



THE RECRUIT

HE IS AFFLUENT AND EDUCATED, A SUBURBAN KID WHO HAS GROWN UP WEIGHING OPTIONS, NOT CHASING LAST RESORTS. NOW HE WANTS TO FIGHT FOR US IN IRAQ. WHAT MADE HIM BECOME A SOLDIER? **BY JESSE KATZ**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES FEE



I, MATT LUDWIG

HE IS A WHITE BOY, SLENDER AND PASTY, WITH WIDE BLUE eyes, dirty blond sideburns, a translucent mustache, and a tangled goatee. He wears a limp, day-old T-shirt and saggy, nylon cargo pants. For the occasion he has removed his knit Billabong beanie, which normally clings like a burglar's tuque to the top of his brow, and his twin cubic-zirconia earrings, which the girl he likes had goaded him into acquiring just a couple weeks before.

DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR...

His right arm is raised. His left is tucked behind the small of his back. He rocks, ever so slightly, on the balls of his feet, reciting his oath in suite 1039, the Ceremony Room, a red-carpeted, wood-paneled chamber within the Los Angeles station of the United States Military Entrance Processing Command. It is one of those monumental yet invisible rituals of the city—thousands of recruits, from every branch of the service, herded each year through a concrete bunker on the fringes of Crenshaw, pledging to fight and, if necessary, die to protect what the lieutenant on the dais calls “our way of life.” On this October afternoon, the fifth session of the day, there are 15 young men and women taking that plunge, some already shorn and fit, others looking too squeamish or too thuggish to have even considered it. Matt stands near the front, itching for a cigarette. He is unassuming yet over-caffeinated, somewhere between geeky and cool, a mix of Tom Petty and David Spade, with a touch of Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*.

TO SUPPORT AND DEFEND...

He is here from Simi Valley, the embodiment of neat suburbia, a community perpetually ranked among the safest in the nation. He is halfway through a bachelor's degree at California Lutheran University, a \$29,000-a-year investment. His parents are affluent professionals, liberals turned evangelicals who have taken pains to shelter Matt from the excesses of their generation. He reacts to news with an “Oh, my goodness!” or a “How crazy is that?” He is 20 but has never voted.

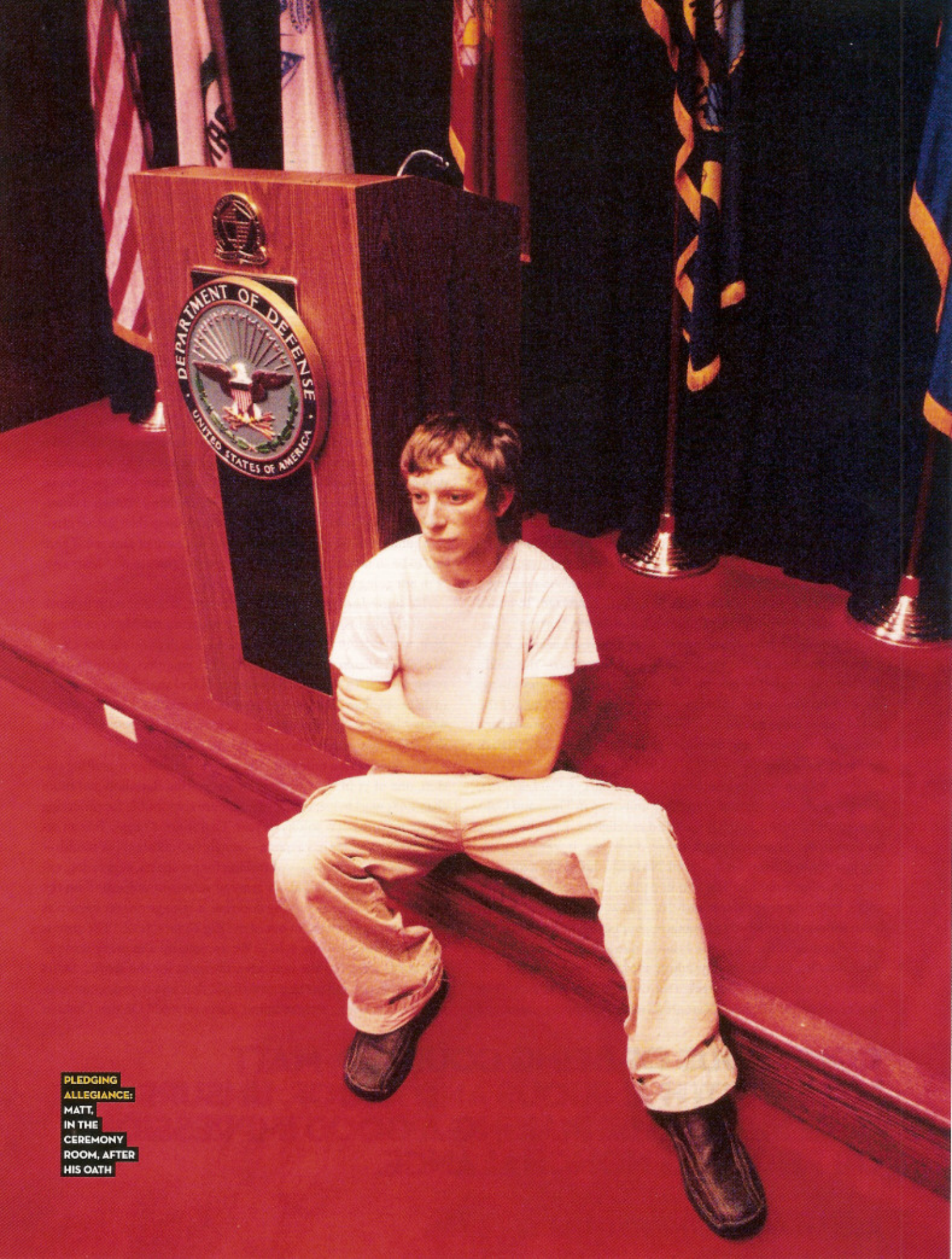
THE CONSTITUTION...

Eleven days earlier, Matt was at work, ringing up a Grand Slam Slugger. He had just clocked in, another morning shift at Denny's, practicing the niceties of cashier and host. Handing him the check was a sergeant first class, tall and chiseled and stiff. He wore a creased olive uniform. There were stripes on his epaulets and medals on his chest. Matt was nearly a foot shorter, his emerald uniform billowing from a spidery waist. Pinned to his breast, there was a name tag: WE WILL PUT OUR CUSTOMERS FIRST. Matt asked the soldier how everything was. “You ever thought about the army?” the soldier asked Matt.

OF THE UNITED STATES...

America needs Matt Ludwig. Without him, without the quarter of a million other volunteers who join the armed forces every year, we face the specter of a draft, of anyone's son or daughter being shipped off to combat. Yet there is something awkward and cheerless about watching it happen, about witnessing a kid—caught between adolescence and adulthood, undaunted but inexperienced, whom we do not even trust with a beer—take such a giant leap. Matt is not driven by desperation. He is not fanatical or blustery or reckless. He does not have to do this, and if a few things about his life were different, he probably would not be swearing it away. But things are not different, which is why Matt finds himself here, seeking, asking—who he is, what he believes in, how he wants to be remembered. They are the epic questions of any life, questions that do not always come with satisfactory answers. If this freshly minted private wants to fight for us, if he is willing to die for us in Iraq, should we salute him as a hero? Or pray he comes to his senses? “Nothing's ever felt so right,” Matt says.

