

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk



INTRODUCTION

Billy were dying at an alarming rate, partially due to the fact that they were under-armored.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BEN FOUNTAIN

Ben Fountain grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, before his family relocated to Raleigh when he was a teenager. He attended University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he graduated in 1980 with a degree in English. Later, he pursued a law degree at Duke University, graduating in 1983. Fountain met his wife, Sharon Fountain, at Duke. Though he practiced real estate law for a brief period of time, Fountain was primarily fascinated by Haiti and its history of colonialism, racism, and ecological disasters. Despite the fact that he spoke little French and no Haitian Creole, he took his first trip to Haiti in 1991 and has since traveled there more than thirty times. These trips culminated in his first collection of short stories, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, which was published in 2006 when Fountain was 48. His first novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, was published in 2012. The novel has received a number of awards and recognitions, including a Whiting Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Fountain currently lives in Dallas, Texas with his wife and two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States' conflict with al-Qaeda and terrorist groups can be traced back to the early 1980s, when the US supported Islamist guerillas in their fight against the Soviet Union. The earliest iteration of al-Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden. He declared war on the West as a whole, specifically the US and Israel, in the mid-1990s. Several attacks throughout the late 1990s culminated with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This begun the so-called War on Terror, which authorized President George W. Bush to use force to attack terrorism around the world. The US officially declared war on Iraq in early 2003 due to a belief that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and had ties to al-Qaeda—neither of which were true, though support for the war was nonetheless strong throughout the first year of the war. As the government of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein collapsed, an insurgency developed against the new government and the still-present US forces. These rebel forces were responsible for more casualties than the initial war effort. By the time Billy's story begins in about 2005, President Bush had been reelected for a second term thanks in part to the efforts of the Swift Boat group, which sought to discredit Senator John Kerry's military service in Vietnam and curry favor for President Bush. By the time of the election in 2004, support for the war was waning, especially as it became more widely accepted that the war began due to questionable intelligence. Meanwhile, soldiers like

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk is one of many novels that explores the American conflicts in the Middle East, including Kevin Powers' novel [The Yellow Birds](#), which is narrated by an American soldier in Iraq, and Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer*, which explores the conflicts of the area going back to the late 1980s from the perspective of a native Iraqi man. In addition, *Billy Lynn* is often heralded as the [Catch-22](#) of the Iraq War, as it dives into the absurdity of war and the paradoxes inherent to organized, funded violence. Fountain's exploration of the media and the way in which it functions in modern society links back to Guy Debord's seminal 1967 philosophical work, *Society of the Spectacle*. In it, Debord directly critiques modern consumer culture and criticizes modern dependence on images to mediate experiences with reality, which is what Fountain takes issue with in his criticism of the Fantasy Industrial Complex.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk
- **When Written:** 2003-2012
- **Where Written:** Dallas, Texas
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Satire; War Fiction
- **Setting:** The Texas Stadium in Dallas, Texas, with flashbacks in Stovall, Texas and Iraq
- **Climax:** The halftime show
- **Antagonist:** Norm Oglesby, the roadies, and pussy boy; more broadly, the Fantasy Industrial Complex
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Taking Realism Too Far. When director Ang Lee took on the film adaptation of *Billy Lynn*, he wanted to make it as realistic as possible—so he shot the film at 120 frames per second, a rate five times the normal frame rate. Though this creates a hyper-real and immersive effect for viewers, the format resulted in poor reviews as it's difficult to watch when a person isn't used to it. To make matters worse, the film could only be shown in its intended format in two theaters in the US, as only two in the country are capable of screening films at such a high film rate.

Method Writing. In an interview with the *Fiction Writer's Review*, Fountain described his writing process as "method writing," or the writing equivalent of method acting—a style of acting in which actors seek to emotionally identify with their character.



PLOT SUMMARY

Prior to the start of the novel, nineteen-year-old Billy Lynn, a soldier in the United States Army, was involved in a firefight on the banks of the Al-Ansakar Canal in Iraq. During the fight, Billy attempted to save his mentor, Shroom, but Shroom died at the hands of Iraqi insurgents anyway. Because the firefight was filmed by an embedded news team, Billy's platoon was renamed Bravo squad, heralded as heroes, and President Bush asked them to return home for a two-week Victory Tour, culminating at the Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving Day game.

On Thanksgiving Day, Billy arrives in a limo to the **Texas Stadium** and thinks that it looks very different from the stadium he's seen on television. A group of college girls drives up alongside the limo and yells for the Bravos to put their windows down. When the soldiers do so, the girls' faces fall—they're uninterested in soldiers. A movie producer, Albert, rides with Bravo. He's trying to secure a movie deal to make a film about the firefight, and he announces that the actress Hilary Swank is interested in playing both Billy and his sergeant, Sergeant Dime.

When the Bravos arrive at the stadium two hours before kickoff, none of the staff seem to know what to do with them. Sykes and Lodis wonder what their seats in the seventh row might cost, and Dime discusses the movie deal with Billy and Albert. Billy's thoughts wander to how he ended up in the military in the first place: when his sister, Kathryn, suffered a horrific car crash, her fiancé, pussy boy, broke off their engagement. In retaliation, Billy destroyed pussy boy's car and joined the Army to escape the felony charges. As Billy's mind wanders, he hopes that the Bravos' handler, Josh, will bring him **Advil** for his headache. Finally, Billy decides to go find beer with Mango. When the two return, Dime is infuriated that they drank, but he sends them off to go find Major Mac, who has accompanied Bravo for unknown reasons. The hunt for him is futile, so Billy and Mango buy more beer and wander into a shop on the concourse selling overpriced items emblazoned with the Cowboys logo. They find the shop absurd.

When they get back to their seats Billy watches a punter warm up on the field and thinks that Shroom's ghost lives at the top of the football's arc. Suddenly, the **Jumbotron** shows the Bravos in their seats, and grateful citizens mob Bravo and thank them for their service. Billy is stoic and polite but feels as though the people all need something from him. Finally, Josh announces that it's time for lunch and leads the Bravos up to the

concourse. More people rush to Bravo, and many tell Billy that the Fox News footage looks just like a movie.

At lunch, Billy feels almost sick at the sight of the massive buffet. He listens to Albert talk about dodging the draft for Vietnam, and Billy loses himself thinking about how Dime and Shroom ran the platoon in Iraq. Albert's conversations about the movie aren't going well, and Dime is especially angry when Albert shares that Universal Studios wants to set their story during World War II. Billy finally escapes to the restroom but is intercepted by Mango and a waiter, Hector. They all go outside to smoke marijuana, and Hector is shocked to hear that the Bravos have to return to Iraq. When he mentions that he's thinking of joining the Army to get health insurance for his young daughter, Billy, Mango, and Hector wonder what else they can do.

The novel steps back in time to Billy's visit home the day before. Billy's father, Ray, had once been a radio DJ, but after he suffered a double stroke, all of Ray's transgressions came out: his apartments in Dallas had been cover for his secret relationships, and he even has a secret teenage daughter. While Ray had once been loud, mean, and proudly conservative, the strokes left him in a motorized wheelchair and mostly unable to talk—a relief to the entire family. Billy's mother, Denise, tries her hardest throughout Billy's visit to make things perfect, but Ray consistently ruins her attempts by smoking constantly and watching Fox News at full volume. In the morning, Billy takes his nephew, Brian, outside to play, and Billy painfully realizes that children like Brian die in the war. Kathryn and Billy's other sister, Patty, join him outside. When Denise's boss, Mr. Whaley, stops by, he praises Billy's heroism and promises to pray for him, though Kathryn insists that Billy could still die. Billy spends the rest of the afternoon napping in the yard and talking with Kathryn. When he leaves in the morning, Ray watches Billy leave but doesn't say goodbye, and Kathryn shares that she's been in contact with an organization that helps soldiers legally desert.

Back in the present, Billy meets Norm Oglesby, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, in a meet and greet populated by rich Texans. As Billy listens to the conversations around him, he realizes he envies the rich, as the war and death are simple talking points for them. An executive, Mr. Jones, introduces himself to Billy. Billy is strangely angry to see that Mr. Jones is carrying a gun, but he manages to engage Mr. Jones in a conversation about business. As the meet and greet draws to a close, other executives ask Bravo to sign *Time* magazines, and then Josh takes them to their press conference. When Bravo enters the room where the conference will take place, the cheerleaders go wild. Norm gives a long-winded speech about the Bravos, and Billy makes eye contact with a strawberry blond cheerleader. Later, as two reporters ask Billy about ghostwriting a book about his experience at war, the cheerleader finds him. Her name is Faison, and she tells Billy

that being a cheerleader mostly consists of doing service work. She tells Billy that she's a Christian, and as she rattles on about her relationship with Jesus, Billy leads her behind a curtain. They kiss, and Billy picks her up. She orgasms and declares that she knows that what they're doing isn't wrong. As the conference comes to a close, she tells Billy to find her later.

Billy doesn't realize where he is for a full half hour. He finds himself on the football field apparently waiting to film a commercial. Josh arrives with footballs for Bravo to hold, and Billy begins a loose version of tackle football with the other soldiers. After a few minutes two men make the Bravos stop, and a film crew calls them over to film the advertisement. Dime is supposed to wish America a happy Thanksgiving, but he veers off script and also addresses soldiers in the field. Between takes, he and Norm discuss the Bravos' movie, and it takes five takes to get the advertisement right. When it's finished, Norm leads Bravo to the locker room to get autographs from the players. Billy is in awe of the size of the players and doesn't want to pester them, but he feels strange ignoring them. When he gets to Octavian Spurgeon, Octavian asks Billy about the weapons he uses in Iraq. Disturbed, Billy finds Dime, and Ennis, the equipment manager, offers Billy and Dime a tour of the equipment room. Billy feels nauseous seeing the amount of stuff the Cowboys have. Ennis refuses to give Billy Advil for his headache and returns Billy and Dime to the locker room. Octavian calls Billy over and asks if the players could come to Iraq to help out and shoot "Muslim freaks." Billy tells Octavian to join the Army, and Octavian scoffs. Later, Billy gives his football away to a twitchy boy.

Norm invites Bravo to watch the kickoff from his private box. More rich people thank Bravo for their service, and an old man named March Hawey approaches Billy. Hawey knew Bush as a boy and interrogates Billy about the success of the war. Billy lets his mind wander as Hawey talks, and Billy thinks that there's an disconnect between these people's understanding of the war and the reality of it. As the national anthem begins, Billy watches Faison in the line of cheerleaders. When the anthem is over, Billy escapes to the front of the box to watch the game with other Bravos. Hawey finds Billy again and discusses the merits of capitalism. Norm asks Bravo to leave after the first quarter.

Once they're back in their seats, Billy decides to take Mango to go meet Faison. They find her, and Billy feels as though he's never been happier. He receives a call from A-bort instructing him to return, with a cryptic and terrifying message as to what halftime will entail: marching on the field with Destiny's Child. Lodis, who got very drunk before halftime, struggles to follow Billy as the marching bands start up. Fireworks that look like bombs go off, and strobe lights flash. Billy feels as though the ground is tilting as he tries to follow his instructions. The Bravos find themselves backstage, where a woman tells them that next, they'll go out onstage with Destiny's Child. They

briefly see Beyoncé as she comes backstage to change, and then they take the stage with her. Billy notices Sykes weeping and looks at the sky.

After the show, nobody comes for Bravos. They're all shaken, and Sykes is still crying. The roadies nastily yell at them to leave and all of a sudden, a brawl breaks out. Cops send Bravo across the field where they're met by Faison. She and Billy exchange phone numbers, and Josh finally appears to take Bravo back to their seats. Billy calls home and speaks to Kathryn, who insists he needs to speak with the organization that will help him get out of returning to Iraq. She screams when he says he wants to go back.

As Bravo settles in to watch the rest of the game, Sykes began singing—Dime gave him Valium to calm him down. Billy receives a phone call from an unknown number. He listens to the voicemail and tries to decide what to do about Kathryn's offer as the boojee lady sitting in front of Bravo notices that Lodis is asleep and kindly covers him with her snuggie.

Dime informs Billy that they're going to meet with Norm. Albert meets them in the hallway outside Norm's office and tells them the news: Norm wants to fund the film, but he only wants to pay the Bravos \$5,500 each for their story instead of the \$100,000 that Albert promised. Dime refuses the deal, but Norm attempts to force Dime's acceptance by making him speak to the powerful General Ruthven. Dime speaks to the General but leaves the office without accepting Norm's deal. He explains to Billy that General Ruthven hates the Cowboys. With two minutes to go in the game, Dime declares that it's time to leave. Out by the limo, Billy notices the crowd rippling and suddenly, the roadies attack Bravo with pipes and crowbars. Mr. Jones fumbles his gun, but Major Mac shoots it straight into the air. Right after, Billy runs out of the limo to say goodbye to Faison. He knows that their relationship is doomed when she's confused as to why he wants to run away, but they kiss passionately anyway. As citizens mob Billy one final time, Billy realizes that their reality controls the trajectory of the war, and his firsthand knowledge means nothing.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Billy Lynn – Billy, the novel's protagonist, is a nineteen-year-old soldier from Stovall, Texas. In the Army, Shroom (one of Billy's commanding officers) takes him under his wing and becomes his mentor. Though Billy hated school, Shroom impresses upon him the importance of study and curiosity. When Shroom dies during a firefight and Billy tries unsuccessfully to save him, it's caught on film, which leads their squad to embark on the Victory Tour across America. Billy is often struck by the scale of the world, as represented by airports, shopping malls, and other massive structures in the US. He also desperately wants

to understand the global market and how things like wars get paid for. Because he grew up poor, the rich and powerful people he meets at the **Texas Stadium** seem like a different species to him, and he envies how they treat fear, death, and the war as simple talking points. Billy also struggles through the Victory Tour to come to terms with Shroom's recent death, which haunts and perplexes him. As Billy tries to decide where he fits into the world, he often wonders what Shroom would do or think. At the football game, Billy meets Faison, a young cheerleader, and falls instantly in love with her. His fantasies about a future relationship with Faison make him seriously consider what Kathryn wants him to do: desert the Army with the help of an organization that offers legal help to "heroes" like Billy. Eventually, Billy decides that he cannot let the rest of his squad return to Iraq without him, and he understands that his relationship with Faison is doomed.

Sergeant Dime – Sergeant Dime is Billy's 24-year-old commander in the Army and is also part of the Bravos. Though Dime denies it, Shroom once claimed that Dime came from a wealthy family in North Carolina and was a football star. Dime reads books voraciously and has a number of magazine subscriptions. His primary goal in life is to gain knowledge, which also carries over into how he manages his platoon: in Iraq, he often made Bravo Squad get out of the Humvees and walk, just to see the area, even though doing so was extremely dangerous. He keeps the platoon on their toes and attempts, unsuccessfully, to keep them from drinking while at the **Texas Stadium**. Billy seeks Dime out for advice about Faison, though Dime only offers Billy a reality check by saying that the only thing he can do is email her. Billy is often caught between hating Dime and thinking that he'd die for him, a sentiment that's shared by Bravo Squad as a whole. Dime is impulsive and given to rude outbursts at inappropriate times (as seen when he insults Norm when Norm tries to convince him to take the \$5,500 film deal), but Dime is also unwaveringly loyal to the rest of Bravo and wants to do what's best for them.

Shroom – Shroom was one of Billy's commanding officers in Iraq, and the tenth member of Bravo Squad. He died in the firefight that made Billy and the rest of the platoon famous. Shroom is constantly in Billy's thoughts, and Billy is especially haunted by the fact that Shroom foretold his own death. Shroom was an avid reader and philosopher who spent his spare time reading whatever he could get his hands on. He and Dime were unlikely friends, and both were unwaveringly liberal—they were an overenthusiastic, sarcastic audience when Vice President Cheney addressed the Army in Iraq. Shroom was also Billy's mentor and a father figure, sharing with Billy how to walk so that he might only lose one foot if a bomb explodes, as well as instilling in Billy the importance of reading and learning. Billy notes that, although Shroom's funeral should've encapsulated Shroom's eccentric spirituality, it was instead a depressing and overly-Christian affair picketed by

people who likely belonged to the Westboro Baptist Church.

Albert Ratner – Albert is a film producer who has been in contact with Bravo Squad since the Fox News footage of the firefight at the Al-Ansakar Canal came out. He wants to help produce a film about the Bravos and the fight. When he was a young man, Albert went to law school to avoid the Vietnam draft, and he openly opposes how little President Bush and other government officials seem to care about the lives of the soldiers fighting in Iraq. Despite this, Albert believes that the Bravo film will garner support for the war and offer the American public a much-needed morale boost. Throughout the novel, Albert is always on his phone with studios or agents attempting to secure a deal, and he promises to keep fighting for the movie even after Dime shoots down Norm Oglesby's deal. Even though he cares deeply for Bravo, Albert is a shrewd businessman: he implies that he'll still work with Norm after the deal falls through, even though Norm is mean, rude, and power hungry. Over the course of his career, Albert won three Oscars and also produced one of the greatest flops of all time.

Norm Oglesby – Norm Oglesby is the owner of the Dallas Cowboys. An older man with a trapezoidal head and a great deal of obvious plastic surgery, Norm looks very different in the flesh than he does on television. Billy notices that all the plastic surgery doesn't look good or bad, just expensive. Watching Norm work crowds, Billy observes that Norm looks like he's working very hard, and that it doesn't look natural. Norm's steely blue eyes are cutting, and he's particularly interested in Billy due to Billy's Texas roots. It eventually comes to light that Norm would like to start a film studio and wants to purchase the rights to the potential Bravo film, but his offer of \$5,500 per Bravo falls dramatically short of what Albert promised the men they could sell their story for. It's apparent to Billy that Norm isn't used to not getting his way, an observation that Mr. Jones backs up when he tells Billy that Norm is capable of cutting exceptional deals and getting what he wants, no matter what. Though Norm is technically the person hosting Bravo Squad at the **Texas Stadium**, he clearly feels that Bravo isn't as important as various other guests, seen by the way he kicks Bravo out of his private box and doesn't arrange for them to be picked up after the halftime show.

Kathryn Lynn – Kathryn is Billy's older sister and the middle Lynn child. Billy describes her as blonde and beautiful enough to distract both older men and Billy himself, though Kathryn also isn't afraid to speak uncomfortable truths or use foul language. Prior to the start of the novel, Kathryn was engaged to a man whom Billy refers to as pussy boy. When Kathryn suffered a horrific car accident that left her face terribly scarred, pussy boy broke off their engagement. Billy destroyed pussy boy's car in retaliation, which is how Billy ended up in the Army—the lawyers offered to drop the felony charges if he joined up. Because of this, Kathryn feels responsible for the fact that Billy is in the military, and she goes out of her way to

try to get him out of it. She contacts an organization that helps soldiers legally desert, passes Billy's contact info on to them, and spends all of Thanksgiving Day texting Billy to respond to their messages. She finds it insulting that the Army would force Billy and the rest of Bravo Squad to redeploy after the Victory Tour and is shocked that Billy wants to return to Iraq with his fellow soldiers.

Faison – Faison is a new cheerleader with the Dallas Cowboys and is Billy's love interest. She's short and beautiful, with long strawberry-blond hair. As a Christian, she's very adamant that she doesn't particularly want to have sex until she has a "connection" with somebody, but this doesn't stop her from having a covert sexual encounter with Billy. Faison seems unsettled that Billy will return to Iraq, but despite her obvious affection for Billy, she doesn't seem particularly interested in keeping in contact while he's deployed. For Billy, Faison is very much a distraction and an escape from the horrors of the rest of his time at the **Texas Stadium**, though he learns when they say goodbye that she was as much a part of the horror as everything else. She expresses no interest in running away with Billy, as she sees no problem with life as it is.

Denise Lynn – Denise is Billy's mother and Ray's husband. She's overwhelmingly concerned with keeping up appearances, often to her own detriment—she refuses to declare bankruptcy, which would allow her to keep her home and dissolve Ray's medical bills, on account of what other Stovall residents would think. Similarly, even though her lawyer told her to not speak to the woman with whom Ray had an affair, she's too polite to hang up on the woman when the woman calls the Lynn house. Though Denise technically cares for Ray, she does only the bare minimum and manages to make her care look neglectful and passive aggressive. In contrast, she adores Billy and is extremely proud of him. Even though she tries her best to make Billy's visit home perfect by cooking Billy's favorite foods and wearing makeup, her attempts to control the rest of her family and make them fall into line fail, particularly where Ray is concerned.

Ray Lynn – Ray is Billy's father and Denise Lynn's husband. In his younger days, Ray was a rock and roll radio DJ, but after the economic recessions after September 11, he had trouble finding work. For his DJ jobs, Ray insisted on keeping apartments in Dallas so that he wouldn't have to commute fifty miles to and from Stovall, which the rest of the Lynn family later learned was a way for Ray to keep his extramarital affairs and teenage daughter secret. This became representative of Ray's regular personality shifts: he often berated his family members with extremely foul language but could switch instantly to his "work voice" when his phone rings. After September 11, Ray doubled down on his conservatism and began working to become a conservative talk radio host. He tested all his material on his family, earning the nickname "America's Prick" from his eldest daughter, Patty. While working on these

attempts to become the next big conservative talk radio host, Ray suffered a major double stroke that confined him to a motorized wheelchair and robbed him of his suave voice. When Billy visits his family during the Victory Tour, Ray only grunts when he needs something and spends all of his time watching Fox News and chain smoking. He's petulant and ignores everyone in the family except for his grandson, Brian. Despite Ray's support for the war, he doesn't treat Billy like a hero, and Billy realizes that nothing he does will allow him to connect with his father or make his father proud of him.

Mango – Mango is Bravo's nickname for Marc Montoya. He's Mexican-American and only a year or two older than Billy. Because of Mango's Mexican origins, he often gets teased about being an illegal alien, but Mango is able to shut these speculations down by his ability to list all the presidents and vice presidents of the United States. Mango is Billy's closest friend in the Army, and they both feel resigned to work dead-end jobs upon their release from the Army. Mango attracts Dime's wrath for announcing that football is boring, something that Dime uses to tease Mango even more about not being a real American.

Josh – Josh is the handler assigned to Bravo Squad at the **Texas Stadium**. He's a handsome, suave-looking man, which elicits suspicions among the Bravo Squad as to whether or not Josh is gay. They eventually decide that he's just "metrosexual." Bravo generally likes Josh, as Josh is willing to play along with their jokes and promises to try to get them a meeting with Destiny's Child. Throughout the novel, Billy asks Josh for **Advil** for a hangover, and Josh isn't able to follow through until nearly the end of the novel, showing that Billy's needs are a low priority. Despite taking a long time to help Billy, Josh seems to genuinely care for Bravo and is sympathetic to the miseries Bravo experience at the football game.

March Hawey – March Hawey is an extremely rich old man whom Billy meets in Norm Oglesby's private suite. He later learns that Hawey is "Mr. Swift Boat," or one of the leading members of the organization Swift Vets and POWs for Truth, a group that worked to oppose John Kerry's presidential campaign in 2004. Because of this, Dime later warns Billy that Hawey is a dangerous man with a great deal of power in the government. Despite the warning, Billy finds Hawey interesting, and Hawey is more than happy to talk to Billy about the business world.

Hector – Hector is a waiter who works in the clubhouse at the Texas Stadium. He offers to share marijuana with Mango and Billy as a small way to "support the troops," which the men appreciate. While they smoke, Hector shares that he's thinking of joining the Army to obtain health insurance for his young daughter whose mother doesn't work. Though Billy and Mango initially try to dissuade him, they all agree that there's not much else out there. Hector is also enraged when he learns that Bravo Squad is going to be redeployed after the Victory Tour,

saying that redeployment is no way to thank America's heroes.

Major "Mac" McLaurin – For unknown reasons, Major Mac is assigned to accompany Bravo Squad on the Victory Tour. Apparently, on Major Mac's first day in Iraq, he suffered injuries that permanently damaged his hearing. Because he's almost fully deaf, Bravo Squad gives him a great deal of grief and says things to him and around him that exploit the fact that he cannot hear well or at all. His experience in Iraq also affected his mental health, and Bravo guesses that Major Mac is mentally checked out more than half the time—they talk often about his "thousand mile Prozac stare." When Major Mac defuses an altercation involving a gun, however, Sergeant Dime terms Major Mac a national hero.

Crack – Though Crack's actual last name is Koch, he's known to Bravo Squad only as Crack. He torments Sykes in the lead up to the halftime show but seems just as shaken by the show as the rest of Bravo. Later, when a group of drunk young men try to ask Crack how he feels about gay men in the military, Crack puts a man named Tyler in a headlock and nearly kills him.

Sykes – Sykes is one of the members of Bravo Squad who takes part in the Victory Tour. Sykes is only twenty-two but is already married and has one child, and his wife is pregnant with their second child. Sykes gets extremely drunk in the time leading up to the halftime show and suffers the most out of all the Bravos during and after the show. He's barely able to follow Billy's lead and breaks down crying afterwards. Dime has to give Sykes Valium in order to calm him down.

Lake – Lake is one of the two absent members of Bravo Squad. Very little is said about him, but he lost both his legs in Iraq and is at the Brooke Army Medical Center for the duration of the novel. Before every meal, Billy ritually imagines where Lake and Shroom would sit were they present.

Pussy Boy – Pussy Boy, whose real name is never stated, was Kathryn's fiancé. After Kathryn's car accident, pussy boy, a rich and selfish twenty-something, broke off their engagement because he couldn't stand her damaged face. Billy took it upon himself to destroy pussy boy's car in retaliation and also chased him across a parking lot with a crowbar—the very reason Billy ends up in the military.

The Roadies – The roadies are the road crew who set up and tear down the stage at the **Texas Stadium**. They're a group of cantankerous men who have no time for people who are in their way, even the heroic Bravo Squad. They scuffle with Bravo right after the halftime show, and as Bravo heads for their limo after the game, the roadies attack with crowbars and pipes.

Pastor Rick – Pastor Rick is the pastor of a megachurch that hosted a rally for Bravo Squad in Anaheim. Billy sought Pastor Rick out for guidance regarding how to deal with Shroom's death, and although Billy cried, he realized afterwards that he didn't remember anything Pastor Rick said to him. From there, Pastor Rick constantly texts Bible verses to Billy and tries to

remain as Billy's spiritual mentor, which Billy believes is a way for Pastor Rick to gain credibility. Billy doesn't reply to any texts (sometimes deleting them outright) and desperately wants to be free of Pastor Rick.

