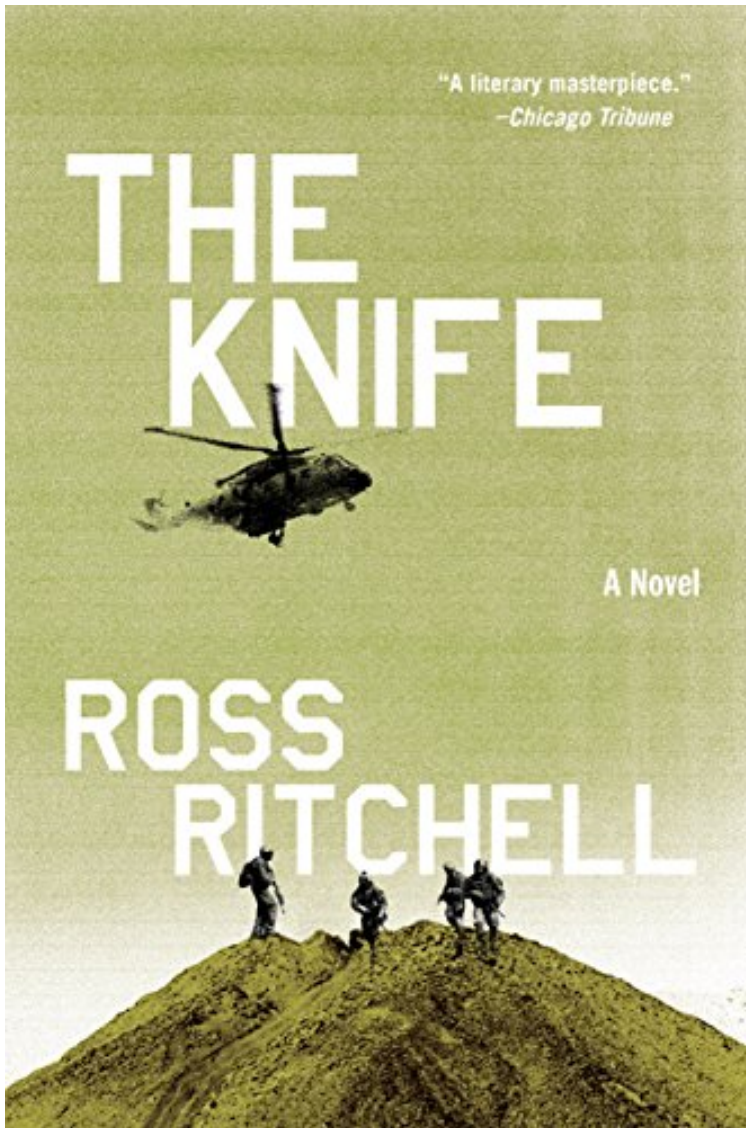


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The Knife



Par Ross Ritchell
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA powerful, dark, and morally provocative debut novel about a U.S. Special Forces unit operating in the Middle East, written by a former soldierNo Easy Day meets Redeployment Its hot and getting hotter this summer in Afghanipakiraqistanthe preferred name for the ambiguous stretch of the world where the U.S. Special Forces operate with little outside attention. Team Leader Dutch Shaw is missing his late grandmother. She was the last link he had to civilian life, to any kind of world of innocence. But theres no time to mourn. After two helicopters in a sister squadron are shot down, Shaw and his team know that theyre going to be spun up and sent back in, deep into insurgent territory, where a mysterious new organization called Al Ayeelaa has been attracting high-value targets from across the region. As Shaw and his men fight their way closer to the source, mission by mission, they begin to realize that their way may

have been prepared for them in advance, and not by a welcoming host. The Knife is a debut novel of intense authenticity by a former soldier in a United States Special Operations Command direct-action team. As scenes of horseshoes and horseplay cut to dim Ambien-soaked trips in helicopters and beyond, Ritchell's story takes us deep beneath the testosterone-laced patter into the lonelier, more ambivalent world of military life in the Middle East. The result is a fast-paced journey into darkness; a quintessential novel of the American wars of the twenty-first century. From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait 1 He was Shaw to everyone in the squadron, nobody to the rest of the world. His given name was Dutch Robert Shaw and his grandmother raised him. She called him her Little Dutch, or the more formal Dutch Robert if he was in trouble, but with her gone his pre-squadron life might as well have been buried in the Minnesota soil along with her lifeless body. She was gone now and he was changing. Special operators lived in the shadows and he was a team leader in the darkest of them. Their lives were classified and they liked it that way, for it let them do their job. The next deployment would be Shaw's tenth, the team's fifth together, and he didn't even think about it as killing after a while. Besides someone having an interesting mustache or getting whacked in their underwear, the kills weren't worth much of a second thought. Holding a weapon? Two in the chest. Strapped with a vest? Two in the head. If he'd wait a second longer it'd be him on the floor leaking into the ground, or one of his buddies. Maybe a building full of people. It was work. Living over life, way of the knife. Summer was just giving way to fall then. They weren't slotted to head out on their next hop for another couple months, but the warmer weather brought an influx of farmers and goat-herders with pockets fattened by jihadist contracts. They'd swarm out of the mountains, deserts, and villages and attack anyone in uniform. Just like back home in the cities, the violence increased with the temperatures. So teams and squads back in the States cleaned their weapons and kept their eyes on the news. There were one hundred three coalition deaths in June. One hundred thirty-four in July. One hundred sixty-one in August. Speaking averages, the numbers usually dropped in September, but then one of their sister squadrons lost fourteen men after a Chinook and a Black Hawk went down in the mountains on the same day. The tally for the month rose to nearly two hundred.

