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Last Known Tomorrow

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Last Known Tomorrow

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

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The Few...

Never tell the Marine recruiter you don't want to end up in the infantry, that you don't have it in you to be a killer. The Marine Corps is about ninety-five percent infantry, so chances are you're talking to the killer you don't want to be. Killers, you see, don't generally enjoy condescension. Besides, how do you know what you have inside you? The human body is a complex machine, full of many things. Play your cards right and you'll get to see some of these things. Screw up, and your fellow Marines will get to see what's inside of you. Then they'll know for sure if you did, indeed, have it in you. Unfortunately, you won't be around for them to tell you.

Your assimilation begins at the Military Enlistment Processing Station, or MEPS. If military service was a lobotomy, MEPS would be the surgical prep area. Don't be upset when you arrive and can't find all the hot women your recruiter promised would be there. They'll look better after some of your blood's been drawn. The fact that MEPS isn't the Shangri-La of patriotism and sexuality just shy of Olympic village lore is the first, of many, deceits you'll experience. Get used to this, as it tends to be a general theme.

Soon after you arrive, you'll be stripped to your skivvies and interrogated by the least highly trained and experienced military professionals indentured servitude can buy. Remember not to answer truthfully, any questions like: 'Have you ever experimented with illegal substances?' or 'Do you sometimes feel depressed or have suicidal thoughts?' Personal facts other than height, weight and blood type are frowned upon due to their personal nature. Should you forget said fact and begin to disclose details of your abusive father's permanent departure from your family unit with a male member of his prayer group, or what said abuse and subsequent absence did to your eight-year-old psyche, there is a failsafe measure in place in the

form of a personal consultation with medical personnel. This consultation takes only moments and is presented in the form of several rhetorical questions: ‘What the hell are you doing? Didn’t your recruiter warn you about talking?’ These questions are followed by a firm corrective application of force to the back of the head and a directive to resume integration.

Your physical assessment can be summed up in two words, *duck walk*. Regardless of any other physical ailments you possess, it is imperative that you can squat and pretend to take a dump while walking in a circle as military officials look on. Should you fail to successfully complete this task, additional rhetorical consultations may be required. Remember, the circular skin imperfections on your back and forearms are birthmarks, not cigar burns, and those cuts on your wrists, the result of an unfortunate run in with a glass door. No other bodily shortcomings preclude you from active military service. Years from now, when you are lucky enough to hobble back to the civilian world in a somewhat coherent state, fellow humans will approach you with comments, like: ‘I was going to join the Marines, but I had ‘fallen arches,’ or ‘breathing problems’ or ‘vision issues’ or ‘was the last living male in my family.’ Telling said individuals you were a half-blind, asthmatic with flat feet and no siblings will not ingratiate you to them. A knowing grimace and affirmative nod of the head is expected. Don’t go off-script.

The final step in the entry process is your oath of enlistment, or swearing in. Feel free to insert a former classmate or least favorite uncle’s name instead of your own during the verbal portion of this program. Do not be surprised, however, when later your drill instructor punches you in the throat for attempting to use said fact as an escape from the personal purgatory you’ve stepped into. The “I didn’t even say my own name” defense does not fly with this new jury of your peers.

Once the swearing in process is complete, you'll be returned to your hotel for the long night. Look around. Stare at yourself in the mirror. Touch yourself, or another if they'll permit it. Admire your clothes and those of others. Try to remember the color of the sky, or the smell of long, wet hair. Make lots of phone calls, even to people you don't like. Eat everything. Try to laugh, or cry. Write a letter to a lost love, or better yet, to yourself. You'll look back and remember this was a goodbye to normal, the baby-teeth of who you were. Tomorrow is your last known tomorrow.

Boot camp: here, your innocence is brutalized, then removed. What springs forth in its place is something you will neither recognize nor embrace. Your first real day of boot camp will be the only one you'll remember. You'll return to it in dreams, a dog-eared page in the book of your life. What's it like? Imagine every part of your personality: your likes, fears, hopes, beliefs, humors, dreams, and abhorrences are each a marble. Now picture these marbles sitting in a smooth glass bowl. The bowl is filled with clear liquid. Your dreams and hopes shimmer beneath the surface, a pleasant kaleidoscope of blues and greens. Your fears pulse red and begin to grow, absorbing the marbles around them. Then the drill instructor comes and knocks the bowl out of your hand, smashing it on the floor. Most of the marbles he crushes beneath his shiny, black boots. The reds scatter, rolling into the dark recesses of the room. Boot camp's something like that.

You will miss your former life. This goes for everything from French fries to fellatio. At any moment, either of these is just as likely as the other to cause an erection. Food and sex will blur and meld in your memory, just like in real life. Per your Drill Instructor's orders, your girlfriend will be forever known as Suzy Rottencrotch, and the Commie liberal she started cheating on you with the moment you left, is Jody. Do not question these names, they have been

researched thoroughly. What Suzy and Jody do while you're performing asphalt-knuckle-pushups in a pool of your own blood or falling from a fifty-foot scaffolding into a vat of diseased mosquito larva for the sixth time that week is none of your concern. In fact, it's best if you just wrote old Suzy off all together, until of course she decides, after a drunken fit of nostalgia, to send those naked pictures you requested. Then, not only will Suzy be your girl, or Jody's, but she'll belong to the whole platoon. Drill instructors love to share with the class.

In boot camp you will become the great one: one sound, one voice, one mission, one faith. Notice that faith is mentioned last, as it is more a suggestion than a rule or requirement. Belief, in general, is problematic, as it leads to remembering. To join the static fray, you must forget. Forget benevolence. Forget analysis. Forget sanctity. Robots are neither pure, nor profane; they just are. Their machinery runs well on War-For-Peace-1.0. You'd do well to remember this.

Becoming requires precision. You will become very precise at things you already know how to do, like walking and talking. Now, however, you will learn how to perform them in unison. You will scream 'Yes sir!' at the same moment as hundreds of others, your vocal chords straining for the exact pitch. Your left heel will strike the deck at the very instant your comrade's does. The walls around you will echo. Your heart will pound, swelled by the pride of an action heretofore mundane. This unity of form is beautiful, a synchronized corpus to be admired. Never be caught admiring it.

You will become proficient in the use of weaponry. For without arms, you are of no use to anyone. They teach this early on. You will be trained on a variety of explosive and awe-inspiring devices, not the least of which is the M16 service rifle. You will spend weeks

perfecting the use of this weapon, but only a few hours actually firing it. Killers-in-training cannot be trusted around their aggressive, somewhat verbose mentors it seems.

The M16 is lightweight, and fires 5.56mm rounds that have a tendency to tumble once encountering flesh. Should one of your fellow recruits happen to put the M16's aluminum alloy barrel into his mouth and pull the trigger, you may find yourself admiring the weapon's muzzle velocity, which is 3,250 feet per second, and its maximum effective range, which is 460 meters. That means that by the time you hear the rifle shot or see the body drop, the round is already five football fields away. The physics of this will secretly excite you.

Should your drill instructor gather the platoon around said headless individual and scream out the question, 'Well boys, do you think he had a lot of brains?' do not answer, 'Not anymore.' Although he should, your D.I. will not appreciate the humor. This is just rhetorical counseling theory at work.

Eventually, you will graduate. You'll be a part of the brotherhood, an O.E.M. component in the war machine. On the thousand mile bus ride home from boot camp, everything will be new. You'll feel a secret power within you. You'll stare at strangers, waiting for them to acknowledge and respect it. They won't. After awhile, you'll question if the feeling was ever really there.

What you will learn first and practice most often during your enlistment is patience. Although each mission throughout your tour will be represented as a crucial time-sensitive endeavor, few are. The term, *hurry up and wait* was, undoubtedly, conjured in a fox hole. It's said that battle is hundreds of hours of boring crap followed by tens of minutes of crapping yourself. In short, learn to talk to yourself, just not out loud.

You will become a master of all you survey. You will build mud fences, hack through flee-infested thickets, and dig holes in sucking sand pits. Then, for the better part of your enlistment, you will watch and wait. During these thousands of hours, sitting on humanity's periphery, you should dream and contemplate your place on the blue dot, asking yourself what value you now provide as a death-dealer in a card game where everyone busts eventually. Instead, you'll likely just sleep and masturbate, indulging what few urges you control.

For years it will go: cleaning what's already clean, drinking until you cannot think, saying words you'd never say, encountering worlds you'll never understand, eating things you cannot spell, developing bonds you'll never break, destroying everything you touch, and becoming, and unbecoming.

A quick tip: if you are sent to Southern Afghanistan on your first deployment to train the local police force to take over their own city's security someday and none of your trainees show up for work, return to Camp Leatherneck immediately. Sitting in an unfortified mud hut listening to AC-DC while congratulating yourself and your fellow jarheads on the unscheduled day off tends to make one a target. When a satchel bomb blows the door open, embedding pieces of your squad leader into your face and hands right in the middle of Angus Young's solo on Thunderstruck, what will surprise you most will be seeing your trainees' faces coming through the blast hole. As you open up on them with your 9mm, you'll marvel at their coordinated room-clearing technique. They were paying attention after all.

When you finally come home, after enduring twelve to fifteen surgeries, you will be the topic of much conversation. Children will ask their mothers, within clear earshot, why you only have one leg. Teens on the train will ask if the scars on your face or the missing fingers on your left hand are due to a birth defect. And every civilian you encounter, from your bartender to your

court-mandated psychologist will ask one question: 'Did you ever kill anybody?' The answer to this question is not, 'Sure did, and you should see what a hollow point round does to a human head at close range.' Just make the requisite 'tell ya but I'd have to kill ya' comment and let them thank you for your service.

End of the Line

I sat at the back of a small, hot church in Everton, Texas, staring at the side-by-side caskets of William and Doyle Barton. Less than twenty spectators populated the creaky pine pews in front of me. Most, I figured, came to make sure the two men were really gone and that this whole thing wasn't some elaborate joke, one more way to have a laugh at our expense. As an old and broken Milly Barton choked out goodbyes to her forty-year-old sons, however, any thoughts of some grand ruse evaporated. Their last prank was that this was no prank. When Milly's husky voice finally broke, she sobbed into the pulpit until several of the church elders came forward and, with some effort, guided the large woman to the front pew. The reverend then stepped forward and asked if anyone else would like to say a few words. Everyone in attendance kept their heads low as Milly turned and surveyed the crowd with hopeful eyes. The only sound was the hum of two box fans positioned in the corners. When no one spoke, the old man in the ragged suit cleared his throat and covered the silence.

“Words don't come easy when loved ones are taken from us, especially when those we lose are taken too soon.”

‘Taken,’ was an interesting word choice. I imagined the two men out on Walsh Reservoir, fat bellies jiggling with laughter as they guzzled Old Milwaukee and hurled lit sticks of dynamite into the lake, enjoying another peaceful day of fishing. Word was the bodies were found with nothing but a few scratches in less than ten feet of water, next to an aluminum boat with a three-foot hole blown through the middle. Some figured the blast concussion alone killed them, others said they were blown out of the boat and too drunk to make it back to shore. In the end, the sheriff's explanation made the most sense.

“It knocked them out, and they never woke up.”

As the preacher went on, I had a vision of the two of them, eyes wide and grins large, sitting at the bottom of the lake as a massive fish swam between them.

“But I know you all have fond memories of Doyle and William,” the preacher said.

Fighting a smile, I pulled at the stiff collar of my dress blue uniform and smoothed the campaign ribbons on my chest. As the old man’s practiced words faded into a calming buzz, I closed my eyes. Did I have memories of Billy and Doyle? Oh, yeah. Fond ones?

I was twelve when the Bartons moved into the yellow, shotgun house next door. I watched through our breezeway’s rusted screen as Mrs. Barton, a few pounds lighter and a few thousand cigarettes younger, yelled after her lanky, fourteen-year old red-heads. The two laughed and mocked her as they unloaded boxes from a dirty Chevy Impala and the beat-up U-Haul trailer it pulled. There was no Mr. Barton around to protest. Unlike my own father’s absence, I later learned that Mr. Barton’s was just temporary, something I’d be reminded of repeatedly that summer.

My mother’s soft snore drifted to me as I slid my lawn chair, quiet as I could, away from her open window. She’d picked up extra work at the hospital laundry lately, working the nightshift, so waking her would mean misery for us both. I never thought about her life then. With nothing but a small military-mandated allotment from my father to help pay the bills, she worked a checkout all day and cleaned death and worse off sheets and pillow cases at night. I had no awareness of that then. I knew we were poor and Dad was gone.

As I sat in the shadows rubbing old motor oil into my baseball mitt, I wondered what it would be like to have a brother, a real ally. Mom was always saying it was just the two of us against the world, and that we had to look out for each other. They were good words, but they

didn't play catch with me, or teach me to fish. And they definitely didn't keep me company the sixteen hours a day she was gone.

The two boys moved as one, each laughing at the other's jokes or finishing the other's sentences. Billy did the latter quite often, since Doyle's stutter kept him from finishing most sentences at all. Seeing them goof around, all floppy feet and elbows, slap-fighting one minute and wrestling in the dirt the next, was like watching clowns in a whirlwind. They were two flashes of red spinning in a cloud of dust, alternating laughter with cuss words. As the light faded and cicadas droned in the East Texas pines, the two newcomers finally stopped beating each other long enough to haul the last two boxes out of the trailer and into their new old house. A few minutes later, they came back outside and plopped down on the weathered porch steps, each holding a rod-n-reel.

Each boy tied several quarter-sized washers to the end of his respective fishing lines and cast toward everything within fifty feet of the house, car and U-Haul included. The long, fluid casts thrilled me, each one ending in washers clanging against the roof of the car, or the side of the trailer. Each hit was punctuated by an appreciative word or two from the twins, their voices heavy with Texas twang.

"Did you see that one?" Billy asked.

"N-n-nice, 'bout hit that b-back window," Doyle said. His last words were high and sharp, sounding like *bake weenda*.

"See those ponds when we drove in?"

"Yep. B-bottom of, of..."

"The hill, yeah. Full of fish, I bet."

"Tomorrow," they said in unison.

Fishing, huh? I loved fishing. I stood at Wier's Grocery for hours reading articles on how to fish with a jig or rig a worm Carolina-style. For a twelve-year-old, I was a walking angler encyclopedia. Practical application was another matter. Maybe the studying led up to this moment. I could impress them with all I'd learned and they could, in turn, teach me how to actually use all that knowledge. It was perfect, or so I thought. I sat up for hours thinking of what I would say to them. When I slept, I dreamed of clown fish.

The next day was Saturday and I didn't have much of an appetite. I was rescuing colored marshmallows from the mass of Leprechaun's Gold, a cheap knock-off of Lucky Charms, when my mother zombie-walked into the kitchen.

"Morning, my love. What has you up this early on a Saturday?"

"I'm going fishing," I said.

"Not alone though, right?" she asked.

"Of course not, Mom. Toby will be there, and maybe those two new boys next door."

"New neighbors, yeah, I saw the U-Haul last night." She dumped two aspirins into her hand and downed them with coffee before shuffling her slippered feet across the cracked linoleum floor. When she was directly behind me, she stopped and waited. "Come on, mister, assume the position."

I pushed my chair back, and then stood. My mother opened her grey terrycloth robe and wrapped it around me, snuggling me into the warmth of her flannel pajamas, something she wore year around. She kissed me on top of the head and held me close. Her long brown hair tickled my neck. She smelled like strawberries.

"I miss you, Donnie. I wish I could go fishing with you, but," she said.

"But you have to work."

“One day,” she said. After another squeeze, she left me to go get ready for her shift.

