

M.I.A.

Columns of dandelions advance on the grass as Rommel traverses the dunes of my sandbox. I deploy sniper guys behind Flaco's lines, aim them at his generals: Patton and Montgomery. I suggest the names. Flaco's the good guys. "They always win," he insists. I like to be the Germans because their helmets look cool and Panzer sounds tougher than tank.

I make Flaco count his men. They're green, easy M.I.A.'s in the tall grass if lost; Dad might chop them when he mows the lawn. Germans are tan, or gray, or yellow, like my Dandelion Afrika Korps. Our dads wear blue uniforms.

"But yours doesn't even carry a gun," Flaco says. His dad's a mall cop—in Milwaukee—and mine delivers the mail here in Chicago.

"My dad was in the Army," I say, "the American Army. He had all kinds of guns. Even drove a tank."

"My dad shot somebody. Under cover, on stakeout. Shot a guy dead."

I don't believe him, of course. Not because security guards don't go on stakeouts. I don't believe Flaco because I can't picture his old man. Never met him. Would he say Freeze punk, or Stop in the name of the law to the bad guys? Flaco wouldn't know either.

My Panzer rolls over a landmine. Flaco makes an explosion noise and swipes the tank onto its side. Spit bubbles pool in the corner of his mouth.

"No Man's Land," he says.

"In the Army they always shot guys. My dad even gutted some with his bayonet," I lie. Dad fed shells to the cannon of his tank during the war. He once showed me a picture from that time. In it he's beardless, his body flat, except for arms that bulge when he curls shells three at a time. He leans against his Panzer, camouflaged by pyramids of empty Budweisers, and considers the circumference of his biceps.

A handful of pebbles, my artillery shells, rain down on Flaco's lines. "No fair, cheater." Flaco's mad I'm aiming at his army's headquarters. He resurrects his generals, hides them under a bunker of twigs. "These guys didn't die. You can't kill them from over there."

"Sure you can." I call truce, run to the front yard, to the sound of the lawnmower. I want Dad to explain that cannons do have that kind of range. I know Flaco has trouble judging distances. He speaks of Milwaukee as if it's farther away than the Sahara.