Mr. Bill Jones – Mr. Jones is a Cowboys executive. Billy manages to engage Mr. Jones in a conversation about global economics, money, and investing, though Billy is aware that Mr. Jones is only humoring Billy. Billy also notes that Mr. Jones is carrying a firearm at the Cowboys game, something that makes Billy oddly angry.

Ennis – Ennis is the Dallas Cowboys' equipment manager. He's in charge of cataloguing and distributing massive amounts of equipment including footballs, padding and personal protection, and over-the-counter medications. Ennis very clearly takes a great deal of pride in his work and his organizational skills, and he refuses to give Billy **Advil** for this reason—he states that he could lose his job over even that small infraction.

Octavian Spurgeon – Octavian is one of the hulking Cowboys players that Billy meets when Bravo Squad tours the locker room. He's especially interested in finding out what kinds of weapons Billy uses in the Army, and he even suggests that the football players be allowed to spend a few weeks in Iraq and use the high-powered weapons to destroy the "Muslim freaks." When Billy suggests that Octavian join the Army if he wants to do that, Octavian insists he can't give up his salary and his fame.

General Ruthven – General Ruthven is a higher-up in the Army and is the person Billy and Sergeant Dime are forced to speak to when they refuse Norm Oglesby's offer of funding for the Bravo Squad film. Fortunately for Billy and Bravo Squad, General Ruthven is a Steelers fan (and therefore hates the Cowboys by default), so he doesn't force Bravo to accept Norm's deal.

Mr. Whaley The boss of Denise, Billy's mother. Mr. Whaley offers Billy a minimum wage job and to throw him a parade, but has offers no other response when Kathryn points out that Billy is going to be forced to redeploy and might die. Billy, meanwhile, realizes that he is just a peon to the rich Mr. Whaley, but that Mr. Whaley is just a peon to the truly rich people that Billy met during the Victory Tour.

MINOR CHARACTERS

A-Bort – A-bort is the nickname given to Hebert, one of the members of Bravo Squad. He's between nineteen and twenty-two years old, is immature, and like the rest of Bravo, uses exceptionally foul language.

Lodis – Lodis is one of the members of Bravo Squad who goes on the Victory Tour. He suffers injuries when Bravo brawls with the roadies, and the boojee lady later covers him with a snuggie. Like the other Bravos he's foul-mouthed and immature.

Holliday (Day) – Holliday is Sergeant Dime's second-in-command. An imposing black man, Holliday (who is often referred to simply as Day) also attracts a fair bit of attention from Albert. During the halftime show, he counts steps to help calm and steady his half of Bravo Squad.

Patty Lynn – Patty is Billy's eldest sister. She has a toddler son, Brian, with her husband, Pete. Though Patty is only in her mid-twenties, Billy notices that she already looks old and saggy. Patty cares deeply for her mother, Denise, and calls her father, Ray, "America's Prick."

Brian – Brian is Patty's toddler son. Brian appears to be the only Lynn family member whom Ray shows any affection towards, though Brian himself loves everyone. When Billy plays with Brian, Billy painfully realizes that many children in Iraq who are Brian's age are killed in the war.

Coach Tuttle – Coach Tuttle is the head coach for the Dallas Cowboys. Billy describes him as being shaped like a bull walrus, and he's less than thrilled to have the Bravo Squad in his locker room.

The boogie lady – The boogie lady sits in the row in front of Bravo during the football game. She kindly covers Lodi in a snuggie when she notices that he's asleep, and she refuses to take the snuggie with her when she leaves.

Travis – Travis is a young, clean-cut man who engages Crack in a conversation about Don't Ask Don't Tell. Crack puts Travis in a headlock and nearly chokes him.

American public's perception of what happened. In this way, the novel examines the ways in which, with enough distance and sensationalism, real events can easily morph into something that more closely resembles fantasy. In particular, the novel points to the ways in which the media are complicit in this process.

In the preface, which is the transcript of a speech that author Ben Fountain gave at the United States Air Force Academy, Fountain introduces the idea that the United States exists alongside what he terms the Fantasy Industrial Complex. Fountain uses the term to describe the oversaturated media landscape that mediates citizens' engagement with events, ultimately making it difficult for people to understand what's real and what's not. In many cases, Fountain suggests, this culminates in people engaging with events as though they're fantasy, not reality, given how much the media sensationalizes the stories. This play between fantasy, reality, and the media becomes the overarching thesis of *Billy Lynn*.

As someone who experienced the firefight firsthand, Billy struggles to reconcile his experience of the battle with his experience viewing the footage of it. Additionally, he struggles with the fact that people he meets on the Victory Tour talk about the battle in ways that Billy never imagined possible. Overwhelmingly, the civilians that talk to Billy about the firefight footage say that watching it made them feel proud and American in a way that they hadn't felt before. Many also state that it's proof that the US is actually doing something in Iraq. For Billy, however, the firefight wasn't an edifying moment, nor was it an event that supported any bigger-picture narrative about the war. Instead, the fight was a terrifying moment of violence that culminated in the death of Billy's beloved mentor, Shroom. The dissonance between Billy's experience of the firefight and the experience of Americans watching the firefight from the comfort and safety of their living rooms highlights the power of the media and the Fantasy Industrial Complex to both trivialize and sensationalize the violence of war. By focusing on the spectacle of war rather than the human costs and consequences of such violence, the media encourages viewers at home to glorify war and ignore its dreadful reality.

To complicate the scope of the Fantasy Industrial Complex even further, the subplot of *Billy Lynn* focuses on Albert, a Hollywood producer who attempts to negotiate a deal with a movie studio to produce a film adaptation of the firefight. As Billy and the other Bravos listen to Albert talk on the phone with various directors, agents, and studios during their time at the **Texas Stadium**, Billy must confront the complex questions that arise when true stories collide with the fantastical narratives that are so often marketed to viewers as being "based on a true story." Billy understands that Albert hopes to use Bravo Squad's story as political propaganda to boost morale and support for the war among Americans at home. Albert's underlying goals for the movie serve as another



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FANTASY VS. REALITY IN THE MEDIA

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk tells the story of nineteen-year-old soldier Billy Lynn. Prior to the start of the novel, Billy and his platoon are involved in a firefight on the banks of the Al-Ansakar Canal in Iraq. After an embedded news crew films the firefight and circulates the footage at home in the United States, the surviving members of Billy's platoon are dubbed the Bravo Squad by Fox News and are lauded as American heroes. They're asked to return to the States for a two-week "Victory Tour," culminating in a halftime show at the Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving Day football game in Dallas, Texas. As Billy navigates the mental and emotional turmoil involved in the sudden transition from being an Army "grunt" to a decorated war hero, he struggles to piece together how his lived experience of the battle relates at all to the

reminder of the dominant and guiding role the media plays in shaping how civilians engage with the war. However, what's most shocking and uncomfortable for Billy is the way in which it begins to look as though basic facts about the fight and about the Bravo Squad will be distorted in order to guarantee funding for the film—including combining Billy's character with that of his commander, Dime, and casting actress Hilary Swank in the new role. Billy realizes that faithful representation of the facts is irrelevant when it comes to crafting a fantastically compelling narrative—particularly when there's a political and economic agenda at hand.

All of this coalesces into the overwhelming sense that, for the media and its viewers, reality matters much less than a good story, particularly when that story reinforces people's views of the world. Whether in the form of raw footage, directed advertisements, or stylized Hollywood films, stories capture the hearts and imaginations of viewers in a way that allows them to divorce themselves from the reality of what actually happened. In this way, when Billy and Dime refuse their one offer of funding for the film, the novel suggests that they are refusing to participate in the fantastical depictions that keep Americans from understanding the true experience of war. In doing so, Billy and Dime boldly stand up for the moral imperative of representing reality in an accurate, authentic way—even if that means unearthing aspects of the war that the American public doesn't want to see or hear.



CLASS, POWER, AND MONEY

As a young man who spent his youth in a very small town and then went straight to the Army, Billy embarks on the Victory Tour with little firsthand knowledge of how class and money function within the United States, let alone on a global scale. As such, the relationship between class, money, and power fascinates him, and he spends much of the novel trying to figure out how they interact and where he fits into that complex relationship. The novel ultimately suggests that the system is closed to individuals like Billy who began life without access to money and power, and there's very little he can do—no matter how hard he tries—to gain access to the privilege and power that come with wealth.

Though Billy admits that he's been fascinated with the American airports and shopping malls since his return to the States, what strikes him most as he moves around the **Texas Stadium** with Norm Oglesby (the owner of the Cowboys) and Albert is the relationship between money and power. In particular, Billy's fascination with these massive structures stems from a burning curiosity about how money works on the large scale required to finance things like the highways, airports, stadiums, and malls. His curiosity also extends beyond the built environment as he begins to question how wars and Hollywood blockbusters are financed. The novel suggests that decisions made by the wealthy power brokers of the upper

class shape every aspect of the world Billy lives in. This is most often alluded to in asides when rich game attendees mention their friendships with President Bush or Vice President Cheney—both of whom represented America as a nation from 2001-2009. This makes it exceptionally clear to Billy that money doesn't just buy wars and stadiums; it can also buy influence and political power. This is something that's truly shocking for Billy to see firsthand, as prior to the Victory Tour, Billy had never witnessed such conspicuous wealth and rampant consumerism before. This abundance is entirely foreign to him, and it occupies much of his time in the novel as he tries to piece together where he fits into the system.

As Billy attempts to make sense of the vast and often-invisible structures of class, wealth, and power, he makes several comments that indicate his belief that he will never be able to fully understand the system. He knows that going to college is the primary way to learn more about business, power structures, and class, but he is firm in his desire to never return to school. Therefore, he is also convinced that he will forever be unable to gain power for himself within the system, given his lower-class roots. Billy remarks that as a soldier, he makes a meager \$14,800 per year—an income that puts higher education and economic prosperity well out of reach. Both Billy and Mango express despair at what they believe their future lives have to offer: Mango believes that after the army, he has nothing better than a job at Burger King to look forward to, while Mr. Whaley, an oilman in Stovall, promises Billy a labor-intensive, minimum-wage job in the oil fields upon his return. This culminates in Billy's realization that he's nothing more than a "protozoan" in the ocean of unknown depths that is the world of money. Nonetheless, this fatalistic belief leads Billy to an eventual understanding of what he *is* capable of doing.

Billy ultimately ends up refusing to play into or reinforce the system wherein money equals power. He gives away his souvenir football signed by Cowboys players (an item that other Bravos believe could be worth \$1,000 if sold). At the end of the novel, he also refuses to accept Norm Ogleby's offer to compensate each Bravo \$5,500 for the film rights to their story. In doing these things, Billy sends a message to those in power that he won't allow them to use their wealth and influence to control his life. Although Billy does this in an effort to demonstrate that the power afforded by wealth is not total, he still remains as dependent on money as anyone, just as he remains at the mercy of the most powerful people in the country—namely, the president and other political figures who influence the course of the war. In this way, the novel suggests that there are limited steps a person can take to claim a sense of agency and resist those who are wealthy and powerful. The novel ultimately shows that in America, a terrible hegemony of wealth reigns supreme, keeping those without money essentially powerless to change the world in which they live.



THE ABSURDITY OF WAR

Though the year in which *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* takes place is never stated outright, it most likely takes place in 2004 or 2005. At this point in time, the United States had been engaged in the Iraq War for more than a year, and public support for the war was waning. It was becoming clear that the reasons the United States invaded Iraq in the first place were questionable at best, consequently calling into question the very purpose of the war. As Billy moves through the novel and attempts to make sense of the war and the world around him, he begins to think of the war as something absurd and impossible to reconcile with everyday reality. Ultimately, Billy determines that the only way he can make any sense of the war—and of death itself—is to view it as something that defies rationalization.

The novel explores the absurdity of war through Billy's flashbacks to his time as a soldier in Iraq. He recalls one afternoon, when his beloved mentor, Shroom, instructed Billy to walk one foot in front of the other. Shroom shares that by doing this, Billy might be able to avoid losing both feet if he steps on explosives. This is when Billy first realizes that war—and the lengths to which soldiers will go to survive it—can drive a person mad. With this, Billy begins to think of the war as something abstract that defies all logic. After this realization, he stops even trying to draw logical connections between actions and their justifications, deciding that the Army is defined by nonsensical tasks and maddening habits. By understanding the war and his role in it as absurd, dubious, and nonsensical rather than guided by logic and righteousness, Billy is able to come to terms with his own mortality. He begins to see the possibility of his death as something that has far more to do with chance than anything meaningful or within his control. Eventually, this sense of absurdity also characterizes the way Billy experiences other people speaking about the war. By writing out the Iraq War's buzzwords in phonetic Texas drawl—such as "dubyaemdees" for WMDs, "currij" for courage, and "nina leven" for 9/11—Fountain heightens the sense of the war's absurdity, suggesting that the only way that Billy can make sense of the war and the language used to describe it is to transform the words into mere sounds, rendering the words themselves useless. Billy, in fact, *does* think of those words as useless and meaningless, and connects the words' meaninglessness to their users' apparent lack of understanding of the reality of the war.

The novel's parallel meditations on the absurdity of the war and the way in which the American public engages with it coalesce in the halftime show. The girl group Destiny's Child headlines the show, flanked by marching bands, ROTC drill teams, high school dance troupes, and the Bravo Squad as the "guests of honor." Though the show is supposed to honor the troops, Billy notes that it's far more focused on showcasing the sexualized bodies of the female performers (many of which are only in high school) and promoting football. In fact, after the Bravo Squad

takes the field, it becomes all too apparent that whoever designed the show was thinking about the spectacle and showcasing Destiny's Child—not the needs of combat soldiers who have recently returned from a warzone. The show forces the squad to march across the football field as lights flash and fireworks that resemble missiles explode, triggering intense PTSD flashbacks in all the squad members and even necessitating the use of Valium to return Sykes to a semi-functional state after the show. The halftime show indicates to Billy that like the media, civilians subconsciously view the war as something detached from reality. The halftime show reinforces Billy's suspicions that those at home know little about what life is like on the front and what it's like to experience the war firsthand. In this way, the novel concludes with the overwhelming sense that it is impossible to make sense of the war, whether one is a soldier or a civilian—and that this absurdity is, in fact, one of the gravest horrors of war for those who must live with memories of it.



FAMILY AND BROTHERHOOD

Over the course of the Bravo Squad's two-week Victory Tour, Billy gets only one day to return to his parents' home and spend time with his family.

When Billy's sister Kathryn admits that she's been speaking to a group that helps heroes like Billy legally desert the military, Billy understands that he's being forced to choose whether to remain loyal to his blood family or the brotherhood he's found with Bravo Squad. Throughout the novel, Billy grapples with what it means to be a family, how to be loyal to the people he considers family, and what family and brotherhood even mean. He eventually realizes that what he truly needs from his family, blood or otherwise, is for them to recognize that his time in Iraq has turned him into a new person. He also wants his family to subsequently show their loyalty to him in a way that respects this new person he's become.

It's important to note that loyalty to his blood family is what sent Billy to war in the first place. Following a horrific car accident that left Kathryn's face severely scarred, Kathryn's fiancé—whom Billy refers to only as "pussy boy"—breaks off their engagement. Though Kathryn limits the expression of her hurt and rage to throwing her engagement ring in pussy boy's face, Billy takes his anger a step further by destroying pussy boy's sports car and chasing him across a parking lot with a crowbar. Lawyers later offer to drop Billy's felony charges if he agrees to join the Army. This backstory offers evidence of Billy's unflinching loyalty to those he considers family, and to Kathryn in particular. However, it's worth mentioning that for Kathryn, Billy's actions only make her feel guilty and responsible for condemning her brother to military service.

Despite Billy's apparent sense of loyalty and familial responsibility, his relationship to his father, Ray, complicates the way that Billy thinks of family and how family "should"

work. Though Ray has always been deeply conservative and supportive of the war in Iraq, he won't acknowledge that his son is fighting a war he supposedly believes in wholeheartedly. Ray doesn't even speak to Billy the entire time he's home, nor does Ray say goodbye when Billy leaves to be redeployed. Billy is generally unsure of what to do about the fact that his involvement in the war still doesn't earn him attention or respect from his warmongering father. Billy clearly feels unloved by his father, which feeds into a bigger picture that encompasses all the Bravo Squad. At one point, Billy briefly describes each of the Bravos' family situations: Mango's father was physically abusive, and his mother was complicit in that violence; Shroom was sexually abused as a child; and several other Bravos' parents are either in jail or dead due to drugs. Although this is all the reader learns about the Bravos' families, this information offers the overarching suggestion that simply having blood family members doesn't guarantee kindness, loyalty, or care from them. In turn, having broken families opens the door for the Bravos to find a sense of family among each other.

Billy's flashbacks of his time with Shroom make it very apparent that Shroom wasn't just Billy's friend or a mentor. Instead, Shroom very much stepped in as the father figure that Billy never had, given Ray's detachment. Similarly, in the wake of Shroom's death, Billy leans on Dime as a mentor and thinks of the rest of Bravo Squad as brothers. Their loyalty to each other is especially evident as they help each other get through the halftime show: Billy leads a drunk and struggling Lodi through the drill, while Day counts steps to calm the soldiers and make it seem more like a drill and less like a war zone. The soldiers offer each other the care, comfort, and understanding that can only come from someone who truly understands the horror of war and the horror of being forced to relive the experiences of war on national television.

Although Kathryn attempts to show loyalty to her brother by contacting the group that helps soldiers desert, Billy finds himself torn between showing loyalty to the Bravos by returning to Iraq and showing loyalty to his family by deserting. Billy does consider taking Kathryn up on her offer, but he ultimately decides that he has no choice but to follow orders and return to war with the rest of Bravo Squad. He understands that his experiences in the Army have fundamentally changed how he thinks about family, loyalty, and responsibility. He knows that even though accepting Kathryn's help would make her feel better, he also knows he wouldn't be able to live with the guilt of allowing the rest of Bravo Squad to return to Iraq and possibly die without him. When Billy chooses to return to Iraq, the novel makes it exceptionally clear that family isn't limited to those who are related by blood. Instead, experiences themselves, particularly terrifying and life-threatening ones, can form lasting bonds that have the power to outweigh the bonds between blood relations.



HEROISM AND HUMANITY

Billy struggles with what it means to be a hero. As far as he's concerned, he only followed orders and did as he'd been trained to do during the firefight on the banks of the Al-Ansakar Canal. However, because his actions were caught on film, posted to YouTube, and played on news channels across the United States, Billy finds himself heralded as a hero, awarded military honors, and sent with the rest of his platoon on a Victory Tour. Thus, as Billy revisits what happened in Iraq, considers how people think of what he did, and compares all of that to how he's treated on the Tour, he struggles to understand what it means to be a hero in America, or if such a thing actually even exists.

Throughout the novel, Billy encounters people and situations that call into question both who gets to define what a hero is, and what actions exactly count as heroic. Billy views his actions during the firefight as the result of intense training, so he feels that what others call heroism, he simply calls doing his job. What's more, Billy doesn't even feel as though he did his job as well as he could have—he was unable to save Shroom from death, despite his best efforts. Though the text makes it clear that there's nothing Billy could've done to save Shroom, the fact that Shroom didn't make it out alive weighs heavily on all of the Bravos' shoulders. This creates a sense that Billy and the American public define the word hero differently, as well as what kind of actions necessitate that designation. However, because Billy is only a "grunt" in the Army, he doesn't have a say in who receives the honorary title of "hero."

On the tour, Billy notices that even as he's called a hero and thanked for his service, few people he meets treat him like a real person. Particularly when it comes to those with power and money, Billy perceives that he's treated as a prop, whose function is to sell the American public on the war. With this, the novel revisits its exploration of class by considering how individuals like Norm treat Bravo Squad differently. While Billy knows that Norm is using Bravo Squad to sell the Cowboys brand and to secure the film rights to a movie about them, other people (like Hector and the boogie lady) acknowledge that Billy and the other soldiers are humans first and heroes second. Though their actions are relatively small—Hector shares marijuana with Billy and Mango and the boogie lady covers Lodi in a snuggie—they offer the men connection and caring that nobody else was willing to give. Their small but tangible actions stand in contrast to those of Norm, whose actions serve solely to dehumanize the Bravo Squad and use them for his own personal gain.

As the novel investigates what it means to be a hero, it also considers how society should treat its heroes. It does this primarily by calling attention to the fact that, even though the Bravo Squad are considered American heroes, they're set to redeploy the day after Thanksgiving. Though Billy attributes this to the illogical nature of the Army and of the war itself, a

majority of the minor characters who learn this fact are aghast that America thanks its heroes by sending them back to a place where death likely awaits. Similarly, though the Bravos are supposed to be Norm's honored guests at the game, the Bravos' treatment and reception around the **Texas Stadium** suggest that being heroes doesn't guarantee that the men will be treated as such. Billy, for example, spends the entire novel asking Josh, Bravo Squad's handler, for **Advil**—a seemingly simple request, but one that Josh simply cannot follow through on, as he clearly considers Billy's headache to be a low priority. Near the end of the game, the squad retakes their seats despite the freezing temperatures and falling sleet, and they're even violently attacked by "roadies" as they attempt to get into their limo after the game.

The novel very overtly draws attention to the disconnect between how people, citizens, and politicians talk to and about the American troops involved in the war, and what those people actually do for the troops. By juxtaposing the Bravo Squad's poor treatment with the way in which the high-profile characters speak about them, the novel insists that it's not enough to hand out medals, take soldiers to a big football game, and parade them around the country. Though the novel doesn't offer any concrete alternatives to this hypocritical treatment of American heroes, it ends with the blistering assertion that more needs to be done to treat service personnel as actual humans, not just admirable specimens or trophies.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ADVIL

Billy's quest for Advil symbolizes the way that America fails to humanize its soldiers. For much of the novel, Billy is horrendously hung over and suffers from a splitting headache. Although he asks Josh for Advil immediately upon their meeting, it takes Josh most of the novel to follow through on such a simple request, showing how Billy's needs were a low priority. Billy asks several other people for Advil throughout the course of the novel, and no one can or will help Billy with his headache, even though Advil is a seemingly innocuous request and would bring Billy a great deal of relief. To make matters worse, Billy asks Ennis, the Cowboys' equipment manager, for some Advil from the presumably extensive stock of painkillers kept on hand for the players. Ennis says they have lots of Advil on hand but refuses to give any to Billy, citing bureaucratic guidelines and the possibility of losing his job. Ennis would be quick to come to a football player's aid but swiftly rejects a soldier, hinting at America's distorted priorities. Echoing the way that all of the Bravos are

treated as props throughout the football game, Billy is shuttled from place to place by the Cowboys staff, who don't seem to care about Billy's headache.



THE TEXAS STADIUM

Early on, Billy observes that the Texas Stadium symbolizes American society. The stadium is filled with thousands of people, boasts of endless food joints and stores, and hosts a football game on a holiday (Thanksgiving) that's unique to America. The stadium offers everything in the way of American culture, from the Jumbotron flashing advertisements to football. Billy also notices that up close, the stadium is also relatively shabby and ill kept, alluding to the income disparity of the American citizens. However, the stadium also looks shiny and wonderful on TV, signifying the media's power to shaping public opinion—like the way footage from the Bravos' firefight in Iraq makes Americans think war is exciting, whereas the Bravos know that war is horrific and terrifying. The association between the stadium and America as a whole is reinforced by the fact that the stadium is in Texas, the home state of then-president George W. Bush. In this way, the stadium doesn't just represent America as a culture; it is representative of the very person who leads the country.



THE JUMBOTRON

The Jumbotron at the **Texas Stadium** is a very literal symbol of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. It deftly controls how people at the football game view and engage with the game, while also pummeling them with advertisements at every given opportunity. Because of this, the Jumbotron distorts reality and offers up an easier-to-digest and more interesting version of the game. Billy realizes this when he decides that the time between plays feels like sitting in church—during those times, the Jumbotron shows replays from the game, advertisements, and shots of the crowd, distracting the audience from how dull and miserable the game truly is.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ecco edition of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* published in 2012.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Years and years of carefully posed TV shots have imbued the place with intimations of mystery and romance, dollops of state and national pride, hints of pharaonic afterlife such as always inhere in large-scale public architecture, all of which render the stadium of Billy's mind as the conduit or portal, a direct tap-in, to a ready made species of mass transcendence, and so the real-life shabbiness is a nasty comedown.

Related Characters: Norm Oglesby, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy and the rest of Bravo Squad approach the Texas Stadium, Billy discovers that the stadium looks very different—and much worse—in real life than it does on television. The fact that Billy only has this realization now, at age nineteen, is a reminder that his family is lower class and didn't have the funds to attend professional sporting events while he was growing up. Instead, getting to attend a pro football game is something that Billy is only able to do because of his sudden fame with Bravo. Billy's surprise at the stadium's shabby state points to the way that the media shows idealized images on television, projecting fantasy, not reality. By carefully composing their shots of the stadium, the media can avoid or downplay the parts of the stadium that are ugly or less interesting, thereby creating a vision in the minds of people like Billy of abundance, shininess, and perfection.

As Billy begins to realize that that particular image of the stadium is something constructed and not at all real, he is consequently able to come to more developed conclusions about the role that the media plays in American society. Throughout the novel, he applies these ideas to the people who talk to him about the war. Many of the rich people that Billy meets at the game praise the Bravos' heroism in the firefight, claiming that the news footage of the event looked like a movie. This implies that the media intentionally chose pieces of footage to make the war look exciting rather than horrific, echoing the way the run-down stadium is made to look shiny and new on television.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Billy sensed the true mindfucking potential of it on their first trip outside the wire, when Shroom advised him to place his feet one in front of the other instead of side by side, that way if an IED blew threw the Humvee Billy might only lose one foot instead of two.

Related Characters: Shroom, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy remembers the exact moment in which he realized how truly absurd and terrifying it is to be in the middle of a war zone, particularly when the war itself doesn't make any logical sense. Shroom's advice is practical, but it also highlights the love and close connection that Bravos share with each other. Shroom clearly cares for Billy's safety, specifically pointing to the close mentor-and-mentee relationship that the two men shared. This passage also shows Billy's realization that in Iraq, he isn't necessarily a strong, invincible hero. He's at the mercy of chance and fate, and there's only so much he can do to protect his life and his body—like putting one foot in front of the other while he walks so that he'll only lose one foot instead of two if something goes wrong.