The twins were headed out; the loud, angry voices next door confirmed it. I ran to the porch in time to see the boys scuffling as they came down their front steps.

“Dammit, Billy, t-that hurt.” Billy laughed and smacked his brother in the back of the head again, sending him flying forward. Doyle dropped his rod and a small tackle box, and then swung several wild punches. He connected twice before Billy could subdue him. Several gut punches and body-slams later, the two stopped and faced one another, catching their breath. Each boy eventually nodded and got up to collect the discarded gear, some unspoken truce brokered between them. They were both whistling the same tune by the time their worn Converse hit the black-top road.

As they passed my house, heading for Stinson’s ponds, I grabbed a small bait box and dad’s old Shimano and jumped on my black Schwinn, the guilt present dad gave me a week before the Army sent him back to Germany for a year deployment. Six months after he left, mom was served with divorce papers. Dad’s little *Fraulein* wanted a man without attachments. Little did I know that the shiny bike with aluminum mags and a racing crossbar would represent all future birthday and Christmas presents, as well as a lifetime of fatherly love and advice. As my mother was fond of saying, ‘It should be illegal for a grown-ass man to get a do-over.’

“Hey guys, going fishing?”

Billy glanced over at Doyle and rolled his eyes.

“No, ballet lessons, dumbass,” Billy said.

I stopped my bike and they laughed. My cheeks burned but I didn’t respond. When they got a few feet away, I heard Doyle mouth something to Billy.

“Hey, kid. I was just kidding,” Billy said. “Come on, you can come with us.”

It was going to happen, just like I planned. I could see us all standing together, pulling in trophy bass and crappie, sharing stories and advice.

“Sure. Okay.”

“I’m Billy, and this is my twin brother, Doyle.”

“I’m Donald Castle.”

“D-Donald, like the du-du-duck?” Doyle asked, laughing.

“Yeah,” I said, “like the du-duck.” Doyle turned bright red and started toward me. Billy slid between us and put a hand on his brother’s chest, stopping him. He then turned and faced me.

“Never do that again. It’s your only warning,” Billy said.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

They both laughed then, so I did too, not sure how else to react.

As I coasted beside them, dragging the toes of my tennis shoes along the pitted blacktop, I tried to tell them about the town. Most of what I said didn’t seem to interest them, not stuff about the big tornado that nearly wiped the town out fifty years ago, or how six people were hung in the square for stealing cattle fifty years before that, or even my theory about how people in town were extra mean. Since Everton was only six miles from the Army base, people figured anyone new was likely just passing through, awaiting orders to some place more exciting. So why waste time being nice? Doyle and Billy didn’t react to anything until I mentioned the hunters that came here each fall for deer season.

“You hunt?” Billy asked.

“I’ve only gone once, when I was little. My dad took me, before he left for Germany.”

“Did you kill one?” Billy asked.

“I froze my butt off, never saw a thing,” I said.

“What? You n-never s-shot your gun?” Doyle asked.

“Never got the chance.”

Doyle scoffed then spit on my front tire. Billy thumped his brother’s cheek.

“He’s just kidding.”

I nodded and laughed it off.

“I s-s-shot a h-h-hawk and a-a-a s-s-squirrel, at the s-s-same t-t-t...”

“Time,” Billy finished.

“Really?” I asked.

“It was cool,” Billy said. “The hawk swooped down and got the squirrel. Then Doyle got the hawk in mid-flight with a twelve gauge. One shot, two kills. Our dad said it was a shot most soldiers couldn’t make.”

“Wow.”

“Damn r-right.”

As we continued down the hill, Billy told me about their father, an Army sergeant and tank commander, who was serving in South Korea. Like my father, the twin’s dad had gone overseas four times. Sergeant Barton, however, returned home after each deployment. Billy went on and on about his father’s accomplishments, listing his medals and expert rifle badges.

“If my dad had been around in World War II, he’d have killed more Germans than anyone.”

I wondered about my own father. If he had any medals, I wasn’t aware of them. At that moment, I couldn’t even recall what his job was. What kind of son was I?

“My father’s good with women.”

It wasn't until Billy gave me a confused look that I realized I'd said anything aloud.

"What women?" Billy asked.

I just blushed and kept walking.

"K-k-kid's a f-f-freak."

I wasn't sure who I hated more at that moment, Doyle or my father.

When we reached the No Trespassing sign at the end of Mr. Stinson's property, I stopped.

"Hey guys, Mr. Stinson is a little crazy. Mom said he even shot somebody once. Why don't we go to another place I know?"

"You're th-the one who w-w-wanted to c-c-come along," Doyle said. "J-just go h-home, p-p-p..."

"Shut it, D," Billy said. He turned back to me and smiled. "Nobody shoots kids, Ducky. Relax."

With that Billy handed me his rod and tackle box. He then stepped down on the bottom strand of barbed wire and pulled up on the next one, giving the "after you" motion with his free hand. I looked at them both and then up the tree-lined road that bordered the property. To my relief, Toby Edwards was pedaling toward us.

Toby wasn't just my best friend; he was really my only one. I can safely say that I was probably his only friend, too. But how hard is it to make friends with pasty twelve year old boys, weighing one-sixty, with extremely high-pitched voices, greasy complexions and a susceptibility to facial skin rashes anyway? I wasn't one to talk, though, as I had more in common, appearance-wise, with a handful of white pipe-cleaners than with other boys my age. We were the perfect blend of economic and social leprosy.

“Hey, Donald, who are your new friends?” Toby called out. The twins both turned to look as Toby left the blacktop, lost control of his wobbly bike, and bailed off, letting his red Wal-Mart special crash into the fence a few feet from us. He did a stop, plop, and roll into the thick weeds to our right, losing his glasses and destroying a pair of white corduroy pants in the process. Billy and Doyle lost it, hitting their knees, doubled-over with laughter.

Toby popped up, weeds in his hair and clover in his teeth.

“Safe,” he said. His arms were stretched out to either side, palms down, in his best umpire impression.

“D-Damn, Ducky and P-Porky’s too,” Doyle said.

“Hey, that’s not cool,” I said.

“Cool’s what I s-say it is.” Doyle stepped in close, towering almost a foot above me.

“No worries, Donald, my good man,” Toby said. “I would laugh too. Just a little brake problem, I’m working on it. Besides, I’ve been called a lot worse. I suppose introductions are in order. I’m Tobias Kellen Edwards.” With this, he stepped between Doyle and me, his hand stuck out to shake.

“Leave him alone, D,” Billy said. “Don’t be such an ass.” He winked at his brother then returned to the fence, stretching it open once again. “Come on fellas. Let’s catch some fish.”

Doyle shouldered Toby aside, ignoring his hand and his greeting and thumped me hard in the chest, backing me up a step. He spat at my feet, then turned and went through the fence. Toby followed. I bent down and was halfway through when Billy let go of the wire, sending rusty, metal barbs into the middle of my back. I yelled and fell forward, just as the lower strand flipped up and caught me in the chin. Toby ran over and put his foot down on the lower strand, allowing me to hit my knees and roll sideways the rest of the way through. Blood flowed down

the front of my shirt and my back was wet and stinging as well. I turned around and looked at Billy, my eyes watering.

“Oh man, I’m sorry Duck. It slipped. I swear,” Billy said. Doyle laughed and slapped his brother on the back.

“What you g-going to d-do now, D-Duck, run and t-tell?”

I sucked in my swelling lip and closed my eyes, tasting the blood.

“Fishing, going fishing,” I said. Only it came out *fithin*.

Toby, wide-eyed, looked from Billy to me, as if he couldn’t decide if he was angry or afraid. I just nodded and picked up my rod and reel.

Stinson’s Ponds was once Stinson Waste and Treatment Plant, but we didn’t know that, then. All we knew was that there were twenty-four ponds, some no bigger than a bedroom, laid out side-by-side, full of the biggest fish any of us had ever seen. The whole lot was about forty acres in total, with some of the ponds separated by no more than a three-foot walkway. Over the years, nature and enriched waste had made the place a near jungle of vines and Cypress trees, our own secret garden. I ate a lot of fish out of those holes before I found out. Which my wife would say, years later, explains a lot about me.

Trying to forget my fat lip and lacerated back, I grabbed Toby and headed for the thickest vegetation I could see, convinced that Mr. Stinson and his shotgun were lurking around every corner. Doyle and Billy went their own way, standing out in the open atop a dam overlooking the largest pond. The two of them forgot all about us as they fell into a hypnotic routine again, one handing the other whatever he needed without voicing it, trying to get their lines rigged with top-water lures as fast as possible.

Their first casts were about six feet apart, at the edge of some red and green lily-pads. The water exploded before the first ripples settled out, each boy yanking back in surprise. In less than a minute, they were beaming and comparing matching, two-pound, largemouth bass. A minute later they had two more. I was mesmerized.

After watching them for several minutes, I tied on my only top water lure and made a cast. To my surprise, I had similar luck, even if it did take me a lot longer to land my first fish. It was a little smaller than the Bartons', about a one-pounder, but still a nice bass. I slid a yellow, nylon stringer line through its jaw and tied it off on the closest bush. After adding two more fish to it, I was flying high. As I narrated my own fishing show, Toby sat down beside me, fidgeting with his purple shoelaces.

“You want to catch one?” I asked.

“You go ahead,” he said.

“Come on, might as well live it up before we get shot, right?” Toby smiled and waddled to his feet. Ten minutes later, he caught a fish that went at least two pounds, despite spending half that time trying to yank my Lucky Thirteen out of a tree branch ten feet above his head.

Once they'd caught ten large fish each, Doyle and Billy went to the far side of the property and came back dragging a flat-bottom, aluminum boat. When they reached the main body of water, they flipped the boat over, threw in the two paddles they'd found, and slid the butt end into the calm water before turning to look at us.

“Hey girls, let's ease out to the middle and find us a lunker,” Billy said. Neither of us moved.

“Too s-s-cared?” Doyle asked.

Billy winked and motioned me over with one hand, like he wanted a reason to believe in me. I hadn't seen that look in a long time.

"I'll go," I said.

"Donald, you can't swim," Toby said.

"We aren't going swimming, Porky," Billy said. "You really gonna chicken out?"

"I believe so," Toby said.

"P-P-P-"

"Porky? Pussy? Yes, yes, very astute. Guilty on both counts."

"After you, Duck," Billy said. I looked out across the dark water then back to the dented boat. Last summer, I'd gone to the city pool with my mother every day for two weeks. She tried to teach me several strokes, but I just couldn't manage them in open water. Toward the end of the first week, I finally mastered a kind of wounded dog-paddle, in the shallow end. As I stared at the blackness in front of me, I calculated the distance from the center of the pond to any one bank, trying to change images where I sank like a stone into ones where I briskly treaded water like a retriever. I stepped back, but Billy clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, you're a fisherman, right? Let's go," Billy said. You never know how much you want someone to believe in you until you convince yourself no one does.

About twenty feet from the bank, Billy and Doyle both stood up and started rocking the boat. I grabbed the sides and held on as they chanted. "Du-cky, Du-cky, Du-cky." They were both laughing through their chants, rocking the boat more and more.

"Hey, you boys. What the hell are you doing out there?" A large, scruffy man in a straw hat was coming toward us from the far side of the property, clutching something long and black in his right hand. Billy and Doyle nodded and jumped into the water in unison, making for the

nearest bank. When they reached the shore, they pulled themselves up, grabbed their gear, and headed for the spot where we'd entered, leaving me adrift.

"Donald, start paddling to the far side, I'll get your stuff and meet you," Toby said.

I grabbed a paddle and moved to the front of the boat, almost flipping into the water. By the time the big stranger was close enough to confirm that he was holding a telescoping pole instead of a shotgun, I was reaching for Toby's outstretched hand. Despite the old man's continued shouts, we ran for the fence as well. A minute later, the two of us were pedaling for all we were worth, a stringer of fat, slimy bass flapping against my nobby tires as we struggled up the hill toward my house.

We got away, but our troubles were just starting. What I thought was going to be a great summer became a constant game of where's Bill-Do, with Toby and I "finding" the new town bullies around every corner. From stealing our clothes while we swam at the city pool and then forcibly removing our trunks in the bathroom, resulting in a series of naked fifty yard sprints through the town square, to tying the two of us to a flagpole on the courthouse lawn during a thunderstorm, they never tired of our embarrassment.

On the odd occasion when we happened upon just one of them however, it was totally different. Each appeared lost, or sometimes even cordial. Together though, they changed, becoming a grotesque transformation of anguish and pain. By August, we'd had all we could take.

"We have to fight back, hurt them somehow," Toby said. "If we don't, they'll never stop." We sat in a weed-choked, storm drain a few streets over from my house, our only remaining hideout they hadn't discovered. Water trickled across the ribbed bottom of the pipe as Toby brought up plan after plan, each more ridiculous than the next.

“We can’t cover them in fire ants. How the hell would we keep them still for that long? And where are we gonna find that much honey?” I said.

“We could dope them. I’ll steal some of my mom’s tranquilizers,” he said.

“That might kill them.”

“A real tragedy. Here lies the two red-headed assholes who blew the Sam Rayburn statue’s head off, hog-tied Toby and Donald to a fire truck, and pushed over a duct-taped Port-o-Jon on picture day with a third grader inside.”

“I forgot about that one. Cassie Wilson’s skin is still light blue.”

“My grandma has some old bear traps,” Toby said. “We could get them to chase us into a bunch. They wouldn’t be able to walk straight for, like ever.”

“Bear traps?” I said. “How are we going to lure them into a damn bear trap? They aren’t Doberman Pincers.”

“You’re right. Dobermans don’t serve the Dark Lord. Well, at least I don’t think they do.”

“You read too much.”

“And you, not enough.”

Toby convinced me to give the bear traps a try. Instead of baiting them, we would hide several in strategic locations. Toby lobbied for their front porch, but I convinced him we needed to avoid unnecessary casualties. In the end, we chose Stinson’s Ponds.

“We’ll set the traps Saturday morning,” Toby said. “Then, you go tell them you saw the biggest bass ever jumping out of the water over there. They won’t be able to resist. When the time is right, I’ll attract their attention and get them to chase me through the kill zone.”

“The kill zone?”

“I watched a Rambo marathon on cable last night.”

“How are you going to get them to chase you?” I asked.

“You’ll see.”

Saturday morning went just as planned. Toby and I set up the traps while a heavy fog from the ponds surrounded us. It was calm, with a blanket of gray clouds zooming overhead. Fish jumped in each little pond we passed, making me wish I’d brought my fishing gear.

“Yes, yes, the fish are very exciting,” Toby said. But I need you to focus, Donald. Today we fight back.”

“That’s all the traps,” I said. “I’ll go get Bill-Do. You hide.”

It wasn’t hard to convince them.

“Big fish, huh? Whatever. P-P-Probably s-s-saw a frog.”

“I don’t know,” Billy said. “Anything that would scare him so bad he’d come get us has to be pretty big.” I held my arms out as far as I could stretch them.

“Damn,” they said in stereo.

Within minutes we were ducking through the fence. I pointed to the biggest pond, which still had the little boat beached on the south shore. “That one, by that big log in the center.” The two started casting immediately. I waited for Toby to appear.

On his second cast, Doyle hooked something big. The water churned and Doyle strained, yelling to his brother. “Hell yeah, I g-got him, b-biggest fish ever.”