SO HELP ME GOD.



PLEDGING
ALLEGIANCE:
MATT,
IN THE
CEREMONY
ROOM, AFTER
HIS OATH



THE FIRST OATH OF MATT'S LIFE WAS ANYTHING BUT VOLUNTARY. Standing before his first-grade class at the Capital Christian Center, he was instructed to accept Jesus as his savior.

Capital Christian had been his parents' idea, a fundamentalist megachurch that towers over Highway 50 on the outskirts of Sacramento. Matt was raised in nearby Cameron Park, on the western slope of gold country. It is a landscape more rustic, less invented, than Southern California's, but after a childhood of religious study, of pursuing "excellence in Christ," Matt was choking on graces and airs. "Everything's basically forced down your throat," he says. "I saw so many people put up a front, like, 'Oh, I'm such a great Christian,' because that's what everybody wanted to hear." As a teenager he had to take a vow of sexual chastity until marriage. To guard against temptation, the school banned all dancing, hosting a banquet instead of a prom. In 2002, the year Matt graduated, Capital Christian made headlines for expelling a kindergartner—the child's mother had refused to give up her job as a stripper. "They always played it up like we needed to be protected against the evils of the world, but in order to defend against that you need to know what's going on in the world, and they don't teach that," Matt says. "There's no life preparation."

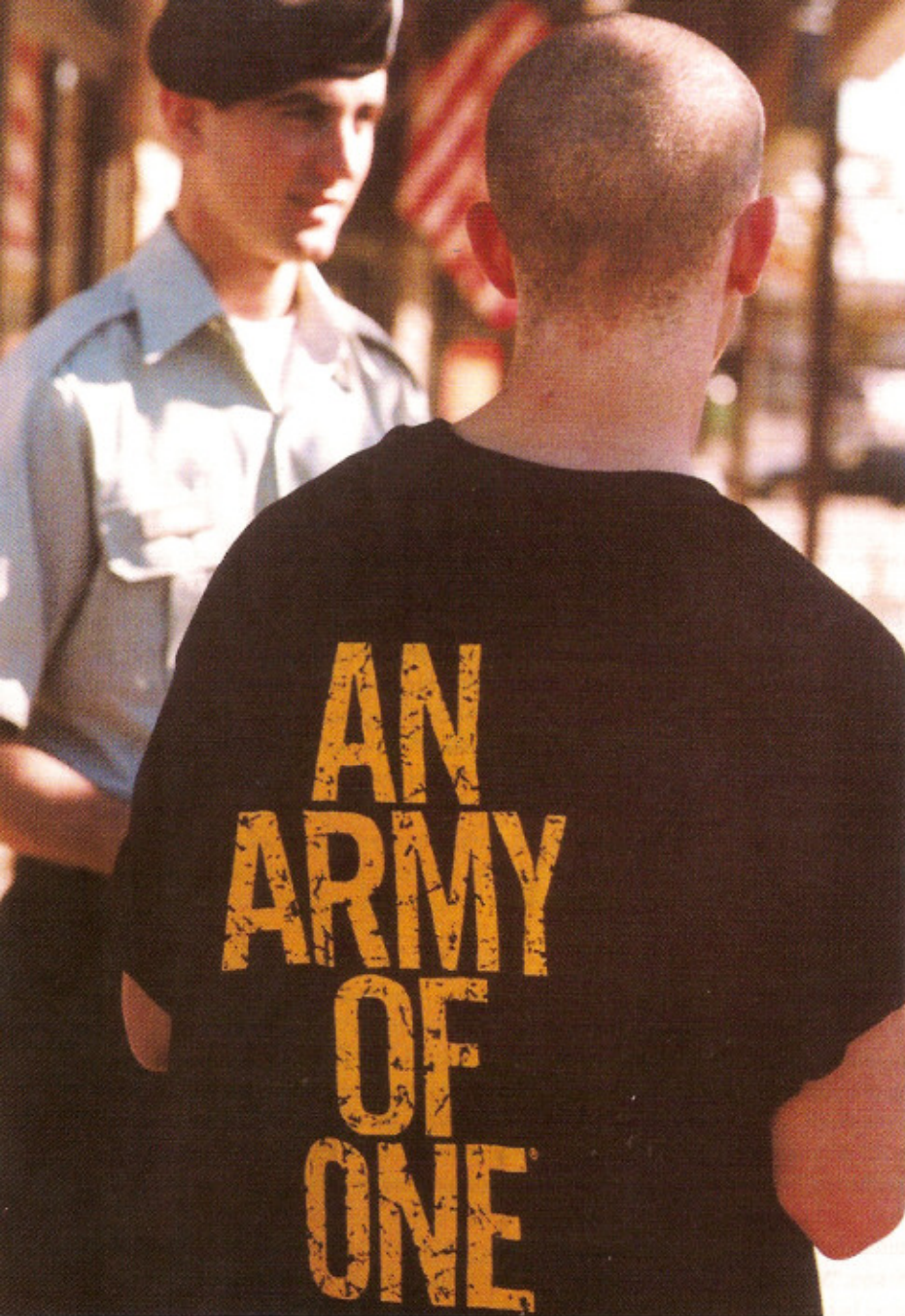
Without any faith to lose, Matt headed south, to Cal Lutheran, the secluded 3,000-student liberal arts university in Thousand Oaks that, by comparison, scarcely qualified as religious. In his first year he slew all the taboos of home: smoke, drink, sex. It was eye-opening, just not in the way he expected. No longer bound by a moralistic code, Matt found he was still in a place consumed by appearances, by rigid rules of status and class. He was surrounded, at last, by an abundance of female possibilities, but having never played the game—acquired the requisite brands, mastered the appropriate styles—he felt himself harshly judged. He came to a bitter and self-defeating conclusion. "There's a lot of cute girls," he says, "but they're all uptight bitches." Matt grew isolated, skipping classes and

winging tests. He is possessed by a peculiar blend of intelligence and spaciness, the kind of student who can ace a final without cracking a book, then flub the one exam he tries to pass. He fixated on chess, waging fervid matches against his cell phone. His brain is wired that way, for games of logic and strategy, to the exclusion sometimes of a wider cultural awareness. One semester he signed up for modern dance; to his disappointment and embarrassment, it did not prove to be a course in hip-hop technique. He declared himself a criminal justice major, then lost interest in school altogether. Before classes resumed last September, he requested a leave of absence. There had to be something else. "I don't care what I have to do," Matt says, "I'm not going back home."