☞ It dawns on him that the Texas Stadium is basically a shithole. It's cold, gritty, drafty, dirty, in general possessed of all the charm of an industrial warehouse where people pee in the corners.

Related Characters: Norm Oglesby, Mango, Billy Lynn

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy and Mango wander the stadium's concourse in search of Major Mac, Billy decides that the stadium is in no way charming and is, in fact, a terrible place. When he comes to this conclusion, Billy realizes that the version he saw on television as a child was a staged and fantasized version of the stadium. The disparity between the stadium on television and the stadium in real life shows how the media frequently presents a distorted, edited picture of a place or event. In this instance, the media portrays the stadium as being beautiful and shiny as a way to advertise and encourage support for the Cowboys football team. Similarly, the media depicts war as being exhilarating or like a movie—seen in the cinematic depiction of Bravo's firefight. When Billy later sees this footage, it looks entirely unrecognizable to him, even though he was physically in the firefight. As Billy reveals through his conversations and flashbacks throughout the novel, he sees the reality of war

much like the reality of the stadium—it's "basically a shithole."

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● Their eyes skitz and quiver with the force of the moment, because here, finally, up close and personal, is the war made flesh, an actual point of contact after all the months and years of reading about the war, watching the war on TV, hearing the war flogged and flacked on talk radio.

Related Characters: Mango, Sergeant Dime, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Following a Jumbotron clip of Bravo Squad, people at the stadium mob Bravo at their seats to thank them for their service. Billy recognizes that what people want is a sense of reality of the war, and as a soldier, Billy himself becomes a symbol for the war and for the righteousness of the American project in the Middle East. Billy shows that the civilians think of him as "the war made flesh," and a symbol of American heroism—not a human being. This sentiment is reinforced throughout the novel as people ask Billy insensitive questions about what it feels like to kill people. They simply don't understand that the war is not as simple as killing "bad guys," as their words would lead one to believe. Essentially, the American public makes Billy the symbol for their very simplistic view of the war. In reality, Billy is forced to grapple with extremely difficult questions about what the war is actually about, and what his role in it really is.

●● They say thank you over and over and with growing fervor; they know they're being good when they thank the troops and their eyes shimmer with love for themselves and this tangible proof of their goodness.

Related Characters: Billy Lynn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy prepares himself to deal with the onslaught of

grateful civilians, he considers that people are self-congratulatory about thanking him for his service. Later, this realization is used to illustrate the divide between this self-congratulatory, relatively meaningless "support" for the troops, and what real support would look like—namely, money or armor for the troops. This is another facet of the Fantasy Industrial Complex, as the media leads people to believe that simply thanking the troops is enough to properly care for them. By obscuring or ignoring the reality of the war in Iraq, the media can channel support for the war however it pleases and create this easy outlet for thanks.

●● "It was. I had to keep telling myself this is real, these are real American soldiers fighting for our freedom, this is not a movie. Oh God I was just so happy that day, I was relieved more than anything, like we were finally paying them back for nina leven. Now"—she pauses for a much-needed breath—"which one are you?"

Related Characters: Mango, Sergeant Dime, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

As Josh tries to lead Bravo to the private club for lunch, citizens mob the soldiers yet again to thank them for their service. A wealthy, unnamed wife says this to Billy with enthusiasm as he politely listens to her. The fact that the woman must remind herself that the footage of the Bravos on the Al-Ansakar Canal isn't a movie shows how deeply film and obviously unreal depictions of war and violence have permeated American society. This woman appears to have no previous experience viewing real, unscripted violence, and in order to understand it, she must apply the language of fiction and film to it. This shows that this woman, as a representative of the American public, relies heavily on mediated versions of reality to understand the world around her. She also demonstrates that she has little idea what the war is about. Fountain makes it very clear in the preface that Iraq had nothing to do with September 11, so the woman's assertion that the US is paying Iraq back for September 11 is entirely ignorant. Finally, when she doesn't recognize Billy, it reinforces the fact that she sees him only as a symbol for soldiers. To her, he's just any American soldier, and it matters very little who he actually is.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ What's happening now isn't nearly as real as that, eating this meal, holding this fork, lifting this glass, the realest things in the world these days are the things in his head.

Related Characters: Lake, Shroom, Albert Ratner, Sergeant Dime, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy eats lunch in the exclusive club at the stadium, he loses himself in thoughts about Shroom, Lake, and the war, reasoning finally that being at this meal doesn't feel as real as his memories of the war. This makes it abundantly clear to the reader that Billy struggles to understand what's real and what's not, entirely independent of the Fantasy Industrial Complex that does the same for citizens at home. Billy struggles because what he's experienced and what he remembers about the war feels far more real than being back in the US on the Victory Tour, even though these experiences are also real. It seems that Billy's struggles stem from being surrounded by the American public's ignorance at the stadium. The citizens that Billy meets at the game view the war as fantasy, not reality. The citizens also reduce the soldiers to symbols of patriotism and heroism (rather than seeing them as human beings), indicating that those at home don't truly understand the war or those engaged in it.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛☛ You can deny him, he thought, watching his father across the table. You can hate him, love him, pity him, never speak to or look him in the eye again, never deign even to be in his crabbed and bitter presence, but you're still stuck with the son of a bitch. One way or another he'll always be your daddy, not even all-powerful death was going to change that.

Related Characters: Ray Lynn, Billy Lynn

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

While eating dinner with his family during his brief visit home, Billy comes to the realization that his father will

always be a part of him and of his life, no matter how much he wishes otherwise. This continues to develop Billy's thoughts about the differences between blood family and chosen family. Throughout the novel, it is clear that Billy finds more comfort, support, and love through his chosen family, Bravo Squad. However, when Billy realizes that Ray will always be a part of him, Billy also realizes that choosing one family doesn't mean that he can reject the other. This essentially expands his definition of family, revealing how those who fall under the umbrella of "family" don't have to be perfect or supportive.

☛☛ So is this what they meant by the sanctity of life? A soft groan escaped Billy when he thought about that, the war revealed in this fresh and gruesome light. Oh. Ugh. Divine spark, image of God, suffer the little children and all that—there's real power when words attach to actual things.

Related Characters: Brian, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy plays outside with Brian, his two-year-old nephew, Billy is forced to see the war in a new light. Observing Brian's childlike innocence, Billy begins to realize that the innocence of childhood is universal, and he understands that children just like Brian, who are curious and happy, die every day in the wars that plague the globe. Further, Billy is both complicit and responsible for their deaths.

Prior to this realization, the novel implies that Billy had simply been able to ignore this fact because he didn't have a face to attach to the idea of "children." However, after Billy conflates Brian with the innocent children who die from war, Billy's understanding of the war changes. This shows that when a dose of reality invades one's preconceptions about something, particularly something so violent and awful, it's no longer possible to think of those preconceptions as abstract or unreal. Billy will never again be able to think of the children dying in Iraq without thinking of Brian and the fact that those children are human, just like Brian. It makes the war even more real for Billy and brings the righteousness of his role as a soldier in it into question.

●● Billy rattled off the cities. Washington, Richmond, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Columbus, Denver, Kansas City, Raleigh-Durham, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Tampa Bay, Miami, and practically every one, as Sergeant Dime pointed out, happened to lie in an electoral swing state.

Related Characters: Billy Lynn (speaker), Mr. Whaley, Ray Lynn, Sergeant Dime, Kathryn Lynn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Whaley stops by the Lynn house to see Billy, Billy discusses the Victory Tour with him. In this passage, Dime's observation impresses upon Billy that the people who make up Bravo Squad don't matter as much as the idea and the political power of Bravo Squad as a whole. By parading Bravo in swing states, President Bush (who recently won reelection) can impress upon voters in those states that reelecting him was the right thing to do. By reducing Bravo to symbols and non-human heroes, others with more power are able to direct the public opinion of the war to support their own goals and aims. Billy and Bravo as a whole know they're being used, but because they're just "grunts" in the Army, they can't do anything about it and are forced to comply with the political goals of those in power.

●● The Mr. Whaleys of the world are peons to them, just as Billy is a peon in the world of Mr. Whaley, which in the grand scheme of things means that he, Billy, is somewhere on the level of a one-celled protozoan in a vast river flowing into the untold depths of the sea.

Related Characters: Norm Oglesby, Mr. Whaley, Billy Lynn

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

While Billy talks to Mr. Whaley, he begins to understand that though he always thought of Mr. Whaley as being wealthy and powerful, Mr. Whaley is has very little money and influence compared to the people Billy meets on the Victory Tour. When Billy realizes this, he begins to form a much darker and fatalistic understanding of how the class system works in America. This realization impresses upon him that there's very little he can do to climb the class ladder, given that he makes very little money as a soldier

and there are few opportunities for economic advancement once he's completed his service. Billy essentially comes to the conclusion that money and power rule the world, and there's little or nothing he can do to catch up.

Chapter 7 Quotes

●● He glows, which isn't to say he's a handsome man but rather shimmers with high-wattage celebrity, and therein lies the problem, the brain struggles to match the media version to the actual man who looks taller than the preformed mental image, or maybe broader, older, pinker, younger, the two versions miscongrue in some crucial sense which makes it all a little unreal [...]

Related Characters: Sergeant Dime, Mango, Billy Lynn, Norm Oglesby

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Upon finally meeting Norm Oglesby, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, Billy struggles to understand how the real-life Norm matches up with the version Billy has seen on television for his entire life. This struggle with Norm is almost the exact struggle that Billy experiences with the Texas Stadium. Like Norm, the stadium looks very different in real life than it does on television. In both cases, this has to do with the way in which the media manipulates how they're shown on television to tell a particular story—one that's not necessarily the objective, unadulterated truth. Seeing Norm in person also impresses upon Billy that Norm is actually human, a fact that's also obscured by his television persona.

●● Mortal fear is the ghetto of the human soul, to be free of it something like the psychic equivalent of inheriting a hundred million dollars. This is what he truly envies of these people, the luxury of terror as a talking point [...]

Related Characters: Billy Lynn, Norm Oglesby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

While at a meet and greet with Norm Oglesby and other rich Texans, Billy realizes that the true difference between himself and the wealthy people surrounding him is that he is deathly afraid of returning to Iraq, while that fear is merely a talking point for the rich and famous. The rich and powerful people at the game never have to face the possibility of dying in the Middle East. Because of sensationalist media coverage and geographic distance, these rich and powerful Americans see war as entertainment, consequently creating a gulf in understanding between Billy and these rich people. It reinforces for Billy just how absurd the war is, as it's impossible to make logical sense of it in the way that these people try to do. It also reminds him again of how powerless he is, given that he is wholly unable to make civilians understand the truth of the matter—both because Billy cannot come up with the words to explain it, but also because he doesn't have the power or the safety to speak truths like that.

☞ It seems the airiest thing there is and yet the realest, but how you enter that world he has no idea except by passage through that other foreign country called college, and that ain't happening.

Related Characters: Mr. Bill Jones, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

After speaking with Mr. Jones about how global business works, Billy decides that he'll never understand the business world because he refuses to return to school. This shows that the languages of wealth and power aren't ones that Billy has learned; they're foreign to him and will likely stay that way due to the limited opportunities he has for advancement. For Billy, the world of money and business is just as fantastical as the war is for many of the people he meets at the stadium, reinforcing the idea that the war itself isn't the only absurd thing: those with the power to control the war also reside in a world that's absurd.

☞ The role of cheerleader being secondary by definition, yet cheerleaders themselves exhibitionists by nature [...] Nobody cheers for the cheerleaders! And how that must hurt, the goad for many a deafening scream of crazed enthusiasm.

Related Characters: Faison, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

During the press conference, which is attended by the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, Billy considers what life is like for those in a supporting role. Billy doesn't make the leap at this point that in many ways, he's just like the cheerleaders in his role as a soldier. He supports the idea of America in much the same way the cheerleaders support the football team, and while the cheerleaders are admired for their moves and physical feats, the football players are considered the real stars and athletes. This shows how American society dehumanizes those in supporting roles. Both Billy and the cheerleaders are rendered faceless and considered to be just another soldier or cheerleader by those who look at them—most people don't recognize Billy, despite his "leading role" in the video of the Al-Ansakar Canal, and March Hawey later refers to the cheerleaders as a whole as "Norm's showdogs" in reference to Jumbotron footage of Faison. By highlighting how the American public renders the soldiers and the cheerleaders faceless and fails to recognize the hard work they do to support others, the novel picks at the power system that puts soldiers and cheerleaders at the bottom of the chain.

☞ All the fakeness just rolls right off them, maybe because the nonstop sales job of American life has instilled in them exceptionally high thresholds for sham, puff, spin, bullshit, and outright lies, in other words for advertising in all its forms. Billy himself never noticed how fake it all is until he'd done time in a combat zone.

Related Characters: Norm Oglesby, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Billy watches Norm give a speech and takes note of the way that the audience hangs on Norm's every word—even though his speaking style is very similar to that of

politicians, and Billy identifies it as being fake. Seeing the war firsthand has allowed Billy to see that the way that politicians talk about the war is far from the truth, and in some cases, intentionally obscures the truth. He also recognizes that politicians work actively to sell the war to the American public, in this case using Billy and Bravo Squad as heroic symbols of American righteousness to make the war look more attractive to those at home. Similarly, Norm participates in the “nonstop sales job of American life” by using Bravo to promote the Cowboys brand.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☹☹ So fuck that, he was done with football after his sophomore year, except the Army is pretty much the same thing, though the violence is, well, what it is, obviously. By factors of thousands.

Related Characters: Albert Ratner, Norm Oglesby, Sergeant Dime, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Down on the football field, Billy reasons that football is terrible because there are too many rules that mask its inherent violence, though he also understands that the Army does much the same thing. What Billy truly takes issue with is the rationalization and mechanization of violence inherent to both the Army and football. These qualities turn football and the Army into absurd displays of power and strength, not guided by any sense of reality or a clear goal. Rationalizing the violence of both war and football in turn make the violence easier to understand and accept for those watching at home, which in turn implicates the role of the media and the Fantasy Industrial Complex in aiding this rationalization. Through media representation, violence becomes even more abstract, making it even harder to think about as real and dangerous.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☹☹ "So whas it like? You know, like what it feel like?"

Billy swallows. The hard question. That's where he bleeds, exactly. Someday he'll have to build a church there, if he survives the war.

"It doesn't feel like anything. Not while it's happening."

Related Characters: Billy Lynn, Octavian Spurgeon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Octavian Spurgeon, a player for the Cowboys, takes a special interest in Billy and asks him what it feels like to kill people. The way that Octavian talks to Billy, and specifically the way that he previously asked about all the different weapons, makes it clear that Octavian views the war and violence as entertainment and fantasy. For Billy, the fact that he's killed people weighs heavily on him and is something that he'll have to grapple with his entire life. In contrast, Octavian has no grasp on this reality and talks about killing people in combat as if war is a video game. This illustrates the massive gap between civilians at home and soldiers at war: neither understands how the other experiences or thinks about the war. In this instance, Billy especially cannot say anything to shift Octavian's perspective. Billy has too little power to discredit the war, or to say that the war is misguided.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☹☹ Here at home everyone is so sure about the war. They talk in certainties, imperatives, absolutes, views that seem quite reasonable in the context. A kind of abyss separates the war over here from the war over there, and the trick, as Billy perceives it, is not to stumble when jumping from one side to the other.

Related Characters: March Hawey, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In Norm's private box, Billy listens to March Hawey discuss the war with other rich Texans and decides that these people have no idea what the war is actually like. This connects with the Fantasy Industrial Complex, which offers the war to viewers as something fantastical and entirely separate from reality. For those at home, it's easy to rationalize the war and insist that there are easy fixes for the conflict. Billy, having experienced the war firsthand, understands that that's not exactly the case. The war is a real thing to him, and as a soldier, he has a very specific

experience of the war that keeps him from looking at it in a more holistic (or simplistic) way. This is one of the main reasons Billy struggles here: his individual experience is so different from these people's understanding of the war. Billy's assessment that he needs to not stumble when bridging the gap suggests that he must engage with these people in the way that they want to engage with the war. His genuine thoughts matter little to them; he's merely a prop.

☝ Yes ma'am, proud, Bravo has achieved levels of proud that can move mountains and knock the moon out of phase, but why, please, do they play the national anthem before games anyway? The Dallas Cowboys and the Chicago Bears, these are two privately owned, for-profit corporations [...]

Related Characters: Norm Oglesby, March Hawey, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After the national anthem, a woman asks Billy if he's proud of America. Instead of feeling proud about America, Billy wonders how and why the idea of America is so entrenched in commercialism. He sees how the idea of America is used to sell things that, in reality, have little to do with the country. This indicates that the home front is absurd, just like the war itself, simply given how wrapped up in consumerism the home front is. This extends to the war itself: it's important to remember that though the Victory Tour is supposedly intended to honor Bravo Squad, it's very much meant to rile up support for the war and offer up the soldiers as representations of the success of the war. Essentially, this passage shows how everyone can profit from selling America to people, from politicians to rich business men like Norm Oglesby.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ Somewhere along the way America became a giant mall with a country attached.

Related Characters: Faison, Mango, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy and Mango walk through the stadium to find Faison, Billy observes that spectators, bored and sad due to the Cowboys' impending loss, are shopping to ease their pain. He thinks of this as being uniquely American. The assertion that America is nothing but a mall reinforces the prominent role of advertising in American culture. Billy observes throughout the novel that everyone is trying to sell the public something, especially, in his experience, reasons to support the war. Essentially, the public uses its spending power to purchase the type of reality they want to see, regardless of whether it's true or not.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ "Son, try to look at it this way. It's just another normal day in America."

Billy's heart melts a little at that son. The stage is disappearing around them like a mortally wounded ship beneath the waves.

"I don't think I even know what normal is anymore."

Related Characters: Sergeant Dime, Billy Lynn (speaker), The Roadies, Sykes

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

Bravo is forgotten after the halftime show and Sykes in particular is struggling with the effects of PTSD. Billy is disturbed by the disconnect between how he experienced the show and how the American public apparently experienced it. For the sobbing Sykes, it wasn't just another day in America: it was a terrifying experience that plunged him right back into the warzone in Iraq. The fact that someone thought putting Bravo through this performance was an appropriate way to honor them shows just how different the experience of war is at home than it is in Iraq. A generous reading would suggest that the designer of the show simply has no idea of what life is like on the front lines, and didn't think about the very real consequences of setting off fireworks around combat soldiers. No matter how generous that reading may be, it still doesn't excuse the fact that the designer either didn't know or didn't care, most likely as a result of the media coverage of the war. The coverage very specifically doesn't talk about how difficult this sort of thing is for soldiers, which in turn allows people

at home to think of soldiers as strong, stoic heroes capable of anything—when in reality, they're human beings scarred by the horrific realities of war.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝️ Plus the fact that the war's put up some spotty box-office numbers, didn't I say that might be a problem? So we're bucking that too. I know fifty-five hundred sounds pretty lame after the numbers we've been talking about, but for young men like yourselves, young soldiers on Army pay, it's not nothing, right?

Related Characters: Albert Ratner (speaker), Norm Oglesby, Billy Lynn, Sergeant Dime

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

Before the meeting with Norm to discuss the possible film deal, Albert tries to talk Billy and Dime into accepting Norm's offer of \$5,500, even though Albert apparently spent the entire Victory Tour assuring them they could secure \$100,000 for their stories. Though Albert is a generally sympathetic and kind figure to the Bravos, his attempt to sway Dime shows that, just like most of the other powerful characters in the novel, Albert wants to make a business deal and be done with this more than anything. He's willing to dehumanize the Bravos (and notably, will suffer no consequences for doing so due to his wealth and power) for his own gain by insisting that this deal is acceptable and worth taking. With this, the novel asserts that money rules all, as it suggests that Dime and Billy will be bullied into taking the deal, given that they're dependent on money like anyone else, and Albert is technically correct. However, the deal denies the fact that the Bravos are human and are deserving of compensation for their thoughts and their stories, and further, it insists that the Bravos exist as props for the rich.

Chapter Quotes

☝️ They are his boys, his brothers. Bravos would die for one another. They are the truest friends he will ever have, and he'd expire from grief and guilt at not being there with them.

Related Characters: Shroom, Sergeant Dime, Kathryn Lynn, Faison, Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy fantasizes about accepting Kathryn's help and deserting the Army, he tries to make the fantasy as real as possible. This is a poignant example of Billy rejecting the Fantasy Industrial Complex, as he does his very best to consider what it would actually mean to desert, not what the best-case, sugar-coated scenario would be. He's able to do this because of his firsthand experiences in the war, which have taught him that the sense of family he found with Bravo is stronger than any familial relationships he has at home. This realization makes the war even more real for Billy, as unlike so many other Americans, he understands that there are true human costs to this conflict.

☝️ For the past two weeks he's been feeling so superior and smart because of all the things he knows from the war, but forget it, they are the ones in charge, these saps, their homeland dream is the dominant force. His reality is their reality's bitch; what they don't know is more powerful than all the things he knows [...]

Related Characters: Billy Lynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy is mobbed by grateful civilians one final time, he comes to the realization that his knowledge of the war means nothing when put up against the power of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. The Complex insures that those at home only see a curated version of what the war is really like, thereby keeping them from truly understanding the conflict and what it's like to be in the middle of the war. Billy, on the other hand, knows exactly what it's like to be in the middle of the conflict. However, his knowledge has no power to change the course of the country or the war, given that he's only a "grunt" in the Army.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

The author, Ben Fountain, prefaces the novel with a speech he gave at the United States Air Force Academy in 2013. The story began to form in his mind in 2003-2004, when it became clear that the United States had gone to war under false pretenses with no clear plan. Soldiers were dying, Iraqi civilians were dying by the thousands, and the country was amassing a great deal of debt. Despite all this, President George W. Bush continued to insist to the American public that the war was just and necessary. His reelection in 2004 indicated that the public believed him.

Fountain explains that America has recently witnessed a similar situation, since the Vietnam War followed a similar pattern. He mentions a quote from an investigative journalist that insists that all governments lie and shouldn't be believed. Fountain admits that although al-Qaeda was (and still is) an enemy of the U.S., and that al-Qaeda's attacks certainly warranted retaliation, there was no reason to invade Iraq—a country that was already an enemy of al-Qaeda and had nothing to do with the September 11 tragedy.

Fountain wonders how this happened in the first place. He proposes that Americans aren't stupid, but rather, that American culture is stupid. Fountain defines culture as the consistent immersion in movies, internet, and around-the-clock news cycles. He terms this immersion the Fantasy Industrial Complex, and defines it as the state of constant advertisement of anything—products, lifestyles, or political agendas. He argues that this complex makes it easy to obscure what's real and what's not, as people's lives take place in fantasy and consequently numb them.

The problem of existing within the Fantasy Industrial Complex is that it doesn't give people the tools to handle the reality of death, failure, or trauma. Fountain says that September 11 was a crisis for the American people, and though it initially started a discussion about America's role in the world, it soon devolved into simplistic us versus them rhetoric. Several prominent figures at the time counseled that some sense of history would've helped the country figure out how the events of September 11 happened in the first place.

Fountain's preface sets up the historical and cultural context for the story to come. He makes his own views on the war exceptionally clear by indicating that the reasons for the war were ridiculous and not founded in truth. When he talks about how Bush spoke about the war, Fountain implies that there's a disconnect between what those in power know is true and what they say is true.



Fountain highlights how the Iraq War and the Vietnam War were both absurd from the very beginning, as they were fought for unclear reasons. By making this clear, Fountain suggests that reality of these wars is stranger than fiction. This casts the coming story in a sinister light—although the story is fiction, the reality it's based on is already absurd.



By taking issue with the American advertising culture, Fountain insists that every person within the society has an agenda—everyone is trying to sell something. This idea will be important for the rest of the novel, as Billy learns that he cannot take people at face value. Everyone he meets has a deeper meaning or purpose, and Billy himself isn't exempt from this system.



Here, Fountain very much resembles the character Shroom, who will emerge later in the novel. Fountain advocates for learning and understanding of history, which Shroom is also passionate about in the novel. In addition, Shroom is a very liberal character, which suggests that there's a link between this disapproval of the war and one's political leanings.



Fountain tells the cadets that they don't have the luxury of living in a state of numbness, as the war isn't a game. Fountain suggests that the reality of the military is on the opposite end of the spectrum from the Fantasy Industrial Complex, and it's ridiculous that the military quickly became something that the Complex used for its own means.

There are several facts that could've helped keep the us versus them rhetoric at bay. First, none of the hijackers from the September 11 tragedy were from Iraq or Afghanistan. However, instead of acknowledging this fact, the American government embarked on an advertising campaign to rally support for the "War on Terror." Congress approved invading Iraq in the spring of 2003, and President Bush spoke in May of that year declaring that the conflict was over.

Fountain mentions an interview with Karl Rove, the man known as "Bush's Brain," in which Rove said that the United States is an empire and therefore acts to create its own reality. As the war continued to defy America's "power to create reality," the Complex went into overdrive and began marketing the war even more heavily. Supporting the troops became one of the most effective angles of this—Fountain says it's easy to thank veterans for their service, but superficial acts of thanks don't translate to true love for one's country.

Love, Fountain believes, is what makes war real for people and removes it from the fantasy realm. In the case of the Vietnam War, everyone who knew someone of draft age was emotionally invested in the war. Now, however, ordinary citizens aren't forced to feel the effects of war. There have been no raised taxes or rationing, and Hummers (trucks and SUVs based on military Humvees) jumped in popularity in the states while soldiers drove under-armored ones in Iraq. Fountain suggests taxing the Hummers at home to support the underfunded Veterans Administration as a way to actually support the troops.

Fountain says that the cadets are going to be forced to sacrifice for reasons that aren't clear, which Fountain declares is a tragedy. Further, soldiers raised in a democracy must turn into slaves when they join the military, which explains why soldiers are so adept at compartmentalizing. Although this is a stellar coping technique, human nature dictates that at some point, soldiers will have to grapple with the reasoning for what they're doing. Fountain insists that it's obscene to ask soldiers to sacrifice their humanity.

This passage sets up the idea that the conflict that Billy will face in the novel won't be one against a singular foe. Instead, his foe is the entirety of the American population—a group that overwhelmingly doesn't understand what the war is like, per Fountain's logic.