With his neck muscles bulging, and his dirty teeth clenched, Doyle pulled, cheered on by his brother. I laughed and clapped, as the behemoth pulled back, dragging Doyle closer to the water’s edge with each tug. Then, the fish made a run, exploding from the water and shocking us all by its massive size. What must have been a twenty-pounder shook his head and danced

backward, trying to throw the red Devil's Horse. Once back in the water, the fish went straight down. Doyle yanked the rod backwards. The line snapped a few inches from the end of the pole, sending Doyle flying as the monofilament disappeared into the dark water.

"The b-boat," Doyle said. "We're g-going after it."

"She's gone, brother," Billy said. "We'll never find that line, plus she probably spit the bait as soon as it broke."

The fish breached again, shaking its head and contorting as it danced over a row of Lilly pads, still trying to shed the lure. It finally flopped back into the water with a huge splash, leaving curls of line sitting on the outermost row of pads.

"Everybody in the boat," Billy said.

We paddled out to the far side of the pond, quick and quiet. I was in the middle, a paddle in hand. Billy was behind me. Doyle leaned out over the front of the boat, trying to reach the line before it went under. We came in too fast though, and the boat zoomed into the pads before Doyle could grab the line.

"D-Damn. Missed it. B-Back up."

I started to paddle backwards but felt cold water trickling down the back of my neck. I turned and saw Billy, shaking his head no, a handful of clear-blue fishing line in his hand. He began wrapping the line around the hand that held the paddle, creating what looked like a makeshift tourniquet. When the boat stopped moving, Doyle turned around.

"What the heck? S-She's m-m-mine."

"Not anymore," Billy said. He held his arm stiff and kept well-roping the fish in, most of its fight evidently gone. Doyle could only watch as his brother pulled the shimmering

largemouth up, heaving it in with both hands. He held the fish up, his arms shaking with its weight.

“Biggest fish I ever caught,” Billy said.

“I’ll fu-fu-fu, I’ll k-kill you,” Doyle said.

Billy worked the Devil’s Horse out of the fish’s jaw and bit the line free of it with his teeth. He pitched the lure over to his brother.

“Here, you can catch another one.”

Doyle stood up and stepped forward, the boat sloshing from side to side. He grabbed the wooden paddle from me and swung it at Billy, the force almost knocking him from the boat. Billy leaned back to avoid the blow, throwing out his left hand, the one holding the bass, for balance. The fat fish smacked the side and teetered on the back deck of the boat for a second before coming to life, flouncing twice before plopping into the water.

We all froze. There was everything before the fish and then there was everything after, each belonging to a separate reality.

Billy stood up and pulled the fishing line from his right arm, ripping at his flesh until the paddle was free. He then stepped toward me and looked down. “You better stay out of the way.”

I looked back at Doyle and saw the same look in his eyes. I gauged the distance to the shore at about forty feet. I saw myself sinking after about ten. Billy swung his paddle at Doyle, missed, and then stepped to the back of the boat. He straddled the back deck, placing a foot on the rails at each side. Doyle stepped to the front of the boat and did the same.

They both began to rock and the boat started bouncing from side to side, causing a wave-pool effect all around us. I held tight to the sides and kept my head down, trying to anticipate the violent sway. The two boys laughed and pistoned their legs up and down trying to throw one

another out, each time tipping the boat higher on its sides. The boat went too far left and dipped below the surface, pulling in a flood of cold water. I flung myself to the opposite side trying to equalize the weight and stop the flow, only to find myself head over heels as the boat flipped back the other way.

I sank below the boat and clawed for the surface, all the while being pulled forward by the boat's continued rocking. When I broke the surface, I fought for air and reached for the side of the boat, but it was already rising as it rocked the other way. The motion, once again, sucked me forward, so the cold aluminum slammed into my face and arms as it rocked back. As I sank, Doyle grinned and threw me his paddle, striking me in the head as I went under again. In a flash of brilliant pain, I breathed in and sank.

I came to and spit a mouthful of water into Billy's open mouth. He cursed and turned me on my side. My face was sticky with blood and my head pulsed. I coughed for what seemed like forever, hacking up sludge and black water.

"Saved his fucking life, did you see that?" Billy said. Doyle just nodded and sat in silence.

I rolled to one side and saw Toby, sneaking along the back. I'd all but forgotten the plan until that moment. I tried to wave him off, but he misunderstood, believing I had just given him the go signal. He stood up and smiled.

"Well, if it ain't Bill-Do. Hick-ass trolls from the depths of hell. L-L-Look at Us, W-W-We W-W-Wuz J-Joined at the B-B-Brain. They c-c-couldn't d-decide how to s-s-split it up, s-s-so they t-took the whole thang out. D-D-Daddy was s-s-s- proud. C-C-C-Come and G-G-G-Get me boys!" Toby then turned around and yanked his pants down, mooning us all. On one cheek he'd written Bill and on the other Do, in red, magic-marker. He'd meant to spell out Bill-Do,

only he'd got things turned around, evidently looking at his butt in the mirror when he spelled it out. Across his backside he'd written LLIBOOD, his anatomy providing the first O. He then spun around and pulled up his pants before giving them the bird with both hands. My laughter turned into another hacking cough as Toby turned and ran.

Billy got to his feet and grabbed Doyle's arm to help him up. They started off in the direction of the traps and I called after them.

"Billy, don't chase him. It's a trap." Toby was going to kill me.

"Trap? B-Bull," Doyle said. He then took off. Billy started after him again.

"No, Billy, don't go."

Billy stopped and looked back at the same time that Doyle screamed from the woods.

"What the hell?" Billy said.

"Bear traps, all along that trail. We wanted to get you guys back." My vision blurred then, and I started to black out.

"Billy, I'm hurt bad. Help me!" Doyle yelled.

Billy looked toward his brother's voice and then back at me. "I'll be back, Doyle." He then picked me up and hoisted me over one shoulder.

"You need a doctor."

As Billy carried me over the dam, the big bass jump high in the air, just before I lost consciousness. My lie had come to life and almost killed me.

Billy and Doyle still persecuted us all through junior high and high school. That's just who they were. It was different after that day though, the day my dream burst through the surface of our lives.

When the preacher finished, I got up and hobbled to the front of the church. My missing right leg, courtesy of an Afghanistan surprise attack, and the titanium assembly that replaced it made normal progress challenging.

“Captain Castle, you have something you want to say?”

“Yes, reverend.”

I spent years running from them while, at the same time, wanting what they had. The day I left Everton for Marine boot camp, they watched me get on the bus. I remember the look in their eyes. For years, I couldn't figure out what it was, but I convinced myself it was pride. As I stepped behind the pulpit and adjusted the ribbon bar again with my remaining hand, I looked out on the sparse audience. Their eyes were filled with that maddening combination of pity and awe, a look I was all too familiar with now. Toby sat in the third row, his plump little wife and rosy-cheeked kids squashed between them. I smiled at him, and he nodded.

“Miss Barton, I came here today to tell you how sorry I am for your loss, and to say to you what I never said to your sons. Thank you, Billy and Doyle, for saving my life.”

Catch the Light

For the third time in as many minutes, Boz slammed the M16 rifle butt into his friend's exposed leg.

"Dammit, Boz, you hit my friggin knee again," Jed said. He clenched his teeth and rubbed the row of whelps rising from his right leg.

"I'm sorry," Boz said. "I've never broken anyone's leg before. It's harder than it looks. Just hold still, I'll get it this time." He raised the weapon again.

"Put it down," Jed said. "It was a stupid idea anyway."

Jed Potter rolled the camouflaged trouser leg down and re-bloused it above his spit-shined boot. He then limped over to the squad bay windows and looked out beyond the parade decks and obstacle courses to the San Diego airport, busy with midday commuter planes.

"I'll figure something out," Jed said. "Lock that thing up and let's get to work. Sergeant Loredó will have our asses if the floors aren't shining when he gets back."

Each man grabbed a soapy towel and began scrubbing the green tile outside the drill instructors' hut.

"For the millionth time, I'm sorry I got you into this," Boz said.

"You should be."

The speedometer was pegged, the red needle bouncing to the right of one-thirty. Jed tightened his grip on the steering wheel and leaned forward, trying to see the dark road past the Camaro's vibrating hood.

"Can you go any faster?" Boz asked.

Jed glanced in the rear view and then shook his head. "It's a three-fifty, not a rocket."

Boz, still pulling on his clothes in the back seat, looked behind them as well.

"There's no one back there," Jed said.

"He's coming," Boz said. "You should have seen his face."

Jed slowed the red '78 Chevy down to eighty, worried the hood was about to fly off. Pine trees zipped past them and a light rain blurred the foggy glass. Boz, fully clothed now minus the Nikes he dropped racing across Nadine's yard, jumped into the front seat.

"What did he see you two doing, exactly?" Jed asked.

Boz smiled around the cigarette he was trying to light and ran a free hand through his wavy blonde hair.

"Nothing, well not really nothing, I was just sitting there on the couch."

Jed flipped on the wipers and thought he caught a glimpse of red behind them.

"And Nadine?"

"She was just resting her head in my lap," Boz said.

"Of course," Jed said.

"And she may have been naked."

Jed laughed as he pictured Sheriff Briggs, a former Marine, walking in as his choir-girl daughter pleased Boz.

"You don't do anything half-assed do you?" Jed said.

“I do everything half-assed,” Boz said. They were both still laughing until they topped the next hill, then things weren’t funny anymore.

“Damn, looks like daddy made a few calls,” Jed said.

Two squad cars were parked nose to nose across the highway ahead, blue and red sparkled on the wet pavement and lit up the East Texas night. Jed slowed the car to fifty.

“Turn around,” Boz said.

“What? I can’t just...”

“Now, man,” Boz said, his left hand grabbing the wheel.

The car swerved right and Jed yanked left in response.

“What the fuck, Boz?”

Jed slapped Boz’s head and jammed on the brakes, sending the Camaro spinning across the center line. He tried to correct as they careened toward the police cruiser on the left, but the steering wheel spun freely. The car did a full three-sixty and was halfway through another when the rear tires caught on the uneven shoulder, jerking it sideways. They skidded across the shoulder sending a hail of gravel into the air before slamming, trunk first, into the back of one of the cruisers, taking out everything from the rear tire back. Unfortunately for Jed and Boz, they suffered only minor injuries.

Four days later, the judge, an old military buddy of Sherriff Briggs, gave the two boys a choice: join the Marines, or go to jail. It was a harder decision for Jed than he wanted to admit. Boz seemed glad to leave town in one piece.

Jed’s father acted genuinely proud of him. That was a first. A cattleman and veteran of the Korean War, Thomas Potter was a hard man.

“The Marines, now that’s a smart move, son,” Thomas said.

The fact that joining was his son's only way of avoiding criminal charges didn't seem to matter. Seeing the twinkle in the tall man's eyes, Jed didn't remind him. It was enough just to see his father look at him with something other than disdain.

"I leave in a week," Jed said. "Put in my notice at the grocery store yesterday."

"Good, good. Now I don't have to hear about all that writing non-sense. Teachers don't make any money anyway, and writers make even less. You'll be a Marine. You'll be a man."

Jed really hadn't considered what he was giving up until that moment. For two years, he'd been taking community college classes, writing stories, and saving his money, in hopes of one day leaving Texas to go to college in California or New York. After a stirring lecture in his American literature class, his father asked him why he was in such a good mood. His head full of Fitzgerald and Faulkner, he answered before thinking.

"I'm going to study literature, Dad. I want to be a writer."

"Don't be an idiot, Jed."

"Papa-Charley thinks it's a great idea."

"Your grandfather's has poisoned your mind."

It was hard to believe his grandfather and his father were related. Charles Potter was an artist. To pay the bills, he was a contract painter, adding custom paint and faux finishes to the board rooms and bedrooms of the Southwest. He was expensive and slow, but when he finished, owners neither remembered the time it took nor noticed the zeros on the check. Unlike his son, Charley worked to live, taking on only enough new business each year to pay the bills and keep the workshop full of fresh canvas and oil paints. A hermit, he lived in a small cabin in the woods behind the original Potter homestead. Unplugged from the world, he holed up in his studio for days, drinking homemade wine and recreating historical events in brilliant hues.

Jed was the only member of the family Charley allowed inside his cabin on a regular basis. They never talked much, but when they did, Charley referred to Jed, as Jedi. He said it suited his aura better. Charley drank and painted while Jed scribbled in his journal. Sometimes the two went hours without speaking.

The old man said his subjects sometimes chose him. He painted George Washington, blank-faced in a dead forest in winter, John Wilkes Booth smiling behind Lincoln at the Ford Theater, his hands empty, John Lennon autographing a copy of *Double Fantasy* for his would-be murderer, Mark David Chapman, outside the Dakota, and stacks of others. Charley never spoke more than a few words about the dark ones. Jed figured they were just something he had to get out of his system. The pieces Charley wanted to discuss all involved baseball. Half of his paintings were of the sport's greatest moments: Ruth calling his shot, Bobby Thomson's Shot Heard Round the World, Hank Aaron hitting 715, and even the smallest accomplishments of anyone that ever played for his favorite team, the Texas Rangers, done on splashy backgrounds with large, bright dollops of color that made the players come alive.

His grandfather worked with a small brush, his bushy eyebrows just an inch from the canvas. Jed had dreaded this visit all week. How could he tell him that he was going against all that he ever said he was? Charley stood up and arched his back, his tall frame snapping and popping. He pulled a rubber band out of his long grey hair, letting it fall to his shoulders.

"Nolan Ryan's seventh no-hitter, see the twinkle, the spark in his eyes? That's my life," Charley said.

"It's amazing, Papa Charley."

"Your life is there too, in your words." He pointed at Jed's journal.

"Dad disagrees."

“Men always doubt what they can’t see.”

Jed dropped his head and stared at the blotches on the floor.

“I’m leaving for the Marines tomorrow. I have to.”

“I know. Tommy told me. You and your friend, the crazy one, right?”

“Donnie Bosworth, yeah.”

“It’s good to be a good friend.”

“The Rangers, they’re in second place. Did you see in the paper? This could be the year.”

“This could be the year.”

Jed sat at the living room table with his father, as his friend got out of a dusty Pontiac. Boz went around to the driver’s side and hugged his mother through the window. He then stood up, patted the roof of the car and smiled.

The car lurched forward and made a wide loop. His mother waved as she pulled out of the driveway. Boz continued to wave long after the car was out of sight.

“About that time,” his father said. “I’ll go bring the truck around.”

When Boz didn’t knock, Jed got up and looked around the room, trying to memorize everything. The only pictures on the walls were of him as a baby, and his father with a group of Army buddies. Above the fireplace was a painting his grandfather gave to his father the year Jed’s mother died of cancer. In it, his mother and father stood knee-deep in Blue Bonnets and Indian Paintbrush. They were smiling, the sunset red behind them. It was time to go.

Boz sat in a wooden rocker on the breezeway, his head in his hands. When Jed came out, he looked up.

“You hate me don’t you,” he said.

“Hate’s a strong word,” Jed said.

“You want to kick my ass though, right?”

“That’s nothing new.”

The truck idled a few feet away. Boz got up and hugged him.

“You aren’t going to kiss me, are you?” Jed asked.

“I might.”

“Dad would love that.”

The black Ford eased down the long driveway, dust rolling thick behind it. As they approached the main road, Charley’s dented white El Camino pulled up. The old man jumped out before his car even stopped, heading for Jed’s passenger door as the beat up Chevy rolled down into the shallow ditch beside the driveway.

“Damn, dad, you didn’t even put your car in park,” Thomas said.

Charley waved off his son, his attention on Jed.

“A hug, Jedi, can I have a hug?” Charley asked.

Jed smiled and stepped out of the truck.

“Sure, Papa Charley.”

The two embraced until Thomas cleared his throat.