He started at Denny's for \$7.50 an hour. It was enough to move out of the dorms and into a rooming house on the Mexican side of Simi, not far from the Metrolink tracks. He slept on the floor, next to a pile of *Maxim* magazines and Carl's Jr. wrappers, sharing a bathroom with half a dozen other renters. "I feel so different from the main people I am supposed to be with, like middle-class, upper-class white," he says. "It's like I just got sick of them. They treat you like shit. I like real people who don't put up a front."

Denny's is just a mile from the army's Simi Valley recruiting station, one of 55 in the Los Angeles Recruiting Battalion and more than 1,685 worldwide, which together are responsible for procuring nearly 100,000 new soldiers a year. That is not a target. It is an order. Every recruiter has a quota—usually two enlistees per month—which means endless days of trolling for prospects, suggesting, enticing, inspiring, cajoling, an army of salesmen unleashed on the civilian world. The recruiting doctrine, a 13-page primer known as Pamphlet 350-7, is straight out of the Zig Ziglar school: "The army is a product which can be sold.... We are salesmen in every sense of the word.... You are the best advertisement for the army.... Stand tall, look sharp, and assume an attitude that says to your community, 'Here I am, your army recruiter. Focus on me.'" On that October

CONSCIOUS OF BEING COURTED, MATT LOOKS BOTH ANXIOUS AND ALOOF, UNSURE IF HE SHOULD BE MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION OR FEIGNING NONCHALANCE.



**PRIVATE
LUDWIG:
MATT, HEAD
SHORN, GOES
RECRUITING
WITH
THOSE WHO
RECRUITED
HIM**

an upscale community, thought to be above the army's typical inducements, sent his stock even higher. A week before dropping in at Denny's, he was assigned to turn around the Simi Valley station, one of the region's worst performers last year. Matt suddenly had the king of L.A. recruiters in his backyard. "I'm not going from number one to the bottom," Waud had vowed. "Ain't gonna happen."

Like most young adults of the post-9/11 age, Matt had been subjected to the military's overtures, one more urgent than the last, ever since high school. The marines came calling first; he shrugged them off. Later it was the navy; not a second thought. He was neither a bleeding heart nor a flag-waving patriot. "I question everything," Matt says. "Politically, I'm kind of in between. I play devil's advocate on all sorts of stuff. I have no faith, but I'm not an atheist. I dunno, is there a term for

that?" Now his suitor was the army, the largest and perhaps least glamorous of the services, a recruiter once again sizing him up—and at a time that could hardly have been less auspicious. The previous month, the U.S. death toll in Iraq had topped 1,000, an artificial milestone perhaps, but a test nonetheless of America's stomach for a war with no end in sight. The list so far had included 127 from California, more than any other state in the nation. Among the mourned, three from right here: in January, a Simi Valley High School graduate; in March, a Moorpark High graduate; in April, another Simi graduate. "Pretty much everything I've learned, I've learned from myself—trial and error," Matt says. "Fortunately there haven't been many errors. I wouldn't be this far. I just make good judgments, I guess."

morning at Denny's, Matt may have seen a soldier grabbing breakfast. But the soldier, Timothy J. Waud, was at work. "You've got to win their hearts and minds," says Waud, his shirttails pulled taut by stays running down to his socks. "You've got to act like you care about these kids—for real. Not just because you're paid to."

The army's Los Angeles battalion, which covers an immense swath of Southern California, from the Central Valley to the Orange County line, has struggled to accomplish its mission. It was called on to enlist 3,615 soldiers last year; it managed 1,968. A 16-year veteran, the last five as a recruiter, Waud approaches the job like a Green Beret, eating little, sleeping less, setting his clocks 15 minutes fast to keep ahead of the action. As chief of the Thousand Oaks station for most of 2004, he came closer than any other commander in the battalion to making his numbers—delivering 32 of the 37 enlistees he was supposed to drum up. That he succeeded in



WHEN MATT'S PARENTS WERE HIS AGE, VIETNAM WAS RAGING and the draft was in full swing, their own politics to the left. They would not be the only two '60s Democrats to reinvent themselves as '80s Republicans, but the arc of their pendulum was so dizzying, it continues to roil their lives. "They've just flip-flopped all over the place," Matt says. "After hearing their histories, it still makes no sense to me."

His mother, Michelle, shares a lineage and a maiden name with Beat icon Jack Kerouac. At Carondelet, a private all-girls school in San Francisco's East Bay, she was suspended for handing out pamphlets at the behest of the Weather Underground. "They had kind of come up to me: 'Will you distribute these flyers about our antiwar rally on campus?'" she says. "When you're that young, you're so idealistic and so vulnerable." Matt's dad, Mark, also grew up a peacenik. He walked precincts for McGovern in high school. Later he studied prelaw at UC Davis but dropped out to backpack across Europe. "In my family, we hated the military," he says. "I never would have thought about joining. It would have been the last thing, a disgusting thing, for me to do."

They met at a Sacramento life insurance company, two young executives-in-training seeking stability, a newlywed couple slowly waxing conservative. Michelle nudged Mark about church. "We weren't Christians when we got married," she says. Mark promised to give it a try, once they had kids. Matt, the eldest of their four, was born in '83, at the height of the Reagan revolution. "I still wanted to play racquetball on Sunday mornings with my buddies," Mark says. "Michelle kept saying, 'Remember what we said.' I started going, but I didn't want to be there. It took months to sink in." By the time Matt was ready for kindergarten, his father had given himself over to Capital Christian, a 6,000-member Assemblies of God congregation. The Ludwigs continued that way for much of the next two decades, classes, sermons, seminars, socials, everything for Cap Christian—"our church family," says Mark. Then one day Michelle stopped going. The church, she decided, had grown too impersonal, the doctrine too extreme. "It's a very narrow, ultraconservative viewpoint that's

presented," she says, "and there wasn't much freedom of discussion to argue that viewpoint, either at church or in our home." Matt had just left for Cal Lutheran, a step his mother endorsed but that his father derided as an expensive lark. In rapid succession, Michelle moved out, met a man, filed for divorce, and got married—last September 11, at the Aladdin in Las Vegas. Nothing has been the same.

"I don't understand what's happened to her," Mark says. "Here we are, we believe the Bible is the word of God, and it's clear—clear—and we go along, raising our family, believing that, and all of a sudden you say, 'I don't believe that anymore, I'm going to divorce you.' I can't stress how astounding this behavior is in the context of the way our family has lived our lives."



CLUTCHING HIS PHONE AND CIGARETTES, MATT WALKS through the tinted-glass doors of the Simi Valley recruiting center, 48 hours after he first met Waud. The station is in a shopping plaza, off the Tapo Canyon exit of the 118 freeway, next to a Fatburger, a Dairy Queen, and a Curves for Women. Sometimes it seems as if Simi is all name-brand chains and fabricated environments—babbling fountains and piped-in music and private security. Matt calls it Pleasantville. "So perfect," he says. "So bland."

Conscious of being courted, Matt looks both anxious and aloof, unsure if he should be making a good impression or feigning nonchalance. His snowboarder's cap, the color of cream gravy, is pulled low, affording him a touch more swagger than he might have sported at the restaurant. His fingers are threaded around an I ♥ MEXICO key chain. "My girlfriend's Hispanic," Matt explains.

