opposite sex. Captain Johnson did not ask for an explanation, nor did I offer one. But according to data, the academic year had followed suit.

The captain pointed to the academic column. There were more Ds than any other grade. and thought out loud. "You have a few good grades here and there, but overall…." He stopped short. "Are you in summer school now?"

"Yes, Sir," I said. "For chemistry."

"I see."

Captain Johnson laid my records down and sat back in his chair. I kept looking over the paper with my hands still clenched at attention in my lap. None of what was laid out in front of me was a surprise. I did not need a spreadsheet to tell me that the past semester, if not the past two years, had been a disaster.

He was still looking at me when I lifted my eyes. "I regret to inform you, Cadet Salter. You have failed to meet expectations and are being honorably discharged from The United States Military Academy."

Two years and what seemed like a lifetime shuttered through my mind. I could hardly hear Captain Johnson explain, "If after a yearyou have your grades up at another school, you can reapply and come back."

I snapped back to reality. I knew a cadet who had gotten caught plagiarizing his psychology paper. As a result, he lost rank and had to act like a new plebe for the rest of the year.

"No, thanks," I thought, still without words.

I was scared, but I was ready to go.

"Would you like to call home?" he asked.

I picked up the beige rotary telephone on his desk and dialed. Mom chirped when she answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom."

"Hey, Val. How are you?"

"I have to leave West Point."

"What do you mean?"

"I got kicked out. I have to leave."

"Oh!" She gasped, "What *happened?*"

"I got kicked out, Ma. My grades. I'm failing my classes…."

"What? Oh, Val. Hold on a minute, let me get your father. Charles!" She called.

"What's going on?" he shouted from the background on the way to the phone. It was that loud authoritative voice that I was surprisingly glad to hear.

"I got kicked out, Dad. I have to leave." The statement was easier to say the second time. Still, I lowered my head to my lap, half in a whisper because the captain was still sitting two feet away on the other side of the desk. "They're giving me an honorable discharge."

"Ok, hon. I'll be there, OK? Just pack your stuff and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Ok, Dad," I choked on a tear. After all that I had been through, I still did not want to disappoint them.

I had never wanted to disappoint them. It usually came down to a night in the kitchen of my childhood home in South Jersey, a three-bedroom ranch perfect for our family of five. We sat comfortably around a dark wood table that matched the China cabinet. Mom, Dad, my big sister,

brother, and I had many conversations at that table, talks that were often emotional battles of will. Usually, my sister cried, my brother cared less, Mom stayed silent, and Dad, who often held odds in his favor, would leave the fight, leave the kitchen, and leave the house any time he felt a sense of defeat. By the time I was 16, I barely said a word.

Early my junior year of high school, those conversations around the dinner table leaned toward where I would go to college. My sister and brother had already left home, but even though I was alone with my parents, there was not much for me to say. When they asked me what I wanted to study, I stated my case: “I want to be a writer. I want to go to college and study English and become a writer.”

Mom didn’t understand the concept of being a writer even though I had been writing poetry since I was nine. Dad understood perfectly, but he also believed that a small liberal arts school was not the best for me. I became so angry and frustrated at the notion that being a writer wasn’t good enough for them. I felt like the one thing that I loved the most about myself was the one thing they didn’t care about.

When I began to get calls from recruiters about the service academies, it was literally a dream come true for my parents. When I was nine, we attended a West Point graduation for the daughter of one of their friends. I ran onto the field, diving into a sea of crisp white uniforms to grab the cap of newly graduated cadet. I saluted every cadet I saw for the rest of the day.

I could admit that being recruited to the service academies appealed to my tough side. Besides having a 3.6 GPA in high school, I played varsity soccer, basketball, and lacrosse. I was not the kind of girl who minded getting dirty. I could almost see myself in the military and see the experience as being fun. But there was a catch: six years active duty service.

Finally, one night at the kitchen table, I asked, “So, when do I write?”

My parents replied in appalling unison, “You can write when you get out.”

“When is that?”

“It’s only six years,” Dad said. He had come to the table, argument prepared.

“Six years?” I said. *“Six years?”* The truth was, it would be four years of school and six years active duty *after* graduation. It was a prison sentence.

“That’s not a long time,” Dad chuckled. “It’s the greatest opportunity you could ever have!”