Given what Fountain has already set up, it's implied that Bush's declaration that the war is over isn't true—evidenced by the fact that the coming story follows soldiers fighting in Iraq a year or two after Bush's speech. Clearly, the war wasn't over when Bush said that it was.



Rove's assertion shows that having power allows an entity to bend the facts of the world to fit its own needs and desires. This tells the reader that financially and governmentally powerful characters in the novel aren't to be trusted, and neither are the characters that only thank the soldiers for their service.



Fountain proposes that the only way to make emotionally uninvolved citizens truly feel the effects of the war is through finances. That is, if people aren't emotionally involved in the war by personally knowing troops, those people can and should experience the discomfort of war by having to support it financially.



Fountain defines "compartmentalizing" as a soldier intentionally not asking hard questions while fighting in the war. However, compartmentalizing only puts off such questions in the short term—eventually, the soldier has to ask them. This shows that in order to cope with war, soldiers must pretend to be just as uninformed as regular civilians.



Fountain asks what literature has to do with war and reality. He defines literature as writing that preserves reality and the written language. Essentially, literature is the opposite of Karl Rove's definition of "reality." Fountain offers Homer's *Odyssey* as an example, as it's "news that stays news." The epic poem tells the story of soldiers trying to get home from a war fought for questionable reasons. Fountain insists that the *Odyssey* is more than just entertainment, as it allows a person to better understand his or her own situation. Fountain encourages the cadets to read so that they can continue to connect to reality.

*Although the Fantasy Industrial Complex is a modern problem, Fountain shows that these problems have existed throughout history by drawing connections to an ancient text like the *Odyssey*, which should read as a cautionary tale. By telling the cadets to read, Fountain hopes to shield them from the Complex by connecting them to reality and to history as a whole.*



1. THE THING BEGINS

The narrator insists that the men of Bravo aren't cold despite the inclement weather, thanks to the five Jack and Cokes that each of them drank in the last forty minutes. Now that he's in the limo, Billy feels like he needs to drink to recover from the onslaught of grateful citizens thanking him for his service. Billy lets the people's words swirl around his brain and can't make them mean anything. Since he will sit in the aisle seat at the **Texas Stadium** later, Billy will have to endure more grateful citizens throughout the day.

The fact that the grateful citizens are exhausting suggests that Billy has a different understanding of war than they do, and that the citizens don't understand that Billy is struggling to deal with their praise. Their constant praise also shows that they don't necessarily view him as a full person who might need some time to himself. Instead, they view Billy as a hero who belongs to the people.



Sergeant Dime, Billy's commanding officer, accuses Billy of checking out. When Billy offers a satisfactory reply, Dime says offhandedly that Major Mac is gay. Another soldier, Holliday, takes offense, but Major Mac says nothing. Dime laughs and repeats his statement, loudly and slowly—Major Mac is almost fully deaf. In the limo, Major Mac and a movie producer, Albert Ratner, accompany the eight remaining members of Bravo Squad. Counting Shroom, who is dead, and Lake, who is seriously wounded, Bravo has two Silver Stars and eight Bronze Stars among the ten members.

These initial moments with Bravo reveal that this is a group of very young men who are fairly immature—despite the fact that they're also highly decorated war heroes. Further, the mention of dead Shroom and injured Lake indicate that this isn't a feel-good war story, which reinforces Fountain's assertion in the preface that war isn't something that should be idealized.



Billy remembers a TV reporter asking him what he was thinking during the battle, and Billy was only able to say that he wasn't thinking. Billy was only afraid of messing up in battle, and it wasn't until days later that he felt as though he didn't screw up too badly. By that point, however, the footage from the battle was circulating at home, and within days, Bravo was flown home for their two-week Victory Tour. Shroom flew with the rest of Bravo in a flag-draped coffin. The narrator notes that Bravo Squad is just the name that Fox News gave the platoon, but the incorrect name stuck.

The fact that Billy is unable to answer the reporter's question suggests that there's a major disconnect between the way that civilians like the reporter think about the war and the way that soldiers like Billy do. While the reporter thinks about war as though it's something logical, Billy will say several times throughout the novel that he just followed his training, which indicates that the Army turns soldiers' responses into reflexes, not logical thoughts.



Billy thinks about the civilians who flew with Bravo on the first leg of their flight. They were from all over the world and generously shared their cigarettes and alcohol. One man had shown Billy a case full of gold chains, and Billy realized that he had no idea the war had anything to do with riches. Returning his attention to the car, Billy listens to Albert talk into his cellphone and Crack read the sports pages of the newspaper so that Holliday and A-bort can bet on the results of the game. Albert suddenly interrupts to say that the actress Hilary Swank is interested.

Bravo erupts in cheers as Albert explains that Hilary is interested in playing Billy and Dime as one character. Billy is confused, but Albert insists that it can be done. Albert has also been on the phone with Mark Wahlberg and George Clooney trying to sell the Bravos' story. Films about Iraq have underperformed at the box office, but Albert insists that the Bravos' story will be easy to sell given that it's a triumphant rescue story. Albert gets back on the phone, and Bravo listens to his foul banter. Crack returns to the sports pages, and Sykes impersonates Beyoncé, wondering aloud if she'd go to bed with him.

Dime silences Sykes, and the other Bravos join in and yell at Sykes to be quiet. Suddenly, the Bravos notice that an SUV is driving right next to them in the slow-moving traffic. College girls hang out of the SUV's open windows and yell at the Bravos to roll down their windows. After Sykes and A-bort yell at the driver to disengage the child locks, they finally roll down the windows. However, when they see the "jarheads," the girls immediately deflate and become merely polite. Sykes yells that he'll love the girls even though he's married, but the girls look up and down the freeway for more appealing prospects.

Billy pulls out his phone. He has a text from his sister, Kathryn; one from his other sister's husband; and a Bible verse from Pastor Rick. Billy wonders if he actually knows anybody and if his fame means anything. He wonders what the football game will hold, given that Bravo is supposed to appear on national television as part of the halftime show. Bravo has been hoping that they'll get to meet Destiny's Child, but they figure that they'll probably have to do something dumb like they've had to do on most of their local television appearances. The tour has been humiliating for this reason.

The war that Billy experienced seems to be an entirely different war than the one that gave the man on the plane such riches, illustrating the discrepancies in how soldiers experience war versus civilians. Additionally, the solid gold chains indicate that there's wealth to be made from war, which points to the fact that for some, war is profitable and is therefore perceived as a good thing.



Albert introduces the world of Hollywood as a third world for consideration in the novel, alongside the warzone and America's home front. Hilary Swank wanting to merge two characters into one suggests that in Hollywood, the actual truth of a situation matters very little. Instead, creating a compelling story and getting big names involved are of the utmost importance, as that's what will sell.



The girls' unsavory reaction toward the soldiers foreshadows the entire rest of the novel and introduces the idea that soldiers aren't afforded the respect and reverence they deserve. While calling the soldiers heroes turns them into superhuman figures, when it comes to their very human desires for love and connection, soldiers are dehumanized, stereotyped, and ultimately rejected.



Billy is dissatisfied with the texts he's received, indicating that he expects different treatment now that he's famous. The description of the local television appearances suggests that Bravo is a commodity more than anything else—instead of honoring the soldiers for their service in a meaningful way, the TV stations dehumanize the soldiers just like the girls in the SUV did.



Billy feels too young and like he doesn't know enough—he's never even been to a professional sporting event. He's never seen the **Texas Stadium** despite having grown up eighty miles away from it. Now, as the stadium comes into view, Billy realizes that seeing it on TV has somehow masked the fact that the stadium looks homely and slumping in real life. Billy feels a kind of sadness and a sense of loss as he looks at the stadium, thinking that it's the same feeling he gets when he thinks about family. He thinks that every new thing, from babies to buildings, eventually disappears or gets destroyed. He wonders why this fatalist view isn't more widely held, given that it seems so obvious. He reasons that America is stuck on "teenage drama."

The men in the limo silently gaze at the stadium until they pass a homemade sign that reads, "stop anal rape in Iraq," followed by an annotation of "heavens to Betsey." Bravo Squad howls with laughter.

This passage offers several clues that suggest that Billy's family life is challenging. The fact that he's never been to the stadium suggests that his family may be poor. Similarly, his fatalist view about family implies that his own family has already be destroyed. Thus far in life, Billy's experiences have shown him that everyone is susceptible to this kind of loss.



The sign serves as a reminder to the reader and to Bravo of the absurdity of the war. The sign's content also suggests that civilians have very different thoughts and priorities about the war than the soldiers do.



2. A PRIVATE IN THE INFANTRY

Bravo arrives at the **stadium** two hours before the kickoff. Nobody seems to know what to do with them, so they remain in their seats in the seventh row. Sykes and Lodis debate what it would cost to purchase the seats, as Billy chats with Mango. Next to Mango is A-bort, then Holliday, Lodis, Sykes, Crack, Dime, Albert, and finally, Major Mac. Billy looks at the sky through the open dome and thinks that though it's cold, he doesn't feel it. Dime suddenly asks Lodis how long a football field is. Lodis answers incorrectly, so Dime turns to Billy. Billy offers the correct answer, and Dime leads the rest of Bravo in applause. Billy is nervous about the way Dime is treating him, as he feels like it's punishment—but he can't figure out who's being punished.

Sykes begs Dime to allow him to place bets, but Dime refuses since Sykes maxed out his credit cards on porn not long ago. To escape Sykes, Dime jumps down to the sixth row of stadium seats and moves over to talk to Billy and Mango. Dime asks Billy his thoughts on Hilary Swank, and Billy expresses concern. Dime insists that weird is the new normal and makes digs at Billy's masculinity. When Billy reminds Dime that Swank wants to play him too, Dime says he'd be fine with it if Swank would be his girlfriend for a few weeks.

The way that Dime barks at the platoon suggests that he's an authoritarian leader who feels the need to keep his soldiers on edge, just as Billy is feeling now. Even though the novel depicts the Bravos' brotherhood as superior to any individual Bravo's family situation, this brotherhood is not without its dysfunctions. In addition, Sykes and Lodis' debate about the cost of the seats suggest that they, too, come from modest means, and that this experience is something entirely new for them.



Syke's gambling and credit card problem humanizes him dramatically—he may be a hero, but he struggles with controlling his impulse just like other people do. Although the reader is given insight into these humanizing moments, the other characters the Bravos interact with are not. In this way, the novel encourages the reader to see the Bravos as humans, while making other people's dehumanizing treatment of the soldiers all the more shocking for the reader.



The narrator explains that Dime has a number of magazine subscriptions that he reads in addition to three or four books per week. He's a twenty-four-year-old college dropout and denies that he was a star quarterback in high school, though watching him throw a football suggests otherwise. Among the sergeants, he's known as "Fuckin' Liberal," but Billy eventually realized that Dime wasn't the only one who leaned left—Shroom also shared Dime's beliefs. Billy remembers a time when Cheney gave a speech where they were stationed, and Dime and Shroom cheered and shouted with such enthusiasm that their captain had passed them a note commanding them to stop. Cheney seemed to like the enthusiasm and didn't get the joke.

Dime calls down to Albert and says that Billy thinks Hilary Swank is weird. Albert says that Hilary is very nice and explains that playing a man would be a challenge for her. The narrator explains that Albert is attempting to get each Bravo \$100,000 for their life story, plus a cut of other film profits. He's been in and out of the Victory Tour and has promised Bravo that he'd have a deal for them by Thanksgiving. Billy is beginning to fear that Albert won't be able to make it happen, but he keeps this fear to himself.

When Billy first joined Bravo, Dime and Shroom had taunted him endlessly. Finally, Billy addressed them and insisted that he wasn't a "delinquent punk." Shroom mentioned that Billy trashed a man's car, and Billy explained what happened. The car had belonged to his sister's fiancé. Kathryn had gotten into a car crash that should've killed her, but she miraculously survived. Her plastic surgeon assured her that she'd look normal again but pussy boy, as Billy calls him, had called off their engagement because he couldn't handle her mangled face.

Kathryn threw her ring in pussy boy's face, but Billy took it a step further by destroying the car with a crowbar two weeks before Billy was set to graduate. The school board allowed Billy to graduate, but he still faced felony charges for chasing pussy boy across the parking lot with the crowbar. Billy had been offered the deal of joining the Army in exchange for having the felony turned into "criminal mischief" on his record, and so he became a soldier. After Billy divulges this story, Dime and Shroom stopped tormenting him.

Dime is cognizant of the absurdity of the war. In contrast, the fact that Vice President Cheney was apparently unaware that Dime's enthusiasm was false suggests that Cheney truly believed his audience fully supported the war, even at a time when, statistically speaking, a majority of the US did not support it. Dime's false enthusiasm also shows that he is a master at figuring out ways to subvert the power systems, make his liberalism known, and, to an extent, use these skills to get his way.



Albert's replies indicate that it's far more important to him to get the film made than to be true to the original story by casting someone other than Hilary Swank. Albert's priorities show that money dictates how he moves through the world and conducts business.



The fact that Billy doesn't even talk about pussy boy by name suggests that Billy is fiercely loyal to his family, as he simply writes off and dehumanizes this person who wouldn't remain loyal to someone Billy loves. It's also worth noting that given the clues that point to Billy's family being lower class, the medical bills from an accident like this could have devastating consequences—further explaining Billy's earlier assertion that everything gets destroyed.



Destroying pussy boy's car allows Billy to take control of his belief in inevitable destruction and use it for his own good, thereby demonstrating family loyalty and giving pussy boy a lesson in real-life consequences. The fact that Dime and Shroom accept Billy's explanation show that they, too, value loyalty, which in turn helps cement the strong bond between them.



3. IT IS MOSTLY IN YOUR HEAD BUT WE HAVE CURES FOR THAT

Billy hopes that Josh will bring him some **Advil**, as Billy is hung over from last night, and the Jack and Cokes in the limo didn't help. Dime tells Albert about Shroom's funeral, which should've been a solemn tribute to Shroom's spirituality but instead was a "freak show of Christian wingnuts." Crack asks Albert to make sure that all goes in the movie, but Albert insists that nobody would believe it. Billy watches the Goodyear Blimp fly over the dome, and a tribute video to former Cowboys football players begins playing on the **Jumbotron**. Billy thinks that in two days he'll be back in Iraq, but today, he's immersed in all things quintessentially American: football, Thanksgiving, and well-wishing citizens.

Billy tells Mango that he's going to the restroom, and Mango suggests quietly that they go get beer. The two race up the steps, and Billy feels as though the dome is pulling him backwards into it. He thinks back over the last two weeks and the immense structures he's seen, all of which he finds unnerving. Billy uses the restroom as Mango asks for beers in Coca Cola cups. Billy performs fifty pushups before taking his beer. He and Mango watch the other football fans around them, and Billy finds himself fascinated by ordinary citizens. He asks Mango what they might be thinking about. Mango sarcastically suggests the meaning of life and then amends his answer to the game, food, and the weather.

Billy thinks that those thoughts sound right, but he wishes that Americans at home thought about other things a little more. As he watches the crowd, Billy is impressed that most people are wearing Cowboys merchandise. When Billy and Mango finish their beers, they return to their seats. Mango burps loudly and it smells incriminatingly of beer. Dime turns angrily to Mango, and Billy innocently asks what happened to Major Mac. Bravo erupts in laughter, and Dime sends Billy and Mango to go find Major Mac.

Mango and Billy promptly buy more beers and then walk through the crowd. They wonder where Major Mac might've gone and remark on the futility of trying to find someone in a crowd of eighty thousand people. Billy thinks that searching for Major Mac is just another pointless task that makes the Army what it is, but he's glad to be doing something. Mango is a great companion for such a task—he's rock solid and can recite all the presidents and vice presidents from memory, which tends to shut down whispers that he's an illegal alien. The only time Mango broke down was when Bravo was asked to search the aftermath of a car bomb for the correct number of missing limbs.

Though the text doesn't specify who the "Christian wingnuts" are, they likely refer to members of the Westboro Baptist Church, a group that began protesting at soldiers' funerals around this time. When Albert asserts that nobody would believe how sad and strange Shroom's funeral was, it shows that Albert has very definite ideas of what will sell in Hollywood—and extreme Christianity apparently won't. In turn, this reinforces the idea that the American public engages with the parts of the war they find interesting, not what's actually true.



Again, Billy's fascination with the large structures across America implies a lower-class upbringing. Similarly, his curiosity about ordinary citizens shows that he thinks about them in much the same way the citizens think about soldiers. For Billy, citizens are enigmas who live in an entirely different world, completely separate from the horrors of the war.



In noting the prevalence of Cowboys gear in the crowd, Billy recognizes the outpouring of overt support for a privately-owned football team. The Cowboys are thought of as American heroes, just like Bravo Squad are—though nobody is dressed to support the soldiers, suggesting that citizens don't feel as though the soldiers need the kind of support that the players do.



Billy's analysis that the Army is inherently nonsensical helps him cope with the fact that the war itself and everything adjacent to it seem similarly absurd. It frees him from having to ask questions such as why he's doing what he's doing, which allows him to compartmentalize. The struggle Mango faces to be taken seriously as a "real American" suggests an underlying belief among the gossipers that non-Americans can't be true heroes, which seeks to delegitimize Mango and his service.



Billy gets a text from Kathryn asking if he's cold. Mango and Billy discuss the hot girls they danced with at a strip club last night. Mango insists that the girls seemed more like models than strippers. Billy remembers that when Sykes returned from his private dance, he told them that his girl had been truly into him. All of Bravo had gotten blowjobs, but Billy decided afterwards that he needs more from a woman. He's still a virgin and desperately wants a girlfriend. He's distraught that he hasn't found one in the last two weeks. Billy feels as though time is running out.

Later, Bravo will pack, and the next day, they'll start their flight back to Iraq to finish their combat tour. The narrator notes that many people remark that it's miraculous that Bravo only lost two members, but Billy thinks that given how random it all seems, they could've *all* died. He remembers when he first realized how maddening war can be when Shroom advised him to walk one foot in front of another so that if a bomb went off, he might lose only one foot instead of both. Shroom later made the point that if a bullet is going to make contact, it's already been fired.

Billy knows that Mango is also thinking about the war, and he remembers Kathryn telling him to keep being lucky. He looks around the concourse of the **stadium** and thinks that it's a truly disgusting place. Mango and Billy decide to abandon their search for Major Mac and return to their seats after buying pizza. Billy thinks about the fact that he's a semi-celebrity right now. Sometimes he's invisible, but other times, thankful Americans mob him to express their gratitude. He knows he's being used as a publicity stunt, but he figures that that's part of being a soldier.

Billy and Mango wander into a high-end shop selling Cowboys merchandise. They immediately begin laughing as they take in the absurdity of the Cowboys chess sets, leather jackets, and toaster ovens. They argue over whether the leather jacket is real leather and begin wrestling with each other, lobbing insults as they do. The man tending the shop steps in and loudly offers assistance, and Billy asks the man if the jacket is real leather. When the man affirms that it is, Billy victoriously turns back to Mango, and they begin wrestling again. The shop tender calls their attention and mentions that they sell five or six leather jackets per game. Billy and Mango leave, and Mango remarks with awe that the jacket was \$679.

Billy's anxiety surrounding the fact that he hasn't found a girlfriend in the last two weeks suggests that while citizens engage with the war as though it's fantasy, Billy thinks about intimate relationships as though they're fantasy, not reality. He essentially suggests that he expects a Hollywood-esque whirlwind romance, showing that he, too, is just as trapped in the Fantasy Industrial Complex as anyone else.



Shroom's logic rests on the belief that war and violence are inherently illogical and not something a person can control. Notably, this is a view that forms with firsthand experience, offering evidence for why citizens talk about miracles when, in Billy and Shroom's eyes, living or dying is just dumb luck. Shroom's advice, however, is one way he shows loyalty to Billy—it gives Billy a slightly better chance at making it out alive.



Brimming with people from all walks of life, the stadium represents America as a whole. Thus, Billy's assessment that the stadium is disgusting implies that the same is true for the country. The stadium look shiny and exciting on television, mediated by camera angles and careful selection on footage. In real life, however, the stadium is falling apart. Likewise, America seems like a perfect country, but upon closer examination, it's very easy to see everything that's wrong with it. As Billy will discover later, there are "nice" parts of the stadium, but access to those parts is very limited to the super rich—just like in America.



Again, the prevalence of the Cowboys brand and the existence of shops like this indicate that citizens are more than willing to spend money on products that support the Cowboys. For Billy and Mango, the fact that someone would spend \$679 on a Cowboys jacket is illogical, echoing the way that they perceive war as similarly absurd. Further, a jacket of that price is well out of Billy and Mango's reach, which implying criticism as to how Americans pay their soldiers.



4. THE HUMAN RESPONSE

As Billy and Mango retake their seats, Albert is on the phone again negotiating how to get Hilary Swank to read the script. When Sykes questions Albert's conversation, Albert slowly explains to him that now that Hilary's interested, they can tweak the script to make it work for her. He assures Sykes and Dime that the story will be easy. Getting Swank to read it is the hard part, as she won't read without an offer from a studio. Crack asks if they have a studio, and Albert says they don't. He confirms that this is a paradox and explains that he'll make it happen by scaring people into committing.

Billy notices that Albert is sitting next to Dime and seems endlessly fascinated by the sergeant. Once, Holliday muttered that Dime is "property," and the rest of the Bravos are "product." Billy wonders what Shroom and Lake are in this system. He is also annoyed by the rest of the platoon's interest in the money they might get from the film. He knows that money won't guarantee a safe return, and he believes that the day he receives money will be the day he dies. Because of this, Billy is conflicted about the whole business of the movie.

A man seated behind Albert engages him in conversation about a script he wants to write, and Billy watches a dozen Cowboys take the field to warm up. He soon becomes entranced by how the punter kicks balls to ridiculous heights. Billy finds watching the kicks almost meditative, and he imagines that the uppermost arc of the ball is where Shroom lives now. He thinks it's silly, but reasons that "the long arm of marketing" can't touch Shroom up there.

Billy's reverie is interrupted by the fans around him, suddenly drawing his attention to the **Jumbotron**, which is fixed on the Bravos. Sykes starts flashing gang signs as the video cuts out to flash the names of Bravo Squad on the screen. The crowd cheers loudly and mobs the Bravos to thank them for their service. Billy adopts a reserved and polite expression to weather the onslaught. He marvels that nobody calls him names or is rude, but he still finds the encounters frightening. He notices that the civilians all need something from him, because he's the "war made flesh." The civilians all believe that the solution to the war is obvious: send in more troops and drop more bombs.

*This paradox is a nod to the novel [Catch-22](#), a defining work of satire about World War II and a common comparison to Billy Lynn. By including this reference, *Fountain* situates the novel as a similarly satirical critique of war and the film industry. Once again, Albert is more interested in making money off of the Bravos than telling their story accurately and depicting the reality of war.*



Holliday shows that all of Bravo are well aware that they're being used to sell the war to Americans, and that they're just a product that represents the heroism and righteousness of the war. A film would make this even more pronounced, as moviegoers would be paying to see a fictionalized version of Bravo and the war. Once again, the novel implies that it is absurdity that people will pay for entertainment but will not pay their soldiers more.



Though Billy's reasoning is comforting to him, it's not exactly correct—a film would absolutely politicize and dramatize Shroom's death. While Shroom himself won't have to deal with those consequences, Billy will have to deal with the emotional turmoil of watching his mentor's death turned into something strange, unrecognizable, and profitable.



The Jumbotron is a very literal symbol of the mediating effects of the Fantasy Industrial Complex, as it flashes advertisements and game playback, encouraging people to watch a representation of the game that's been cut and edited instead of watching the actual spectacle down below. When the Jumbotron shows Bravo, it similarly separates Bravo from reality by encouraging game-goers to view Bravo just as soldiers and heroes, not as men who might anxious or uncomfortable, like Billy is.



Billy senses the citizens' passion when they touch him and speak to him. He understands that they know that thanking him is a good deed. One man touches Billy's Silver Star, which feels lewd and invasive. One newsperson several days ago asked what it was like to kill people and watch fellow soldiers die. Billy rambled nonsense, but he couldn't say that it was raw, messed up, and horrendous beyond all belief.

After the crowd disperses, Josh, the Bravos' handler, arrives. He asks where Major Mac is if the Bravos are ready for lunch. The Bravos ask if they can meet the cheerleaders, and Josh speaks into his walkie-talkie. Billy feels as though the Cowboys didn't make any plans for hosting Bravo, given how little Josh seems to know. When Josh is done, Billy asks if he managed to secure some **Advil**. Josh apologizes profusely and promises to get some. Mango teases Billy about still being hung over, but Billy thinks he feels horrible primarily about the blowjob. When Billy looks back to the field, the punter is gone, and Billy feels as though he's lost sight of Shroom in the sky.

Billy thinks back to Shroom's last minutes alive. Shroom foretold his death; right before things started exploding, he took Billy's hand and said, "I'm going down." If Billy meditates on this event for any length of time, a disconcerting hum starts up in his head. Billy thinks back to a reporter asking him about Shroom. Truthfully, Billy thinks about Shroom every few seconds and visualizes Shroom go from living to dead again and again. Billy remembers scrambling after the insurgents as they dragged Shroom into the grass. Continuing to think about Shroom, Billy thinks that he's not sick, but not exactly well right now. Josh interrupts with the announcement that it's time for lunch and leads Bravo up to the concourse.

Civilians again mob Bravo Squad with thanks, and a wealthy family tells Billy that watching the footage from the embedded crew was like watching a movie. As the woman and her daughter talk about the war, Billy mentally tunes out. He thinks that civilians are like innocent children, and he pities them. When Bravo is able to move again, Crack insists that one woman was grinding on him until he suggested they keep in contact after he returns to Iraq. Billy doesn't doubt it.

Billy's inability to answer the reporter's questions truthfully shows that he feels pressured to talk about war in a way that confirms civilians' own understanding of combat. The civilians are essentially using Billy to reinforce their own illusions about the war, and Billy's position as a hero means that he feels a responsibility to tell them what they want to hear.



Billy's quest for Advil is a symbolic quest for recognition as a human being with needs and a headache. Josh, on the other hand, shows Billy that Billy's pain is negligible and not worth his time when he continues to forget this one small thing that could bring Billy some comfort. On a grander scale, this points to how the country as a whole doesn't serve its soldiers—the Cowboys don't even have a clear plan for how to host their heroic guests, just as the war seems similarly cobbled together and nonsensical.