“We have to go. Thanks for coming,” Jed said, his voice cracking.

“Don’t lose your spark, Jedi.”

Jed nodded then jumped back in and closed the door.

“The baseball, Jedi. Don’t forget the baseball,” Charley said.

During the sixth week of Marine Corps boot camp, Jed received a letter from his father telling him that Charley had suffered a massive stroke.

I hate to drop this on you now, considering where you are, but I thought you should know. He's stable now, but he can no longer talk or feed himself. I had to put him in a full-time care facility in Dallas. It's possible he could improve, but unlikely. I'm really sorry, Jed. I know how much you loved him.

It was that last part that hurt Jed the most, you *loved* him. His father, if only subconsciously, had already written Papa Charley off.

Training was now just a distraction. The screaming and spitting of his drill instructors didn't move him. He just stared forward and waited it out. His D.I.s sensed something, like the spirit they so wanted to crush had left. This didn't sit well with them. If they couldn't hurt him or scare him, they could at least punish him. He pulled every shit detail that popped up, extra cleaning details, mess hall duty and double helpings of nighttime fire-watch, all accompanied by Bosworth, his perceived partner in crime.

During one of Jed's stints on mess duty, a full-bird colonel came through the chow line with several lesser officers, speaking in a loud drawl.

"Wish I'd had money on that. I bet it was a million-to-one odds the Rangers would make the World Series. Hell I imagine the whole damn state's hung over this morning. Potatoes, with extra gravy," he said.

"When's the first game, sir?" Jed said. The mess sergeant smacked him in the back of his shaved head.

"Did you just speak to a fucking officer, recruit?"

"Sorry, sir."

The officer nodded. Then, as he picked up his tray he said, "It's Saturday, recruit, game one's in Arlington."

Just three days away.

Jed and Boz had almost finished the squad bay floor when Jed decided on a plan.

"Tonight, during fire-watch," Jed said.

"How?" Boz asked.

"The airport. I'm jumping the fence," Jed said.

"I guess I am too then," Boz said.

"No need in both of us getting thrown in the brig."

Boz dropped his towel.

"You'd just fuck it up without me."

"I'm serious, Boz. This will mess up your life."

"You mean like I've fucked up yours? You think I want to live with that my whole life?"

Jed nodded and slapped his friend on the back, secretly relieved.

"I figure PT shorts and T-shirts is the way to go," Jed said.

"We're going to look like rejects from a mental ward."

"Aren't we?" Jed said.

At two a.m., Jed and Boz, dressed in PT gear and carrying wool OD green blankets, crept down four flights of stairs. Then they weaved between sand pits, rappelling towers, and stacks of telephone poles. Reaching the fence, they tied the blankets together and slung them over the razor wire at the top.

"Okay man, last chance to turn back. You did sign a contract," Jed said.

“I’m nineteen, what the hell do I know about contracts?” Boz said.

Jed dug his sneakers into the chain link. Once he reached the top, he spread out the blanket as best he could and belly flopped onto the wool-covered razor wire. Reaching down and grabbing the fence from the opposite side, he crawled down the fence, face first, scratching his stomach, arms and legs as he went. Once his legs were over, he crawled sideways, trying to right himself. This unbalanced him even more and he fell the last four feet to the ground. Bloodied and bruised, he stood, a warmth filling him.

“Nice one, Grace,” Boz said as he started up.

“Any landing you can walk away from, or something,” Jed said.

Boz scaled the fence in half the time. When he reached the top, he opted to throw a leg over, making his descent more manageable. He dropped the last few feet and landed next to his friend, unscathed. He’d even managed to bring the blankets with him.

“Great, I’m the Mr. Bean of my own daring escape,” Jed said.

“The blood makes you look tougher,” Boz said.

They ran beside the fence to the far corner of the Marine Recruit Depot. There the base property ended and a large construction area began. Unoccupied earth-movers and gravel trucks provided ample cover. At the far side of the construction zone was the airport parking lot. Boz stopped at the first line of cars and looked back at the rows of barracks in the distance.

“It’s so dark over there,” Boz said. Jed glanced over his shoulder without stopping.

“Come on, Boz, we need a phone.”

“What for?”

“To call my aunt and convince her to send us some money.”

“You really think she’ll send us enough for two plane tickets?”

“They’re not letting us on a plane,” Jed said. “Plus, we don’t have ID. If we had the money, we could buy a couple bus tickets. You don’t need ID for those, do you?” Jed asked.

“Beats me,” Boz said. “Hey, maybe if your aunt sent us enough money, we could pay someone to give us a ride. Hey, can you hotwire a car?”

“Um, two things: one, what would I hotwire it with, and two, do I look like someone who can hotwire a damn car?”

“Well you’re in a shitty mood,” Boz said.

They sat in the shadows as cars came and went, waiting for someone with a friendly face. It was a long wait. Finally, a blue van pulled in and parked a few feet away. Several bald men exited, each wearing a gold robe. Boz jumped out to greet them.

“Howdy, fellas. You wouldn’t be interested in a trip to Texas would you?”

Jed smacked his forehead and stepped out of the shadows.

“What my friend means is we are in a tight spot and need some help,” Jed said. “We need a ride to the nearest Western Union and we’ll pay someone to take us there.”

The men shook their heads and started walking toward the terminal.

“Come on, guys,” Boz said. “His grandfather is dying and he has to get to Texas to see him. Have a heart.”

The group looked at one another and then back at the two men. The tallest of the group stepped forward, wearing a gold robe with tassels. He was bald, although likely only in his twenties. He had rings on his fingers and large hoop bracelets on both wrists. His palms were together, in a gesture of prayer.

“I am sorry, my friends, but our mission is inside,” he said. “You must find another way.”

“Your mission?” Boz said. “Well what about my friend here and his mission? You all are some kind of monks or holy men aren’t you, what with all the robes?”

“We seek Krishna, the divine energy of the Supreme,” the tallest one said. “It is our mission to let as many as we can know of this power.”

“Ah shit, Jed. Let’s go. I’ve heard about these guys, incense and monkey blood. Folks join up and then disappear.”

“That is untrue, my friend, but yes, please go,” the leader said.

“Thanks anyway,” Jed said.

As the two friends walked away, one of the men from the group called out to them.

“Wait. I’ll help you.”

He was the smallest of the young men, his head freshly-shaven, the cuts and scrapes of the razor still evident. His robe was wrinkled and creased, as though pulled from a package. Unlike the others, he had no tassels, rings, or bracelets.

“Brother, what are you saying?” the leader asked. “This is not in service of Rama.”

“They need help,” the young man said. “We are here, at this time. This is no coincidence. You said Krishna could manifest in anyone. What if he is standing before us?”

“That’s right, if I’m old Krista and you leave me out here, woohoo, I’m gonna be pissed,” Boz said.

“Krishna would never say that,” the leader said. “Come, brother. This is not a path to light.”

“No. I’ll not abandon them. There is no Hare in that. Please, gentlemen, you can get in the van.”

Boz bowed to the tallest and then made several Karate-like gestures. Jed elbowed him and then turned toward the vehicle. The young man opened the driver's side door but stopped as two of the other men from the group approached.

"But Doug, you're our ride, dude," the closest man said.

Jed smiled as the pensive spiritualist turned California surfer.

"Just call your mom, Todd," Doug said.

"Okay gentlemen, where to?"

"Either Western Union or Dallas, Texas," Jed said. "Your choice."

"Dallas it is," Doug said. "Lord Krishna, be praised."

"Hell yeah, Dougie," Boz said.

The night was cool. The clean, metallic smell of the desert filled the van as they cruised east on interstate eight. Jed sat in the passenger's seat letting the breeze blast away the weeks of mental and physical abuse. The more distance they put between themselves and the Marine base, the better he felt. Boz stretched across the bench seat behind him, his limp body bouncing along to the movement of the van as he slept. Doug drove along in silence. After giving them a brief explanation of the Hare Krishna faith and answering questions from Boz like, 'Do you get a lot of chicks in that get up, I mean like hot hippie types?' he told them he needed quiet time to meditate. Jed smiled at the request, very familiar with this feeling. No one spoke until they stopped for gas around the Arizona border.

"Wake up, gentlemen. I need a break," Doug said.

Jed winced and shielded his eyes, pulling himself from a dream in which his father and his drill instructors were taking turns shooting at him as he zigzagged across a prairie of wildflowers.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Close to Tuscon, I think,” Doug said.

Through squinted eyes, Jed made out a truck stop, with small businesses on either side. Traffic from the interstate rumbled by and chalky dust was everywhere. Boz yanked the sliding door open and stepped out into the blinding Arizona sunrise.

“Debbie’s Triple X Experience,” Boz said. “Oh yeah. I’ll be right back.”

Jed stepped out and stretched, watching his friend head for a group of trailers below a huge neon sign of a leggy girl sitting atop three red X’s. What the hell, Jed thought, he has no money. How much trouble could he possibly get into?

“I appreciate all this, Doug,” Jed said. “I’ll go in and call my aunt, see if she can wire some money to me in Tucson.

Doug yawned and handed Jed a Visa card.

“Don’t bother,” Doug said. “You can just pay me when we get there. For now why not go and get us some food when you pay for the gas. I’ll pump. See if they have any fruit or yogurt, would you? We’ll need water too.”

Jed nodded and went to pay. He grabbed bags of chips, sodas, turkey sandwiches, and apples and yogurt for Doug. He handed the elderly female clerk the card and crossed his arms as she stared him for several seconds. He’d forgotten what he must look like with his scraped up legs sticking out of his running shorts, his white T-shirt stained with blood.

“You one of them survival nuts, aren’t you?” the clerk said.

“That’s me. Can’t get enough of that desert survival rush.”

“Better get some water there, survival rush, or you’re gonna be buzzard food.”

“Right, thanks.”

He grabbed two large bottles from a nearby display.

Overloaded with his haul, he left the store and was almost run over by an approaching Arizona state trooper. He stopped and allowed the black sedan to cross in front of him, keeping his eyes low as a cloud of white enveloped him. The trooper parked and stepped out, not even looking Jed's way. Before the muscular black officer reached the door, a loud yell drew his attention to the business next door.

"You bastard, come back here!" yelled a half-naked blonde from the Triple X doorway. Boz ran across the cracked pavement, a huge grin on his face.

"Start the van," he said.

The juggy lady, up in years by the look of her wrinkled skin, came straight for them, her red heels clicking as she approached. Boz got into the van and Jed followed, sliding in behind the wheel and starting the engine as he watched the trooper watch them. He pulled forward but the irate woman jumped in front of them and started pounding her fists on the hood. Her sagging breasts swung back and forth with each blow.

"You owe me. Where's my money?" she yelled.

"All I did was watch her dance a few times," Boz said.

Jed closed his eyes and tried not to punch his friend. His plan for his grandfather floated farther away with each smack of the metal. Looking up, Jed saw the trooper standing a few feet away.

"What's going on here?" the trooper asked.

"That one there owes me a hundred bucks," she said.

"For what?" the trooper asked.

"Come on, Johnny. You know," she said.

The trooper cleared his throat and turned back to the van.

“Pay her,” he said.

Boz looked from the trooper to the girl, then he shrugged.

“Either pay her or step out of the vehicle,” the trooper said.

The van’s side door opened and Doug stumbled out. He bowed low and clapped his hands together as he started to chant.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna.”

“Stop. Who the hell are you?” the trooper asked.

“Douglas Kahn, a brother of Krishna, a seeker of the Rama. These are my brothers. I am training them in the faith,” he said.

Thank God for shaved heads, Jed thought.

“Sir, I will pay for the kind lady’s services, but we do not have much,” Doug said. He held out a twenty.

“I said a hundred,” she said.

“Please, ma’am, it is all we can spare,” Doug said. “Our path to faith is a long one.”

The trooper looked back at the woman.

“Take the money, Marge.” he said. “And put some clothes on. You’re gonna scare good folks running around like that.” He then turned and walked back to the store.

Doug handed Marge the money and climbed back in the van. Jed could still see her in the rearview mirror as the Ford creaked up the freeway entrance ramp. She stood there, silent and topless, as they drove away. Her body was stiff, like some lurid version of a nuclear blast mannequin. Her hand, holding the twenty, was still stuck out in front of her.

Once the trio was back on the interstate, they started wolfing down the contents of the bags.

“Damn, Doug, you’re my hero,” Boz said.

“It is nothing. You are like Krishna in many ways, my friend. He too was a prankster and lover of life. He would not approve of relations with that woman, however.”

“Neither do I,” Jed said. “What if he’d pulled us out of the van? How can I get to Papa Charley if I’m in jail?”

“I’m sorry, Jed, but I hadn’t seen skin in over two months, not even internet titties,” Boz said.

Texas plains replaced Arizona desert as Thursday rolled into Friday. The three drove in shifts, trying to get to Dallas before four p.m.

“Why Friday?” Doug asked.

“Maybe I’m crazy, but the World Series starts in Arlington on Friday night. My grandfather is a huge baseball fan, and the Rangers are his favorite team. He and I joked for years that if they ever made it to the World Series, we would be sitting in the front row, right behind their dugout. I have to get him to that game,” Jed said.

“But you told us back in San Diego that he was dying. You lied?” Doug asked.

“No, I didn’t lie. He had a massive stroke a few days ago. He’s in some care facility in Dallas. I’m going to get him out.”

“Why would I think that’s crazy?”

“Because I do,” Jed said.

They rolled into Dallas at half past three, stiff and exhausted. Doug parked at a Seven Eleven, just off the interstate, so Jed could make the call he'd dreaded since they scaled that fence. It rang four times before his father answered.

“Collect call from Jed Potter, will you accept the charges? If yes, press one.”

The line was silent and the automated voice repeated the request. Jed swallowed hard and imagined how small his father's opinion of him was at this moment. The line beeped as his father pressed one.

“Dad?”

‘You're fucking AWOL.’

The line crackled and Jed looked out across the parking lot, watching two black birds pecking at a large moth by the gas pumps.

“I'm sorry, but I need help.”

“I'm not helping a deserter.”

“I need my money, dad. Not all of it, but at least a thousand.”

“So get it, why do I care?”

He could hear his father's voice wavering.

“I don't have an ID. I need you to wire it to me, Western Union. There's one here in Grand Prairie.”

“Grand Prairie? You mean you're in Texas? How stupid are you? Back here's the first place they'll look.”

“I don't care. I just want to see Papa Charley.”

“You went AWOL for that? Jed, he won't even know you're there.”

“I will,” Jed said.

“It’s that damn baseball bet isn’t it,” his father said.

“Yes, and no,” Jed said.

“You two are a damn mystery. Give me the information for the wire.”

Jed read it off, then repeated it.

“He’s at Rosewood Meadows, it’s at Mockingbird Lane and seventy-five, north of downtown.”

His father hung up before Jed could say anything else.

Once he had the money, Jed gassed up the van and they headed for Rosewood. Doug, refused the cash Jed offered, requesting instead to come to the game with them. Jed shared his plan in the parking lot of the care facility.

“I’ll go in and find out where he is, when I wave at you from the front doors, you two come inside and distract the people up front. Maybe do some more of that chanting stuff, huh Doug? I’ll try to wheel him out while they aren’t looking.”

“Sure. I even have another robe for your friend.”

“Hell no, I’m not doing that shit,” Boz said.

Jed looked at his friend and held out his scarred arms, and then he rubbed his nearly-bald head.

“Really? Where’s my car, Boz. Where’s my life? All this shit and you’re gonna balk at wearing a robe and acting the same damn way you do in the course of a normal day?”

“All right, you cheap-shot bastard, but at some damn point we’re gonna be even,” he said.