Before the pitch can begin, he will need to take a test, a short multiple-choice exam to gauge his eligibility. The popular conception of the military may be that it preys on the wayward and dim, but any number of shortcomings—including the failure to graduate high school—can disqualify an otherwise eager candidate. Matt parks him-

THE YOUNG INHABIT A NAIVE UNIVERSE, THEIR RESTLESS ENERGY AT LEAST PARTLY A FUNCTION OF THEIR INNOCENCE. BUT MATT'S BLIND SPOTS, FOR A KID SO BRIGHT, CAN BE MYSTIFYING.

**STANDING****TALL:
SERGEANT
WAUD IS THE
ARMY'S
TOP RECRUITER
IN LOS
ANGELES**

blazed through quarter-mile drags, regularly topping 120. In the process he got to know more than a few cops. "In a good way?" Waud asks. "Yeah, well, sometimes," Matt says. He has been looking into the California Highway Patrol, sort of an if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em approach. But the CHP, pinched by the state's budget crisis, has been in no rush to hire.

"What got you interested in being a cop in the first place?" Waud asks.

"Kind of the war," Matt says. "I don't really know."

"What is it about the war that triggered something in you," Waud asks, "whereas it made other people go, 'Waa-baa, I'm scared?'"

"I'm sick of the status quo, like just doing the same thing day after day. It's nice to be part of history."

"You sound like a guy that wants to go out there and blow shit up."

"My purpose for going into the military is, like, I'd *want* to go

fight," Matt says. "I hear other people: 'Oh, I don't want to go over.' I dunno, you're a soldier. Why not fight? That's your job."

"Right," Waud says.

They talk about the jobs the army offers, 212 in all, from cook to mechanic to pilot to sniper. With Matt's score, he could probably qualify for anything. None offers a guarantee of combat, just as none comes with an assurance of non-deployment. It would all depend on his specialty, his unit, world events, and luck. Waud pulls out a three-ring binder, each page held in a laminated sleeve. He shows Matt pictures of rifles. Of tanks. Of missiles. Of choppers. "I used to play war games, like Risk, Axis and Allies, Stratego," Matt says. "Does that lead into anything?" Waud tells him about military intelligence, » **CONTINUED ON PAGE 212**

self in front of a laptop computer. The questions on the screen range from the vexing (What is the solution for x , if $8x - 2 - 5x = 8$?) to the bellicose (What is the meaning of *maim*? Of *ravage*? Of *obliterate*?). Time runs out before he can finish. He still scores in the 80s. "Obviously," says Waud, welcoming Matt into his office, "you're not a dumb guy."

Matt's chair is set up to the side of Waud's desk, so that they face each other, elbow to elbow. On the wall is a framed *Sports Illustrated* cover devoted to Pat Tillman, the former NFL star who was killed last year, by friendly fire, in Afghanistan. A radio is tuned to classic rock, the volume a little too high. A member of Rotary, Waud has been trained to establish rapport, to ask open-ended questions, to zero in on his prospect's DBM, or dominant buying motive. He gets Matt talking about speed, about the thrill of hitching himself to a turbocharged machine. In high school Matt owned a Toyota Supra, voted the best car of his senior class. Until the engine gave out, he

The Recruit

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 105 » his own job before becoming a recruiter. "It was a blast," Waud says, "like playing a big ol' board game." Matt strokes the tuft on his chin. He has spent less than an hour in the presence of Waud, and yet Waud already senses Matt is ripe. He leans forward. "If we could find you a job out of 200 and some odd jobs that fit what you're looking to do, maybe get you a little incentive, maybe a little extra money in your pocket, do a little traveling or something like that," he says, "do you think this is something that you'd look into?" Then Waud sinks back in his chair, cocks an eyebrow, and waits.

It might be that Matt is caught up in the moment, that he is focused on the excitement and adventure being sold, not the sacrifice. It might be that he is responding to Waud's authority, to a confident and imposing adult figure who has deemed him worthy of attention. Or it might be that the army just means cash for a new car. Matt never asks for time to think.

"Definitely," he says. "Oh yes, definitely."

"Congratulations," says Waud, shaking Matt's hand. "That's all I can offer. Nothing in any recruiting station will put you in the army."

He explains the next step, taking the full three-hour exam known as the ASVAB, short for armed services vocational aptitude battery. It will require a formal appointment and a trip to Los Angeles. "If you want," Waud says, "I could run you down there Friday afternoon, take the test, and—boom!—have you back by dinner."

"Can I get a shirt?" asks Matt, eyeing the ARMY OF ONE freebies scattered around the office.

"You show back up," Waud says, "you get a shirt."

MATT HAS MORE than 30 numbers programmed into his cell, each with a distinct tone. Most are snippets of streetwise bravado—50 Cent, Lil' Kim, Chingy, DMX—except for his mother's number, which rings to the *Ghostbusters* theme, and his father's, which is from *Batman*. Neither of them had known he was going to meet with a recruiter. "They haven't really known me for two and a half years," Matt says. "I'm a completely different person than when I left."

He breaks the news first to his mom. She is a human resources analyst for Cooperative Personnel Services, a recruiter in her own right who screens and hires employees for county governments in Northern California. "She kind of flipped out," Matt says. "She was like, 'What? No! Do you know how many people are dying over there?'" Then he calls his dad. He is the director of underwriting for Health Net of California, one of the country's largest managed care providers. "I think he's living vicariously through me," Matt says. "He was happier about it than I was."

TAKING THE ASVAB means journeying into another acronym, MEPS, the military entrance processing station. The country has 65 of them—their motto, "Freedom's Front Door"—through which all recruits must pass. Southern California's is in the African American heart of southwestern L.A., where La Brea Avenue meets Baldwin Hills. For a Simi Valley recruit, the drive there can be like a trip through the looking glass, an hour or two in thick traffic, from the 118 to the 405 to the 10, making the transition from suburban exile (Waud's office is a few blocks from the courthouse that rendered the Rodney King verdicts) to urban core (MEPS was torched during the ensuing riots).

Even though he arrived in Ventura County more than two years ago, Matt has hardly set foot in L.A. Entering the city, he cranes his neck, staring at people, studying graffiti, absorbing a panorama scrubbed clean by the autumn rains. The young inhabit a naive universe, their restless energy at least partly a function of their innocence. But Matt's blind spots, for a kid so bright, can be mystifying. As the car veers onto the Santa Monica Freeway, away from the Westside, he points to the hills. "Is that the real one?" Matt asks. There is silence, none of his escorts too sure of the question. Matt is undeterred. "The real Hollywood sign?" he asks again.

Down La Brea, across Jefferson, over the railroad tracks, and into a parking lot behind the Rancho Cienega Sports Complex, the car finally pulls to a stop. Matt's driver, Staff Sergeant Sean Donahue, leads him through a chain-link security gate, into the rear of MEPS, past an armed guard and a metal detector. He instructs Matt not to

leave the facility for any reason—the neighborhood being too dangerous, according to the military, even to step out for a smoke. At the front desk they are stopped by a soldier in battle fatigues. He nods at Matt's beanie. "Sir, can you take off your hat for us?" Matt looks at Donahue. "It's a military thing," Donahue says. Two hours later Matt is done, early this time. His score is even better than before, a 96, which puts him in the top 4 percent of the nearly half a million applicants who take the ASVAB every year.