Though Billy doesn't name it as such, he's likely suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This makes it abundantly clear that his experiences weren't thrilling or righteous, as citizens seem to want to think. Instead, Billy's experiences have left him with lasting mental and emotional damage, which continues to humanize Billy for the reader. Again, by keeping Billy's struggles hidden from the citizens he meets, the novel creates a deep disconnect between the citizens and Billy's understandings of war.



By insisting that the footage looked filmic, the family shows that they are at the mercy of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. For them, fantasy and reality look exactly the same, which means that they can think about the brutal reality of war as though it's just a movie, and, therefore, meaningless in the real world.



Billy checks his phone and finds a text from Pastor Rick. He deletes it as Major Mac steps in beside him and insists that he's been there the entire time. Billy feels awkward and wants to ask Major Mac for guidance as to how to deal with grief and death. Billy first tried to ask Pastor Rick for guidance, but he turned out to be unhelpful. Billy considered asking either Dime or Albert, but neither could provide the guidance that he was looking for. Billy desperately wants to know if Major Mac watched any of his friends die, but Billy feels his opportunity slipping away as Josh leads Bravo to an elevator.

Now that Shroom is gone, what Billy needs more than anything is a sense of intimacy and brotherhood with somebody who has experienced similar trauma. This shows first how important brotherhood and friendship are for emotional healing, as Billy is convinced he won't find closure until he talks to someone. Second, Billy's longing for connection also suggests that one can find community through scary or trying experiences, as Billy senses that he has things in common with Major Mac.



5. BY VIRTUE OF WHICH THE MANY BECOME THE ONE

As Billy grabs a plate and takes in the sight of the sixty-foot-long buffet, he feels as though he's going to be sick. The "club" is where the country club crowd spends the day at the game, though the room is horrendously decorated and looks more like a 1970s hotel than an expensive club. The place makes Billy feel horrible, and he thinks he's allergic to rich people. When Bravo entered the club, the patrons rose and applauded. The manager, a disgustingly greasy man, shows Bravo to their table. The rich civilians' stares make Billy feel woozy, but a glance from Dime settles him.

Like verbally thanking soldiers for their service, applauding when Bravo enters the room is an easy way for the civilians to support the troops. In reality, however, kind words and clapping do very little to actually support them. Billy's discomfort highlights his modest upbringing and makes it clear that this abundance of wealth is foreign and almost vulgar to him.



After Bravo is settled, Josh announces he has to leave. He jokingly promises to try to get the Bravos lap dances from the cheerleaders before he slips away. Dime tells the Bravos that each soldier can have one beer with lunch. Billy sits near Dime and Albert so that he can listen to their conversation and hopefully learn something. Before he starts eating, he thinks about where Shroom and Lake would sit. Billy considers the other rituals he follows, and reasons that none of them matter since everything in life seems random. He remembers standing guard once and feeling a pop on his nose—it was a bullet that barely missed him.

Billy recognizes that rituals such as prayers are a means for people to try to make sense of the world and feel as though they have more control over it. Although he tries to take comfort in these rituals (such as deciding where Shroom and Lake would sit), Billy's experiences have shown him that life and the war aren't controllable or logical. Instead, life and the war are random and unexplainable, just like the bullet that barely missed his nose.



Billy muses that dodging bullets in Iraq and the memories in his head feel more real than eating in Texas. He thinks of Lake and his two missing legs, but Dime calls Billy's attention back to lunch. Albert declares that he'll miss Bravo, and Crack urges Albert to visit them in Iraq. Albert objects and admits that the only reason he went to law school was to escape going to Vietnam. He remarks on the hypocrisy of the fact that all those in charge of the war—Bush, Cheney, Rove—all got out of military service. Albert declares that these politicians should be just as protective today's young men as they were with themselves.

Here, Albert becomes the voice of reason by pointing out the hypocrisy of those in charge of the war, such as President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Karl Rove. The hypocrisy these men demonstrate shows that they don't view the soldiers as fellow humans. Rather, the soldiers are disposable and simply support a political vision.



When Albert first contacted Bravo, they were confused. When they researched Albert, they discovered that he'd won three Best Picture Oscars and produced one of the greatest flops of all time. In the present, Albert watches as patrons of the club stop to pay their respects and marvels at the fact that everybody loves Bravo. He explains that the studios are pushing back on the film because they don't understand what Bravo went through. When his phone buzzes, Albert picks up and says immediately that Hilary is interested. The conversation then turns to the political nature of the film. Albert insists that this movie must be political, and further, that the politics of this particular film are about making people feel good about America.

As Albert hangs up, he explains that accountants run Hollywood these days and promises to secure funding for the film no matter what. Billy and some of the other Bravos go back to the buffet for seconds, and patrons wave them to the front of the line. Billy's hangover is better, and now when he looks at the food, it looks luxurious. He reasons that the point of civilization is beautiful food and private bathrooms. Bravo starts giggling as they walk back to their table, but Dime angrily shushes them when they arrive. They soon learn that Dime is angry because Universal Studios verbally committed to the film, provided that the story relocates to World War II.

Billy thinks about what once Shroom said about Dime—that he's a master of the psyche—and again loses himself in thinking about how Shroom spent his leisure time smoking and reading. Shroom and Dime seemed to know everything about each other, which puzzled Billy, and Shroom would tell everyone that he loved them before they went outside the wire (off the base). Again, Billy fixates on how Shroom foretold his death and remembers shooting at the insurgents while trying to administer first aid to Shroom.

Dime begins snapping at Bravos for no apparent reason when Albert passes him the phone to read an outlandish text from someone in Hollywood. Dime asks if they're screwed, and Albert explains that Hollywood is like the court of Louis XIV in that you can't go straight to the king; you have to get someone else's support first.

Because Albert is in Hollywood, it makes sense that he picks up primarily on these performative displays of "love" and "support," even though these experiences are uncomfortable and unsatisfying to actual soldiers like Billy. Though Albert insists the studios don't understand Bravo and the war, it can be argued that he doesn't understand either. He doesn't seem aware that these grateful citizens are wearing on Billy and are showing their support in meaningless ways. Instead, he's too focused on the spectacle of the civilians' support, perceiving it as potential support for his film.



Universal Studios' proposal is a very overt example of the fact that truth matters very little in Hollywood. Technically, the film would still be "based on a true story" even if the story were to be transposed to World War II. However, removing the context of the Iraq war means that the film producers and writers would be able to avoid having to consider the difficult questions about how the Iraq War should be portrayed.



As a mentor, Shroom encouraged Bravo to acknowledge their feelings and engage with each other as vulnerable human beings—not the hallowed, prop-like heroes the American public views them as. Seeing Dime through Shroom's eyes suggests that Dime might not be punishing Billy but could be grooming him for a task yet to come.



By comparing Hollywood to an ostentatious French court, Albert reinforces that the home front is just as absurd as warzones in its own way. This follows Billy's curiosity about civilians at home. To him, they live strange and unimaginable lives, as do those in Hollywood.



An old man stops by to thank the Bravos for their service. He tells them about his oil company's new technology, explaining that he's trying to bring as much oil production home so that America can bring soldiers home faster. Then, the man asks the soldiers "how we're doing over there." Dime brightly replies that it's a mind-altering experience but insists that the Bravos love the violence. The man seems to deflate as Dime continues to expound on the Bravos' love of violence and their ability to efficiently kill, closing by telling the man to stick to his job, and his men will stick to theirs. The man shuffles away as the Bravos snicker, and Billy thinks that people shouldn't talk about what they don't know. Albert suggests that Dime look into acting after he gets out of the military.

The man refers to fracking, a controversial method of extracting oil and natural gases from the earth. Many environmentalists insist that fracking causes lasting damage to water, and, by extension, the communities that consume that water. The man's assertion that he wants to bring men home faster also implies that he believes the Iraq war is primarily about the fight for Middle Eastern oil, whereas the novel has already revealed that the reasons for the war aren't so easy to pinpoint. The man is, essentially, trying to simplify the war and make it seem logical, which Dime won't let him do.



Dime berates Billy some more, and Billy recalls the day that Lake was injured. Billy had lost all composure, and Dime shoved him in a supply closet. Dime cried with Billy, and after a minute, Dime said he was proud of Billy and kissed him on the mouth. Billy's lips were sore for days after, and Dime never mentioned the event. He wonders how that moment will play out in the movie if Hillary Swank plays both Dime and Billy.

Again, the emotional reality of the war is exceptionally strange, and Billy's thought process suggests that this experience is impossible to understand. The kiss is, however, indicative of the assertion that trying experiences lead to these intense and highly emotional connections.



Dime orders another round of beers, and Billy decides to find the restroom. As he washes his hands, he remembers a childhood classmate who acted strangely after surviving a car crash that killed two of his friends. He always did strange things, and nobody questioned him. Billy often thinks about him when he looks in the mirror these days.

When Billy connects his own experience to that of his childhood classmate, Billy recognizes that he probably doesn't seem normal in civilians' eyes, just as his former classmate was perceived as strange.



In the hallway, Billy runs into Mango and a waiter. Both look suspicious, and Mango invites Billy to smoke marijuana with them. The waiter, Hector, leads them to a hidden outdoor deck. As they pass the joint around, Hector asks if they're concerned about passing drug tests, and Mango jokes that it's not like they can threaten to send them back to Iraq. When Hector very seriously says that the Army wouldn't do such a thing, Billy and Mango exchange a glance before explaining that they're already scheduled to return. Hector seems genuinely scandalized. He asks about the potential movie and starts to ask what happens if they die in Iraq. They pass the joint around again, and Billy feels as though the war is distant.

Hector is one of the few figures in the novel who attempts to do something meaningful to support the troops. Here, he helps Billy and Mango take the edge off and treats them like normal young men, not superhuman trophies. However, Hector also views the Bravos as heroes, indicating that he has bought into the rhetoric that the government promoted to rally support for the war.



Hector asks if Bravo is going to meet Destiny's Child, and Mango laments that nobody has told them anything—they don't even know if they'll get to meet the cheerleaders. Hector insists that everyone meets the cheerleaders and says that they should absolutely get to meet Destiny's Child. Billy wonders if he'd have sex with Beyoncé given the chance but decides he'd rather hang out, get to know her, and have sex. He wonders if the war has made him more interested in the "entire-body-soul connect," or if he's just getting older.

Given the emotional connections that Billy formed with Shroom, Dime, and the rest of Bravo, it's likely he simply craves an intimate and emotional connection with a girlfriend as a result of needing community to survive in a warzone. Notably, Billy's daydream also shows that he thinks of Beyoncé as a person, not just a celebrity, which contrasts with the way that the civilians view Bravo as heroes, not human beings.



Hector mentions that he's thinking of joining the Army, explaining that he has a daughter whose mother doesn't work and neither of his jobs provide insurance. He says that the Army is offering a \$6,000 enlistment bonus and insurance. Billy is pained to learn that the Army is offering bonuses to others when they got him for free. They all decide that the Army sucks, but Mango remarks that life won't be much better when he gets out.

All three young men recognize that as members of the lower class, there's little opportunity for them to move up in the world. In turn, this entices people like Hector to join the Army in order to obtain basic services and a steady income for his family, even though it also puts him in danger of dying.



6. BULLY OF THE HEART

Bravo was given two nights and a day to visit their families several days before Thanksgiving. Billy went home to Stovall, where his father, Ray, drives around the house in his motorized wheelchair—and according to Kathryn, Ray does nothing but grunt when he wants something. Ray had once been a radio DJ, but after September 11, he was forced to quit. He worked odd jobs and kept apartments in Dallas, and Billy loathed the way that Ray could go from berating him in the foulest of language to talking on his cell in a happy, upbeat voice. Ray soon dedicated himself to becoming a right-wing radio host, and he subjected his family to rants about conservative issues. Patty, Billy's oldest sister, deemed Ray "America's Prick."

These early descriptions of Ray illustrate the reasons why Billy clings so tightly to Shroom and his positive mentorship, as Ray was evidently verbally abusive and cruel to his entire family. As a DJ and a wannabe talk radio host, Ray is complicit in the Fantasy Industrial Complex, as he was one of the many people responsible for mediating the public's engagement with the world.



Ray spent his days watching Fox News, listening to conservative radio, and smoking until the day he suffered a double stroke. Now, only Billy's mother, Denise, and Kathryn understand Ray, though he seldom speaks. The family secret remains unspoken: everyone aside from Ray enjoys that he can no longer talk. It's a relief, and it very nearly makes up for the years he kept an apartment in the city, had numerous extramarital affairs, and apparently fathered a daughter and now owes child support.

As a whole, the novel affords a great deal of power to those who speak—from Cheney and Albert to Norm Oglesby later on. Ray's inability to speak signals his loss of power, which also corresponds to a lack of privacy and subsequent dehumanization as his wife and children find out about his second secret life and punish him for it.



Ray is impossible to please, and Billy realizes that he won't even be able to impress Ray with the fact that Billy is a national hero when he arrives home. Denise cries, as do Kathryn, Patty, and Patty's toddler son, Brian—but Ray only glances up from the TV when he notices Billy. Billy stands in the doorway and comments on Ray's suave appearance in a way that drives Ray mad, though Ray says nothing.

Even though Ray has no power to say anything to hurt Billy, Ray still has the power to hurt Billy in other ways. By not acknowledging Billy at all, Ray denies both his son's heroism and his humanity, as well as Billy's desire for connection and emotional intimacy.



Later, Denise prepares a "perfect" dinner. Ray promptly turns up the volume on Bill O'Reilly all the way and chain smokes through dinner. He ignores his family as they talk to and about him, and Billy is struck by the realization that even though the rest of the family can hate or ignore Ray, he will always be a part of them. Denise technically attends to Ray's needs, but she does so slowly and with a passive-aggressive air. When she mentions that "that woman" called earlier, Patty and Kathryn shriek and tell Denise to hang up on her next time. They don't even acknowledge that they're speaking about Ray's lover right in front of him, and they joke that Denise should tell the woman that *she* can care for Ray.

After dinner, Billy drops his things in his childhood bedroom and masturbates several times throughout the evening and night. In the morning, Ray overturns the coffee pot and then heads for the living room and Fox News. As Denise, Patty, and Kathryn clean up the mess, Billy asks if Ray truly watches Fox all day. They just look at him.

When the mess is cleaned up, Billy takes Brian outside. Billy is shocked to find that he doesn't find Brian boring. Rather, Billy is enchanted by Brian's curiosity about everything in the backyard. As Billy chases Brian, it suddenly crosses his mind that the idea of "the sanctity of life" is encapsulated in Brian's little body. Billy groans as he realizes that children just like Brian die in the war, but he quickly tells himself to compartmentalize his thoughts and think about it later.

Patty comes outside to hang out with Billy and Brian. She lights a cigarette and answers questions about her husband, and Billy notices that his once-lithe sister now seems mellow and heavy. Billy admits that he'd rather stay in Stovall than redeploy, and Patty asks him how it feels to be famous. She and Billy discuss Billy's less-than-stellar reputation in Stovall, and Billy wonders if he went crazy after being confined in school too long. Patty tells Billy that the entire family is proud of him, and when Billy says that Ray isn't proud, Patty insists that Ray is, he just doesn't know how to show it.

Patty asks Billy if he's heard about the house. She explains that Denise wants to take a loan out on the house to pay off Ray and Kathryn's medical bills, but if Denise files for bankruptcy instead, she'd be able to keep the house and wipe out the medical bills. Patty continues that Denise cares too much what other people would think if she declared bankruptcy. Patty also says that some people around town say that the Lynn family has had so much trouble because they don't pray hard enough.

Ray clearly wants to live in the fantasy world of the twenty-four-hour news cycle rather than in the real world of his family, and it's hard to blame him—his family is objectively cruel to him, deserved or not. This shows how the fantasy of the media offers individuals a way to escape and exist somewhere else. In addition, this passage also reinforces the fact that Billy's family life is exceptionally dysfunctional. Even if Shroom did criticize Billy for a time, he came around and became Billy's greatest mentor, something that it seems Ray never did.



By refusing outright to live in the real world, Ray forces the rest of his family to inhabit the real world against their will. He knows full well they're bound up in their responsibility to care for him, showing that he has a far more sinister view of family than they do.



Experiences like this make the war suddenly and vividly real for Billy, making it much harder for him to continue to think of war as something absurd and nonsensical. Further, by connecting dying Iraqi children to his nephew, Billy is forced to recognize fully that the "enemy" is made up of children just like Brian, who are similarly innocent and curious about the world around them.



Patty's insistence that Ray is proud of Billy suggests that Patty might view Ray in a kinder, more human way than the rest of the family. Given Billy's musings on what age and the war are doing to him, it's possible that for Patty, having a son and building a family of her own has allowed her to view her father in a more generous light.



The novel obliquely suggests that "keeping up with the Joneses," as Denise wants to do, is a consequence of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. This shows that the Complex affects everything, from the way that people think about world events to the way they think about their role and reputation in their community.



Kathryn appears and fetches beers for Patty and Billy, and the three of them sit outside with Brian. During the afternoon, several neighbors stop by with food and to thank Billy for his service. Kathryn eventually pins Billy's Purple Heart to one breast and his Silver Star to the other, which scandalizes Denise and sends Billy into fits of laughter. Kathryn refuses to take them off and is still wearing them when Mr. Whaley, Denise's boss, arrives. Mr. Whaley is very obviously astounded at Kathryn's leggy, tanned body and he does a poor job of hiding his attraction.

Denise and Mr. Whaley join the Lynn children outside, and Mr. Whaley asks Billy about the war and his reception on the Victory Tour. Mr. Whaley struggles to keep his eyes off of Kathryn, who follows the conversation intently. Mr. Whaley offers to put Billy in touch with his lawyer to review the movie contract and tells Billy that Stovall will put on a parade next time Billy is home. As Mr. Whaley continues to praise Billy's heroism, Kathryn bluntly points out that Billy has to go back to Iraq and might die. When Mr. Whaley insists he'll pray for Billy, Kathryn snarls and goes inside. Mr. Whaley tries to smooth the situation by asking about Kathryn's next surgery and mentioning that it's been a hard year for the Lynn family.

Mr. Whaley offers Billy a job in the oil fields upon his return, and Billy feels as though he might actually accept what he knows would be a minimum-wage job, assuming he makes it out of the war intact. Billy realizes, however, that Mr. Whaley is nothing compared to the rich people that Billy met on the tour. On Thanksgiving Day, Billy realizes that Mr. Whaley is a peon to the rich and powerful at the stadium, while Billy is a peon to Mr. Whaley—and little more than a speck of dust to the richest in Texas.

After lunch, Billy returns to the backyard and naps. He dreams that he's riding a parade float, but he sees Shroom at the back of the crowd saluting and knows that Shroom is dead. Billy finally lunges awake to find Kathryn leaning over him and breathing in his face. She's wearing a bikini, and the sight of her rouses Billy, even if she is his sister. Kathryn threateningly tells Billy that he has to come home, or she'll kill herself, stating that she's responsible for sending Billy to Iraq in the first place. Kathryn points out the dark absurdity that Mr. Whaley wants to throw a parade when Billy might die, and Billy considers the changes that Kathryn has undergone since her accident. While she used to be a wholesome Christian girl, she's now lean, scarred, and throws around insults regularly.

The fact that Denise is scandalized by Kathryn's joke suggests that Denise believes the awards truly mean something. Billy, on the other hand, can find the humor in this because he understands that while the awards are certainly appreciated, they do little to actually improve Billy's quality of life as a soldier. By extension, this also shows that even though the war directly affects Denise, she believes these awards are enough to support the troops.



Like thanking a soldier for his or her service, saying that he'll pray is an easy and expected sentiment that allows Mr. Whaley to feel good about "supporting the troops." The parade falls into this category as well, since it would only recognize Billy's service, not actually do anything to improve his quality of life or help him make it through the war alive. Because Mr. Whaley is better off than the Lynns, however, he can get away with promising expensive parades and no actual support.



Though offering Billy a job is a true kindness that might allow Billy to make a life for himself later, the fact that it's minimum wage is cutting commentary on how Americans treat soldiers poorly upon their return from warzones. This job would put him in a similar situation as Hector, the stadium waiter who wants to join the Army to better provide for his family.



Billy's attraction to Kathryn is another way in which the novel shows that Billy's family situation is dysfunctional; his attraction is subversive and "not supposed to happen," just as Ray isn't "supposed" to be such a distant, mean father. Though the questions that Kathryn asks next indicate that she doesn't truly understand what the war is like, she does fully recognize the absurdity and the hypocrisy in how the country treats its soldiers. Further, her guilt is her way of showing loyalty to Billy.



Kathryn hands Billy another beer and asks about the tour. Billy deflects, and Kathryn admits she's going crazy in Stovall. She insists there are no boys and mentions that she should be graduated and wealthy by now. Her final two surgeries are scheduled for spring, and in the meantime, she's enrolled in community college to stave off student loan penalty interest. Kathryn notes that everyone, herself included, is politically conservative until they get sick and realize that their insurance companies will screw them, and nothing is there to protect them. Billy suggests that Kathryn didn't pray hard enough.

Billy asks Kathryn about Denise's possible home equity loan. Kathryn tells Billy to not worry about it but shares that they're \$400,000 in debt due to medical bills. She tells Billy to not give their parents any money, as Ray bought his secret daughter a brand-new Mustang car for her sixteenth birthday.

The rest of the afternoon passes as Kathryn asks about life at the front. Finally, she asks how Billy and the other Bravos actually feel about the war. Billy admits that he doesn't think anyone knows what they're doing in Iraq. He says that the soldiers are trying to work on infrastructure and feed children, and the Iraqis hate them.

Kathryn asks what would happen if Billy didn't go back, and Billy insists that he can't not go back. She frantically lists all the high-profile men who didn't serve—Cheney, Karl Rove, Bill O'Reilly, President Bush—and says that if they want a war, they can fight it. Kathryn begins to cry when Billy doesn't appear swayed and mentions that there's a group in Austin that helps soldiers legally desert. Billy insists he'll be fine, but finally pulls a weeping Kathryn to him. He finds her cries peaceful, and he falls asleep.

Billy wakes to the sound of Ray's wheelchair in the yard. It startles Billy, and his soldier reflexes kick in—he notes that if he'd had a weapon handy, Ray would be dead. Ray lights a cigarette in the yard, and Billy thinks about how family is supposed to be the one sure thing in life. He thinks of all his fellow Bravos' families, all of which are dysfunctional or abusive. Billy remembers how, in the days after September 11, Ray had gotten on the air advocating for "nuclear cleansing" in the Middle East, and Billy feels as though he was fated to join the Army because his father so wholeheartedly supported the war. However, even though Ray strongly supports the war that his son takes part in, Ray still doesn't seem to love Billy.

The mention of Kathryn's student loans are both a reminder that of the Lynn family's tight financial situation and something that signals that she'll have to work extra hard to pull herself out of this accrued debt. Further, the fact that she must take on more debt (by enrolling in community college) to keep the debt at bay shows how the American economic system hurts families like the Lynns who don't have the money to send their children to college outright.



The revelation about the Mustang suggests that had Ray been more loyal to his married family, they might not be in such dire financial straits now.



For Billy, the war is less about the firefights like the one that got him famous and more about these humanitarian projects, though the fact that he's not recognized for feeding children suggests that the American public is more interested in dramatic battles than actually helping people.



Kathryn's cries are comforting to Billy because they're a very overt depiction of her support and loyalty, which he doesn't get from other members of his family. The existence of this group in Austin suggests that there are Americans who believe the war is misguided, and that Americans don't treat their veterans properly.



Billy implies that the Bravos share such a strong bond because none of them come from solid, stable, loving homes. Even though the relationships between Bravos are dysfunctional in their own ways, the Bravos look out for each other in ways that their families never did.



Billy watches, perplexed, as Ray whirrs around the yard, presumably looking at the flowers—something he's never done before. Suddenly, Brian rushes out the back door and runs to Ray. He climbs on the back of Ray's wheelchair and begs for Ray to "make it jump." Billy watches Ray as he wheelies out of his slow-moving chair, and Brian howls with happiness. Billy feels warm and wonders if he and Ray might have a "moment" as Ray pulls around towards Billy, but Ray instead throws a cold, dismissive look at his son.

At dinner later, Ray again cranks up the volume on the TV, and Denise, Kathryn, and Patty argue about the home equity loan. When Denise breaks down crying, Billy assures her that everything will be fine. When Billy goes to bed later, he feels much older than nineteen. He wakes up horribly hungover, masturbates, packs his things, and joins his family. Denise and the girls look stricken over breakfast as Billy explains where he's off to next. Kathryn tells Billy to compliment Beyoncé when he meets her, and Denise begins to cry. Billy feels as though he has to be strong as he watches Patty tear up too.

Denise suggests that maybe someone should wake Ray, but Billy shrugs. Brian sleepily pads into the kitchen and climbs into Patty's lap, and his presence seems to calm everyone. Billy watches the clocks move towards 7:00am, at which point everyone notices a black car pulling into the driveway. Denise begins sobbing at the sink, Kathryn runs to the door, and somehow, Billy ends up holding Brian. As Billy says goodbye to Denise and Patty, he feels as though Brian muffles some of the shock and pain. When he hands Brian back to Patty, he tells her to never let Brian join the Army. Kathryn says goodbye to Billy at the car and closes the door after him. Once in the car, Billy feels as though he's melting. He looks back and sees Ray watching, but Billy doesn't know how to interpret Ray's gaze.

7. WE ARE ALL AMERICANS HERE

Back at the **Texas Stadium**, Billy thinks that if he were to add up the wealth of every person he's ever known, that number would still be less than Norman Oglesby's net worth. Norm owns the Cowboys, and even Sykes, who spent much of the Victory Tour preparing to taunt Norm for questionable decisions about players, is nothing but polite. The Bravos meet Norm in a chilly, bare room filled with about two hundred rich guests. Billy feels as though this is a historic event in his life. He's shocked that Norm in real life doesn't match the version of Norm he's seen on TV, though he reasons that the joint he just smoked is probably making this disconnect worse.

As a toddler, Brian has nothing to do with the pain and suffering that Ray has felt as a result of his strokes, which makes Brian the only "safe" family member for Ray to have a relationship with. When Ray dismisses Billy and continues to play with his grandson, it shows that Ray does have the capability of being warm and loving—he just cannot show that to someone who has witnessed his great embarrassment and understood it.