Jed smiled and got out of the van.

He walked up the brick pathway, between manicured hedges and rows of colorful flowers, his heart hammering away. He'd put all his energy into just getting to this point. What would happen next never really occurred to him. He stared back at the van before taking a deep breath and opening the heavy oak door. Papa-Charley, asleep in a wheelchair to one side of the nurses' desk, awaited him inside.

"You must be Jed," a thin, red-headed nurse said.

"How?"

"Your father called us," she said. "We got Mr. Charley ready for you."

Jed knelt beside his grandfather, looking for his twinkle. His face was slack however, as he continued to sleep.

"You mean, I can take him?"

"Sure, honey, as long as you bring him back," she said. "Here you go." The nurse handed Jed a white plastic bag.

"What's this?"

"It's just a few things he may need: diapers, wipes and a few bio-bags," she said. "We changed him before you got here, but sometimes the medication is a little hard on his system, if you get my meaning."

Jed just stared at the bag until the nurse smiled and tucked it into a pocket in the back of the wheelchair.

"And, honey, I wouldn't try to feed him," she said. "Don't get me wrong, he has a strong gag reflex and will eventually swallow whatever you give him, but the whole thing can be a little disturbing if you aren't used to it."

Jed could only nod.

Boz and Doug were halfway across the parking lot when Jed wheeled Charley out into the balmy September afternoon. Despite his heavy heart, Jed couldn't help but laugh when he saw Boz, decked in a gold robe that stopped just above his ankles.

"I think we're even now, bastard," Boz said.

"Nope. You didn't chant. Help me through tonight and we're good," Jed said.

"Done."

They made it to Arlington in under an hour. The streets were filled with excited Ranger and Giant fans, honking horns and waving banners on their way to the stadium. Jed knelt in the back of the van, beside Charley's wheelchair, pointing out details of the event the old man had always dreamed of. Although his eyes were half open now, nothing Jed said seemed to register.

"I've heard that people in a coma talk about conversations they weren't awake to hear," Boz said.

Jed rubbed his grandfather's back and glanced at Boz, nodding in appreciation. Parking attendants directed them to a drop-off point across from the first base side of the ballpark so they could offload the wheelchair. Jed gave the attendant a hundred to allow them to park in a handicapped spot without a permit. They pushed through the throng, a sea of red and blue parting before them as they approached the ticket booths. First pitch was thirty minutes away. Jed rolled Charley up to the window and asked if they had any tickets left. The elderly Ranger's employee looked down at Charley and then up to Jed.

"We only have a few singles left."

"Do any of those have wheelchair access?" Jed asked.

The man typed into his terminal for several seconds before answering.

“I do have one on the first level, but it’s pricey, five hundred. I suppose you could purchase another single and just stand with him. Right behind the wheelchair area is a standing room only section. It’s sold out, but no one will care if you have your own ticket.”

“That’s great. Thanks for doing this,” Jed said.

“That will be seven ninety with your seat included. Sorry, it’s the cheapest one we have left.”

Jed took the tickets and rolled Charley back to Boz and Doug, who were getting many strange looks in their gold robes.

“I can’t believe you kept that thing on,” Jed said. “I’m sorry, guys, I could only afford two seats. I only have a hundred left.”

“But many people here seem to have tickets for sale,” Doug said.

“Scalpers, they’re probably asking double the price,” Boz said.

Doug reached inside the neck of his robe and pulled out a small change purse, stuffed with twenties.

“Come, little Krishna. Let’s find a scalper with faith.”

“Praise Ramen,” Boz said.

“Rama.”

“Whatever.”

Boz smiled and gave Jed a salute before chasing after his new best friend.

Jed wheeled Charley into the stadium just as the color guard marched across the field with the American flag. The Marine in the group’s movements were fluid, everything so precise. So that’s what the finished product looked like. As a local country starlet sang the national

anthem, Jed stood at attention, surprised at how automatic his actions were once the music started. What black hole was waiting for him tomorrow?

The song ended and the Ranger's brass and past stars took the mound for the first pitch festivities. A tall Texan stepped out from the group of suits and party dresses and the crowd began to applaud. A montage of highlights flashed on the Jumbo-tron, frame after frame of batters whiffing at fireball strikes. The applause grew louder and the man smiled and waved. He then took a short windup and threw the ball several feet over the catcher's outstretched glove. A smattering of laughter rippled through the crowd, drowned out by loud applause.

Charley's eyelids fluttered, but nothing more.

"Look Papa-Charley, Nolan Ryan."

Keyhole

Tracer rounds whiz by, their light reflected in the Concertina wire just inches from my face. Flat on my back, I dig in my heels and inch forward. My body tenses and I jerk sideways as the ground erupts to my right, covering me with chunks of dirt and debris. Deafened and tingling, I push on. It can't be much farther. God, please don't let it be much farther. I slide along, trying to stay as flat as possible, my Kevlar helmet pushing a line through the sand as I go. All I can focus on is my forward progress and the vice-grip I have on my M16.

My helmet hits something solid. Someone or something is up ahead, but isn't moving. The ringing in my ears and the strobe effect of artillery make it hard to focus, like watching fireworks from the deep end of a swimming pool. I manage to pull myself up to the man's side. His voice is a broken record of panic.

"Can't do this. Can't do this. Can't do this."

It's Wallace, a small freckled recruit from St. Louis they'd just dropped back to our platoon. His legs are moving, but the rest of him isn't. Tears slide down the sides of his camo-streaked face as he mutters and continues to squirm. The muzzle of his weapon is wrapped in razor wire, but he doesn't know it.

"Wallace, your weapon's stuck."

He continues to struggle.

"Wallace."

He flinches, and then looks at me through coke-bottle lenses.

"What? I'm okay. I'm okay."

"The wire, Wallace. Here, let me help."

Bad idea. I wait for the next tracer flash and try to grab his rifle barrel as it and the rest of Concertina swing back and forth. Just as I think I've got it, Wallace jerks the weapon downward, ripping my fingers open on the wire's many teeth.

"Dammit, Wallace, you idiot."

"I'm sorry, man."

The artillery stops and the field we're crossing is bathed in light from a line of surrounding flood lamps. I shut my eyes and put my hand to my mouth, tasting the coppery sting of blood. Deep laughter and clapping make me forget about my shredded fingers. A few feet away, to the right of the live-fire training course, is the man I wish death upon several times a day, Staff Sergeant Pena. He stands in a pressed camouflage uniform, his chest puffed out and his tan arms crossed. He has a weasel grin and his drill instructor cover is cocked back like a halo on his balding head. The rest of Kilo Company is at attention behind him.

"Recruits, take a good look at these two," Pena says. "They're the ones that'll get you killed in real combat. Cole, you and your lover get your ass out of there. You've got shitters to clean." Still lying on my back, I crane my neck and glance behind me. Another few feet and I'd have made it.

"Fucking Wallace," I say.

Pena and the other D.I.s have my number now. Up until this point, I'd kept a low profile. My dad told me, "Keep your head down and don't volunteer for anything." That was the formula for surviving Marine Corps boot camp. It was working, too. Now I'm a shit bird, and everything I do will be mocked and scrutinized.

To make matters worse, my little act of chivalry turns Wallace into my shadow. They put him in first squad, right behind me in platoon formations. He's also put on my fire team in

training exercises and made my bunkmate, in the cot above me. I can't get away from him. I'm one-twenty soaking wet, a little slow and somewhat uncoordinated, not the best candidate to *carry* another - mentally or physically. Staff Sergeant Pena and the other drill instructors even have a name for us, the Turtledoves.

“Where are my love birds? Turtledoves, get up to my classroom now,” Pena says.

The classroom's an open space, about thirty by thirty, outside the drill instructor's duty hut in each training barracks at MCRD, San Diego. In theory, it's a place of instruction, thus the name. In practice, it's a torture chamber, a place where D.I.s punish the guilty and innocent. A place where a drill instructor can be heard yelling: “You wanna fuckin play boys, we'll play. I got more games than Milton Bradley.” Before I met Wallace, I managed to skip class. Now, I was setting attendance records.

“Push-ups boys, drop,” Pena said. “Too fucking slow, get up. Now drop, on your backs. Sit ups. Sit ups. Too slow. Up. Bends and thrusts. Faster, faster. Too fucking slow. Stop. Drop. Push-ups, stop in the up position. Stay there. Wallace, I better not see your chest touch the deck. Down. Mountain climbers, get those knees up. Faster dammit. I got all-fucking-day, boys.”

I piston my legs, push, jump, then do it all again. Sweat burns the cuts on my hand, and they sprout fresh blood spots through my bandages. I don't have time to care. I just make sure I do everything a little better, a little faster, than Wallace. It isn't that difficult. He just thrashes on the floor, trying to get his bony body into the right position for whatever Pena calls next. Each time he gets into a rhythm, Pena calls out a change. The wiry D.I. smiles the whole time, putting his head down when I look up, hiding his enjoyment beneath the brim of his Smokey Bear.

“Stop,” Pena says. “Stand at attention. Lock your damn body, Wallace.”

My heart hammers as I catch my breath with a closed mouth and a rigid body. Seconds tick by as Pena stands there, flipping through a folder spread out on his training pulpit. I watch without appearing to, my peripheral vision skills vastly improved after the last two months of training. I see Wallace's name in bold type on the top of the folder.

“So, Timothy Wallace, how is it you've been dropped from training by three platoons and you still look like a skeleton?”

“Sir?” Wallace says.

“Did I tell you to fucking speak?” Pena asks. “Shut the hell up. It says here you've failed to qualify three times at the rifle range. Is that right? You can answer now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pena goes toward him, turning his back to me and leaning in close, as if he's about to tell Wallace a secret. Wallace swallows hard, his lips tremble. The rest of the platoon sits at the end of their bunks, polishing boots, pretending not to watch.

“Know what happens when you go UNK your fourth time?” Pena says.

Wallace opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

“You go home,” Pena says.

Wallace closes his eyes. Pena leans in even closer.

“That's why you're such a fuck-up, isn't it? You found yourself a way out. Well, there's nothing says you have to go home in one piece.”

Wallace's eyes are wide, his lips trembling. Pena slaps him hard on the back and executes a perfect about-face. He's facing me now, and looks surprised, like he forgot I was behind him. I'm a statue, my eyes locked on the far wall. He studies me, moving closer and closer, stopping only when he's pushed up against my right shoulder. His breath hot on my ear.

“You didn’t hear shit. Understand?”

I nod.

“If you give a fuck about him, Cole, you’ll help him,” he says.

I stare back at him.

“Get your fucking eyes off me, recruit,” Pena says.

He snatches the folder off the podium. Taps warbles from the loudspeaker, and he dismisses us.

“Guide and squad leaders, square away this platoon. We leave for the rifle range at o-six-hundred tomorrow. All your shit better be ready.”

The rifle range, known to west coast Marines as Edson Range, is located inside the largest Marine base in the United States, Camp Pendleton, California. To get there from MCRD San Diego, we take a half hour bus ride in silence. Although Pena and our junior D.I.s patrol the aisles frequently, I feel alive for the first time in months.

Each day in boot camp is like a week trapped in a cramped box with no food and no light. We see no one but our D.I.s and our fellow recruits, day in and day out. There are no phones, no television and no news, the only contact with the outside world comes via letters from friends and family, delivered twice a week. If no one writes, you never get out of the box. But here, today, speeding down I-5, I remember the world. We pass Burger King and flame-broiled aroma fills my nostrils. Girls with wavy hair drive by in gleaming sports cars, windows down and blouses flutter. They smile and wave, driving me to arousal. Rows of empty phone booths outside a 7-11 beckon. I hear my girlfriend, Maria’s, voice and her laugh. I see her stretched out on a blanket, waiting for me. The ocean sparkles in the California sun and I remember tan legs and long, blonde hair.

Pena yells the moment we go through Pendleton's main gate, reminding us what world we belong to.

"Recruits, welcome to Camp Pendleton. You are now surrounded by the largest population of Marines on the planet. In honor of this occasion, we're throwing you all a little party, in the gas chamber," Pena says.

Wallace, my seatmate, groans.

"Fourth time," he says.

I give a small nod, keeping my eyes on our handlers up front. I'm not looking forward to it, but anything Wallace could survive three times can't be all that bad.

A stump of a Marine takes us through the basics of bio-hazard protection. He speaks too loud and too fast, just like all the others. Without asking if we have questions, he hands us each gas mask before dividing the platoon into pairs. Pena makes certain I stay with Wallace. After a short march across a parched field, we reach a cinderblock building. Yellow buckets filled with water and sponges are lined up by a huge metal door. With only a few small windows, the place looks like an above-ground bunker.

"Recruits, this exercise will teach you to trust your gas mask if you're ever exposed to a biological or chemical attack," the instructor says. "Put your gas mask on, then don and clear. You should have a tight seal and be breathing clean, filtered air. Once you've done this, turn to your buddy and make sure his mask is secure. When everyone is ready, we will enter the chamber in teams of two. It is important for each team to work together throughout the exercise. Stay with your partner at all times, he's your ticket out of my little house of horrors."

My mask gives me trouble right away. The straps are cinched too tight in the back, making it almost impossible to get over my head. Others are already entering the building and I see that we might be the last group. I yank the straps.

“Relax,” Wallace says. “Turn around and I’ll loosen the straps in the back. We’ll get it.”

His voice is muffled by his mask, yet calm. I look back, making sure it’s really him. His mask is secure and he’s ready to go.

“Come on, face forward,” he says. “I have to get it seated. There, all good.”

He spins me back around.

“Now you have to clear it, like this,” he says.

He does the move twice, pinching down the nose of the mask while exhaling, then inhaling while covering the circular filters on either side with his hands, to make the seal. I follow his lead and the mask tightens around my face. I nod and we walk inside.

Canisters of CS gas are already popped, fogging the inside of the dark chamber we enter. Something is wrong. My hands and neck sting, and my eyes pour.

“Recruits, jumping-jacks, counts of four, exercise,” Pena says from a loudspeaker.

We start counting off, and I hack phlegm. Others around me are coughing as well. My eyes sting so bad I can’t open them. All my exposed skin is on fire.

“Stop, recruits. That’s good. Now, I want you all to remove your masks,” Pena says.

The words make me laugh aloud. Remove our masks? Are you kidding?

“Now, recruits.”

I shake my head then rip off the mask. The burning is everywhere now. I can’t stop coughing, which makes me inhale even more CS gas.

“Don and clear your mask now,” Pena says. “If you don’t clear it, it won’t work.”

The coughing, burning, and oozing snot render me helpless. I fight with the mask and end up falling backward on the floor, kicking empty CS canisters as I go down. I fold into a ball and rip at my eyes, my mask forgotten.

“Cole, come on,” Wallace says. “You gotta get that mask on.”

I can’t speak. Everything burns.

“Give me your hand, Cole,” Wallace says.

I can’t think. Wallace grabs me and pulls hard, bringing me to my feet. There’s an opening and he drags me toward it. We reach the door and someone closes it. I can’t see anything now.

“Please, Staff Sergeant, I need to get him out,” Wallace says.

“Nope. He can’t leave without a mask on,” Pena says. I can just make him out, his big arms crossed, his stance wide.

If I had a weapon, I’d empty it into him.

“Here, Cole. Take mine. I’ll go back and get yours,” Wallace says.

He slips the mask over my head as I sit on the floor, useless.

“Breathe in, now blow out,” Wallace says. He then starts to cough.

Pena is laughing.

“Look at my little turtledoves, looking out for each other. Awwwww.”