Shaw knew they'd be getting spun up early. Bets were placed with each passing day. Sir, a refill? The girl pouring coffee stood in front of him, her blond ponytail splayed over her shoulders and chest like parted curtains. Her name tag read Stephanie and she'd drawn a little heart to dot the i in her name. She wore khaki pants and a dark green sweater and a little too much eye makeup. She was cute, beautiful soon if she didn't start smoking or fall in love with any of the guys like the one seated before her. Their profession aged people. She looked sweet and relaxed and she had her eyebrows raised, as if she wasn't yet annoyed but was thinking about getting there. Shaw looked older with a beard, so she probably didn't see him as someone liable to hit on her. He was safe, thus was she, she might have thought. But he wasn't safe in that regard, merely distracted. He'd been drumming his fingers on his empty cup, focused on the TVs nailed to the walls. The news had been broadcasting widespread suicide bombings in the Middle East for the last few days and the beeper he wore in his pocket weighed heavier than normal. He hadn't noticed her sweater-strangled breasts hovering mere inches from his face. Sir, a refill? she repeated. He turned toward the sound, quick and abrupt. He nearly nosed her breasts. The longer strands of his beard pricked the loose wool of her top. He nodded and tipped his cup toward her. Smiled. He had a good smile, deep dimples on both cheeks. Please. The dimples were a strong peace offering. She smiled back and poured. Cream? He nodded. Thank you. She held her smile longer for him than she did for most customers. She poured from a small silver creamer and stopped when he cut the air with his fingers. He thanked her again, and she had probably just started staring through his beard, recognizing the handsome face buried beneath it, when an older couple seated at another table called her over. An old woman held her white coffee cup in the air with arthritic fingers while her husband sat across from her, asleep, with his head in a book. The old woman looked like she wouldn't be able to hold the cup up much longer, so the waitress backpedaled quickly over to the old couple, running her fingers through her hair. She kept her eyes on Shaw as she moved and he watched her while he blew waves in his coffee, the tattoos on his wrists freed and visible from his sleeves. His lips hovered over the rim of the cup and he mouthed her name. Stephanie. Stephanie. He watched her pour for the old woman and liked the way she rested her hand gently on the old woman's brittle shoulder. He could see her smooth hand and the fragile, delicate wrist emerging from the sweater she'd rolled up to pour the coffee. A leather bracelet emerged on her wrist and he wondered who'd given it to her. A family member or friend, maybe. Another man. She probably hadn't seen Shaw's fingernails, stained with gun oil, but she might have learned to love that about him. The news continued blaring in the background, but he was too busy counting strands of the blond hair cinched into her ponytail to care. And she might have started noticing something in

him beyond what everyone else in the shop could see: a tall blond guy with a wild beard and large back muscles shifting beneath a trim blue sweater that hugged his chest and waist. And then the beeper in his pocket rumbled. He took it out and black stars filled the screen with a minus-2. He let out a breath. The stars meant rush two hours to get back to base and it was October second, which meant he owed Hagan fifty. Hagan bet on the first week in October and Shaw the second. He opened his wallet and fingered the fifty he now owed Hagan and the five that would cover the coffee. He had just thought of asking the waitress for her phone number when the beeper went off. It was pointless now he'd be leaving in hours so he stood up and made sure to catch her eye when he did. He waited for her to turn away from the old couples table, and when she did her blond hair caught the sunlight. For just a moment, he let himself think of what it might look like lying next to him on the grass of a farm in the summertime, a baby on the way. Maybe two or three others further down the life line. Then he smiled at her, held the fifty up in his hand, and left it on the table for her. He'd tell Hagan to shove it. Hagan would be upset only for as long as it took him to talk about the girl he was with the night before. Huge tits, Hagan said. He was smiling wide and appeared to be