This subpar dinner and sad breakfast compared to the rest of Billy's visit shows that the comfort of home has dissolved over Billy's twenty-four-hour visit. Now that he's older and has seen through changed eyes how his family functions, he's no longer able to idealize any of his family members.



After his time at home, Billy understands and seems to accept that Ray isn't a useful or necessary part of his idea of family anymore. When he tells Patty to not let Brian join the Army, it shows that Billy is fully aware of how strange, absurd, and difficult military service is for the service member's family. It's also a way of showing loyalty to Patty, as he doesn't want her to have to go through the pain he sees Denise experiencing now.



The fact that Sykes apparently has so many issues with Norm and is still overwhelmingly polite to him tells the reader that Norm is an exceptionally powerful man, primarily because of his wealth. In addition, Norm looks different in real life than he does on television, echoing Billy's earlier observation about the stadium itself.



Norm goes down the line of Bravos, shaking hands, and when he finally gets to Billy, Billy feels as though he's levitating. He can barely concentrate on Norm's words as Norm notes that Billy is from Texas, which, according to Norm, explains Billy's medals. Norm insists that Billy is now part of a famous fighting Texas tradition stemming back to the Alamo, and Billy listens to the crowd laugh. As Norm addresses the crowd, Billy studies Norm's face, which has been contorted from many years of plastic surgery into something that doesn't necessarily look good or bad—just expensive. When Norm says that Bravo has given America back its pride, Billy is perplexed, but he can't argue.

Norm introduces the Bravos to his wife and the rest of his family. After, the rest of the guests mob Bravo Squad to thank them for their service. One couple asks Billy about meeting George and Laura Bush, and Billy remembers that he half-expected President Bush to act embarrassed or ashamed for the war. The man mentions that the president recently hosted them at a state dinner with Prince Charles, and he and Charles talked about hunting.

Billy feels especially poor among the rich people in the room, but he realizes that everyone here is American. He feels envious that these people think that war is a mere talking point, he and thinks back to Shroom's aphorisms about fear. Shroom said that fear guides everything, and Billy thinks about how all of this played out in the platoon—Dime is fearless, while other soldiers giggle or wet themselves from fear. As hard as Billy tries to steer the conversations away from the war, everyone wants to talk about the war as though it's an easily solvable problem.

Billy drifts in and out of the conversation until a Cowboys executive offers to get Billy another Coke. The man introduces himself as Mr. Bill Jones, and Billy notices that he's carrying a weapon. This fills Billy with rage and fear. Offering to talk about something other than politics, Mr. Jones leads Billy to the bar and has the bartender put Jack Daniel's in Billy's soda. Billy asks Mr. Jones if he might be able to procure some **Advil**, and Mr. Jones sends a text. As he does, Billy tries not to gawk at the massive Super Bowl rings on his fingers.

For Billy, it's absurd to say that Bravo gave America back its pride—Shroom's death and Lake's injuries are horrific reminders that Bravo wasn't entirely victorious, though people like Norm overwhelmingly gloss over those facts. This shows how individuals who didn't experience the firefight firsthand don't have to grapple with the facts that they don't like. Further, as a rich man, Norm has the power and influence to tell the story he wants to tell—and Billy can't argue because, as a "grunt," he has no power.



When the couple talks about George and Laura Bush as being friends, it indicates that the couple is exceptionally wealthy and powerful. Simply meeting President Bush isn't enough to afford Billy any power. In addition, it is apparent that Bush didn't offer Bravo much in the way of hospitality or understanding, which suggests that he doesn't view Bravo as human in the same way he thinks about this couple.



When Billy feels out of place among his fellow Americans, he recognizes that the rhetoric of many politicians addresses Americans as a homogenous group. This is a tactic to try to create a sense of unity and sell the war as being good for everyone. These people haven't experienced fear like Billy has, which allows them to talk about the war flippantly.



Mr. Jones's gun and Super Bowl rings signal that he's an exceptionally powerful and wealthy man. When he notices that Mr. Jones carries a gun, Billy is angry, which points to his intimate and painful familiarity with what a gun can do. Billy's anger also suggests that he thinks that toting a gun without intensive military training is a liability, not a help.



Once Billy gets his drink, he scans the crowd. Noticing how thick the crowd is around Norm, Billy decides to watch and see what he can learn. Billy observes that Norm is a successful schmoozer but also seems to be working very hard—and watching him work the crowd is almost painful. Billy notices the same thing is true for the rest of Norm's family. Mr. Jones tells Billy that someone is bringing **Advil** for him.

Suddenly feeling fearless, Billy asks Mr. Jones how a business as large as the Cowboys even works. Specifically, Billy wants to know where the money comes from to build the **stadium** and pay the players. Mr. Jones patiently says that it has to do with "leverage relative to cash flow," which means nothing to Billy. Mr. Jones attempts to explain what can be done with enough leverage. Billy is struck that he's having a conversation like this, even though he knows he's not following at all. Eventually, Mr. Jones steps away, and Billy thinks that the Army has been a crash course in just how big the world is. He wonders if there's a math-based parallel world where money exists. Billy reasons that money is both the realest and most ephemeral thing in the world.

Billy wonders how he could learn about business but knows he doesn't want to go back to school. Dime catches Billy off guard and twists Billy's nipple before ordering himself a soda. Billy asks Dime what leverage is, and Dime explains that it's essentially using other people's money and accruing debt. Dime changes the subject and says that Norm is very interested in Albert and the movie business. Dime and Billy watch Mr. Jones work a crowd, and Billy angrily declares that only a jerk would carry a weapon at a football game. Dime starts to laugh but suddenly turns angry when he smells Billy's alcohol. After berating Billy for drinking, Dime insists that he needs Billy to help keep the rest of Bravo alive. Billy feels as though he'd rather die than disappoint Dime.

A-bort and Crack approach Billy minutes later with crazed looks, insisting that they want to have sex with Norm's wife. Mango shows up as Billy primly calls the others rude and gross, and the others begin betting on whether or not A-Bort or Crack will be successful. Suddenly, a Cowboys executive approaches, and the Bravos return to their good old American boy personas. The executive sets down a stack of *Time* magazines for the Bravos to sign, which, by now, is a common occurrence. Billy notes that the soldier on the cover isn't even a Bravo. The six-page article describes the battle on the Al-Ansakar Canal in detail.

By noticing how socializing doesn't come easily to Norm, Billy humanizes Norm and makes him easier to empathize with and engage with as a human, not as a powerful symbol for the Cowboys. Mr. Jones seems to have made a similar observation about Billy—getting him a drink and Advil is recognition that Billy is human, not just a symbol for the war.



This conversation confirms for Billy that the business world of the rich and powerful is beyond him. It also shows him how the Army has allowed him to see the world for what it really is—unlike many Americans at home, Billy has seen these massive structures of the world, as well as dire poverty. He understands that math and big business control wealth and poverty, but he still finds money confusing and absurd, just like the war.



As Billy will soon realize, the only other way to learn about business (besides going to school) is by getting directly involved in it. However, it's unlikely that Billy would be able to secure a job offer from one of the rich businessmen at the game. Offering a job to Billy would be a real, substantial way for civilians to support the troops. However, most civilians prefer to offer empty words of thanks for Billy's service rather than actually helping him. In addition, Billy's whirlwind of emotions about Dime reinforces Shroom's assertion that Dime is a "master of the psyche." Dime evidently knows how to ensure loyalty from his men and keep them on their toes, both of which will keep the men alive in battle.



The fact that Time doesn't even feature a Bravo on the cover illustrates how those at home view soldiers and the war: the soldiers themselves are interchangeable, and Bravo is a faceless mass of soldiers, not a distinct group of ten men. Further, the fact that the article is six pages and is extremely detailed shows that public wants to immerse themselves in the excitement of the war from the safety of their homes and not think about how the war adversely affects those involved.



The Bravos throw back a round of Jack and Cokes before Josh rounds up the men and briefs them on their upcoming press conference. He assures them that there will be cheerleaders, and that Trisha has a role for them at halftime, but also explains that Trisha is Norm's daughter. Finally, Norm arrives to lead the Bravos to the press conference. Billy's headache persists, and he wishes Josh could find him some **Advil**.

When Norm opens the door into the press conference room, the cheerleaders start up a chant praising the soldiers. As Norm urges the reporters to stand and applaud for Bravo Squad, Billy feels as though the war has reached a new level of crazy. Billy feels as though Norm views the Bravos as a means to boost the Cowboys brand. After the cheerleaders finish another cheer, Norm introduces Bravo Squad as "America's best," which sends the cheerleaders into another chant. Billy wonders what it's like to be a cheerleader, who only cheers for others and never gets cheered for in return.

Norm offers a quick rundown of the Bravos' heroic exploits in Iraq while Billy studies the cheerleaders. Most look like college girls, and Billy has to remind himself to not look like a creep. Norm continues to expound upon the evil of the terrorists, and Billy wonders if Norm will ever run for office. Norm's speaking style is very political and artificial, and he's very much a performer. Billy realizes he only began to notice that politicians speak this way after he spent time in Iraq.

As Billy continues to look down the line of cheerleaders, one, a short strawberry blonde, returns his gaze and smiles at him. Billy turns back to Norm for a minute before looking back at the cheerleader. She winks at him, and Billy loses himself in a fantasy of falling in love with her, getting married, and having babies. Meanwhile, Norm finally allows the press to ask Bravo questions. Questions range from the Bravos' favorite US cities to their most unusual mission in Iraq. When asked, Dime carefully says that the American soldiers are making a difference for the better in some places. Billy continues to lock eyes with the cheerleader.

Even if Mr. Jones attempted to acknowledge Billy's humanity, he and Josh still fail to fully recognize Billy as a human with needs and a headache, since procuring Advil for him seems to be a low priority. Once again, Billy is perceived as a prop rather than a human.



Billy conceptualizes the cheerleaders as being in a similar role as the soldiers: both support a bigger entity (the Cowboys and America, respectively) and per his assessment, neither are given the respect they deserve. Both are dehumanized and used as props to support these larger ideas, and they have little power to make any real impact or change.



Again, the novel makes a direct connection between existing in Iraq and understanding that politicians (and powerful people in general) speak to entertain and curry favor, not to actually say anything truthful or useful. This suggests that civilians who don't have Billy's firsthand experience won't necessarily pick up on this, as they're immersed in the Complex and don't realize that the politicians are performing.



Remember that Billy has just visited home and experienced the heartache of his dysfunctional family situation. His daydreams about the cheerleader show that he desperately wants to create a stable, loving family of his own. His daydreams are also an escape from having to think about war during the press conference.



When someone asks about how it was meeting President Bush, Dime describes him as easy to talk to. The rest of Bravo looks blank, as Dime's contempt for Bush is well known. Reporters ask about food, religion, and the possibility of a Bravo movie, and finally, they ask what "inspired" Bravo's heroics at the Al-Ansakar Canal. Dime delegates the question to Billy, who manages to mumble something about knowing he needed to save Shroom and his training kicking in. The reporters are apparently intent on getting Billy to admit that he shot the insurgents who tried to capture Shroom, and when he finally gives in, the room erupts. Billy believes the reporters missed the point but agrees that he'll surely think about Shroom during the national anthem later.

For the reporters, hearing Billy say that he killed a "bad guy" is thrilling and supports their perception of the war as being exciting and heroic. For Billy, killing an insurgent is an unfortunate fact he'd rather not think about. Billy indicates that what happened on the Canal wasn't guided by emotion or reason; it was reflex guided by intensive military training. The reporters, on the other hand, want to hear about an emotional and thought-out experience, as if combat were a movie rather than a reality.



8. DRY-HUMPING FOR THE LORD

The narrator explains that the next morning, a photograph of A-bort surrounded by three cheerleaders will run in the *Dallas Morning News*. A-bort's first name is spelled wrong, which earns him a new nickname, and he looks like a prop amongst the cheerleaders. The narrator notes that the photo will make Billy realize that the twenty-two-year-old A-bort is also just a kid like Billy. The narrator says that the photo will make Billy anxious.

A-bort's photo in the newspaper with the cheerleaders seems to be more about publicity for the Cowboys than recognition for the soldiers. In addition, the newspaper spells his name wrong, which is dehumanizing and shows that the reports don't actually care about A-bort as a person.



After the press conference ends, groups of three cheerleaders latch onto each Bravo. Billy doesn't want to touch them, but they get close to him anyway. He finds their makeup disappointing but decides they're beautiful anyway. The cheerleaders praise Billy's answers to the reporters' questions, and Billy feels as though he wants to ask one of them to marry him. The girls tell him about a service trip they took to Iraq and insist that they feel way more appreciative of soldiers. They also seem to stare down the media men, though Billy understands that this entire setup is fake and absurd. He resents the reporters and thinks that seeing them makes him glad he's a soldier.

Again, Billy thinks of an intimate romantic relationship as an escape from the horrors of the war. It also reinforces Billy's humanity, as he desires love and connection like anyone else. The cheerleaders' service trip to Iraq couldn't actually provide them the experience that Billy and other soldiers live every day, showing that just being in Iraq isn't enough to give someone a full understanding of the war and what it's like to be a soldier.



Billy spots "his" cheerleader with Sykes and asks the surrounding cheerleaders if a girl needs to be single to be a cheerleader. They crisply tell him no, but before Billy can ask about his cheerleader, the reporters gather Bravo Squad and Norm together for a photo. As the cameras flash, Norm evades questions about possibly building a new **stadium**. Billy muses that the reporters must know that the Bravos are being used to promote the Cowboys. As he watches Mr. Jones discuss the game with someone, Billy is surprised to realize that he is still offended by Mr. Jones's gun. He finds it presumptuous.

Billy's continued offense at Mr. Jones's gun comes down to Billy's understanding that a gun gives a person an inordinate amount of power over the people around him—whether or not that person even uses the gun. The gun essentially elevates Mr. Jones to a superhuman level, while making all the other attendees at the game vulnerable.



Deciding he needs a minute to himself, Billy leans up against the wall. Several reporters approach him and ask if he's thought of writing a book. They offer to ghostwrite for Billy, but Billy instead answers questions about his own reading. When the reporters ask about drug use, Billy points out that at nineteen, he can't even buy beer. As they chatter on, Billy becomes aware of his cheerleader standing next to him. He gives the reporters his email address so that they'll leave, and he finally turns to the cheerleader. She introduces herself as Faison and explains that her grandmother was Miss Stovall in 1937. Billy loses himself listening to her talk about working to pay for school.

Faison compliments Billy's interview and tells him about what it's like being a cheerleader. She claims that most of what the cheerleaders do is service work and insists that it's very enriching. She pauses before asking Billy if he's a Christian. Billy turns away before saying that he's searching, and he deflects her other questions about his spirituality. Faison insists that God wanted them to meet today. Billy sighs and decides it must be true. As Faison begins to explain how she came to Jesus, Billy takes her hand and leads her into the small space between the backdrop curtain and the wall.

Slowly, Billy leans in and kisses Faison. They kiss energetically, Faison occasionally coming up for air and whispering that she could get kicked off the squad for this. Billy presses his pelvis into Faison's, and she wraps her legs around his waist. She orgasms quickly, puts her feet back on the ground, and leans into Billy. With tears in her eyes, she whispers that she's never moved this fast with someone, but she knows it's not wrong. When she asks Billy his age, he lies and says he's twenty-one. She insists he has an old soul, a line that Billy thinks is from a movie.

Billy hears the voices from the press conference moving away, signaling the end of his time with Faison. She explains quietly that she's not a virgin but she's not casual about sex. Billy assures her that he's the same way and doesn't mention that he's a virgin. Faison goes on, rambling about commitment and how long it takes to form a bond. Billy whispers that he'd like to see Faison when he gets back, and Faison is shocked to hear that Bravo has to return to Iraq. A voice calls for the cheerleaders, and Faison instructs Billy to find her at the twenty-yard line.

A book, especially one that's ghostwritten by reporters, would only feed the Fantasy Industrial Complex and further sensationalize the war and Billy's experience of it. The reporters continue to push the idea of the book, revealing that they view Billy as a way to make money. In addition, while the exchange about drugs and alcohol may be the reporters' attempt to humanize Billy, they may actually be looking for something scandalous to write about rather than caring about Billy's own health and safety.



Billy's avoidance suggests that he doesn't find comfort in Christianity or religion, though his (somewhat reluctant) agreement that God wanted him to meet Faison shows that Billy is looking for meaning in the world. In addition, Faison's words about religion are rendered in the same visual way as the words about the war, perhaps suggesting that the novel treats war and religion as similarly absurd and meaningless.



The line from a movie shows how insidious the Fantasy Industrial Complex is: as fictional lines make their way into real-life conversations, it blurs the distinction between fiction and reality. Interestingly, when Billy lies about his age, it's an attempt to make himself seem bigger, better, and more heroic than he feels at nineteen—something that the novel has suggested is in direct opposition to true intimacy, foreshadowing that Billy and Faison's romance won't work out.



Faison's shock that Bravo will return to Iraq suggests that, like Hector, she thought the government took better care of its soldiers, which is further evidence that she has bought into the Fantasy Industrial Complex. She believes the war is something logical, thinking that Billy could simply earn the right to not go back.



9. JAMIE LEE CURTIS MADE A SHITTY MOVIE

Billy spends the next half hour unaware of his surroundings, and finally arrives at the football field. Mango declares that it's going to snow, and everyone else chatters about the movie. Apparently, Norm himself is interested in funding the film. Billy realizes that films get made when someone is able to convince everyone else that the film *will* get made, which he thinks is a questionable business model. As Albert talks on his phone on one side of Bravo, and Norm conducts his own phone call on the other side, Lodis and Crack discuss what they'll buy with their money and who will play them in the movie. Crack whines that if Norm really wants to support the troops, he'd fund the film.

Billy desperately wants to ask Dime for advice regarding what happened with Faison, but Dime is in a funk. Billy wonders if what happened was even real, but he notices that his back hurts and strands of her hair are stuck to his shoulders. He decides he needs to know how to make it work with Faison. Josh interrupts Billy's reverie by leading several cheerleaders over to them. Josh pulls a bunch of footballs out of a duffel bag and explains that Bravo is to hold the footballs during the shoot. When Bravo asks Josh about halftime, Josh still doesn't have any information. They ask that he not make them do anything lame or hard.

Lodis complains about the cold wind, and Day bullies Josh into walking past Norm and listening in on Norm's conversation. When Josh returns, he has disappointing news: Norm is talking about football, not the movie. Billy picks up a football, tosses it to Dime, and runs. Billy manages to catch the ball, throw it back to Dime, and run further into the end zone. As Dime and Billy throw the ball back and forth, cheers rise up from the end zone crowd. Billy feels good and in control. As he pivots to throw the ball back, he sees three footballs sailing towards him.

Mango, Lodis, Sykes, Crack, and A-bort join in, and Bravo plays a loose version of tackle football with no rules, laughing the entire time. Billy thinks that if football were always like this, it'd be a fantastic sport, but rules have ruined it. He considers how rules hide the fact that men and boys just want to run and knock into each other. He realizes that the Army does basically the same thing of rationalizing violence.

Billy doesn't like how in Hollywood business model, getting something done hinges on convincing others that there's no choice but to do it. Incidentally, this is precisely how the war in Iraq was sold to the American public. This draws a very overt connection between Hollywood and politics, suggesting that politics is as much a performance and an effort to sell as the Hollywood film industry is.



Just like not having Advil for Billy, not having any information about the halftime show is one more way that the Cowboys staff shows Bravo that they are a low priority. In this instance, it seems that the staff doesn't care enough about Bravo to give them a heads up about something that will go on national television. Instead, the Bravos are toted around as props.



Billy doesn't have to say much of anything to communicate his intentions to Dime, which shows how close the bond is between the Bravos, and how that bond can translate into a number of different areas. Meanwhile, Norm's conversation about football rather than Bravo's movie tells the reader where Norm's interests truly lie.



Here, Billy connects rules and regulations to the way in which both football and the military rationalize violence and hide the fact that they are exceedingly dangerous pursuits.



Several large men in a golf cart, all wearing Cowboys coats, drive up and yell at Bravo to get off their field. The Bravos mock the men and run off the field as fans boo in the end zone. As two women with pinched faces arrange the Bravos, Norm tells Dime that he questions where Hollywood's loyalties lie, given that they won't make films that "reflect what America's really all about." They agree that setting Bravo's story in World War II is silly.

As the cameras roll, Dime speaks his line, wishing Americans a happy Thanksgiving and then abandoning the script to address the troops in the field. The Bravos laugh, but the directors aren't pleased. Dime again veers off of the script for the second take. Lodis and Sykes laugh during the third, and a fan screams at them during the fourth. The directors call a break, and Billy backs into a huddle of three cheerleaders. They tell him that Faison wasn't included in the shoot because she's new, but the conversation dies after they ask about Billy's Silver Star, and he recites the official spiel as to how one earns it.

The directors call everyone back for a fifth take, but the cameras glitch. While they wait, Billy listens to Dime and Norm discuss Albert and the film. Norm mentions that he thinks Hilary Swank's involvement is "nutty," and he mentions a movie that she was in with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Dime corrects him, noting that the particular movie featured Jamie Lee Curtis, not Hilary Swank. Norm insists the movie was still bad. Billy watches Albert put his phone away and wishes Albert had more at stake in the film. The fifth take goes smoothly, and Norm instructs the Bravos to hang onto their footballs so that they can get some "ink."

10. XXL

Billy is awed by the sheer size of the football players. He thinks that America is the only place where football could flourish, given its immense food resources to fuel these massive people. He watches one player pour an entire box of cereal and a gallon of milk into a mixing bowl. When Norm introduces Bravo, the team applauds, but they seem barely interested in the soldiers. Norm asks Coach Tuttle if the soldiers can get some autographs, and Tuttle begrudgingly agrees.

Billy hangs back, afraid to even look at the football players. He feels small and exposed, and all of the padding the players wear depresses Billy. The players themselves don't look as though they want to be bothered as they get dressed, which Billy understands. He feels weird not getting autographs, so he goes down the line. Most of the players barely look up as they sign, and Billy watches two extremely ill children get autographs as well.

Here, Norm tries to position himself as a good old American boy who wholeheartedly supports the troops, though it's worth remembering Crack's earlier comment that if Norm wanted to support the troops, he'd fund the film immediately. This shows that Norm might not be as invested as the Bravos hope he is, since he hasn't yet committed even though he voices support for the film.



By going off script, Dime attempts to circumvent some of the Fantasy Industrial Complex and show soldiers in Iraq that someone is aware of what's going on. When the cheerleaders lose interest in Billy, it reinforces the idea that those at home aren't particularly interested in the specifics of the military. They want to hear a dramatic story, not boring bureaucracy, which is really how Silver Stars get distributed.



Billy recognizes that Albert still doesn't have anything but money and a two-week relationship with the Bravos at stake in the movie. Albert is truly a representation of the Complex, as he hopes to capitalize on the drama of the Bravos' story to earn money, regardless of how the story changes (by casting Hilary Swank, for example).



An autograph is only valuable because the person it's attached to is deemed valuable. It's telling, then, that the Bravos get the players' autographs, not the other way around, despite the fact that many characters talk about supporting the troops and call them heroes.



At this point in the war, soldiers were overwhelmingly under-armored, which is a sharp contrast from the heavily padded football players and reflects where Americans' priorities lie. The way the players engage with the children suggests that the players view themselves as superhuman, above acknowledging anyone else's humanity.



When Billy gets to Octavian Spurgeon—a hulking black man with delicate cheekbones—Octavian greets Billy awkwardly. The player is silent for a moment and then starts to ask Billy about Iraq. Two other players gather as Octavian asks what it feels like to kill people. Billy thinks that he'll have to reckon with that question if he survives the war, but he says it doesn't feel like anything. Several more players join the conversation as Octavian asks what Billy carries. Billy explains that it depends on what he's doing and lists several guns. Players ask about AK-47s and what they do to the body, and they ask the same about several other high-power automatic weapons. Billy laughs, though it isn't funny, as he explains that the automatic weapons destroy the body. The players murmur like they're eating something sweet, and Billy excuses himself.

Billy finds Dime, whose football still sports no autographs. He tells Dime that the players aren't sane, which makes Dime laugh, and then tells Dime what happened with Faison. Dime laughs but congratulates Billy. Billy asks what he can do to not lose Faison, and Dime insists that Faison was just doing a nice thing for Billy. He says that if Billy can get her email address, that'll be his only chance.

An equipment manager named Ennis introduces himself and then asks Billy and Dime if they'd like a tour of the equipment room. Ennis asks how the Bravos' visit has been thus far, assuring Dime that the Cowboys try to take care of their "special guests." The equipment room is as large as an airplane hangar and filled with cabinets and shelves. As Ennis leads them through the room, he points out the space-age fabrics and materials. There's an entire wall of shoes of different types and treads, twelve styles of shoulder pads, and individualized options for mouth guards in the helmets. Ennis also points out the thousands of packs of chewing gum, and cold-weather thermal gear.

Dime asks about steroids, but Ennis ignores him and leads them to the footballs and the coaches' equipment. He explains that it takes two semis to travel for away games. By the end of the tour, Billy's headache is even worse from the plastic and leather fumes of the room. He feels as though he doesn't understand what he's seen, but it's definitely made him sick. Ennis mentions that he was in the Army in the early 1960s but narrowly missed going to Vietnam. He thanks Dime and Billy for their service, and Billy asks Ennis if he has any **Advil**. Ennis explains they have tons, but he could lose his job for giving Billy some.

Octavian's preoccupation with weapons and killing people highlights how he has the privilege of engaging with the war as though it's an interesting hobby, not a horrifying reality. It also shows that he dehumanizes the enemy, though Billy must do the same in order to compartmentalize and do his job. This is why his earlier realization about Brian being the same age as the innocent Iraqi children who are killed in war was so shocking for him—it forced him to stop compartmentalizing and understand that the enemies are people too.



By refusing to get autographs, Dime refuses to play into the Complex that affords more attention and care to professional sports players than to soldiers on the front. In addition, Dime steps into the role of a mentor figure and gives Billy a reality check about sustaining a relationship with Faison. He acknowledges that this is a real-life situation, not fantasy.



Again, compared to the under-armored soldiers in Iraq, the equipment room is a rude indication of what America truly values and where it spends its money. The "space-age" materials show that these materials are scientifically tested and developed, indicating that a great deal of care and money went into their production. All of this coalesces to create the sense that the soldiers don't matter as much as football players.