Oh, no, I thought. *Here we go…*

“See, you just don’t understand,” Dad said. “You don’t have enough knowledge, enough time on this earth to see how things really are. You can’t *get* this kind of education just anywhere.” He collected himself. “You talk about Ivy League? They can’t hold a candle to this. West Point? This is the cream of the crop! And it’s *free*! You see, that’s what they give the rich white people. We have to work so hard, your mom and I, just to get you guys in a position where you can get ahead in life. They don’t have to work for *anything*. This is the system they set up for themselves to give their children a free ride. They give them this stuff for free *all the time*. You get an opportunity like this, you’re set for life!”

When he finished, he was nearly in a cold sweat, de-fogging his glasses and wiping his brow.

There was no point in arguing with him, especially with Mom sitting right there. I thought about how the military uniforms appealed to me, with the grunginess and stability of having everything provided. For God’s sake, I was accustomed to discipline and hard work. I just wasn’t sure I could wait, if writing was going to be on the backburner for an indefinite amount of

time. Then again, I had been writing all these years with no support at home, so what would another ten years matter?

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime?" I asked.

"It's just a school! Like any other school! You go to school!"

There was nothing I could do. They had found the best plan for me. Someday, maybe, I was going to be a writer. But for now, I was going to the military academy.

On June 28, 1993, my name changed. It was my first day at West Point, Reorganization Day or "R-Day" for short. I spent half the bright hot morning outside the main gym in line with my parents, my sister, and 1000 other families. As soon as I got through the door, I was taught how to walk and how to talk like a cadet. Along with the other new cadets, I filled my bag with shoes, boots, uniforms, and gear. I was issued new clothes, measured for body fat, and administered a flu shot, all in an endless assembly line. Sweating and dehydrated, we lugged our new belongings up six flights of stairs, changed our clothes into white shirts over grey pants, and marched to the parade field. There we recited the Oath of Honor in front of all our parents and loved ones who wouldn't see us again for the six weeks of Beast: Cadet Basic Training.

At the end of that first evening I lined up at attention in the hallway with the other ladies of my platoon. "What's your name?" asked a tall female cadet officer with strawberry blonde hair pulled into a bun. Wisps stuck to her forehead from the heat and humidity inside un-airconditioned halls the barracks.

"Valerie!" I yelled.

"Valerie?" She shouted back in an incredulous tone. "What's your *last* name, cadet?"

Oh I thought. "Salter!"

"Ok, Salter. You are New Cadet Salter from now on! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" I shouted in reply.

She put her hands on her hips in command. Her fuchsia pink polished fingertips caught my eye and I reserved a part of my heart and mind not to take this place too seriously.

My respect for the military grew over time, the way I grew to love my M-16. The yelling, marching, and drilling of basic training were barely replaced by dehydrated days and showerless nights, training in the thunderous hot mountains of Camp Buckner. That second summer, affectionately called "Dirt," is where I learned to rappel from mountains and launch large artillery. By the end of the summer, I was covered head to toe in mud and gnat bites.

I didn't mind the bumps and bruises, the sweat and grime. But despite my high school achievements, the academics challenged me from the very beginning. West Point is an engineering school where every cadet chooses a double major such as pairing psychology and systems engineering. Even as an English major, I would eventually have to pair it with an engineering concentration.

There were normal college courses as well. Towards the end of the first six weeks of basic training, we plebes, or freshman cadets, were given the opportunity to choose our classes. I ranked my language class preferences on a scantron sheet: Spanish, French, and Portuguese. When I received my schedule that first day in our barracks for the year, I couldn't believe when I read the course title: Russian Language. I knew for a fact I had not chosen it. I asked my squad leader what to do. He said I would have to make an appointment to see the Dean of Academics.

Most of the instructors are Army officers at the Academy. That would make the Dean of Academics to be a full-bird colonel. When I arrived at his mahogany office the next day, saluted, and greeted, he politely informed me that I had indeed chosen Russian as my language and that I

would not be able to change it. On the first day of class, it was obvious to me that most of my classmates were not there by choice, either.

Learning Russian turned out to be the highlight of my academic career at West Point. I must have taken calculus three times before the end of my tenure. Economics was a different animal altogether. It took only a couple weeks for my instructor to call me to his office for a conference. Apparently, I had economics all wrong. Backwards. Upside down. He stared at me blankly and I stared right back. He sent me to my barracks with no resolution of what I was going to do about my grade in that class.

