

THIRTY-ONE WORDS

By Paul DiLella

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CHARACTER: There is one main character, which can be played by a man or a woman. The name is Sgt. 1st Class Evan (or Evelyn) Myers. The age is flexible; she/he can be 18-40. Myers is tough, firm, and patriotic. Decisions, even about complex issues, come easily, and once made, are irrevocable. There is no turning back.

SETTING: The present. A high school library at the start of the school day. A table and chair. The American flag.

AT RISE: *SGT. 1st CLASS EVAN (or EVELYN) MYERS in full military dress enters carrying a briefcase. HE sets it down on a table. Opening it, HE takes out a sheaf of papers. Students file in. HE moves in front of the table to greet them. MYERS pantomimes handshakes. His left arm hangs limp; due to a combat injury, the appendage is almost useless. HE stands at an angle to protect his left side. What's evident is that without the uniform, HE could pass for the same age as the juniors and seniors filling the room. The main difference, though, are the eyes: intense, scrutinizing, and judgmental. The conviviality is calculated and meant to be disarming. After all, HE is on a mission.*

MYERS: Good morning. Nice to see you. Glad you could be here. Today's a scorcher, isn't it? Take a seat. Anywhere. Hi. How are you? Strong grip there, fella. Good morning. Hi, ya. Is it always this hot at 7:30? Pahrump, isn't it? Yeah. Good to meet you. Thanks. Hello. I'll be glad to answer all your questions when I'm done. Just find a seat. We're filling up fast. Morning. Glad the AC's on. Bad form if the recruiter melts. Hi. Good to meet you. Take a seat, please. Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please. Quiet down. Quiet. **(There is still a murmur from the crowd. HE barks "Attention!" Now silence.)** Appreciate your help. We need to start. I've got to drive to Beatty this afternoon. Excuse me for a second. **(HE crosses to the "door" and mimes locking it. Moving to the table, HE makes a point of showing the key and then pockets it.)**

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Thanks to your librarian—Mr. Fitz-Gerald, isn't it—I have a captive audience. Lateness is unacceptable. Don't worry. If there's a fire drill, the door opens from the inside. You should know that.

My name is Sgt. 1st Class Evan [or Evelyn] Myers of Nevada's 72 Military Police Company. During my recent tour in Iraq, our company handled thousands of insurgents who have surrendered or been captured. Our job was to process, house, and monitor the enemy. For the next two months, I am on temporary assignment. My mission is to recruit those who would willingly serve their country in its hour of need. That's why you're here today. But you know that.

First, I'd like to find out something about you. No, don't worry. I'm not going to ask you to stand up and introduce yourselves. I've got a better way. I want you to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance with me. Let's see. Is there a flag in the room? Ah, yes. Good. We're ready. Stand, and say after me. Come on. Stand. All of you. Come on. That's it. Everybody. Okay. On the count of three. One, two, three. "I pledge allegiance . . . to the flag . . . of the United States of America . . . and to the Republic for which it stands . . . one Nation . . . under God . . . indivisible . . . with Liberty . . . and Justice for all."

Well...people...that was pathetic, awful. It sucked big time. Since when is laughing and snickering appropriate? When is mumbling an acceptable affirmation of the words? If you can't speak in unison, how can you expect to drill in unison or think in unison? On my drive from Las Vegas, I passed the Sheraton, which features the Star Trek Experience. How many of you have seen that? Raise your hands. Good. Some of you need to catch up on the Sci-fi Channel. Anyway, the interactive ride features the Borg. The Borg is a collective, where individuals work together to achieve a single objective that benefits the society as a whole. Sometimes, being a soldier is like being a Borg. Remember that.

Unfortunately, most of you have failed your first test. Actually, your only test. Is this what it comes down to? Senior slackers who want to skip class? Juniors who want to jump the Ship of State? I presume you're here because some of you---perhaps most of you---want to join the military. How can you pretend to defend something you know nothing about? You there—the young lady with the flag on your jeans—yes, you. What's your name?

(Pause.)

Cyndi? Yes, Cyndi. Thank you. Cyndi, is that how we show respect for our country by literally sitting on the flag? Don't you know there's a Flag Code? A guideline from 1923 that explains the proper use of the flag. Don't you know that? The image of the flag on T-shirts, pants, underwear, jewelry demeans the ideals our nation was founded on and scorns the patriots, past and present, who died to protect those beliefs. Don't say a word. None of you. You got me started, and I'm going to finish.

I'm not going to make this easy for you. I'm not going to let you off the hook. From this moment on, you're back in class, my class, Pledge 101. No notes. No videos. Your homework: examine your conscience. If you believe what I say, if you can recite the Pledge with understanding and conviction, with passion and commitment, then I will honor your requests to apply to the world's greatest military fraternity, the brotherhood of men and women dedicated to the preservation of life and liberty here and around the world. If some of you can't do this, you ought to reapply for citizenship. Because your cluelessness is holding everyone else back.

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