I sense the difference right away. I can breathe without going into a coughing fit. I squint and see a small blur coming toward me.

“Cole, it’s me,” Wallace says. “Your mask is fucked, but I got it on. Let’s get out of here.”

Pena finally opens the door and we stumble out, snot, saliva and tears pouring out of us both. The sky never looked so blue.

We're given the afternoon to clean up, square away our temporary barracks and recover from the gas exposure. With our drill instructors in the large Quonset hut next door, we're able to talk at a low whisper for the first time in weeks.

"Thanks for today."

"I owed you," Wallace says.

As I apply a fresh coat of polish to my snot-covered boots, I finally ask what has been on my mind for weeks.

"Is what Pena said true? Are you trying to get out?"

"Fuck no. Getting out's the last thing I want."

"Really? No offense, but you don't exactly seem to be cut out for this stuff."

Wallace doesn't answer right away. He just pulls something from his footlocker and hands it to me.

"Maybe I'm not, but he was," Wallace says.

It's a weathered photo of a Marine in dress blues. The man in the picture resembles Wallace, but is older and much larger. The inscription on the back reads: *Semper Fi, brother.-*

Tom

"Your dad?" I ask.

"My brother. He died in Beirut, when the barracks were bombed in eighty-three. I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry. So, you're trying to follow in his footsteps or something?"

"Or something, yeah," Wallace says.

He took back the photo and removed his thick glasses.

“Those things keeping you from qualifying at the range?”

“No, I can see well enough. I get up there and I just get so nervous. I can’t control my breathing. Rounds go all over the place. Once I even shot the wrong target.”

He smiles as he says this and I realize I like him. I guess I had all along. I picture him up there on the firing line, his brother’s face bouncing through his head.

“Well, you’ll get it this time, right?”

He just nods and wipes his spectacles with a green T-shirt.

It’s ten a.m., day one, and I already hate marksmanship training. My legs are stiff from sitting in one place for two hours, aiming my empty M16 at a barrel as a shooting coach talks about site alignment, site picture, trigger squeeze, and breath control. Half the platoon wears eye patches on their non-shooting eyes. The result of being told they possess poor eye control in relation to target focus, a fancy way of saying they can’t keep their off-eye closed when they shoot. Evidently, sight alignment is hard to achieve when both eyes are trying to achieve it simultaneously.

I sit for hours in a fixed position, dry-firing as my arms, legs, and ass fall asleep. I pull the trigger about a thousand times, looking forward to doing it for real.

The first shooting day arrives. I load my first clip and tap it on my helmet to settle the rounds evenly in the clip, just like I’d seen on TV. It’s goofy, but it excites me too. I’m about to fire an M16.

“Groups one through four, you’re up first,” Pena says. “Follow your shooting coaches to your assigned boxes at the two-hundred meter line. All other groups get down below the berm line to pull targets.”

I’m in group three, with Wallace and several others, so I head to the firing line. Since I’m the next to last shooter in my group, I sit back at the spotter box and watch. It’s ugly at first, shooters not getting set before they fire, or firing before the targets appear. Just a bunch of crazy eighteen-year-olds, stressed to the max and outfitted with loaded assault rifles.

My time comes and I feel good. Everything comes back to me, the training, all the breathing. It all feels natural. I finish at the two-hundred meter line, hitting twenty-three out of a possible twenty-five bull’s eyes. I’m rolling. On the three-hundred meter line it’s the same story, only this time I put all fifteen shots in the center. At the five hundred meter line, Staff Sergeant Pena and several shooting coaches start paying attention. I take ten shots from the prone position at five hundred meters, registering nine bulls out of ten. I finish my first full course run three points shy of perfect, something I’m sure few recruits have ever done.

For each good shot I made, Wallace makes an equally bad one. I watch him all afternoon, hands covering my face as he jerks, lurches, twitches and coughs while squeezing off shots. I talk to him, saying whatever I can think of to calm him. At the five hundred meter line, he seems a little more relaxed, but the damage is done. Out of a possible two hundred and fifty points, Wallace scores one hundred and twenty-five. A recruit needs a minimum of one hundred and ninety to qualify.

“That’s why they call it a practice round, Wally,” I say. “Don’t sweat it. You have four more cracks at this.”

The week changes everything for me. Pena stops his constant harassment and ridicule. He even asks me to help other recruits having range difficulties. Instead of spending hours down in the pits dragging targets, I stay up on the line and watch other shooters, offering advice. The man I wished dead is acting like a human being for a change, but I don't buy it. I'm just a big feather in his cap now and I know it. Graduating a recruit that aces the rifle range, a feat only a handful of Marines have ever accomplished, would probably mean promotion. Still, gratitude and respect trump bullying and ridicule every time.

But Wallace continues to shoot abysmally-low scores, once even dipping below one hundred. Pena lets me help him more and more, even allowing me to position myself next to him on the line as he fires, something range officials aren't happy about. The more I try to help, the worse Wallace shoots, it seems. Tomorrow is Friday, qualification day, his last chance. I'm not feeling too good about it.

"Cole, go see Staff Sergeant Pena," a junior D.I. says. I stop collecting spent casing on the firing line and head back to the squad bay.

Pena sits in the Quonset hut, his feet up on a desk.

"From Cole to diamonds, right recruit?" Pena says.

"Yes, sir."

"You shot a two-forty-nine today. You going to get that last point for me tomorrow?"

"I'll get it, sir."

"Good man. I'm counting on it."

"Sir, about Wallace."

"Don't worry, Cole. It wasn't a real threat. I was just trying to motivate him. If he blows it tomorrow, he'll be home by Monday, in one piece, where he belongs."

“Thank you, sir.”

“Of course. Now get back to the platoon.”

For the big day, they pair us up again, saying they want no more than two shooters per target for qualification. Wallace and I are together, as usual. We get an early morning run as well, so the sun will be behind us the entire time. Wallace goes first. He’s a mess, but he’s keeping it together. I squeeze his shoulders and push him forward.

“Tom’s with you, man. I feel him. Go finish this.”

He nods and approaches the line.

“Stop thinking, stop hesitating, and stop adjusting your glasses,” I say. “Just aim and squeeze. Shut everything else out.”

At the two-hundred meter line, he looks calm and determined. He fires without hesitation, the difference in him is immediate. Shots that had been misses all week turn into twos and threes. He finishes at the two-hundred meter line with a score north of one hundred, for the first time all week.

I follow suit with a perfect score and we head to the three hundred meter line.

More of the same there. Wallace is dialed in. Maybe it wasn’t just hollow talk, maybe his brother really is with him.

“You got a little edgy there at the end, Wall, but you’re still good to go,” I say. “You only need thirty-one points at five-hundred meters and you have ten shots to get it. That’s nothing.”

I take his spot and feel a familiar calm. Everything slows down until Wallace and the other shooters melt away. A light breeze blows on my forearms and the sunlight warms my back. Then there’s nothing, just me, my weapon and the target. I don’t miss.

Wallace walks beside me, kicking empty brass and smiling as we approach our last firing position.

“Regardless of how this turns out, Cole, I want to thank you. You’re the first friend I’ve had in four platoons worth of recruits.”

I pat him on the back and nod, trying to remain focused. After all, I have a perfect game going.

“You know the drill,” the range officer says. “Five hundred meter line: ten shots, at a body silhouette target, from the prone position, ten minute time limit. Anything in the black gets you five points. This is where you earn your first Marine Corps badge. Shooters down and ready.”

Wallace is all over the place from the start.

“Slow down,” I say. “You’re rushing your shots.”

Six shots in and he has two fours, a three and three misses. Eleven points. He needs twenty more, which means four straight bulls. I cringe as he pulls the trigger on his seventh shot. When they raise the red lolly-pop indicating a bull’s eye from down in the berm, I can’t believe it. Wallace doesn’t respond. He just waits for the marker to drop and fires again. The red marker rises again. When it drops, Wallace fires. The marker comes up a third time. To say I’m shocked would be an understatement. This guy hasn’t hit more than two bulls all week, now he’s popped three in a row. I hold my breath as Wallace squeezes off the last shot.

Nothing happens for almost a minute. I go over to the range officer and ask him what’s going on. He radios down and I hear a crackling response.

“No hole on the last shot. Shooter missed.”

I watch as a white marker appears and is swung in a half-moon in front of the target, waving Wallace a miss for the last shot. He stands and stares down range, then looks back at me, his eyes full of tears.

“Next shooters, take your places,” the range officer says.

Wallace walks past me to the spotter box then stumbles to his knees. I have no words for him and no time.

I get to the line needing to forget and dial it in. Nothing feels right though. I squirm around my mark, trying to find a comfortable shooting position. Four minutes pass before I take my first shot. Bull. Okay, just breathe. I take another shot. Bull. I stay in position and take five more shots, all bulls. Wallace’s face fills my head. Try as I may, I can’t push it away. Bull. My breathing is starting to hitch a little, but I still have enough rhythm to squeeze off another shot. Bull. Now I not only can see Wallace’s face, but that of his brother. What will he tell his family when he goes back home?

Last shot, I pull the trigger.

I wait, but nothing happens. Rolling over on my back, I look up at the group gathered behind me, four range officers, several of my junior D.I.s, and Staff Sergeant Pena. They look down at me then back down range, confusion evident in their faces. The range C.O. is among the onlookers and he calls down to the berm.

“Stop fucking around,” he says into the walkie. “This isn’t funny. What? Are you serious? No way,” he says.

I get up and walk over, but I already know before the white marker appears down the line, waving from left to right. I missed my last shot. I walk over to Wallace and sit down. He doesn’t even look up.

Ten minutes later, Pena pulls me aside, grinning.

“They just called up,” he says. “The range officers pulled the target to verify your score. They found a keyhole shot. A fucking keyhole, can you believe it?”

“Sir, I don’t understand,” I say. “What’s that?”

“A shot so close to a prior shot that it basically passes through the same hole. You did it, Cole. You scored a perfect two-fifty. All you have to do is go down to the range office and sign off on it,” he says.

With each dusty step, a realization hits me. Wallace and I shot on the same target. The keyhole shot could just as easily be his. How the hell am I supposed to confirm it’s mine? I turn around and head back to the line to find Wallace. I see him sitting on a bench, staring at his feet. Before I reach him, Pena stops me.

“What are you doing? I ordered you to go down and confirm your score.”

“Sir, Wallace shot on that target, too. He only needs one bull to qualify.”

“Look at him, Cole. He doesn’t belong here. Plus, what are the chances that’s his keyhole shot and not yours? Come on.”

As he says this, another image of Wallace appears to me, one of caged terror that night in the razor wire. Countless others follow, ones of him stumbling, flailing, and falling, a stamp of fear ever-present.

I look over at Wallace, who’s watching us. Can he hear what we’re saying? He waves, and then drops his head. I wonder if his brother was a good shot?

“Wallace,” I call out. He doesn’t move. “Wallace?”

Nothing.

I turn around and head back down to the range office and sign off on my perfect score.

Too Much Butterfly

Two black monitor lizards emerged from a mass of vines and mangroves, stalking down the beach. Jed eased into a firing position and trained his M-16 on the lead lizard, marveling at its size. Caressing the trigger, he waited for the shot. Just a few more feet. His target spotted him and hissed.

“Alpha Mike Foxtrot,” Jed whispered. He exhaled and pulled the trigger.

The firing pin released with a hollow pop, stopping half-way through the weapon’s bolt carrier, impeded by the plastic flag-safety insert.

“What the hell are you doing, Marine? Monitor lizards are a protected species here. Did you sleep through the island brief?” Boz asked.

Jed Potter, or Smoke as his fellow jarheads called him, looked back at his fox-hole buddy and shrugged.

“Yeah, dry-firing at lizards, I’m such a rebel.” Smoke said. “How are we supposed to prepare for live fire without ammo? Seriously, what the hell? Two months without a port, and when we finally do stop, in fucking paradise no less, they stick us in fox holes. It’s bullshit. I can’t wait until Gunny calls this thing so we can hit the ville. What’s it been, seven hours?”

“Eight,” Boz said. He smiled and stretched open a lounging Miss April, 1990 centerfold, flexing his short arms for effect. “Yay, war games.”

“We’re stuck here drawing down on monkeys and overgrown geckos and India Company gets malaria and crotch-rot stumbling through the jungle,” Smoke said. “And who sets up a fucking ambush from an uncovered beach position? These are the assholes leading us into battle in a few weeks? Awesome.”

Boz laughed, admiring playmate cleavage through gritty fingers. “Gotta love the suck.”

Nodding, Smoke turned back toward the beach, just in time to see two large black tails disappear into the jungle's growing shadow.

"Those fuckers were mean-looking huh, Smoke, battle-ready. Bet they've seen some shit in their day."

"Battle-ready," Smoke said.

"Damn, there you go thinking again," Boz said. "Cut that shit out. You'll be gold. Plus, I'll be with you, man."

Boz slid over, grabbed Smoke's shoulder, and began butting his friend's Kevlar helmet repeatedly with his own, the dull *clunk, clunk, clunk* echoing down the beach.

Smoke pushed him away and smiled.

"Stop turtle-fuckin' me, ya sick bastard."

Another hour of insect bites and sick jokes passed with no sign of India Company. The entire beach was in shadow when the C.O.'s Hummer finally made an appearance.

"Third platoon, India screwed the pooch," the platoon commander said via bullhorn. "Grab those E-Tools and get to it. Fill your holes, secure your gear; then hit the ship's armory. NCOs, march them back, check your counts, and then cut 'em loose. The night's yours, Marines."

"Oorah," Helo Company answered in unison, small shovelfuls of sand already flying.

Smoke and Boz stood at lazy parade-rest just inside a small Quonset hut at the main dock. Their ship, the U.S.S. Okinawa, was anchored a few hundred yards away in Subic Bay. Both men fidgeted and rolled their eyes listening to the duty officer dole out advice. A small price to pay for a night of liberty in the Philippines.

“Boys, you know the drill. Show me your IDs and dog-tags and sign the log book. Here’s your libo cards. Don’t lose them. Don’t forget to grab a jimmy or three on the way out. Doc just refilled our prize box.”

He spat fresh tobacco juice on the Quonset hut floor.

“Remember, its Cinderella Liberty tonight since we’re shoving off at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow. The Shitface Express will be picking everybody up shortly after midnight. Better not be late. Going AWOL in wartime is treason. They’ll shoot your ass.”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“Find yourself something warm and wet boys, because this could be your last chance. Just don’t bring back anything you can’t wash off. Doc ain’t got a shot for Gonasyphaherpaids.”

All Smoke heard was *last chance*. Boz pushed him backwards out the door.

“Gonaherpa-what?” Boz said.

“Hell if I know,” Smoke said. “Let’s DD before he explains.”

They hurried up the hill that overlooked Subic Bay’s main naval port, a small armada docked in the waters below. A brisk walk turned into an uphill sprint, the two dodging vines and pot-holes as they went. When Smoke, the taller and thinner, was several strides ahead, he yelled over his shoulder.

“Last one to the taxi line buys the first round at Dolly’s.”

“Cheatin bastard,” Boz said.

Smoke was already leaning against a dusty sedan, smiling and feigning calm respiration by the time Boz reached the top.

“Yeah, yeah, long-legged bastard,” Boz said. “Just get in the damn car. Lucky for me the beer here’s cheaper than the water. Hubba hubba, Honcho, to the main gate.”

While Boz was busy imitating their favorite duty officer, complete with stuttering Texas drawl, Smoke stared at the jungle.