The two semesters of plebe year went on that way, and the first semester of sophomore, or *yearling*, year. By the time my dad hired a tutor to help me in math, I was too far gone. I thought I was making the best of it, though. I had a mentor named Captain Salter who had looked me up solely because we had the same last name. We turned out to be distant cousins, and he and his family had me over for dinner a couple times. I began writing again, and even had a private conference with poet laureate, Yusef Komunyakaa. I sang in the Cadet Gospel Choir, played lacrosse, drank on weekends, and spent my nights sneaking out of the barracks.

In the early spring of my second year I began to be so tired that I had to take naps between classes. I survived until spring break, to visit the clear blue skies outside of Dallas, Texas with my best friend. Even on break, I felt like someone was beating me up at night. After returning from that trip more exhausted than ever, I passed out in lunch formation while my company lined up to enter the mess hall. No one thought anything of it because passing out in formation was common for any cadet who simply locks their knees.

Then one Saturday I had to pull guard duty, watching the log book and answering the barracks phone from 7am-11:30pm. That night I went to sleep and didn’t wake up until 3:30pm

the following afternoon. I fell out of bed and shuffled down two flights to friend's room. She took one look at me and asked me if I was ok. I wasn't sure. She asked me if I had had anything to eat, and when she offered me a French fry I threw up in her sink. She took me to the clinic where the doctor quickly diagnosed strep throat. I was almost out the door, prescription in hand, when the doctor changed his mind and called me back in to test for mononucleosis. Positive. The nurse could barely find a vein strong enough to hold an I.V.

My parents and sister visited me in the hospital, but there wasn't much for me to do but rest. After a week, I was released and ordered physical therapy to regain my strength. I also had to go back to class. During a conference, one of my teachers said he knew something must have been wrong because I had been sleeping through his class. I didn't tell him that I thought it was because he taught Earth Science and he always had a projector on with the lights off. He was genuinely disappointed in conveying that my grade in his class, like others, did not look good. By the end of May, I had regained my physical strength, but my grades never recovered.

So when summer school began for the second time, I did not have time to explain it all to the captain who held the chart with my name on it.

"Thank you, Sir," I said. Then I stood up, saluted, turned around, and ran off. I ran like I had never run before. Of all the running I had ever done under command, I was free to run wherever I wanted. I ran out of the barracks, that fortress of Hudson Highland stone. I ran past the parade yard and soccer fields to the monuments and cannons at Trophy Point and found myself on the road that leads to the North Gate. I ran past the Commandant's house, past the road that slopes steeply down to Eisenhower Hall, and headed up the mountain to officers' housing. Unintentionally, I found myself at Captain Salter's door.

I rang the doorbell and the captain's wife answered. She asked me into the tiny foyer while Captain Salter rose from the dinner table. Suddenly, I realized I was standing unannounced in an officer's living room sweating in black athletic shorts and grey USMA t-shirt. I told him I had just gotten kicked out and I was leaving West Point tonight. He was very gracious and said good luck and good-bye.

Back outside in the cool night air madness set in. Running put it off. I kept running, back past the barracks to the front gate and Thayer Hall, where it had all begun three years earlier. My parents and I had stayed at that post hotel one night my senior year of high school during the application process. I had to sleep on the floor because the 200-year-old hotel room was so small. I ran down the back steps behind Thayer, down to the Hudson River and looked out over the stone wall long enough to see the shadows of the trees on the water below. Then I heard Taps which meant it was 11:30 and technically time for lights out. I had been gone for over three hours, yet I was still unable to process my thoughts.

I walked back to my room to pack.

My best friend was standing in the hall waiting for me. Someone had told her what happened. "Girl, we were looking for you for hours," she said. "You had me worried, girl. I couldn't find you."

"My bad," I said. I felt wild and free, but I couldn't look her in the eye.

She started to cry.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. My dad's coming to get me. I guess I have to pack up." I couldn't deal with the intensity of the situation. It would take more than ten years to get past myself and realize how much my expulsion had broken her heart. But at that moment she had to get back to

her room. Even though curfew was relaxed during summer session, she had to at least be on her own floor when the guard on duty came by to check.

When my dad showed up, we got everything in the car: my standard Army issue trunk and personal items, my uniforms and civilian clothes, my computer, and my books. I did not have to clean my room.

The United States Military Academy at West Point is 45 minutes northwest of New York City, less than four hours from my hometown. In two years, I had become familiar with the ride back to Willingboro, New Jersey. Knowing the twists and turns of the Palisades Parkway and the exits on the Turnpike did not make the ride any easier with my father. Neither one of us said anything. My future was as black and open as the night.