quite in love with himself. Shaw thought he might have forgotten their bet entirely. The youngest guy in the team, Hagan had a round, doughy face but carried nothing but muscle on his frame. Dressed in cargo pants and utility shirt like everyone else, he had flecks of dip stuck in his bottom teeth and his lower lip bulged with the brown flakes of tobacco. He stood propped in the doorway leading to the pit, his hands flexed around invisible breasts he'd given himself, and was rocking back and forth on his heels. He looked like a hulking, giddy idiot. A middle-school pervert. Huge. Shaw nodded because to Hagan they were always huge, and because he needed to be believed. Hagan was fragile like that. Plus, keeping his mind on tits would keep his mind off the money Shaw owed him. Congrats on the huge, Hog. Shaw slapped Hagan on the back and walked around the wooden pallets being filled up with all their gear. Hagan didn't ask for the money, so Shaw laughed and continued on past him. And you've got shit in your teeth. Huge, man, Hagan yelled after him, running into the pit. Did you hear me? Huge! The pit was dim and humid, loud. Hagan stopped in the entry-way and looked to the ceiling. He yelled, Huge! Tits! as loud as he could, his arms spread like Christ on the cross and his chest trembling. Hagan liked tits. Hagan also juiced. Yelling about tits like that all roided out, he looked like a rabid beast and devout sex saint. The pit was full of tall gray metal lockers and the team bays were separated by numbers and squadron colors. There were footstools housing disassembled, fully automatic weapons lying on rags or propping up half-naked operators drooling into plastic-bottle spitters and ornate metal spittoons the room over. There were lots of sharp, blind corners and dead ends and the smell of sweat and metal ruled the air. State flags and captured weapons hung from the ceiling or outside lockers, along with a few crucifixes and a single Star of David. A clock taken from a raid on one of the royal palaces hung above the pit, attached to a metal D-ring and chained to an anchor in the roof. The hands of the clock traced the face of a dead tyrant's son and his ghost slowly turned on the chain, keeping watch over the guys who killed him. The reek of gun oil and damp concrete made the men dizzy for the second it took to get used to it. Then they did and knew they were home. The team bays were alive and frantic. Electric guitars shrieked through speakers nailed to the walls and hop bags were pulled from the tops of lockers and spread out on the floor, their owners hunched over and among them, frazzled or calm, running their fingers through ammo, banger, and frag pouches. Looking for small holes that might lead to big problems. The lockers were doubles and opened in the center like French doors. Extra fatigues and civilian clothes hung inside them, along with the occasional newbie with his mouth and hands bound with flight tape. Shaw had also seen blow-up sex dolls, kegs, and a pet dog or cat in lockers as well. He heard about an MP stashed in one to avoid a DUI charge once, too, though he never saw it. Dalonna stood in front of his locker with his arms crossed and his eyebrows raised, the folds of his shaved head wrinkled like waves running on the tides of the ocean. He had two daughters and a wife and looked like Gandhi if the latter had lifted weights his entire life. He was expecting a son. You'll never guess, Donna, Hagan said, when they entered the bay. Dalonna looked at Shaw. Shaw shook his head, removed his lock, and sat inside the locker on a stool he kept at the base. I'll take a shot, Dalonna said. He scratched his beard and looked at the ceiling. She was a supermodel, no, a porn queen. A real dick diva. And they were gigantic, beautiful flesh mountains. Everests. Hagan was nodding along aggressively. It seemed like his head might fall off or that he might make himself sick. Shaw was getting dizzy just looking at him. Cut that out, Hog, Shaw said. Necks aren't supposed to move like that. Hagan waved him off and looked at Dalonna. Donna. Check it. He brought his hands in front of his chest and flexed them around the invisible breasts that'd gone from cantaloupes when he first showed Shaw to watermelons for Dalonna. Hagan was generous like that. Dalonna laughed and shook his head. You're a caveman. And you're