The hours he'd spent watching news reports before he left California a month ago came back to him. CNN talking heads rattled on about a battle-hardened Republican Guard and how they would make this our next Vietnam. Each story was accompanied by flight camera videos of bunker-buster explosions on the Iraq/Kuwait border. Once the bombing was done, the troops would go in, to drive Iraq out of the Kuwaiti desert.

"Hello? Where are you man?" Boz asked. "I told you, no thinking. Seriously, be here. Now. Tomorrow's tomorrow."

Smoke smiled, finally for real, and rested his shaved head on the tattered upholstery as the taxi whizzed down blacktop roads that barely cut through the jungle on either side. Their destination: Adult Disneyland.

"It's our last night, why don't we nut up and go check out Subic City?" Boz asked. "Everybody says it's the shit. I heard girls there shoot darts out of their hoo-hahs hard enough to pop balloons." Boz cupped his hands on either side of his mouth in mock secrecy as he spoke. "Now don't tell me you wouldn't like to see that! LBFMs shootin' darts, that's some sit-around-and-tell-the-grandkids shit there."

"Hey, little Johnny, sit down and grandpa will teach you about human dart guns. See, the girl would put the darts up here," Smoke was laughing too hard to finish.

"Come on," Boz said. "The jeepne ride is on me. I hear you can have two or three girls at once and no old chicks with pasties like here in Alongapo."

"Okay. Let's preflight at Dolly's, get a couple of tacos, and we're gone."

Boz slapped Smoke on the back and grunted a loud Ooh Rah, his standard response to most things, while Smoke settled up with the driver. After clearing the checkpoint at the main gate, they navigated the endless number of beggars, hawkers, and five-year-old Chiclet salesmen before finally reaching Dolly's Dancing and Taco Bar, a little hole of a place on a side street where generations of U.S. service members ate dog tacos and drank formaldehyde-preserved San Miguel beer.

Preflight consisted of getting something greasy into the stomach and laying the alcoholic groundwork for the night's real debauchery. As the two scarfed canine and swigged dirt-cheap drafts, Boz's endless chatter melded nicely into the blaring AC/DC and Metallica. They sat at the end of a long runway bar that served up no fewer than five dark-skinned, dark-haired beauties at a time. In Alongapo, unlike towns further south, the girls were required to wear bathing suits or bikinis that covered their top and their bottom. Covered had a loose interpretation though, as most of the suits were transparent mesh with tiny pasties. The atmosphere was that of many stateside topless bars, but with the added kick that any girl in the place could be had for ten bucks.

Boz threw pesos onto the stage. The dancers yelled in Tagalog and scrambled for the bouncing coins, their small, agile bodies glistening with sweat and neon. Smoke imagined them transforming, their faces and limbs contorting as VX nerve gas enveloped them. He shook his head, chasing the vision. He glanced at his friend, wishing the two of them could talk about it. Boz cut off weakness talk immediately. To speak of a fear was to give it power over you, he said. This left Smoke trapped in his own head. Hell, no one even knew he was a virgin.

Maybe he'd just have a few beers and return to the ship early. He could stop by the USO and call his mom. Her last letter was full of veiled worry. Maybe he shouldn't call her. Fear was cumulative. He could call Lisa or maybe Kate, surely one of them still had something for him. Plus, the ship was no place to be working off a full-blown hangover. The sailors, not to mention his own platoon

members, would really enjoy watching him spew off the side of the ship. He'd just finish his beer and go back.

"Tequila shots, Baby. Yeah." Boz said.

So much for will power.

After wolfing down four tacos, three beers, and two shots of tequila each, Boz said they were going to hit one more bar. Smoke attempted one last plea at an early return and a clear conscience, but it was half-hearted.

"Go back? You're my wingman, Smoke. You're going to let me go on alone? What if I get iced by some NPA terrorist?"

"I hate you."

The streets were full of drunk sailors and Marines. Smoke and Boz managed to wade through the chaos without getting dragged into any of the fights currently under way.

"Damn, this is crazy shit," Boz said. "Let's go see my girl, and we'll head out." He jumped a pool of vomit and headed toward a blue door framed in red neon.

Slim's Tavern was the number one bar in Alongapo, and with good reason. The owners went out of their way to hire the most athletic, well-endowed, young Filipinas around. Smoke knew the place would be packed, but the scenery was worth the trouble. Since Boz had a thing for a fake-blonde dancer named, Terra, Smoke knew they'd have to wade through the place at some point.

Smoke wished his earlier resolve had been stronger. First Recon had set up camp and was doing a pretty good job breaking up the place. Six tattooed drunks were up on stage taking off their own clothes as their recon brothers and the savvy dancers cheered them on. Smoke yelled to Boz that this was a bad idea, but his objections were drowned out by Metallica. As he tried to get Boz's attention, someone grabbed him. In one swift move, Smoke was spun around and pulled forward. A

Recon Marine with a maniac smile punched him in the face. He stumbled back and was hit again, this time losing his balance and smacking his head on the bar top.

When he came to, both of his ears were ringing and what little hair he had felt wet and sticky. The music had stopped and everyone around him was writhing and intertwined, like he'd fallen into a pit of snakes. Someone bear-hugged him from behind and then hoisted him to his feet. As he tried to orient himself, he was dragged backwards. A blurry angel, with dark hair and smooth skin matched his backward progress through the crowd, using part of her dress to wipe blood from his head. Her concern excited him. The bar fight was raging as Boz hoisted Smoke into a corner booth.

“Don't worry,” Boz said. “You're not bleeding that much. Just stay here and let her take care of you. What's your name, beautiful?”

“Lucia.”

“You're in good hands, buddy,” Boz said. “Drink this while I go kill that motherfucker.” He handed Smoke a large bottle of Red Horse beer and winked.

It was just a quick look, a shared second, but it was enough. Smoke tried to regain his footing as Boz returned to the fight, but Lucia held him back.

“You no good for fight, yet,” she said. “You drink deep. Let Lucia help you. Your friend don't need you. He fight real good. Look.”

She was right. He could see over her bare shoulder that Boz had the situation under control and had even summoned reinforcements from Helo Company. Boz was trading blows with two men at once and Smoke could hear him laughing each time he threw a punch or was hit by one.

“He laughing? Crazy guy.” Lucia said.

Smoke tried once again to get up and help when he saw the same giant that sucker-punched him grab a beer bottle and advance. Before he found his balance however, a ranking Recon officer

stepped in, swiping the bottle in mid-swing. His presence among the enlisted men stopped the fighting. Murmurs of “officer on deck” spread through the club as fists and bottles were lowered. The officer dropped the bottle and bellowed, staring down the drunken crowd with cold eyes.

“Save it for Saddam, you fuckin’ idiots. Marines don’t fight Marines.”

With that, the melee ended and the music blared once again. Smoke shook his head and sat back, glad he’d been spared additional pummeling.

As Boz ordered fresh beers and went over blow by blow of the scrum, Smoke relaxed and let his eyes rest on the vision in front of him. She smiled back, tipping beer into his waiting mouth with one hand and cleaning up the gash at the crown of his head with a beer-soaked paper napkin. She was tall and wide-eyed. Her hair was dark, but not jet-black like most of the girls. It framed a somewhat angular face with a smooth complexion and pouty lips. Per the hiring requirement, her body was fit, from her small waist to her muscular calves. As she leaned forward, he smelled jasmine. Perspiration beaded between her breasts, which were now just inches from his nose.

“You Marines, you all crazy,” she said. “All you do, drink and fight. World ending and you get more beer. You all the same. Okay, you live, I think.”

She finished her bar triage, then leaned over and kissed his forehead. He shivered as cool air marked where her lips had been.

“We aren’t all like that,” Smoke said. “I don’t even like to fight.”

“Good damn thing too,” she said. “You fight for shit. But, I like you. You are quiet. Too bad you leaving tomorrow.”

Boz stumbled back to the booth, loud and larger than life, crashing Smoke’s little party.

“Come on, dude. Put it back in your pants and quit milking that beer. Tara’s gone, so let’s jet. Gotta make it to Subic City and back ‘fore twelve,” he slurred.

“I’m not sure I can walk. Besides,” Smoke said, cutting his eyes toward Lucia, “we were talking.”

“No, no, you go,” she said. “Lucia knows. Marines always too much butterfly.” She shook her head and smiled. “You fly flower to flower, never stay long. Lucia knows, Lucia knows.” Her voice trailed off.

“No, I’m not like that. I haven’t...”

“Lucia no stung no more,” she said.

She put her head down and walked back into the crowd.

With Boz’s help, Smoke wobbled across the dance floor. At the exit, he leaned on Boz and stared back into the glitter and buzz, hoping to catch one last glimpse of her.

Boz found a Jeepne, a taxi that resembled a Keystone-cop car, and clapped his hands.

“This is our ride, buddy. Pick up the pace.”

“I don’t know, Boz, I can’t see straight. I’m thinking I have a concussion.”

“It’s always me, me, me,” Boz said. “Come on, a couple shots and you’ll be right as rain. You’d leave me, after I just waded into a freakin’ three hundred pound Recon gorilla for you?”

Smoke nodded then climbed in, trying to will the pounding in his head to stop. Boz jumped in and told the driver to make for Subic City. As they picked up speed, Boz stepped to the back of the vehicle, which was totally open with bench seats on either side, steadied himself with a bow-legged stance, and pissed into the street at fifty miles-per-hour. Smoke hardly noticed, instead staring into the dark jungle while his thoughts pin-balled from his future, to the fight, and finally to Lucia. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe the open head wound, but he just couldn’t make sense out of what she’d said. He was a butterfly? A stinging butterfly? She was? His focus swirled and he dropped his head, fighting nausea as the jeepne zoomed through the night.

He was still replaying the moments with Lucia, wishing he had done or said more when Boz shouted over the engine noise.

“Hallelujah, we’re here.”

So this was Subic City? Smoke looked at a handful of dilapidated bars standing all aglow, colored lights everywhere. It reminded him of a trailer park at Christmas time. The streets were packed and the air filled with celebration. They jumped out and Smoke paid the driver while Boz looked around with a little kid face.

“Holy shit, Smoke. It’s like somebody stuck a mini Las Vegas in the backwoods of Alabama. Look over there. That’s where we gotta go.”

Boz pointed to a large two-story building that glowed bright pink. Smoke smiled and shook his head as he read the neon sign out front.

MUFFDIVERS -We go down so you no frown!

“Mom would be so proud,” Smoke said.

At first glance, the place didn’t seem much different than the Alongapo bars. The girls were topless, but other than that it looked like maybe the scuttlebutt had all been a lot of hype. Undaunted, Boz downed a shot, drank a beer, and told Smoke he’d be right back. Smoke was paying for their next round when Boz returned grinning like the Grinch.

“Oh shit, what did you do?”

“Grab the beer and come with me. Someday you’ll thank me for this.”

Smoke closed his eyes and dropped his head, realizing the door he was about to walk through.

They followed a tiny lady into a dark room off to one side of the bar. Smoke walked in and thought there must be some mistake. The room was bare except for a tall oak table and six chairs.

Their hostess gestured for them to take a seat and then stepped through a side door. Smoke pulled out a

chair but realized the chair legs were extremely short, almost non-existent. Because of this, his legs were almost horizontal with his butt when he sat down, heels and calves resting on the floor. This wouldn't have been so bad if the table wasn't so tall. The top of it came to his upper-chest.

“Dude, what the fuck is going on? You got me worried the three bears are coming back soon.”

“Just relax and trust me for once,” Boz said. “Drink your beer and kick back. I promise this is will be fun.” He winked and took a swig of beer.

The side door opened again and a different girl led in four other Marines, while their original hostess brought in a full tray of drinks.

“What the hell?” Smoke asked.

He struggled to get up out of his weird bear-chair.

“Relax, Smoke. We're gonna play a little game. It's called Smiles.”

“What are the rules?” Smoke asked, glancing from Boz to the other Marines staring at him and laughing.

“You'll see, Devil Dog. Just listen to your buddy,” the tallest Marine said.

Two short-haired young girls entered and stood in a corner. Their arms were linked and their chests bare. They looked like twins with pert nipples and matching red thongs. Both girls smiled and waited. Anything involving those two couldn't be bad. Smoke blushed and adjusted his trousers before sitting back down.

“Okay, okay, Marines, you pay now,” the momma-san said.

Smoke glanced over at Boz as the other Marines reached for their wallets.

“I got you, Smoke,” Boz said. He gave the mamma-san a handful of colorful bills and then took another swig of beer.

“Now, all you sit,” the mamma-san said. “Pull chair up close, all hands on table. Everytime hands on table. Understand?”

Smoke choked back laughter. Six tough Marines sitting around a table looking like two-year-olds having their first meal with the adults. For the shorter men in the group, like Boz, the table was just shy of chin level. Before any of the jokes popping into his head found voice, the two girls got down on all fours, and then crawled beneath the table.

“What the?” Smoke said. Warm hands on his inner thigh shut him up. His first impulse was to flinch, but as those hands moved quickly to his zipper and beyond, he leaned back and smiled.

“That, my friend, is why they call it Smiles,” Boz said. “You just bought the table the first round.”

The Marines all laughed and pounded on the table.

“Whatever you say.”

Thirty minutes and five rounds later, they dragged themselves back to the main bar. Smoke paid for three rounds, and twice he hadn't even been touched. He just couldn't wipe the permanent grin off his face. The party ended when Boz tried to pull one of the girls out from under the table, prompting the mama-san to jump from the shadows and unleash a verbal attack in Tagalog. He just stared, glassy-eyed, and smiled as she yelled and wagged her fat fingers. After he produced another wad of funny money, she calmed down and had her girls bring them all another round.

They went upstairs to one of the overhanging balconies. It was a cool night and the breeze felt good on Smoke's injured head. They sat for a while, laughing and talking about the fight and the game. Boz left again to find cigarettes and Smoke's thoughts drifted to Lucia.

He wanted to go back and find her, to smell her perfume and try to change her sad words. This time, he'd really listen, and say things that mattered. She'd see that they were both different. He was still mulling this over when Boz returned with a wide grin and a large bottle-rocket.

Right away Boz seemed different. When he'd left, he'd been drunk and lethargic, ready to pass out. Now, he was hopping around like an agitated monkey.

"I hooked up with this chick downstairs. She was really, really hot. She gave me a rocket," Boz said. Except his words were all zipped together, *shewasreallyreallyhotshegavemearocket*.

"She was smoking this metal cigarette shaped like a baseball bat. Said it was a one-hitter. What's a one-hitter? Anyway, I took a couple puffs. It was awesome. I feel so really totally awake now. Hey, we gotta shoot this thing off. Come on, it'll be great. Where should I aim it?" All of his words were blurted out rapid-fire.

"You smoked what? Boz, I think that might have been crack or something. Are you serious? Didn't you pay attention during that drug brief?"

"Nah, man. I fell asleep as soon as they dimmed the lights?" he said. "What's a one-hitter? Did I already ask you that? Crack huh? Hmm...feels good." His bottom jaw oscillated the entire time he spoke.

"We gotta get you out."

Before he could finish, Boz lit the rocket. Smoke freaked and reached for the fuse. He lost his balance and the chair slid out from under him. He went down in a heap, and his head bounced off the floor. All he'd done was change Boz's aim. So, instead of flying into the night sky, the rocket flew directly across the street and landed on the thatched roof of a neighboring bar. The roof went up in flames, thatch and cinder curling into the night sky. Smoke was mesmerized, his gut twisting as the fire

grew. Half-naked dancers and drunken servicemen streamed into the street below. For an instant, the whole world was ablaze.

Boz, as always, brought him back. His friend howled beside him, laughing like a lunatic and jumping up and down, rocking the entire balcony with each leap.