"We don't have to tell anyone what happened," he said.

I wondered who the "anyone" might be. My mind filled with the lies I would have to tell and the absurd denial in which I would have to live. He did not guide me to a road of escape out of this declaration. He did not create an alibi or cover. It was for good – a done deal.

At home, my mother cried and said, "I never wanted you to go."

My first couple weeks at home were spent in a mental coma. I had been going crazy since the night I ran the length and breadth of West Point and the suppression at home made it worse. After those first couple weeks, one of my brother's friends offered me a job at Sears in the loss prevention department. I took the job despite having never had a job before, except for being paid a salary as a cadet.

One day in early August, just two months after my expulsion and one month into my job at Sears, my brother asked me if I wanted to go to school with him in Alabama. He was two school years ahead of me and was preparing to return to Alabama A&M University in Huntsville

to play baseball. I jumped at the idea and looked up the school in one of the college books we had lying around the house. I found out that the University of Alabama in Huntsville was in the same town, which suited me better. As much as I wanted out of the house, I did not necessarily want to be on campus with my big brother.

The price of UAH listed at $2500 per semester. I took that data straight to my father. The speed of his positive response made me suspicious that Mom and Dad either had no thought to my future at that point and welcomed the divine intervention or had orchestrated the whole thing. Either way, within a week I was packed and ready to go to Alabama with parent-provided registration money in hand. My brother drove the whole way in his white Dodge Aries K, and we got to Huntsville in one day. We coasted down Monte Sano into the Tennessee Valley where Huntsville spread wide open against the horizon.

Early the next morning, the Alabama air warmed and welcomed me like an embrace. Not so hot that I couldn't get any work done, just hot enough to know I was being comforted by the sun. My brother drove me to the campus of UAH and dropped me off in front of the University Center, a two-story white building with the cafeteria attached to the back end. I stood outside on the broad white sidewalk for a few minutes to realize where I was: 1300 miles away from home, standing in the sun. I was at a real school. A true university. The kind you see in books, where you see the library, liberal arts, dorms, and gym in one panoramic glance. West Point seemed like a blink of my imagination, but time moving fast did not scare me. I was right where I needed to be. I walked into the office, transcripts in hand.

"May I help you?" asked the clerk while I was still twenty paces away. I was the only student in the room, and she was the only clerk present.

"Yes, ma'am. I am here to register for school this semester." I was nervous to be speaking on my own behalf for what seemed to be the first time.

"Are you a new student?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm a transfer student."

"Ok," she smiled, "Do you have your transcripts?"

"Yes," and I handed them to her.

"Ok. Fill out the application while I take a look."

She handed me a stack of forms to fill out, and I took them a couple paces back to a blue office chair next to a gray cubicle with a matching hutch. I savored my ability to fill out all the forms myself, another sign that I was making my own choices. My future manifested in my hands with each signature.

"Have you decided which classes you are going to take?" she asked when I returned with my forms.

As much English as possible, I thought.

The clerk read through my silence. I believe she could see that I had never chosen my own classes and would need some help. "Well, it looks like most of your credits have transferred."

I squinted at her incredulously. Did she see the three D's in math, the D in Economics, and the D in Earth Science?

"Well, yes," she said, reading my mind again. "Your D's in math transferred as C's."

Wow, West Point. You did me a solid. I never have to pick up a pencil again.

"The rest of those classes…" she continued, "didn't count toward your general requirements." She shook off the question of 'What the heck were you taking Economics for in

the first place?' and brought her encouraging smile back. "Your language grades transferred, too. You took Russian, right?"

"Yes," I said, dropping my eyes. I thought she was going to ask me to explain but she didn't.

She single-handedly lifted me out of the shame of a transcript that made no sense. "We have a Russian language program here. It looks like you have half your credits for a minor already."

Are you serious? Russian is going to be my minor? I struck a vow in my heart to laugh at that irony for the rest of my life.

"So, what can I take?" I asked, preparing to conquer the world.

"Well, what do you want to be your major of study?"

"English!" I proclaimed.

I went back to the desk and registered for four English classes, one Russian, and a PE. I took Shakespeare. I worked in the library. I lived my wildest liberal arts fantasy. I wrote poetry during, after, and between classes. I performed spoken word poetry at open mics. I felt the Alabama grass tingle betwixt my Jersey toes. My life was in my hands. My accomplishments were my own. My failures were my own. My destiny lay out before me like a slow Alabama sunset changing from blue to purple to orange and yellow.