"That's pretty good, right?" Matt asks.

"That's excellent," Donahue says.

"There's only one question I didn't know," Matt says. "What does *acquiescence* mean?"

AS PROMISED, Matt receives his T-shirt. It is XXL. He asks if there is anything smaller. "Unfortunately," Waud says, "it's one size fits all." Matt puts himself at five feet seven, 120 pounds. He is two months shy of his 21st birthday yet has the build of a junior high scrub. For as long as he can remember, size has been his bane, a barrier to sports, to romance, to commanding the respect of teachers and bosses. Waud tries to empathize. "The thing I always had going for me, I was the tall guy," he says. "Girls love tall guys," Matt says. "That was my *only* game," Waud tells him. Matt has dreamed of getting a tattoo across the top of his back. If he survives boot camp, he will do it. He already knows what it will say: TOO MUCH TO PROVE. "It's not that I have a Napoleon complex," Matt says. "I'm not out to prove that I'm better than other people. It's just to prove that I'm average, that I can keep up with everyone. I've had to prove myself—what I know, what I am—to other people my whole life." Instead of a tattoo Matt has a decal. It is stuck across the rear window of his car, now a Hyundai, the cheapest, bare-boned model available. In neat white letters it says: TRUST NO BITCH.

If Matt had a girlfriend—and that is a term he uses warily—her name would be Olga Hernandez. She entered Cal Lutheran the same year he did, a working-class Mexican American girl from San Fernando who shares his outsider's perspective on phoniness and wealth. Olga had been a softball star in high school; she has hips and curves and enough muscle to work as an undercover

er security guard at the JCPenney in the Thousand Oaks mall. She once took Matt home, to see her old neighborhood and meet her Spanish-speaking parents, the first boy she had ever invited. "Basically we have a relationship, just not spoken," Matt says. "We can lie together on the bed and cuddle for hours. But it's a something-we-never-act-on type of thing." He is sitting outside, at one of the several Starbucks he frequents in Simi Valley, smoking Marlboros and sipping his usual, an iced grande vanilla latte, which he orders at least two or three times a day, no matter the weather. He has begun to shiver. His teeth are chattering. His neck is twitching. He often ends up this way, chilled, underdressed, nerves jangling from tobacco and caffeine. It somehow makes him look smaller, to be so clenched. He is anxious to see Olga, to tell her about the army. "She doesn't know yet," Matt says. "She'll probably pass out."

He drives the Hyundai to Cal Lutheran. There is only one parking spot near Olga's dorm. He starts to back in. It is spacious, wide enough to accommodate a Hummer. Before he can straighten out, Matt's rear tire bangs into the curb. He cranks the wheel, then tries again. Forward and back, cutting and braking—three, four, five times before he finally gets himself parallel. Street racing was Matt's equalizer, the antidote to being slight. Maybe the army is, too, a force so much larger and more powerful than he, with all the weaponry he needs to impose his will on an adversary. Matt shrugs. "I can drive like a maniac," he says, "but I can't park worth a shit."

THE ARMY wants to know everything about Matt.

"Have you registered for the selective service?" Waud asks him.

"What's that?" Matt says.

"Have you ever been a conscientious objector?" Waud asks.

"What's a conscientious objector?" Matt replies.

"Are you allergic to wool?" Waud continues. "Are you missing a testicle?" Asthma? Jaundice? Collapsed lung? Sleepwalking? Bed-wetting? Night blindness? Periods of unconsciousness?

Matt shakes his head.

"Have you ever been treated for alcohol dependence?" Waud asks.

"Well," Matt deadpans, "I was a college student for two years."

The interrogation, which requires Xs and initials on every answer, signals Matt's graduation from prospect to full-fledged recruit. The scope is so vast, the details so difficult to verify, he is having a hard time taking it seriously. Then something hits home. Waud asks about prescription drugs. It leads to a story about childhood, to the roots of Matt's self-image. When he was 11 or 12, his indifference to school already causing him trouble, Matt was treated for attention deficit disorder. He took Ritalin, then Adderall, but stopped once he got to college. In truth, he never believed in the syndrome or accepted that he was among its sufferers. His mother, however, thought it explained a lot. She became a champion of ADD education, even serving as chairperson of the Cameron Park chapter of CHADD, the nation's leading support group. "It's like, all of a sudden my mom got interested in it," Matt says, "and then all of a sudden, all her kids had it."

"It's so weird," Waud says. "I know I would have been an attention-deficit kid if I was growing up in a big city like this or in this era. Fortunately I was on two and a half acres of country yard, and my parents were like, 'Go outside and kick the ball against the wall, go run with the dogs...'"

"It's just kind of like being a kid," Matt says.

"Most of the time, the ones that are quote-unquote *hyper* and not paying attention—it's mostly because they're advanced," Waud says.

"And bored," Matt says. "They're creative, and they want to do other stuff that's actually stimulating."

"I think that's one of the worst things that's happened to society," Waud says. "I can't control my kids—give 'em drugs.'"

For Matt there was another, unforeseen consequence of taking this medication, much of which was amphetamine based. Throughout puberty, while other kids were sprouting, Matt had no appetite. "You're never hungry," he says. "I blame my being small on that."

HE WOULD HAVE given anything for Olga to be awed by his mettle, humbled by his selflessness. But her reaction is neither adulatory nor weepy. "Why do you want to do that bullshit?" she snaps at Matt. "Espe-

cially now?" Olga wants to be an FBI agent or, maybe, the first female owner of the Dodgers. Her dorm room is decorated with posters of Ken Griffey Jr. and the rap trio G-Unit. A bullet casing and a pair of miniature handcuffs hang from the rearview mirror of her Jeep Laredo. There is nothing fragile about Olga; there is, she worries, about Matt. "I won't say I baby him or that I, like, have pity on him," she says. "He's a smart boy. But he's, like, naive in certain things. He says, 'Sometimes, you act like my mom.' Well, sometimes he acts like a little kid."

In the lexicon of recruiting, Olga is known as a COI, or center of influence. It applies to anyone in the community, friend, relative, coach, pastor, whose perspective on the military, pro or con, might sway a potential enlistee. Olga's politics are shaped by the personal—a friend from high school, now a marine, is on his second tour of Iraq. "The first time, he loved it," Olga says. "He was all gung ho, like, 'Let's go out there and kick some ass.' The next time, he called me and he was crying on the phone. I guess he saw his sergeant blow up and a bunch of his friends—three of them died, plus the sergeant—and he was crying, saying, 'This is crazy. I don't want to be here. You know, we've killed so many innocent people.' He goes, 'It's funny, but a lot of soldiers are talking about killing themselves.' It's so sad. I mean, this is a guy who was just, like, totally hard-core."

Olga does not want to see Matt hurt. She does not want to be the one hurting him. "Every day I try to figure out why he's really doing this," she says. "I just don't think it's him."