Even though Ennis was a soldier himself, he still cannot bring himself to acknowledge Billy's humanity by providing him with medicine. The equipment room makes Billy feel sick because it shows plainly just how much work and expense goes into creating the media spectacle that is professional football. Meanwhile, nobody seems willing to fund a movie about a true story in the Iraq war.



Dime asks Ennis to autograph his ball. Ennis tries to refuse, but when Dime insists that Ennis runs the team, he finally gives in. This is Dime's only autograph. Back in the locker room, Norm stands on a chair and addresses the team. Billy notices that the players are some of the best-cared-for humans and thinks that they should be sent to Iraq. They'd terrify the insurgents, and the insurgents wouldn't stand a chance. Norm asks the players to channel the determination of the Bravos, which riles the players.

The Cowboys' pastor leads the players in prayer, and Billy remembers that Shroom said the Bible is just a compilation of Sumerian legends. Billy finds it difficult to pray but finds comfort in the fact that there were ancient civilizations well before Christian ones. Shroom never got to tell Billy who the Sumerians were.

Octavian Spurgeon summons Billy to his locker, where several other players are gathered. Octavian says that they'd like to come to Iraq, ride with the Bravos for a week, and shoot "Muslim freaks." Billy tries to imagine what's in Octavian's head, but he says simply that it doesn't work that way. Octavian insists that they'd help for free, but Billy says that the Army would love for Octavian to join up—then he'd get to do "extreme things." The players snort, and Octavian insists that they have jobs with contracts they can't break. The players laugh, and Billy turns to follow Mango out of the locker room.

11. THIS IS EVERYTHING THERE IS

Billy decides to give his ball away as he follows Norm and the other Bravos through the crowds. He scans the masses for a "little redneck kid" that reminds him of himself and finally spots a twitchy boy wearing only a hoodie. Billy is infuriated that the boy's parents took him to a football game instead of buying him a winter coat. When Billy approaches he boy, the boy can barely speak. Billy compliments the boy's name, gives him the ball, and walks away without looking back. Mango is shocked, but soon gives his ball to a passing child too. He notes that the ball could be worth \$1000 if the Cowboys win the Super Bowl, but they decide that's not going to happen.

Contrary to what Dime says, Ennis does clearly run the Cowboys, and his signature is worthless compared to the players' signatures. This shows again that people like Ennis, soldiers, and cheerleaders, aren't afforded the same kind of respect as the entities that they support.



In the preface, Fountain highlighted how "news that stays news." Here, that idea gives Billy comfort, as the Bible tells stories that are broadly applicable and ancient (and therefore, had been news long before they made it into the Bible).



Again, Octavian clearly dehumanizes the Iraqis and glorifies the violence of the war. For him, war is something to pick up and put down. When told that he'd need to experience it like a soldier or not at all (which would mean giving up his privilege and wealth as a player), Octavian shows he thinks very little of the soldiers and what they do.



By giving his ball away, Billy chooses to simply remove himself from the system that affords those with money the most power. This sets up the precedent that Billy is willing to forego money if doing so aligns with his principles—or if taking or keeping the money makes him sick like the locker and equipment rooms did. His observation about the parents purchasing game tickets versus a winter coat illustrates the power of the Complex, as it values these commercial experiences over comfort (or even physical health).



The Bravos have heard nothing about halftime, which riles them up. They decide to get drunk, but Billy thinks of Faison and decides to only get buzzed. Norm invites Bravo Squad to watch the kickoff from his private box, and the guests already in the box applaud when Bravo enters. Billy feels the "money vibe" as he takes in the bars, buffets, and waiters. Bravo heads for the bar as Norm gives yet another speech thanking Bravo for their service. The guests listen intently, and Billy wonders what combination of birth, education, money, and social skills allows these people to look like these do.

An old man waves Billy over and introduces himself as March Hawey. Hawey immediately begins talking about viewing the footage on the news and even asks his wife to tell Billy how affected he was by the footage. Hawey says that watching it was cathartic and a morale boost, and the gathering crowd nods in agreement. Hawey leans in and asks Billy if it's getting better in Iraq. Billy answers noncommittally, and Hawey continues. He says he fully supports the war and that President Bush (whom he's known since Bush was a boy) is a fine man, but the people around Bush are making a mess of the war.

Hawey asks Billy if he was scared, and Billy says that he was, but he didn't have time to think about it. The crowd seems to want more, so Billy repeats a Dime-ism: if you have enough ammo, you'll probably be fine. The crowd laughs, and even though Billy didn't technically lie, he feels dirty like he did. He looks around at the crowd in the box and focuses on Dime.

Billy thinks back to how Shroom spoke about Dime as being all-knowing and exceptionally smart. Dime was one for getting out and walking in Iraq for the sole purpose of gaining knowledge, even if doing so was exceptionally dangerous. One day, a group of teenage boys approached the walking soldiers and yelled, "give me my pocket." When Dime and Shroom figured out that the boys wanted money, Dime laughed and taught the boys how to properly demand money in English. The boys thanked Dime and walked away, yelling, "give me five dollars beech!"

Back in Norm's private box, Billy listens to Hawey say that he thinks it's bad to keep talking about terror on the news. One woman mentions that Cheney surely likes it, and Hawey smiles cryptically and says that he and Cheney are old friends but haven't talked in a while. Someone arrives with a Jack and Coke for Billy. He sips and thinks that everyone here is so sure of the war, and that an abyss separates these people from the *actual* war.

When Billy tries to figure out how these extraordinarily wealthy and powerful people look the way they do, he recognizes that they don't look the way he does—another indication that "Americans" aren't all the same, as politicians' speeches would lead one to believe. The guests' applause is, again, an easy way for them to show their support for the troops and for the war without actually doing anything substantial to help the soldiers.



Again, the way that Hawey talks about viewing the video is wildly different from the way that Billy thinks about experiencing it. Hawey seems to think of the video as entertainment and wholly American. Billy, on the other hand, doesn't feel as though he has the power to tell Hawey, as he previously told Kathryn, that nobody seems to know what's going on in Iraq.



Billy struggles to give Hawey what he wants (and feels bad when he does) because Billy's experience of the war is so different. For Billy, it's real, gruesome, and damaging, while for these people in Norm's box, it's a charming talking point.



This anecdote about teenage boys in Iraq works to humanize the Iraqis for both the soldiers and the reader, reinforcing the idea that the "enemy" is human, and teenage boys exist everywhere. Just as children Brian's age die in the war, teenage boys also die and must suffer the consequences of the conflict.



The way that Hawey talks about Cheney indicates that he's powerful and runs in the same crowd as America's most powerful politicians. This suggests to the reader that Hawey isn't someone to be trusted. Like President Bush, Hawey likely doesn't value soldiers' lives as the lives of actual humans.



Billy listens to the conversations around him until Norm comes up and puts his massive arm around Billy's shoulder. Norm talks about the honor of having such heroes present, and remarks that it's no surprise that a Texan led the way at the Al-Ansakar Canal. Billy blushes. Others take it for modesty, but Billy is miserable as Hawey suggests that Billy will be the next Audie Murphy (a decorated WWII veteran from Texas). Norm mentions that Billy was recommended for a Medal of Honor, but someone at the Pentagon didn't agree. Billy, ashamed, hopes that no Bravos are watching, but he sees Dime and Albert watching and realizes that Dime told Albert about this.

When Norm mentions Billy's Medal of Honor, he does it in such a way as to make it seem as though he believes Billy should've gotten it, especially when he then compares Billy to Audie Murphy. Billy's shame, on the other hand, reminds the reader of just how powerless Billy is to change anything about his situation. He's at the mercy of everyone above him to decide whether he returns to Iraq and whether he's recognized for his service. His shame also shows that Billy does believe the medals mean something, indicating that he, too, has bought into the Complex to some degree.



Finally, Billy escapes to the bar for Coke, and Dime joins him. Dime admits that he told Albert about Billy's Medal, but he won't tell Billy why. Dime tells Billy that March Hawey is "Mr. Swift Boat," and Billy tries to not let on that he didn't know. Dime tells Billy to watch out for him, as men like Hawey are smart and know the true enemies are dissenters at home. He assures Billy that his medals mean nothing to these people and insists that they get to decide who's a real American. Dime leaves, and Billy feels as though his headache is getting worse.

"Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" was a political group that formed during the 2004 election to oppose the John Kerry's run for president. Given that Kerry lost, Hawey was successful—indicating just how powerful Hawey is. He was able to sway an election against a candidate who actually did serve in Vietnam, which is why Dime insists that Hawey can decide who's a hero and who isn't.



A woman excitedly tells Billy that he's on the **Jumbotron** and engages him in conversation about the Victory Tour. She and her husband laugh when Billy says that the airports are the things that stand out the most. She asks about his time in Washington D.C. and is disappointed that Bravo wasn't invited to a formal state dinner. As the conversation swirls around the war and the Iraqi people, Billy mentally checks out and watches other Bravos. He begins to feel as though his headache is just psychological.

Though the woman's "sadness" that Bravo didn't get to attend a state dinner is somewhat absurd, humorous, and indicative of her wealthy, it also makes the point that President Bush didn't exactly do everything in his power to honor Bravo Squad when they visited and received their honors.



People begin shouting for silence as "The Star-Spangled Banner" begins. The Bravos snap to attention as the Cowboys' color guard brings out the flag and the national anthem begins. Billy thinks about Shroom and Lake, but his mind wanders to Faison. He picks her out in the line of cheerleaders, and he almost feels as though the anthem is a love song. Billy moans, and a woman steps towards him and puts her arm around him comfortingly. Her grasp is brittle, and Billy reasons that as a soldier, his body doesn't belong to him.

The woman that grabs Billy seems to think that Billy is moaning because of pride or love for America—a belief that shows again how the American public turns their soldiers into props and dehumanizes them. Though she has no evidence to the contrary, it's telling that the woman doesn't consider the fact that Billy could have a number of other reasons to moan that don't have to do with pride for his country.



Billy observes that Americans sound like drunks at the end of the anthem. A group of older women asks Billy if he's proud, and he thinks that he sure is. However, he also wonders why they play the anthem before these games between the private, for-profit corporations that are the professional football teams.

Billy misses that football games are an encapsulation of American culture as a whole: like the news, football is sensationalized violence, and America's relationship with the game is mediated through television.



Billy finally escapes the women and finds A-bort, Holliday, and Mango watching the field from seats at the front of the box. He joins them, ascertains that they still know nothing about the halftime plans, and watches a few plays. They wonder if they're being rude, and Mango finally declares that football is boring. As he watches, Billy thinks that Mango is right. He feels as though he's sitting in church between plays, but the four manage to order drinks, which helps.

Dime swings into a seat and snarls about there being alcohol in the Bravos' drinks, but Holliday interrupts to say that Mango thinks football is boring. Dime fixes Mango with an angry stare and nearly yells that football is the best sport, while soccer is "fruity," and if Mango wants to watch it, he can go back to Mexico. Mango reminds Dime that he was born in Tucson, but Dime continues his rant until Mango tries to insult the Texans who fought at the Alamo.

Dime asks Billy to point out Faison, and he compliments Billy on his choice. When Dime leaves, he gives Billy the binoculars. Billy trains them on Faison and feels as though he's falling deeply in love with her. Suddenly, March Hawey joins Billy and asks Billy about dove hunting around Stovall. Billy knows nothing about dove hunting and hands over the binoculars at Hawey's request. Billy asks Hawey about his businesses and says he might be interested in business after the Army, assuming he won't be bored. Hawey laughs and says that if a person wants to make money, they need to find something they like and work hard at it.

Hawey continues that business is like a puzzle with a thousand moving parts and tells Billy that a person needs to be an independent thinker and have inner peace to be a successful businessman. He lists the virtues of the capitalist system, stating that it's responsible for "tremendous human progress." Hawey says that self-interest and greed lead to generations constantly getting better and better, and Billy thinks that America has never made more sense. Hawey acts as though he's going to continue his speech but stops when he learns that Billy is only nineteen.

After a moment, Hawey asks Billy to confirm that he was denied a Medal of Honor. Hawey mentions his own brief service, and his thoughts trail off. Billy thinks that all the old men struggle to talk about their service. Hawey finally says he's proud to have met Billy and begins talking about his grandsons. Billy notices Faison on the **Jumbotron** and groans, and Hawey makes approving noises and comments on Norm's "show dogs."

Mango picks up on the fact that for the rich crowd especially, football is barely about watching the game. It's about the spectacle of watching each other, showing off wealth, and getting to chat idly about politics. Meanwhile, the soldiers simply don't know how to exist in such a world and instead find themselves on the fringes of Norm's private box.



Though Dime can't be blamed for wanting his soldiers to stay sober enough to keep up conversations and look acceptable, he's also attempting to force them into the image of the perfect hero that Norm and the others expect. The men's desire to drink shows the reader that they just want to have a good time and be human. The soldiers may also be drinking as a way to cope with all of the uncomfortable situations they're put in at the game.



Bird hunting is historically a rich man's sport, which again shows just how wealthy and powerful Hawey is. The fact that Billy doesn't even know that dove hunting is good around Stovall (or even that dove hunting existed) shows the degree to which Billy is shut out from that kind of wealth and privilege, even when it exists in his own backyard.



Though Billy thinks Hawey's description of capitalism makes sense, it's also worth noting that capitalism is also the reason why Billy feels as though he'll never be able to catch up to Hawey and become rich. By encouraging competition, capitalism makes sure that men like Hawey are continually rewarded for their successes and makes it harder for individuals like Billy to achieve success.



Hawey's comment about Faison reinforces the fact that the cheerleaders are there as supporters: they support the players in theory, but they also support men like Hawey who want to look at beautiful women. In this way, the cheerleaders become less than human, especially on the Jumbotron. There, they exist for visual consumption only.



12. BILLY AND MANGO ARE OUT FOR A WALK

After the first quarter, Norm asks Bravo to leave the box to make room for the Mexican ambassador. Josh leads them back to their seats in the drizzle, and the men pull out their phones and tobacco. Billy has a text from Kathryn and one from Pastor Rick. Billy remembers meeting Pastor Rick. After a rally, Billy sought him out for guidance about Shroom's death. Billy had spilled out all of his feelings about Shroom's death, but later, Billy couldn't remember anything Pastor Rick had said. Now, the man won't leave Billy alone, and Billy feels as though it must give Pastor Rick credibility to have a relationship with an active soldier.

Mango struggles to settle as Billy fields well wishes from citizens from his aisle seat. Billy wonders what he believes in and sends up a "prayer" for Lake, Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld. He prays that the war is about the oil and the Humvees will get armor, and he prays that Shroom has eternal life in heaven, even if he's dead on earth. Billy suddenly sits up and tries to concentrate on the game. He watches the **Jumbotron** and wonders if the game is really about advertising, not the game itself. He thinks that America is a nightmare of superabundance. As he thinks back to Ennis and the equipment room, he decides that war works the same way: the winner is the one who can manufacture the most death.

Billy tells Mango to come with him to meet his girlfriend. Mango is confused but happily follows. Billy observes the people shopping and thinks that America is a mall with a country attached. He leads Mango down a tunnel, which confuses Mango until Billy says his girlfriend is a cheerleader. Mango screams. When they reach the railing near the ground, Faison notices them and screams. Billy introduces Mango and tells Faison they saw her on the **Jumbotron**. Faison is thrilled, which pains Billy, as he understands she desperately wants to be famous. He mimics one of her steps, and she and Mango laugh. Billy feels as though he's never been happier.

Security guards approach Billy and Mango and ask them to leave. Billy gives them a hard time, but the security guards persist and claim that the people in the front row cannot have their views blocked. Billy feels as though he'd gladly kill the guards, but the thought passes and he and Mango leave. As they do, Faison calls that she'll see them on the field at halftime. Mango is in awe that Billy wooed a cheerleader, and he insists that even if Faison is a Christian girl, she'll definitely be up for sex. He says that if they don't have sex before Billy leaves, she'll forget about him.

Billy recognizes that Pastor Rick only wanted to use Billy to gain power through association with the war. Further, although Pastor Rick would like to think he's helping Billy, his "help" is just as effective as so many others' feeble "support the troops" sentiments. Billy is evidently still struggling to process Shroom's death even after his talk with Pastor Rick, suggesting that Pastor Rick only pretended to acknowledge Billy's humanity and emotions.



The comment about the Humvees is a nod to the fact that soldiers in Iraq at this time were severely under-armored, especially in terms of their vehicles. Armoring the vehicles as well as the Cowboys pad their players would be a far better way to support the troops than anything else. Billy shows that he's trying to not buy into the Fantasy Industrial Complex by demonstrating that he realizes the war isn't righteous.



Billy finds Faison's desire to be famous indicative of her desire to be an intrinsic part of the media that supports the Fantasy Industrial Complex. This suggests that Faison and Billy have very different desires and foreshadows the impending end of their short-lived relationship.



Billy's sudden desire to be violent indicates that he's having a difficult time adjusting to being in these situations that are so different from life in Iraq. Again, the fact that he's struggling so much shows how poorly Norm is treating his guests. By forcing them into these situations that mess with their emotions and mental states, Norm shows that he doesn't understand that this might be difficult for a combat soldier.



Billy's phone rings. He picks up A-bort's call and tells A-bort that he and Mango went for a walk. A-bort relays that Dime wants them back immediately, and after a pause, A-bort says in a hushed voice that Billy doesn't want to know what halftime entails.

Halftime shows are about creating a spectacle to jazz up viewers and feed the "fantasy" part of the Complex, suggesting that the show will have very little to do with reality.



13. RAPED BY ANGELS

Billy knows halftime isn't going to go well when Lodis begins slurring his words and has no idea where he is. Billy tries to explain that they're down on the field getting ready to run a drill. He thinks he needs to tell Dime that they can't do this, but Dime is on the other side of the formation with a marching band in between them for symmetry's sake. Billy feels as though they're preparing to march into battle. Billy watches the high school marching bands get into formation and thinks that their innocent baby faces make him feel old.

The mention that Bravo is split in half for the sake of symmetry makes it clear that halftime is about spectacle only, not what will best honor Bravo. The difference in the way that Billy thinks about halftime and the way that the organizer intends halftime to be seen illustrates the great divide between soldiers and the home front: for those at home, the war is a fantastic spectacle.



Billy takes in the drum major, the Army Drill Team, and a corps of ROTCs. The drum major counts the marching band in, and as the band starts, Billy notices Destiny's Child slip in front of the formation. Billy feels like he's floating outside of himself as Destiny's Child begins to sing. When the drums start back up, the entire formation begins to march across the field. Billy watches flag girls, drill teams, the ROTCs, and marching bands weave in and off the field, filling it with noise. Later, he'll agree that it looked like a Broadway musical, but during the show, he feels like he just needs to hang on. He thinks the high school dance troupes look like strippers, and Destiny's Child walk in a way that seems to defy biomechanics.

It's worth noting that now that Bravo is finally in Destiny's Child's vicinity, they're entirely unable to coherently speak or engage with the group. This creates a sense of disillusionment. Also pay attention to how Billy describes his mental state: he's experiencing symptoms of PTSD and possibly a panic attack, reinforcing that this show was designed without the needs of soldiers in mind.



Strobe lights start flashing as troupes of dancers take the makeshift stage on the other side of the field. Lodis is already flinching and begins to howl when fireworks start going off. Billy tries to calm Lodis, but he sees that even Crack looks clammy. Billy thinks that this is the perfect PTSD trigger, but Bravo has no choice but to get through it. As he marches, Billy realizes that this show is supposed to be deadly serious, even though it's ridiculous. He looks for the mark that will tell him to turn back around, while Destiny's Child will go on to take the stage. The announcer introduces Destiny's Child, and Billy feels as though the world is falling apart.

Although Lodis is likely more susceptible to PTSD symptoms because he's so drunk, the fact that all three Bravos are affected by the noise and the spectacle highlight their humanity: they're experiencing a negative reaction to what they've experienced at war for the sake of creating a spectacle at home. This also indicates that the media is willing to sell anything they can, regardless of the human consequences.



As he watches Destiny's Child, Billy remembers being told to assume he's going to die when he deployed. He wonders how he can possibly go back after seeing Destiny's Child up close, but reasons that it's not supposed to make sense. When Bravo reaches their mark, they flounder a bit. Day starts counting off steps and Billy finds his stride. He watches the ROTC boys in front, thinking they're probably older than he is, but they look much younger. Now, Bravo stands for a minute, and Billy watches the field fill with dancers. The backup dancers dance like "the nastiest video on MTV." Out of the corner of his eye, Billy watches the Drill Team's rifles going around and around.

The strobe lights make Billy's headache worse, so he narrows his eyes. He thinks of the spectacle before him as a stew of sex and toy soldiers, and he is perplexed that everyone seems fine with the sexiness on display. Behind the stage, fans hold up cards that form an American flag. Billy struggles to make sense of what he's seeing, and the ground seems to tilt. He begins to wonder if this experience is the most real that life will ever get, and he wonders if this surge of terrifying chemicals and hormones is what God truly is.

Day instructs his half of Bravo to march, and they end up marching to handlers who hustle them backstage. A woman instructs them to march out onto the middle level of the stage, find their Xs, and stand at attention. She teases the tense-looking Bravos, and Billy notices that even Day looks unwell. As fireworks that sounds like bombs continue to go off, Billy thinks that the show feels just like an ambush without the murder.

The Bravos move behind the stage backdrop, and suddenly, Beyoncé steps through. She's gorgeous and close enough to touch. Billy watches handlers offer her water and help her change, and he thinks that she's one of the most powerful people on the planet to perform in front of so many people. Billy meets her eyes, hoping for acknowledgement or a look of compassion, but she grabs her microphone and disappears back onto the stage.

Someone pushes Billy out, and as he looks out at the crowd, he wishes he were at war. There, he knows what he's doing and doesn't have the entire country watching. Someone shoves him onto the stage as the music slows and grinds, and he's barely breathing when he finds his mark. His head rushes, and he watches the Drill Team tossing their rifles with fixed bayonets, and he thinks that they could kill themselves. Beyoncé sings about needing a "soldjah," and backup dancers dance around Bravo like pole dancers. Billy thinks this is wrong and hates that his mother and sisters are watching.

The drill team's rifles, with fixed bayonets, are likely creating an even more pronounced effect in Billy and making his PTSD even worse, echoing the way that Billy was deeply affected by Mr. Jones' gun. When he notes that the ROTCs look younger than he is, it shows that Billy connects their youthfulness to the fact that they haven't experienced the war, and therefore apparently don't have problems with the halftime show. This is performance is normal for them in a way that it can never be for Billy.



Again, using the language of youth by mentioning toy soldiers connects this spectacle to the innocence of those who haven't had to serve on the front lines in Iraq. Further, the absurdity of combining "sex and toy soldiers" reinforces that the people who designed the show have a warped sense of the reality of war and how to appropriately portray it.



When the woman teases the Bravos to loosen them up, she shows that she has absolutely no idea how difficult this performance is for them. For her, both the halftime show and the war are spectacles. For Bravo, the war is the reason they might die, and the halftime show is a painful reminder of the horrors that they've witnessed.



Notice how well the handlers care for Beyoncé, offering her refreshment and helping her with this quick change. Bravo, on the other hand, has been offered no such thing, making it clear that Destiny's Child are the true stars of the halftime show, even if Bravo are the "honored guests."



Even Beyoncé's music, rendered phonetically, turns the soldiers and the war into something used for spectacle and profit. Further, though she sings about needing a soldier, she still doesn't meet or acknowledge the very real soldiers who are helping her put on this show—a clear indicator that this is a performance for her, first and foremost.



Billy notices Sykes weeping, and Billy hopes that they'll make it through. He focuses on the cheerleaders and picks out Faison through the smoky fireworks haze. Billy looks to the sky and doesn't blink as the sleet falls in his face. He feels as though he's rushing towards the future and only returns to the real world when Day taps him on the shoulder.

Again, Billy's feelings as he looks towards the sky are symptoms of the PTSD and anxiety he's experiencing. Here, Billy attempts to protect his mind and body from further trauma by mentally checking out and staring at the sky instead of the painful spectacle surrounding him.



14. IF IN THE FUTURE YOU TELL ME THIS IS LOVE, I WILL NOT DISAPPOINT YOU

After the show, Bravo huddles backstage, apparently forgotten. Sykes cries as the roadies yell at Bravo to leave. Bravo doesn't leave and instead discusses having seen Beyoncé. Billy tells Dime that he feels sick. Dime insists that everyone's fine, and this is "just another normal day in America," and Billy replies that he doesn't know what normal is anymore. The roadie foreman snaps at Bravo again to leave but stops when Crack asks where they're supposed to go. Crack insults the foreman, and all of a sudden, a brawl breaks out. Billy tries to keep a roadie from chasing Dime, who attempts to pull Crack off the foreman.

Though the novel doesn't say outright, it implies that Bravo Squad is the only group left alone after the halftime show. Again, this illustrates clearly how inhuman the Bravos are in the eyes of the organizers. In contrast, Destiny's Child was given ample assistance, again illustrating the importance America places on celebrities like Beyoncé over soldiers.



When Dime gives the word, Bravo stops. They have minimal injuries, though Lodis' lip is split and bloody. Cops lead Bravo away, listen to their story, and then send them across the field to figure out where to go. Billy is thrilled to see a concerned-looking Faison run out to meet them. She's horrified to see that some of the Bravos are hurt and that the Bravos were left unattended after halftime. She shares that the roadies have made trouble before and almost beat up Lyle Lovett a few weeks ago.

Here, the police stand in as a symbol of the American government as a whole: the fact that they can't or won't help Bravo is symbolic of how the government in its entirety does a poor job of helping soldiers. This treatment also calls into question how special the Cowboys' "special guests" really are, as it seems rude at best to not make sure the Bravos are attended to.



The cheerleaders are incensed on the Bravos' behalf and fetch ice for the injuries. Faison asks Billy about Sykes, who's still crying. Billy explains that he's emotional and misses his wife, and when Faison asks, Billy shares that they're going to be back in Iraq until next October. She remarks on the sacrifices the Bravos make, and Billy studies her face. When Faison asks if Billy dreads going back, he answers that at least Bravo will be together. Faison talks about the bonding that happens when you face group challenges and then asks Billy if he's seeing anyone. He wonders if he should ask her to marry him.