not allowed near my daughters. Someone blasted a stereo and the Rolling Stones drowned out their voices. Gimme Shelter. Ever, Dalonna mouthed over the music. Stay away. The lockers rumbled with the rifts and guys on their first or second hop ran around hurriedly, anxious to make sure everything was in their hop bags, while Shaw and the other salts pretended to worry about their bags. They didnt want to be bothered so faked being busy. Anybody not frantically searching for extra pouches, or pretending to look for them, leafed through their wills. Everyone had to figure out who would get what and what they wanted done with their bodies when they died wouldnt be allowed on the bird without it so guys put pen to paper and got morbid. Bagpipes were a common request at funerals, and books, tins of dip, cases of beer, and pouches of tobacco kept pictures of kids or faithful wives company along with the bodies in the caskets. Guys signed over insurance policies to their kids or girlfriends and not their estranged wives. Shaw once knew a guy who requested the ex-wife he hated to be buried with him, though she hadnt passed yet. There had been a shift in Shaw that summer. He might not have fully recognized it, but the exact date, the source of it all, was inked in black on his wrist. He hadnt changed his will for years before his grandma passed that July. July the twenty-third, to be exact. His grandparents had raised him as their own when his birth parents died in a car crash when he was a toddler, and his grandma had been a mother to him his whole life. He had been home with his grandparents during the crash and couldnt remember having guardians who didnt wear Velcro Keds, hadnt fought in the Second World War, and didnt bake apple pies religiously instead of attending church every Sunday. He had a teenage phase during which he played up the tragedy of losing his real parents; it helped land a girlfriend or two, but he recognized it as disingenuous and kicked it. His grandparents were his parents. His mother looked beautiful from pictures hed seen and his father seemed like a man worth knowing from stories, but he couldnt remember his mothers smell or touch and couldnt remember his fathers strength or laugh. Instead, he remembered the smell of his grandpas Pabst Blue Ribbon and how his grandma let him get away with anything. That free pass first fanned the dickhead in him as a youth. Hed throw drinking parties in their basement and unhook bras while they slept. Then one night they found him in his room, passed out with an empty bottle of Jack in his hand, puke all over his face and hair, and he decided to stop hurting them. His grandpas Now, that wont do and his grandmas tears were enough to rearrange his stomach and outlook permanently. And they did. He went on to college, studied business, and graduated magna cum laude, and then the Twin Towers were hit. He was in his first month with an accounting firm in Chicago and quit before the end of the week. Then he went back to Minnesota and told them he was leaving. Before she died, the details of his will read more like a grocery list, mundane and hardly worth a second thought. He didnt have a wife or serious plans for one, and no children because of it, so he figured hed leave everything to his grandparents. When his grandpa died eight years before, on June eighteenth, he had the date inked in black on the wrist protected by the black metal KIA bracelets he wore. Then he listed his grandma as the sole beneficiary. He missed the way he and his grandpa could talk without saying a whole lot. His grandpa had been a Ranger in France, so he understood. The smell of any alcohol reminded Shaw of the stale PBR his grandpa always had in his hand. The dimpled smile and tip of the can as common as his cane. His grandpas death hurt, sure, but he still had her. Shaw liked