ON A DRIZZLY Wednesday afternoon, a week after his first interview with Waud, Matt is summoned to physical training, or PT, as he comes to know it. To get through boot camp, Matt will need to do 42 push-ups in two minutes, 53 sit-ups in two minutes, and a two-mile run in less than 16 minutes and 30 seconds. The strength portion does not especially worry him—he would be glad to bulk up—but running at such a speed strikes Matt as an alarming stunt. He has been smoking since he entered Cal Lutheran, three-quarters of a pack a day now. He started because of a girl;

they experimented together while dating, she lost interest in him, he kept the habit. All day long Matt has been smoking. On his way to PT he smokes again.

For the next hour, as the weather grows worse, Waud plays drill sergeant, barking commands at the young recruits, seven or eight of them, Matt gasping and wincing, the occasional passerby with an umbrella staring at their choreographed exertion. It is a rare sight, these soldiers-to-be stomping around in the muck of a city park, forming columns, turning in unison, practicing 30-inch steps, then trotting, jogging, and breaking into a steady run. As they loop around the playground, Waud prods them with cadence, the call-and-response chants that are a staple of army life.

"I wanna be an airborne ranger," he cries.

"I wanna be an airborne ranger," replies Matt, his voice rising above the chorus.

"Live a life of death and danger," Waud sings.

"Live a life of death and danger," Matt sings.

"Airborne ranger," they repeat. "Death and danger."

Back at the car, Matt lights up. He is fretting over the necessity of going cold turkey once he gets to basic training, but he seems energized by the camaraderie of this early initiation rite, by what the army calls the "soldierization" process. Societies have engaged in such rituals since the beginning of time, culling their young males, subjecting them to hardship, and ultimately transforming them into that culture's notion of what it means to be a man. In the postindustrial age, manhood tends to be measured in economic terms, a reflection of salary and career. The army remains one of those primal tests, a chance to earn entry into a group as mighty as any on this planet—to be sworn and reborn, transcending civilian life. "You kind of leave that world behind," Matt says, inhaling deeply. "Even when you come back, you're still not quite part of it."

Matt's favorite movie is *Tombstone*, the 1993 take on the Wyatt Earp-Doc Holliday story. He has watched it maybe 30 times. "They both know there's really good odds they're going to die," Matt says. "But at least they'll die fighting for something. It's like taking a risk to prove a point." That same notion, of the underdog outmaneuvering a superior foe, even if it means going

down in a blaze of glory, permeates the rest of Matt's interests. He admires Confederate general Robert E. Lee and Nazi field marshal Erwin Rommel, both of whom became renowned for their tactical brilliance despite fighting for a doomed and discredited cause. He has read Sun Tzu's *Art of War* four or five times, each in a different translation. In high school, he lost days engaged in MMORPGs, or massive multiplayer online role-playing games, sort of Internet-based versions of *Dungeons and Dragons*. "I just like the idea of pulling off unbelievable things," Matt says, "of beating someone with your mind."

Until the army, the closest Matt had come to applying those lessons was at Chevron, his employer before Denny's. While working an all-nighter in 2003, he was robbed by a man with a snub-nosed revolver and "the craziest, piercing eyes." The gun was stuck inches from Matt's face. Matt played it cool, reaching into the register and scooping out the cash. Afterward, his manager wanted him to take some time off, maybe see a psychologist. Matt reported for his next shift. "It seems like an experience that might alter other people's lives, like, 'Oh, I love life,' but it didn't change me in the least," Matt says. "Didn't even faze me. I've never really cared about death. It's not that, 'Oh, I'm invincible.' I know that I'm mortal. It's just that—it's kind of bad to say, I know people look down on this, but I don't really care—it's just that, What is there to live for in this life?"

THE MORNING after PT, Matt is back at Denny's, behind the register, an apron hanging from his hips. It is three days before Halloween, and the restaurant is decked out in graveyard decor, a mock tombstone chattering at customers. Matt is at the front, greeting and seating, his banter practiced and polite: "How many?... Wherever you like.... Have a good one...." A couple of middle-aged regulars, Tammy and Richard, walk in, oddball sweethearts who are something of a handful. They used to visit Matt when he worked at Chevron. Now they look for him at Denny's. Among the staff they are known, not so affectionately, as "the Simples." "You guys need anything?" Matt asks. "No,

we're just here to pester," Tammy says.

Matt has a brother, Ben, who is 18 and consigned to a group home. Severely autistic and afflicted with Tourette's syndrome, he alternates between sullen withdrawal and violent fits. Matt, more than anyone, has learned to reach Ben, to calm his rages and brighten his mood. "I was always the one to protect him," Matt says. "I'm the only one he really listens to." Tammy presses her face against a toy-crane machine by the front door. She slips in some quarters and begins rocking the joystick, skimming over the trove of stuffed animals with the game's mechanical claw. "This thing is hopeless—totally, pathetically hopeless," she announces. Matt steps out from behind the counter, a fistful of quarters to the rescue. He takes aim at a pumpkin-shaped bear. "I'll win him," Matt says. "I don't put anything past Matt—if he puts his mind to it, he can do it," Richard says. Matt lowers the crane. The claw closes in on the bear's head. As he raises it, the animal lurches, then drops back to the pile. "So dang close," says Tammy. Matt tries again. "Right there—grab it, grab it, grab it!" Tammy shouts. The bear slips again. "Nooooooo!" she wails. Matt feeds the machine one more time. "If I had the money, believe me, I'd do it for you," Tammy says. Matt snares the orange-bellied animal. It tumbles out the chute. Tammy clutches her prize. "Oh, thank you!" she cries, dancing across the foyer.

Matt's manager glares at them. She tells Matt to clean the pie carousel. He begins spraying, wiping the glass, removing expired desserts. Then she tells him to wait tables. He begins taking orders, serving drinks, running back and forth to the kitchen. A line has formed up front. She tells him to get back to the register. A laminated poster—the Denny's "Declaration of Hospitality"—hangs behind him. To Matt it is just another front, a pledge without substance. By now, customers are complaining. The manager snaps at Matt again. Matt tears off his Denny's shirt. The lunch rush is on, the restaurant in limbo. There is not much principle at stake; Matt will be gone soon, anyway. But there is drama. The army has given him a once-in-a-lifetime chance to play Johnny Paycheck, an excuse not to be nice. "Bye," he says, dropping his uniform on the counter. "I quit."

MATT'S MOM FEARS the army will take the best years of her son's life. She knows, from her own work, how hard it is for veterans to reenter the job force with marketable skills, how easily they can return home damaged, even broken, by what they have experienced. "Matt thinks my objections are just that I'm an overprotective mom, that I'm afraid he's going to get killed in Iraq," Michelle says. "But there's a side of him that's not adult, that doesn't know the reality of it."

Matt's dad hopes the army will redeem the best years of his son's life. He is sure that a military environment—"a place where there's character and discipline and integrity"—will straighten him out, especially compared with the indulgences of a fancy Southern California college. "It's perfect for him, really," Mark says. "Once he gets adjusted to it, I think he'll just thrive."