When Billy lies about why Sykes is crying, glossing over Sykes' PTSD and the psychological consequences of war. This in turn plays into the Fantasy Industrial Complex that also ignores these consequences. However, perhaps Billy assumes that Faison couldn't possibly understand the horrors of war and the painful reminders of it that PTSD brings.



As Billy puts Faison's number in his phone, he explains that Kathryn is his sister. He points out Patty and his mom, who's in his phone as Denise, and explains that Ray doesn't have his own phone. Faison asks if he'll see them before he leaves, and Billy explains that they said goodbye the day before. She insists that she has to go but lingers when she feels how strong Billy's arm is. He promises to meet her where he did before and watches her jog away. Billy calls her phone and waits for it to go to voicemail. He listens to her message and thinks that watching her while listening to her disembodied voice is a strange sensation.

15. TEMPORARY SANITY

Josh runs towards Bravo, apologizing profusely. He explains that someone was supposed to bring them to a pre-arranged meeting point. Josh is shocked when Crack mentions the fight, but all of the Bravos assure Josh that they're fine. When Day asks to go find Destiny's Child, Josh says that he thinks they're already gone. Billy doesn't even ask again for his **Advil**.

As Lodis, Crack, and Mango tend to their injuries in the bathroom, everyone else calls home. Patty answers Billy's call and asks about Beyoncé. Billy deems her "thick through the hips" and insists that that's as close as he got to Destiny's Child. When Patty asks, Billy throws out the names of other celebrities he's met, and then Patty asks what Billy was doing when he was looking at the sky. Billy is disturbed to learn that they showed a relatively close shot of him doing so, and he tells Patty he doesn't remember it.

Kathryn takes the phone and tells Billy about playing with Brian in the snow all morning. She steps outside and lowers her voice as she tells him that Patty shared what he said about not letting Brian join the Army. She says she doesn't think Billy should go back, and shares that she called the group in Austin that helps soldiers. Apparently, they've been hoping a war hero like Billy might reach out so that the movement could rally behind him, and Billy tries to change the subject. Kathryn pushes ahead and says that someone can pick up Billy from the airport and fly him to a secluded ranch until the legal stuff gets sorted out, but Billy says that they shoot soldiers for deserting.

When Billy acts and speaks very stoically about the fact that he doesn't get to see his family again before leaving, he embodies the heroic persona that the government would like him to have. This reminds the reader that Billy is necessarily complicit in this system of dehumanizing soldiers to create heroes; because he is just a soldier, he has little or no power to fight this decision and see his family.



When Billy decides to not even ask about the Advil, it suggests that he's giving in to the dehumanization and is losing hope that anyone will treat him as fully human. The fact that Destiny's Child left also reinforces the assertion that Bravo's desires aren't being taken into account at all.



Showing Billy looking at the sky as such a close shot tells Billy a disturbing truth: the symptoms of his PTSD are visually interesting according to the film crew, offering another example of the media choosing to mask the horrors of war or not call them what they are for the sake of creating a spectacle.



Though the group in Austin probably has good intentions, the way Kathryn mentions that they'd been hoping for someone like Billy indicates that they have a political agenda too. This shows that just like Norm, Alfred, and the President, this group isn't above using soldiers as bargaining chips or symbols for their own political gain. Using the war in this way only reinforces how absurd the war is. It doesn't seem to be about the oil; it's about politics.



Kathryn points out that this group has a PR firm capable of making the government look terrible for prosecuting Billy and insists that he's too sane to go back. Billy admits that he wants to go back. Kathryn screams, but Billy says he can't let Bravo go back without him. He says that he signed up and has to go, but Kathryn insists that it's her fault he had to do that in the first place. She angrily says they don't deserve to have soldiers die when the country's leaders lie, and she breaks down crying. When she recovers, she tells Billy she gave the group his number. He grits his teeth as Kathryn hands the phone off to Denise, and he envisions how they'd fare if he were to die. He decides that Denise would die a slow death.

Denise harrumphs about how lewd the halftime show was, becoming more and more righteous. Billy asks about Thanksgiving dinner and about Ray, who is watching the game with Patty's husband. Denise asks if Billy has a coat, and then starts to rush him off the phone. Billy feels exasperated, as this could be the last time they talk, so he uncharacteristically tells her he loves her. She hangs up quickly anyway, and Billy feels suddenly filled with grief. He reminds himself that he might not die in Iraq, and given how things have already gone for him, he has a reasonable chance of coming home again.

16. WILL SLAY VAMPIRES FOR FOOD

As Bravo makes their way back to their seats, some people stop them to shake hands, but not as many as before. Major Mac has been sitting in their row, and Billy once again ends up in the aisle seat. The Bravos begin to feel as though their situation is pretty terrible—the game is dull, they're sitting in the freezing rain, and they fly back to Iraq in two days. Mango and Billy discuss how tired they are and laugh at Mango's mangled ear. Fans around them cover themselves with blankets and umbrellas, but Bravo sits exposed.

Billy pulls his phone out and tells Mango he's in love. Mango laughs and agrees, noting that it's awful that Billy falls in love right before they leave. Billy moans as the **Jumbotron** plays car ads, and strangely, Sykes starts singing. Apparently, Dime gave Sykes Valium, and now Sykes is thrilled with life.

Billy's phone rings, startling him. It's not Faison, so he lets it ring. After the caller leaves a voicemail, Billy listens to it and then sits back. He reasons that Shroom would definitely return to war, but Billy doesn't know what he should do. He closes his eyes and envisions himself at the secluded ranch. In his daydream Faison steps out of the trees, and they go on to have lots of sex, and Billy applies himself to studying like Shroom did. That way, Billy reasons, when he has to face the government, he'll be ready.

Kathryn's assertion that Billy is too sane to go back is another nod to [Catch-22](#), in which the paradox has to do with one's sanity dictating whether or not they can fly missions. By altering that paradox some and having Billy want to go back because of the bond he shares with the other Bravos, Fountain insists that though war is certainly something that happens on a large scale, the people involved make decisions based on their individual relationships on a much smaller scale.



Billy's attempt to tell himself that that his prior good luck has any bearing on his future luck is a poignant reminder that Billy desperately wants to believe that the war functions in a logical way, and that he has control over his outcome. By reminding the reader that Billy might not make it through, the novel reinforces the fact that Billy is human and not in control of his future.



From this point to the end of the novel, the degree to which Bravo are treated like celebrities diminishes. Bravo is abandoned after the halftime show, suggesting that the media and the Cowboys staff have already gotten what they wanted out of the soldiers, so Bravo is no longer important to them.



Billy falling in love right before Bravo redeploys is proof that life and the war aren't logical: life happens when it happens, regardless of whether or not it makes sense or makes things easy.



The caller is someone from the group in Austin, given that the voicemail leads Billy to think about what he'll do. When Billy frames the choice in terms of what Shroom would do, as well as when he mentions applying himself like Shroom did, it shows that Billy received more mentoring and care from Shroom than he has from anyone else.



Sykes's singing pulls Billy out of his reverie. The nice boogie lady sitting in front of Bravo notices that Lodis is fast asleep in the freezing rain, and she asks the others if the Army even gives soldiers coats. Crack assures her that they're too dumb to care about the weather, and Mango demonstrates how he can hit Lodis to make sure he's still alive. Though Lodis jumps, he doesn't wake up. The boogie lady digs in her bag and pulls out a snuggie. She covers Lodis with it, and the Bravos make him a sign that says, "homeless vet—will slay vampires for food."

After the Cowboys fumble their next pass, the boogie lady and her friends get up to leave. Mango reminds her to take her snuggie, but she insists on leaving it with Lodis. The Bravos thank her as she leaves, and Mango comments on how nice she was. Mango tries to convince Billy that he needs to find a way to have sex with Faison before they leave, insisting that she'll be all for it if she truly wants to support the troops.

Billy's phone rings. It's Kathryn, and he doesn't pick up. She texts him a few minutes later, telling him in all caps to call the organization back. Billy listens again to the voicemail from the group's representative, trying to figure out what kind of person he might be. Suddenly, Dime comes down the row and crouches in the aisle next to Billy. He says he can't stand Sykes right now but claims that he had to do something. To himself, Dime says that Sykes is going to be okay.

Billy asks Dime if he would go back to Iraq if he had a choice. Dime insists they don't have a choice, so it doesn't matter. They argue for a minute until Billy agrees that they don't have a choice. Dime says that because of that, they're going to take care of each other, though he admits he'd be fine never being in another firefight. He picks up a phone call, which is apparently about the movie. Dime asks Billy if he'd be available for a meeting with Norm. Confused, Billy agrees. After he hangs up, Dime says that rich people are crazy, and tells Billy to remember that.

17. MONEY MAKES US REAL

Josh delivers Dime and Billy to Albert in a hallway outside of Norm's suite. Albert pointedly encourages Josh to leave and then tells Dime and Billy what's going on: Albert has decided to form an investor group to make the Bravo film *and* form a production company of his own. He says that once Norm gets the company started, they'll sign paperwork, the Bravos will get paid, and then they'll start production. He assures Dime that he'll still be their official producer.

Like Hector, the boogie lady is someone who appears to truly care about the fate of the troops. Though sharing her snuggie is a small act of kindness, it's something concrete that she can actually do to help the troops. Covering Lodis also acknowledges that he's human, and though the others deny it, he's certainly cold and uncomfortable in the freezing rain.



Mango thinks of sex in much the same way he thinks about the boogie lady's snuggie: it's something concrete that can be given to support the troops. Further, sex also acknowledges that soldiers are humans with human desires, not props or subhuman beings.



Dime's mumbling to himself shows that he cares for his men and wants to do whatever it takes to make them comfortable, even if the result drives him nuts. Despite the dysfunction within the group, this indicates that at its heart, the Bravos deeply care for each other and will sacrifice their own comfort for that of others.



Dime's assertion that he simply doesn't have a choice is a way of coping with the absurdity of the war and his lack of control to do anything about it. It recalls the earlier mentions of compartmentalizing, as deciding he doesn't have a choice is a good way to simply not have to think about the fact that he has very little power in the grand scheme of the Army and of the war.



Albert's caginess suggests that this meeting isn't going to go as well as the Bravos hope. The fact that Norm wants to both take on this project and form his own studio is testament to just how much money and power he currently has and wants to continue to amass.



Coughing, Albert says there is one problem: \$100,000 per Bravo is a lot of money when they'll also have to spend several million dollars for a script and a lead actor. Dime tells Billy that this is where they'll get screwed, and Albert insists that he's not going to abandon them now. He says that Norm suggested they just pay Dime and Billy, but when Dime says that's not happening, Albert says he told Norm that. He explains that if they go with this independent film route, the Bravos would get an advance up front and then a percentage of the net profits. Albert says that in the end it'll probably be way more than \$100,000, but the initial payment would be only \$5,500. Dime sputters and says he won't do it.

Albert continues to try to explain how this will all work, saying that they're fighting the fact that the Iraq War films haven't done well at the box office. He points out that \$5,500 is still good for men on Army pay. Dime is incensed when he learns that Norm has already named his production company, but Albert insists that this is a good thing. He says it indicates that Norm will invest right away, and he warns that it won't get better than this. Dime points out that Albert said before that everyone loved them, but Albert replies that people have moved on in the last two weeks. Norm knows they've been talking to people, and this is the best they're going to do.

Mr. Jones pokes his head out of the suite, interrupting Dime as he asks Billy what he thinks. Albert confirms that Dime still wants to talk to Norm, and though Dime agrees to talk, he declares that the deal is still awful. When Dime asks, Albert says that Norm is going to form the production company regardless and says he'll still be involved. He says nothing when Dime calls him a jerk, and the three finally enter the suite.

The suite is dim and smells of burnt coffee and cigarettes. Norm and his sons greet Billy, Dime, and Albert, as Mr. Jones perches on a stool and Josh stands awkwardly. The executives introduce themselves and then turn their attention to the game and discuss which players to trade out. When Norm finishes looking at the game stats, he finally addresses Albert and asks if Dime and Billy know about the offer. Dime congratulates Norm on his production company, and Norm vows to go all-out on the Bravos' film. He says it's an important film that will give the country a much-needed boost. The executives are involved in their phones or the game as Norm discusses his doubts about Hollywood culture at large.

As Dime points out later, \$5,500 is an absurdly small amount of money to offer Bravo when Norm very obviously has the means to do much better. This suggests, first of all, that Norm likely believes he can make a large profit off of the story and therefore, it's better for him to be able to keep more of it for himself and his investors. Though Bravo is a fine investment for one project, their low statuses means they likely won't be involved in business with Norm again, meaning it's not in Norm's best interest to take care of them.



This exchange refers to Fountain's idea in the preface of "news that stays news." As far as those with money are concerned, the Bravos' story is not news that stays news, while the entire framing of the novel makes it clear that it is. Albert's line about the money still being good compared to Army pay betrays that he doesn't fully want to believe the Bravos are human. He very much wants them to take this deal and go away—he wants them to not stay news.



Interestingly, Albert is fully aware of what he's trying to get Bravo to do, and he knows it's not kind or fair. This indicates that Albert has bought into the class system that allows him to do this to people, and his own privilege allows him to ignore the consequences of his actions.



Remaining engrossed in the game and not speaking to Dime and Billy right away is a way for Norm to assert his dominance. He's powerful enough to keep them hanging as long as he wants, while they're powerless to demand his attention and respect without consequences. Note, too, that by becoming involved in the film industry, Norm would gain even more power to control how people think about America and the war. His treatment of Billy and Dime suggests he wouldn't insist on fair or balanced treatment of soldiers in the film, either.



Norm says grandly that he wants to make a great film, and Dime asks Norm why he thinks he can do that. The executives, shocked, turn their full attention to Norm. Dime insists that he could sell his grandmother the Bravos' story for \$5,500 and asks Norm to show them he's serious. Norm looks dazed but tells Dime to look around and see how serious he is. Billy thinks he'd fold now if he could, but Dime keeps pushing. He asks where the money comes from, and one of Norm's sons explains that they could round up pledges for thirty million dollars by the end of the game. Dime insists that \$5,500 per Bravo seems small in comparison.

Norm patiently explains again that the Bravos will share in the profits after the film is made. He tries to convince Dime that it would be nice to have something decided before they return to Iraq. Dime agrees but says that he thought Norm liked the Bravos. Norm insists he does like the Bravos, and Dime turns to Billy and says that Norm likes them so much, he's going to screw them. Albert immediately herds Dime and Billy to a private room. Norm is obviously offended, but Dime is on a roll. He asks Mr. Jones if the private room is bugged and suggests that this small room is where Norm sees his hookers.

Albert chastises Dime and insists he can't talk to Norm like that, but Dime remains petulant. Finally, Dime asks Albert if Norm needs this deal, or if he's lowballing them just because he can. Albert says it's probably both, and Dime reminds Albert that Bravo leaves in two days. When Albert insists that they can fax signatures, Dime says they can't if someone dies. He suggests holding a gun to Norm's head and rants that everyone wants to support the troops until it comes to giving them actual money.

Albert escapes to the restroom while Dime calls the rest of Bravo. They all agree the deal is horrible. Billy receives a text from Kathryn telling him that she sent a car for him, but Dime interrupts Billy's thoughts asking for his opinion. Billy reasons that he'd rather have nothing than let Norm use him, and says he also hates Norm. He and Dime start laughing, and when Albert comes out of the bathroom, Dime tells him that they won't do it. Albert gets a call from Norm that doesn't seem to go well. He tries to tell Norm that he doesn't have to do "this." When he hangs up, he explains that Norm knows someone high up in the Army, and a General Ruthven is going to call to speak to Dime and Billy. Albert asks if the Army can make them accept the deal.

The comment about rounding up pledges for millions of dollars makes it clear that money at this scale isn't concentrated in one person. There are a number of people that control the wealth and therefore control what would end up on television or in theaters. Norm is likely dazed because he didn't expect Dime to fight back: he's so assured of his power, he doesn't understand that Dime has the power to remove himself from the system by simply saying no.



What Norm likes about the Bravos happens to be that their story is marketable, and therefore profitable for him. Norm is attempting to use his power to dehumanize the Bravos and keep them from ever being able to break into his world by denying them the capital that might allow them to do that. He understands that sharing wealth means sharing power, and that in turn would mean acknowledging the humanity of those who have less than he does.



For Dime, this experience is proof that the rich and powerful in America only want to support the troops when doing so takes the form of saying "thank you" or applauding, actions that treat Bravos as heroes and props, not as people. These actions ignore the fact that soldiers need money to exist in the world just like everyone else, and money is a way to truly support them.



Billy recognizes that though he and Dime have very little power in the grand scheme of things, they do have the power to simply say no and remove themselves from this convoluted system in which money equals power. Albert's confusion regarding Norm's call and supposed attempt at forcing Dime and Billy to accept the deal reminds the reader that Dime and Billy are still beholden to the Army and what the Army wants them to do.



Back in the suite, the TVs show the Cowboys losing. Norm tells Dime and Billy how much he loves winning. When a phone rings, Mr. Jones answers it and hands the phone over to Norm. After a minute, Norm hands the phone to Dime, whose face Billy can't read. On their end, the conversation consists only of "yes sir." When the conversation is over, Dime tosses the phone to Mr. Jones and leads Billy out and back to their seats. He explains that General Ruthven is from a town near Pittsburgh and is a Steelers fan, meaning he hates the Cowboys on principle. Josh runs after Dime and Billy, and he finally has **Advil**.

Like so much else, it's entirely a fluke that General Ruthven just so happens to hate the Cowboys. This shows that the relationship between the military and the public is just as absurd and nonsensical as the military itself, while also insisting that Dime and Billy are still relatively powerless. Although they made the same decision that General Ruthven did, he had the final word, not Dime and Billy.



18. THE PROUD GOOD-BYE

Billy muses that it seems silly to make a movie when the original Fox News footage is available online for anyone to see. The footage is so real it looks fake, and when Billy saw it, he was confused to find that it doesn't look like any battle he remembers. Everyone else says it looks like a movie, including the young couples who sit down in the row in front of Bravo. They're not sure how to handle how young Billy looks, and he can barely follow their words as they thank him for his service and talk about the war.

Here, Billy finally realizes that even a direct representation of reality (in the form of the Fox News footage) doesn't even accurately capture his own lived experience. The way that others conceptualize it, however, shows how the public relies on fictionalized representations of "truth" to understand what reality looks like. They have no conception of what's real or not, which is testament to the power of the Complex.



When Billy takes his seat again, he, Mango, A-bort, and Lodis discuss how rude Norm's attempted deal was. Josh passes out packets to each Bravo filled with Cowboys merchandise and autographed photos of them with Norm and the cheerleaders. Nobody seems impressed. Billy gets a text from Faison asking about meeting after the game, and after he texts her back, he daydreams about escaping to the ranch with her. A phone call from Albert interrupts his reverie. Albert wants to know why Dime won't pick up and explains that General Ruthven won't make them accept the deal. He says that Norm is upset, though he muses that Norm not getting his way is probably good for him.

Filled with items emblazoned with the Cowboys logo, the gift bags are just another way of marketing the Cowboys brand—and for a relatively low cost on Norm's part. The lack of enthusiasm for the bags suggests that the Bravos are aware of this and shows that their status as powerless grunts is wearing on them. This indicates that being at the bottom of the hierarchy is exhausting and provides more reasoning as to why it's so hard to rise.



Billy asks Albert how he felt about getting deferment from Vietnam and how he feels about it now. Albert explains that he's not proud or ashamed of it, and everyone struggled then. When Billy asks if it was worse then than it is now, Albert thinks for a moment before deciding that it's probably still just as messed up. After Albert hangs up, Billy takes more **Advil** and passes the bottle down the line of Bravos.

Finally, Billy and Albert are able to engage with each other as equals by acknowledging how absurd the United States is when it comes to wars. Albert's privilege is what allowed him to escape Vietnam, and Billy's lack thereof is what sent him to Iraq, which suggests that little has changed since Vietnam.



Several male friends of the couples in front of Bravo pile into the row in front, loudly teasing the Bravos about their injuries and waving around bottles of alcohol. Though the couples try to deter them, one man, Travis, loudly asks Crack how he feels about Don't Ask Don't Tell and gays in the military. Crack says mildly that he thinks more highly of gay people who join up than those who don't, but Travis persists. He suggests that gay sex between soldiers is why the United States is losing the war, and Crack calmly suggests that Travis join up. Billy wants Crack to hit Travis and be done with him. He imagines being at the ranch with Faison but adds to the fantasy the grief he'd feel if he abandoned the Bravos.

Dime comes over to Billy and asks about Albert. Billy says that Albert is cool, and Dime insists that even if Norm does make a better offer they won't take it. He says that if they make the movie, he thinks that Norm will keep using them until the Bravos are dead. A man in the row ahead drops a bottle, and Billy gets a text from Kathryn saying that "they" are waiting for Billy. He wonders what Shroom would do but is too distracted by the **Jumbotron** and the men in front cheering rudely to properly think.

Travis turns around again and declares that he doesn't care whom the Bravos have sex with; they're true American heroes. Crack declines to give Travis a high five, and when Travis sits back down, Crack leans forward and locks him in a chokehold. The hold is one that cuts off blood flow to the brain, and Travis goes limp. Other Bravos tell Crack to leave the man alone, and Billy feels sick. Finally, Crack lets Travis go, and Travis' friends help him out of the seats and away from the Bravos. Dime questions Crack but seems uninterested in reprimanding him.

With two minutes of the game left, Dime declares that it's time to leave. Josh leads them out of the stadium, and Billy texts Faison to meet him outside. Nobody stops the Bravos to thank them or get autographs. Josh stops them all just outside to wait for someone to meet them. Faison texts that she's coming, and Albert and Mr. Jones appear out of the **stadium**. Albert assures the Bravos that he'll continue working on the deal for the next two years, but Billy feels as though this is the end. Albert and Mr. Jones walk Bravo to their limo, and Albert asks Billy if they can keep in touch. Billy agrees to be Bravo's point person, but Billy is distracted by thoughts of spilling his heart at Faison's feet.

Travis's assertion that the US war effort is going poorly because of what its service members may or may not be doing in their spare time is undeniably absurd: the rest of the novel has made it very clear that the war itself is misguided and doomed, and nobody even knows exactly what they're fighting for. Further, the fact that Travis keeps pushing the issue shows that he's uninterested in actually hearing what Crack has to say about the matter, an indicator that he doesn't care about Crack's firsthand experiences.



Now that Dime and Billy are willing to vocalize that Norm spent much of the day dehumanizing them, they're able to gain a degree of control over their situation and their future. In this way, by asserting their humanity and their free will, they actively reject Norm's attempts to treat them as "heroes," which would surely continue if he were to make the movie.



Here, Crack demonstrates clearly that he does have power as a "grunt" in the Army. He has skills and knowledge that Travis evidently does not, and by threatening Travis like this, Crack forces Travis to confront his own mortality—just as Crack has to do every day in Iraq. Further, by shattering the illusion of the "good old boy" soldier persona, Crack also humanizes himself.



It's worth noting the connection here between the fact that the Cowboys are losing and the lack of enthusiasm for Bravo. Nobody wants to recognize the Bravos when the Cowboys, as a symbol for America, aren't doing well. This mirrors the overall assertion that nobody is actually recognizing the troops in meaningful ways since the war is going poorly.



Billy looks around for Faison and notices that the crowd is rippling. He shouts as the roadies burst out of the crowd. Next thing he knows, he's on the ground with something pummeling his back. Billy watches Mr. Jones pull out his gun and something ram into Mr. Jones from behind. The gun flies across the ground straight to Major Mac. Major Mac picks it up and fires the gun straight up. Later, the media coverage of the game says nothing about the gunfire.

After Major Mac shoots, he sets the gun's safety, puts it on the ground, and stands with his arms straight out. The cops arrive and finally shuttle Bravo into their limo. One asks the Bravos if they need to go to the hospital and seems to barely believe them when they say no—everyone is bleeding from the roadies' wrenches, pipes, and crowbars. Lodis asks if Major Mac will go to jail, but Dime assures them that Major Mac will be fine.

Billy gets a text from Faison and leaps out of the limo. The cops try to stop him, but he ignores them and steps forward to meet her. Faison is distraught to see Billy's injured face, but they kiss long and hard. She opens her coat and wraps it around Billy as they kiss. When Billy says he'll be home in the spring, she invites him to stay with her. She says that she's never felt this way about someone, and Billy agrees. He says he'd run away with her, and the look in her eyes tells Billy that their relationship won't last. She says they don't need to go anywhere, and Billy finally feels sure about returning to Iraq.

Billy hears Dime bellowing for him. Billy and Faison kiss one more time, and she promises to pray for him as Billy turns towards the limo. A group of people mob Billy and ask him for autographs, and Billy realizes that these people are the ones who control his reality. They control the trajectory of the war, and they know nothing of it. He understands, however, that their version of reality can't save them, and he wonders how many soldiers will die before they realize that it has to stop. Albert and Josh cheerfully usher Billy into the limo and the limo departs. Dime quietly teases Billy about his erection, and Billy knows he'll never see Faison again. He closes his eyes and tries to think of nothing.

The roadies' attack mirrors what happened on the Al-Ansakar Canal, illustrating that the unpredictability and the absurdity of the war translates to the home front. America is just as dangerous and nonsensical as Iraq, demonstrating that the supposed heroism of Bravo Squad isn't enough to protect them amongst their own people.



While for Mr. Jones, the gun was a prop and meant to stand in for power, for Major Mac, who is actually trained to use a gun, it is actual power, as it helps stop the fight.



When Faison insists that they don't need to go anywhere, it tells Billy that she doesn't see the world like he does. She is entrenched in the Fantasy Industrial Complex and can't see that running away is the only way for Billy to escape and make his life better.



Faison's promise to pray for Billy reinforces Billy's assessment of where she stands in the world. In her mind, prayers are enough to "support the troops." When Billy accepts that the uninformed citizens control his fate, it's a reminder that in America, reality is mediated through advertising and absurdity, making it hard to be truly informed. Wondering how many soldiers need to die suggests that one soldier is too many and leaves the reader with yet another chilling reminder that the costs of war are real and human.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk." LitCharts LLC, May 30, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/billy-lynn-s-long-halftime-walk>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Fountain, Ben. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. Ecco. 2012.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Fountain, Ben. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. New York: Ecco. 2012.