to think of what she would do with the government insurance, nearly half a million, if he died. She probably wouldnt do anything with it, maybe get another dog, but he hoped she would hire some help for herself. If not, maybe get a nice foot massage twice a day for the rest of her life the old Vietnamese ladies in town charged only a couple bucks for a half hour. Or maybe she could travel to France. See Pointe du Hoc, where her husband was nearly killed so many years ago in so many different ways. Then she died on a Saturday night in July and he got piss drunk with Hagan and Massey. He got the date of her death tattooed on the wrist covered by his watch before the hangover had time to sprout. Massey tucked him in that night, wrapped a blanket in the caves of Shaws big body, and set a trash can by his face. When Shaw woke, the first thing he saw was Massey sitting on the floor against the wall. You okay? No. Im not. Then Shaw looked at the fresh tattoo on his wrist. The ink shiny and black, the skin red and raw. He smiled. Then he cried. Then he threw up. He needed her. He didnt know it at the time, but whenever he visited her back home in Minnesota her smile absolved him of every mistake he knew he had made or ever would. She was his mother, his grandmother, and as he was a godless man, his single savior and saint. His kills werent murders or ending the lives of others. They were protecting the country like his grandpa had, keeping his sweet grandma from getting blown up on the bus on her way to the market. She was his anchor to the civilian world. To peace. She was the only person he was close to outside the squadron the boys from high school and college didnt understand him anymore and after everything hed seen and done, that didnt seem likely to change. When he saw her he saw approval, redemption. He was her Little

Dutch, no matter how big he got or how many years passed. When she saw him she still saw the little boy with grass stains on his knees and truth in his heart. And he would be okay with that if he knew. But he didn't and never would. After her death he replaced her as beneficiary with a Labrador retriever shelter back home. He loved dogs and had a yellow one named Patch growing up. Patch had a white tuft of skin scarred under his left eye that he got dogfighting before Shaw's grandparents adopted him when Shaw was five or six. He was a good dog, loyal and smart, with the right mix of goof. Patch used to steal Shaw's grandpa's hairpiece while he napped on the couch and then leave it on his slippers for him to find when he woke. Patch lay under the casket for hours after the cancer beat Grandpa had taken him like a bullet, unexpected and quick. Grandma ran her hands through his fur on their deck in the summertime, and Shaw and Patch would both fall asleep in her lap. A boy and his dog. So the Labrador rescue would get all his money when he died. He requested cremation over burial, and that made figuring out the contents of a casket pretty easy. When Shaw finished looking over his will, Hagan was still gesturing with his air breasts. He was closing his eyes, rubbing and slapping the breasts around. Really getting graphic and into it. Dalonna just stared at him. Shaw laughed. The team. The squadron. The only family left. A Briefing Officer came into the pits carrying a megaphone and shouted, Briefing room in twenty, buses in ninety, and a couple guys booed him and he gave them the finger and walked out. Hagan let go of the breasts and smiled at Shaw, raised his eyebrows. Love me some Afghanistan. Shaw nodded and took his kit out of his locker. *Revue de presse* This debut novel about a special operations team leader by a former soldier in a Special Operations Command unit is part thriller, part meditation on the ambiguities of war. Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times* "The book's sense of authenticity is impeccable. The larger experiences of comradeship and loss, the ineffable questions of morality and complicity in combat these issues will resonate with men and women far beyond the special operations community... This isn't a novel to be overlooked because it searches into the searing and ambiguous lives of those fighting through multiple combat deployments; it's a novel about the world we actually live in." --Brian Turner, *The Washington Post* "This first novel looks at bravery, comradeship, futility and deception and indicates that the writer, a former soldier, has skill and potential. His tale of Shaw and his men, who must find the center of a terrorist cell, is exciting and emotional." *Military Times* Army veteran Ross Ritchell's debut novel, *The Knife*, cuts deep to the core of modern warfare, in all its complexity and moral ambiguity. A gripping page-turner. *New York Daily News* The National Book Award went to Phil Klay, a writer who used his experiences as a veteran in his fiction but now a new writer, also a veteran, is giving Klay a run for his money... Ross Ritchell's *THE KNIFE*... reminiscent of Tim O'Brien's Vietnam novel, *The Things They Carried*. It's the best novel yet about life at the point of the knife, in these times of overlapping foreign wars. --Alan Cheuse, National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" In 2014, the short stories in Phil Klay's *Redeployment* were heralded as some of the most authentic wartime writing in our ever-changing post-9/11 world. In 2015, *The Knife*, another literary masterpiece, deserves the same praise for its portrayal of valor and the horrors of war... Ritchell, a former soldier who participated in classified special operations missions in the Middle East and now lives in Evanston, uses personal experience to write a novel that paints war as a complicated, exhausting, gut-wrenching ordeal. It gives Ritchell's story a richly personal and organic sensibility. *Chicago Tribune* "Ritchell, a former special operations soldier, explores both the macho swagger of these hardened soldiers and their more introspective moments in an almost journal-like manner... while not short of action scenes, the novel is at its best when it probes the soldiers' misgivings about the job they're asked to do and the fine line between killing enemy combatants and murder that can exist in a battle zone where civilians and soldiers are intermingled. A simultaneously tough and thoughtful work." *Library Journal* "Raw, authentic and deeply moving, this is a stunning debut." Rene Denfeld, author of *The Enchanted* "The most gripping and thought-provoking novel I've read this year, *The Knife* will enchant, move, and haunt its readers. Ross Ritchell's gritty prose is stunning, and his painfully human characters linger in the mind. *The Knife* is a powerful meditation on war and man, told by a remarkably gifted novelist." Michael Koryta, *New York Times* bestselling author Former Army Ranger and combat veteran Ritchell delivers a war story about the mind-numbing periods of waiting, the stress of battle fatigue, the ingeniously idiotic ideas that fill downtime and the spine-tingling moments when life is ever so fragile... Ritchell describes night operations, "snatch and grab"s and the elimination of HVTs (High Value Targets) without false bravado, while still broadcasting the immense skill possessed by these soldiers. He draws the high drama and moral complexity of the Rangers' life on the front lines from a place of narrative distance, allowing the reader to fill in the unstated emotions of Shaw and his team, giving their story great poignancy. A beautiful book about the soldiers who sit on the front lines of the U.S. military

machine. Kirkus "Ross Ritchell has written a compellingly authentic debut novel. Its uniquely haunting effect arises in part from a dissonance between the clarity of both its action and the immediacy of its telegraphic prose, and yet, at the same time there's a convincing sense of disassociation, a shadow of shocked, repressed emotion." Stuart Dybek, author of *The Coast of Chicago* *The Knife* is intimate immersion in a squad of soldiers in a war zone. It is funny, disgusting, warm and terrifying, by turns or all at once. It is beautiful. Honest. Heart breaking. Katherine Dunn, author of *Geek Love*