When the marriage began to crumble, Matt sided with his mom. She is the realist of the family, grounded, analytical, and flexible enough to let him smoke and drink under her roof. With Matt's encouragement, Michelle tried to pull the youngest two children out of Capital Christian. "Me, personally, I would never send my kids there," Matt says. Mark obtained a court order, keeping them enrolled. The legal battle now centers on Ben. Mark is challenging Michelle for custodianship; in Matt's eyes his father could commit no greater hypocrisy: "Everything to my dad is public appearance—what other people think," he says. "Having a kid like that, who will embarrass him in public, he never accepted it. He never wanted to deal with it. He kind of treated him like he wasn't even his son." It is not hard to see the army as Matt's refuge from this turmoil, an organization that—good or bad—is at least *real*: demanding, messy, hands-on, but without pretense. As a soldier, he might not be free, but he will be unavailable, transported to a world beyond his parents' reach.

The irony, of course, is that his father—the figure Matt is trying to distance himself from—sees in this parting the seeds of a homecoming, a necessary step before reconciliation. When Michelle left, she handed Mark a list of his faults. Among them was his obsession with military history. He has a library full of World War II books. He has turned European vacations into tours of bunkers and shrines. Mark wonders if

her displeasure over Matt's interest in the army is not really about something else, about the son becoming the father. "God says in his Bible, 'The word will not return void,'" Mark says. "Matt knows the truth and has been taught the truth. Somewhere along the way, I am confident, he will grab that truth and take it as his own."

HIS ENLISTMENT comes on his mom's birthday. Matt needs to be at MEPS before dawn. Waud offers to drive him down the night before and put him up at the Westin Los Angeles Airport, another of those invisible intersections between the military and civilian worlds. The hotel is a MEPS way station, the official lodging of recruits on the eve of signing up or shipping out. The third floor hosts a MEPS office, where newcomers are checked in every evening, and a MEPS lounge, where they can watch movies or send e-mails. Waud goes over the rules: no room service, no minibar, no pay-per-view TV, no wandering after the 10 p.m. curfew. "Get some sleep," he tells Matt. "I can tell you, tomorrow you're going to be tired." Matt spends most of the night smoking, reclined by the swimming pool, which is drained and cordoned off with police tape. Jets roar overhead. Palms sway in the damp coastal haze. L.A. feels distant, a shimmering dreamscape, less important than it has ever been. Matt goes to his room. He has brought nothing but the clothes on his back. He watches *Law & Order* and *CSI*. Then he goes out to smoke again. "I'm not in a friendly mood today," he says. "Everyone's getting ready for the tough front they'll have to put on tomorrow."

The wake-up call comes automatically, a 3 a.m. reveille. By 3:30, Matt is downstairs, in front of the lobby, already lighting a smoke. A breakfast buffet has been laid out. He can stomach only a few bites. A Westin courtesy shuttle is idling at the curb. Matt smokes another, his last for the next dozen hours. At a quarter to four, he is on the bus. It is dark, stuffy, tight, a payload of 30 or 40 bleary kids, none too sure of the right posture or vocabulary—sarcasm, formality, indifference—for such a portentous occasion. Matt clutches his paperwork, a manila envelope stamped with his name and social security number. Another 15 minutes go by. "Hurry up and wait," somebody in the back

whispers. The driver, at last, pulls onto Century Boulevard, rumbling through Inglewood, then up and over the hills. At MEPS, the doors are locked. The recruits line up outside and wait again. "Okay, single-file line, back it up," booms a sergeant in camouflage wear. "Everyone sitting down, stand up. Face me. All right. Good morning." He goes over the rules of MEPS: no hats, no backpacks, no sunglasses, no piercings, no cell phones, no smoking, no sleeping, no sagging pants. Matt hikes his up. The corridors are labyrinthine, with colored arrows—blue, red, yellow, green—leading to each phase of induction. Glossies of President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld hang on the walls. In one corner, there is an arcade, with toy guns strafing the screens of *Police 911* and *Dark Silhouette*.

For the next several hours Matt is poked and prodded, weighed and measured, fingerprinted, vision tested, drug tested, HIV tested, and directed to bend and spread. As the morning drags on, the time-honored intramural rivalries of the military can already be seen taking shape. A couple of would-be marines taunt Matt, insisting that the army is always far behind them, at the rear of any attack. "Oh yeah?" Matt shoots back. "Well, we've got more combat deaths in Iraq than you." A marathon of *Rocky* movies play back-to-back in the waiting room. Matt buys some TGI Friday's potato skins from a vending machine; unsure of the rules, he sneaks them, one at a time, from the pouch of his sweatshirt.

Nobody joins the military—indeed, nobody leaves MEPS—without a trip to the counseling office. Recruiters can make all the promises in the world, but only a guidance counselor can put an offer on the table, turn the recruiter's pitch into reality. It is possible to spend an anxious night at the Westin, get on that fiendishly early bus, endure hours of intrusive examination, then hours more of boredom, only to discover that the job that had sounded so perfect has already been filled. Recruiters sometimes get a bad rap, as if they were the ones playing bait and switch. But they operate in the dark, too. "We cross our fingers, hold our breath, pray on the little Buddha belly," says Waud, who is barred from mingling with Matt until a contract has been signed. Basically, MEPS is to recruiting what the sales manager's office is to buying a car. Everyone

who enters these doors is essentially a captive, deliberately worn down and conveniently unaware of what products are actually in stock. There is still no obligation to join. But it would take an uncommonly resolute kid to withstand such a grind, then walk away if the job being offered did not sound quite right. By the time he is introduced to his counselor, Matt is so frazzled, he looks ready to take anything. "I'm gonna get drunk tonight," he says. "Well, no, not drunk. Yeah...drunk."

The counselor is a former army ranger, Sergeant First Class David Gardner. Bald and plump, he is sitting at a computer, the screen set to an American flag. "Okay, what are you looking at doing, bro?" he asks Matt.

"Um, my main ones I want, like the top-of-the-list ones are, like, intelligence and counterintelligence," Matt says.

"Let's talk about it real quick. I want to make sure you understand what you're getting into. A lot of people look at it and think, 'I'm 007.' It's not like that."

"But there's fieldwork?" Matt asks. "It's not just a desk job?"

"Oh yeah," Gardner says. "There's no safe job from going to Iraq."

"Oh no—see, I'd want to go," Matt says. "I just don't know, with all the training, if I'd make it in time."

"I don't know, either," Gardner says. "But I would imagine the war on terror's not just going to be wrapped around Iraq. That's my prediction. There's other countries on the hit list out there."

As it turns out, counterintelligence is not available, but intelligence analyst is. "Happy?" Gardner asks. "I'm good," Matt says. He will become known as a 96-Bravo. His enlistment period will be four years of active duty plus another four in the reserves. The army wants him to do 9 weeks of basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, followed by 17 weeks of specialized training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. If he can leave as soon as November 24, the day before Thanksgiving, he will receive a \$6,000 "seasonal" bonus. He will get another \$8,000 as a reward for his college background. It is a \$14,000 jackpot, the first half of which will be payable in mid-2005, once he gets to his duty station. Where that might be is anyone's guess. "Shit, they're giving me 14 grand to join!" Matt says. "It kind of means someone wants you, if they're willing to pay

you that much."

As if on cue, Waud appears. Matt is Private Ludwig now. "Congratulations, once again, young man," Waud tells him. Outside, Matt fumbles for a smoke. It is 4 p.m., Friday traffic, a long stop-and-go slog back to Simi Valley. "I like this song," Matt says. Waud turns up the radio. Social Distortion is on KROQ:

Reach for the sky

'Cause tomorrow may never come

Depleted, overwhelmed, Matt finally gives in to the rhythms of the drive. His chin drops to his chest. He slumps forward, bobbing against his seat belt. He sleeps until Waud cuts the engine.

TUESDAY IS ELECTION Day. It is the first presidential race of Matt's adult life. He declares himself a Bush supporter but has never bothered to register. "Who'd you vote for?" He is talking into his cell. "You would.... That's 'cause you believe in propaganda.... He's full of crap, Olga.... Anyways, Miss Political, I'm not the one who likes *Fahrenheit 9/11*.... Yeah, right.... Michael Moore's so minority and all.... Shut up, fat girl.... Don't even try to talk shit...." Then Matt's battery dies. "She's going to be freakin' pissed," he groans.

Matt's relationship with Olga is like a chess match. All positioning and leverage, angles and gambits. Olga is accustomed to guys falling for her. Matt has seen them, tongues wagging, done before they even get a chance. He does not want to be among them. "I'd sleep with her, just because I'm a guy," Matt says. "But I'm one of her few friends that's resisted for so long. She's used to everybody worshipping her, running back to kiss her ass." If their relationship were intimate, it seems safe to say, Matt probably would not be seeking his future in the army. Sex has come too sporadically for him to just walk away, especially from a prize as coveted as Olga. It is not as if the choice, though, has belonged only to him. "I don't want to sound mean," Olga says, "but I could kick his ass, and I don't want to be with a guy whose ass I can kick."

Now there are only three weeks left, perhaps the last three weeks they will share together. Matt is planning their final night. Olga sends him text messages, saying they need to talk. Matt calls but gets no response. "She seems like she has something

she wants to tell me," he says. "Lately," says Olga, "he's been acting different, like he wants to tell me something."

IN THE END there is no party, no tears. Matt piles everything he owns into the back of his car—dirty clothes mostly, two pillows, a basketball—and heads north, up the 5, to leave it all with his parents. He flies back down. They do not follow. He crashes in the Cal Lutheran dorms, only \$35 to his name. Olga tries to reach him again. Matt is no longer playing along. "She needs someone to teach her a lesson," Matt says. "I want her to have regrets." Matt had taken out his earrings for his trip to MEPS; by the time he remembers to put them back in, the skin has already closed.

He spends his last night with an old flame, the same girl who turned him into a smoker. He takes her to the Spearmint Rhino, in Oxnard, for a gaze at the all-nude gyration. Whatever Matt thinks he is going to get out of this encounter, the arrival of cops, weapons drawn, storming the joint, cannot be good. There has been a report, apparently, of a couple with a gun. They zero in on Matt first. He scoops up his \$1 bills from the table. They pat him down, quiz him, run his ID. "I'm leaving for boot camp tomorrow," Matt pleads. By the time they let him go, his date is interested in nothing more than a hug. "I'm more of boyfriend material," Matt says later, "than a hit-it-and-quit-it guy." The next morning he pulls out his wallet. He is at Starbucks with some Cal Lutheran friends. They had bet him—ten bucks—he would not be able to score.

One of them, Micah Kaponu Naruo, is a shrewd chess player, Matt's nemesis on the board. "He's usually more defensive," Micah says. "I usually do more attacking." Sergeant Waud is expected any minute. Matt's farewell is a hasty match, one he knows he has no chance of winning.

"Matt!" Micah scolds, sliding his bishop into an undefended rook.

"Damn it," Matt says. "I forgot about that guy."

"Check," Micah says.

"I hate it when you do that shit," Matt says.

"Check," Micah says.

"Hmm," Matt says. "Now I'm just trying to delay the game."

Before he can fly out, Matt needs to return to MEPS for a final check-up, which means two more nights at the Westin. It occurs to him, between the sleeplessness and the drudgery, that he is being subjected to more rules and regulations than he has been at any time since leaving Capital Christian. He is about to embark on a cross-country odyssey, be entrusted with multimillion-dollar equipment, perhaps risk his life on a far-off battlefield, and yet he is being treated like a child—no smoking, no drinking, no girls, no leaving campus. The army is supposed to be the final act of Matt's desheltering, his entry into a world of grit and guts. Yet it also shares much with the church: the hierarchy, the vestments, the leaps of faith, the commandments not meant to be questioned. Matt will be doing big things but within a narrow structure.

Matt's file, from his examination at MEPS, lists him at five feet four, 110 pounds. It is hard to know what to make of these new figures—the measurements, essentially, of a jockey. Matt is sure they are wrong, which is possible. Bureaucracies can be careless. But it is just as possible, maybe more so, that they are accurate. Neither explanation is welcome: The army has sold him short, or he has overestimated himself.

On his last night at the hotel, Matt decides to shave. First he does his goatee. Then he returns to the sink and wipes away his mustache. His head was already cropped; before they parted, his dad had bought an electric trimmer. Now Matt is decidedly impish, four or five years taken off with the fuzz. He looks to be regressing—a version of Dorian Gray, growing younger as he turns into a soldier. "Damn, my face feels weird," he says, stroking his naked chin.

A S ALWAYS, the wake-up call comes at 3. Breakfast at 3:30. Bus at 4. Only this time, as it idles in the predawn chill, Matt cannot be found. He is scheduled to travel with seven other privates, all headed to Fort Leonard Wood. They do not yet know who he is or what he looks like, but they recognize that a comrade is missing. One of them calls Matt's room. Another searches the restaurant. A third climbs up the steps of the bus. "Is there a Matt Ludwig on

board?" he shouts into the darkness, getting only coughs and snickers in response.

For the last six weeks, Matt's identity has hinged on this day. Joining the army was less a decision than an intuition, a moment of clarity, a burst of autonomy. Now that the time has arrived, how could he be missing it? What could he possibly be thinking? Finally, Matt stumbles out of the Westin's elevators, dazed and sheepish. "I never heard the phone," he mumbles, peeved at himself for bungling such a simple task, and so soon into his new life. He gets on the bus. "It's okay," someone from the back drawls, "we still love you." The last on, Matt's group is the first off at LAX: Southwest, flight 2719, bound for St. Louis. It is the busiest travel day of the year.

At the gate he finds a Starbucks. The usual, iced grande vanilla latte. But this time, no place to smoke. He has just enough battery left in his cell phone to check for messages. He powers it on. Nobody has called. At 6:45, a tangerine glow creeps across the tarmac. Matt takes his place in line. On his boarding pass, they have gotten his name wrong: Lidwig. The forecast calls for rain, turning to snow by the time he arrives. **LA**