“Friggin’ awesome. You see that?”

Smoke stumbled to his feet and was finally able to drag Boz back into the upper story.

“We gotta get outta here.” Smoke said. He dragged his drugged buddy downstairs and out into the street. They wove around half-naked girls, disgruntled servicemen, and bucket-wielding Mamma-sans as palm embers fell all around them.

“It’s just a little fire,” Boz said. “What’s the big deal?”

“A little fire? You probably burned the whole building down. Somebody could have been killed.”

“Come on now, man. You’re freakin’ out.”

Smoke continued to drag Boz away from the fire and confusion. On the main road out, a scruffy Filipino sat in his Jeepne sleeping. Smoke called to the man while pulling Boz toward the car. Boz protested as he was forced up the back steps and into a seat.

“Alongapo, Honcho,” Smoke said.

“Come on, man, what about the banana show and the dart girls?”

They rode in dark bumpy silence. Boz tried to change Smoke’s mind, asking him to go back several times. Once it was clear he was being ignored, he closed his eyes and his mouth.

Smoke replayed the last few hours in his head, the warm hands of the girl, Boz’s laughter and the fire. He drifted and things blended together. Lucia’s sad face danced in the flames.

“Four. Hey, Marine! Four pesos,” the driver said.

“I got it, Smoke.”

They settled up and stumbled out, onto Mag-si-si Street. Boz vomited several times on the way back to the main square.

“Let’s catch a cab and go back to the ship,” Smoke said.

“No, I’ll go by myself,” Boz said.

“I’m not leaving you like this.”

“You’re not leaving me. I know that. But you want to see that girl again. Am I right?”

“No, Boz.”

“We got lots of tomorrows, you and me,” Boz said. “You two don’t, brother. Go.”

“You sure?”

“Always.”

Smoke nodded and went to find a taxi. He put Boz in a cab and told him not to talk to anyone. He paid the driver and assured his buddy he’d check on him when he got back to the ship. Watching the taxi drive away, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“How’s that guy still alive?”

Despite the blood loss and sore head, he felt more alive than he had in months. He still had an hour before midnight to go back to Slim’s Tavern and find Lucia.

When he arrived, he was happy to see that 1st Recon was gone and that dancers, not jar-heads, graced the main runway and side stages once again. He ordered a beer and made his way to the back of the bar and sat in the shadows. As he watched the booze flow and the women dance, he scanned the crowd for her. She was gone. He finished his beer and walked to the exit. Just before he left, the lights flashed and a sultry jazz number started, low and full of sax. Lucia stepped on stage.

He forgot everything. Lucia had on knee boots, a long black trench coat open to the neck, and little else. He could feel his pulse pound in his head as she swayed up the runway. Her lithe movements entranced him. As she glided past each upturned face, she smiled and winked. Each man she passed reacted as if he truly believed that look was just for him. Maybe it was. Smoke knew who the butterfly was. Near the end of the song, Lucia strutted to the end of the stage and then stopped. Before she went through the curtains, she looked right at Smoke and blew a kiss.

Smoke waited, hoping she would come out and find him. She never did. He finally gave up and left. Halfway down the steps, he saw a trike with a sidecar idling by the curb. A sailor in dress whites sat in the little oval, drunk and leaning to one side. Lucia stepped out of a door marked *Private*. She glanced over, but didn't acknowledge him. She headed for the sidecar. Smoke called to her.

“Lucia, wait.”

She stopped and pivoted on one high heel.

“Hey, where you going? I paid good money,” the sailor said.

“I know, baby. Lucia be right back for you.”

She walked over to Smoke, grinning.

“Tough guy, you come back.”

“Subic was fun, yes?” she asked. “Oh, I see you red. It was, huh.”

She laughed, but Smoke saw her smile waver as he blushed.

“You big man now, right? What you want, big man?”

“I, well, you, I don't know.”

“Oh I see, you come back to save Lucia. Wanna take me home to America, meet Momma.”

She shook her head and laughed.

Smoke's face burned. Lucia stopped laughing and approached him. She smiled and touched his face.

“Your eyes, they see a Lucia was, not a Lucia is. Lucia likes that. You save that.”

Smoke stumbled forward and kissed her, fearing it was his only chance. Her hands stroked his face as she returned his kiss, for a moment. She pulled back and smiled.

“Lucia see you, too, not big Marine, just sweet little boy. See, we save each other. You go now, before we see too much.”

Smoke let her hand slip through his. She gave him a small nod then turned and walked back to the waiting sailor. The trike putted away, leaving Smoke standing alone. His watch showed eleven forty-five. Time to go check on Boz.

See, we save each other.

He hoped she was right.

Dumb Animals

Corporal Mason Collie, or Dog to his fifty fellow Marines, sat atop his yellow, avionics toolbox staring out across the flight line to the vast Philippine jungle beyond. He was still and quiet, listening for the familiar *whop, whop, whop* that signaled inbound Hueys and Cobras. At twenty-two, Collie was thin but wiry, his hair and eyes dark against his light, freckled skin. He wore a cranial, a green, sweat-soaked T-shirt, and a tattered pair of dark blue coveralls with the upper portion rolled down to the waist and the pant legs stuffed into a pair of scuffed up safety boots, the unofficial uniform of the air-wing Marine. He tapped his fingers and prayed flight ops didn't run late again, causing him to miss another happy hour at Metallica's. The flights were logged as Desert Shield Mock-up Training on the schedule, which meant tons of brass and other dignitaries onboard, so it was unlikely his prayers would be answered.

As a line trouble-shooter, he repaired small, electrical gripes that arose during spin-up and jumped on anything major reported by the pilots once the birds returned. Usually, this was non-rate duty, reserved for those ranked below him, but that was before Sgt. Minko arrived from the grunt side and took over the Avionics shop. For Sgt. Minko, a man who seemed to thrive on intimidation and other pleasures of rank, assigning extra duties and bullying those beneath him was an ever day occurrence, especially where Collie was concerned. Collie figured it was Minko's way of getting back at the world since his wife had him served with divorce papers two months prior, just after leaving him for a Marine she'd met back in California while the squadron was deployed overseas. A Marine who, rumor had it, was better equipped to handle her needs.

The percussive thump of the birds on approach made him smile. He could already taste the cold Bullfrog and see the little mocha dancers gyrating on stage. As the helicopters taxied in,

the trees bowed and leaves scattered in the collective rotor wash. Within minutes, ten helicopters were on deck and in the midst of shut down, long, heavy blades drooping under their weight as they slowed. The closest bird, a grey Vietnam-era Huey, sat at the edge of the flight line. Collie started toward it, but then stopped. Something felt wrong.

It was the trees. They continued to sway, as though the rotors were still at full speed. When the swaying of the branches slowed, little brown balls of fur started tumbling out of the jungle on either side of the line, surrounding the tarmac perimeter. At least fifty monkeys, each little more than a foot tall standing up, shrieked and jumped around the flight line just as high-ranking officers of every sort began exiting the aircraft. When the first group of dignitaries got within range, the monkeys opened fire.

Top brass and aircrew scattered as fruit and feces rained down from all directions. Some Marines ran toward the monkeys, some headed toward the squadron Quonset huts, several narrowly missing decapitation as they ducked beneath the massive, lumbering rotors. Collie dropped his box and crouched beneath the nose of the Huey as officers in their finest flight suits and camouflage uniforms were splattered.

Reaching the safety of the main Quonset hut, one general turned and called out.

“Shoot the bastards.”

The monkeys screeched in unison. Collie swore they were laughing. Down at the far corner of the flight line another creature, chimp-like in size and appearance, emerged. He barked several times, deep and gravelly, and the others turned toward him. A crew chief in the last Huey fired his 9mm toward the closest group, sending them and the larger animal skittering back into the jungle. Collie exchanged confused looks with several of his squadron mates in the silence that followed, all the while trying to hide his excitement.

The squadron was put on safety stand down, with all flights cancelled until further notice. Before the Naval Base Commander learned of the incident, the squadron C.O. sent out a hunting party. One of the dignitaries who'd suffered a facial monkey bomb was also head of the base armory and thus authorized an immediate weapon withdrawal of M16s, 12 gauges, and 9 millimeters. Sgt. Minko, fresh from his daily three-hour workout, returned to the squadron with a group of sergeants and fellow gym rats, fully armed and ready to lead a counter-attack.

"These little bastards are gonna pay," Minko said. "Throw shit at our birds? At our officers? Fuck that. I'll kill every one of them. Just give me the word."

Minko strutted through the Maintenance Control hut. He had a bloated artificial appearance as he paced back and forth, a man-sized Stretch Armstrong with an M16 slung across his back and a 9 mm pistol in his hand. He flexed constantly as he walked, admiring his reflection in the night-mirrored windows. Collie shook his head and wondered if the rumors were true. How could Minko, a mountain of muscle, be small where size mattered most?

Minko caught Collie staring and pointed the pistol at him, a wide grin further distorting his cartoon features.

"Don't stare at me, mother fucker," Minko said. "What are you doing in here anyway? Go find your little butt-buddy Sullivan and start cleaning our birds. I want them shining in the morning. Oh, and make sure all that fruit and shit's off the tarmac too. Sweet dreams." Minko smiled, then pulled the trigger.

Collie flinched as the 9mm's firing pin clicked in the empty chamber.

"Damn, Collie Dog, I thought it was loaded, my bad," Minko said. He smiled and pulled the slide back, chambering a round. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get your ass out on the line. Now."

He timed his yell perfectly, jutting out his thick neck and barking into Collie's left ear as he passed. Collie kept walking, blurting out his retort without thinking.

“You're an ass, Minko. No wonder she fuckin left you.”

The smack of the pistol butt across the back of Collie's head made him drop his cranial and stumble forward in a flash of pain and surprise. The throbbing at the base of his skull was blinding, almost bringing him to his knees as he scrambled to get away from the second blow, a wild round-house right that grazed his neck. He ducked to avoid a third punch, kneeling down and grabbing his cranial by the chin strap in the process. In one swift motion, Collie rose and pivoted, swinging the head-gear in an upward arc as hard as he could. Minko reacted, but not fast enough. He flinched backward just as hard plastic smacked his left cheek and oversized nose. Collie saw the blood and felt vibrations run through him.

Minko's eyes glazed over as he wiped his gushing nose. He spat blood then smiled, looking down at the weapon in his hand.

“You fucked up, Dog.”

The maintenance chief walked in. Both men froze. He took one look at Sergeant Minko's bloody face and Collie standing opposite him and began to laugh.

“Somebody finally called your bullshit huh, Sarge? Well I sure wouldn't have figured Collie for it. Clean yourself up and get out there. Your little hunting party's waiting on you.”

Minko holstered the weapon and stared, first at Collie, then at the maintenance head.

“He struck a ranking NCO, Gunny,” Minko said. “That's an office-hours offense. Aren't you gonna do anything?”

The old Gunny smiled and shook his head before answering.

“Son, if we wrote up every Marine who took a swing at an NCO, there’d be nobody left around here to work. I’m sure you can come up with a few games Collie here can play to make up for this. The tarmac pad-eyes always need cleaning and hell, there’s at least twenty pounds of monkey shit out there.”

Minko shook his head in agreement then winked at Collie. As he walked past him, he whispered.

“Dead.”

Thirty minutes later, Collie and PFC Sullivan shuffled along, heads down and eyes following their weak flashlight beams. They went from one helicopter to the next, wash bucket and brushes in hand. Each man dragged a large trash bag behind him, filled with monkey excrement and rotting fruit. Collie, head still pounding from the pistol-whipping, told Sully what happened.

“If Gunny hadn’t come in, I think he’d have shot me,” Collie said.

“I don’t doubt it, crazy, ‘roided-up bastard,” Sully said.

They dropped their bags and sat on the cargo bay door of a Cobra. Each man switched off his flashlight and began to fish for smokes. Collie slid a cigarette into the corner of his mouth and made the thumb-flick gesture. Sully handed over his lighter.

“Should have seen the look on his face when I smacked him. Needle Dick didn’t know what hit him.”

Sully took a long drag and eyed his friend.

“You better watch the needle dick stuff, Dog,” Sullivan said. “That shit is making him crazy. You know the pilots fuck with him about it all the time too, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard them. So what?”

“Captain Walters said his girlfriend, a dancer from 100% Rock, has a sister that Minko’s obsessed with. She works at 100% too. Minko paid her bar-fine and took her out a few weeks back. He said the girl came back the next day laughing, saying Minko was *walang kaya*. It means impotent or something. Minko said he was just really drunk, but now the pilots call him that. It’s all a joke, but they don’t seem to notice what they’re doing to him. It’s kind of sad.”

“Yeah, I heard a little about that. But he brings it on himself. Don’t tell me you’re starting to feel sorry for him. Did you forget how many shit details he’s put us on, or how many liberty passes he’s taken away for no reason, or how he gut-checked you so hard once you spit up blood? Or how he was this close to killing your best friend tonight?”

“I remember,” Sully said.

“Then enough with the violins, okay?” Collie said. “Let’s get this done before the war party comes back. I don’t want to give that bastard a reason to finish what he started.”

The two men stood, extinguished their cigarettes, and grabbed their flashlights. As they plodded toward the next bird, pausing every few feet to pick up the scattered debris. Gunfire echoed in the distance.

That night, ten Marines went through four boxes of shotgun shells, six thirty-round M16 magazines, and another seventy-five 9mm rounds. For their efforts, the base was saved from the future shenanigans of exactly three small primates. Collie sat some distance away from Sgt. Minko as he and the others spoke of the experience as though they were repeatedly ambushed by war-hardened Viet Cong, and had barely made it out alive.

The Base Commander was not impressed with the squadron’s little war. He called an immediate halt to Operation Simian Slaughter and made everyone check their weapons back in to the armory the first thing next morning. He then issued a directive outlining the parameters of

the Animal Relocation Project, or ARP as it was referred. The project stipulated that the helo squadron was to provide the men necessary to trap the offending monkeys, unharmed, and transfer them to Main-Side where they could then be relocated to one of the many surrounding islands in the Philippine chain. Initially, Sgt. Minko lobbied to head up the program. After it was made clear that none of the animals could be harmed in any way during the process however, he seemed to lost interest. Once he discovered that he could assign this duty, which included sending one lucky Marine into the jungle to train with the Negritos for a month during the rainy season, his interest returned.

“Collie, it’s time for reindeer games,” Minko said. “Go grab your shit and report to some tree-hugger up at the Jungle Survival School, in area six. You get to chase wild monkeys with no weapons. Have fun with that.”

Collie saw the whole thing as a kind of glass-half-full scenario, a month vacation from Minko. In the process, he learned about the Negritos, the true natives of the Philippines. These tribes, inhabiting the jungles throughout the island chain, were experts at concealment and survival. For this reason, they were utilized as guides for U.S. Marines during World War II. They now operated a training program in Subic Bay called JEST, or jungle environment survival training. Collie went through a modified version of JEST, set up by the ARP coordinator, with a focus on primate behavior, traps, and snares. In just a few weeks, the Negritos taught him how to live in the jungle and use everything there to feed and protect himself. Within days, he was able to build bamboo traps, vine snares, and modified kill boxes without spikes, since all the monkeys had to be delivered to the main-side docks unharmed.

He lived with a local tribe, where he hunted and foraged during the day and slept on split bamboo mats beneath the jungle canopy at night. Each morning, he and a group of wiry men set

up snares. Collie then helped gather food for the day, using a large stick to balance himself as he waded into streams, thick with fresh snails and rat snake. He picked fresh greens by the waterside and even caught the occasional wild chicken or bamboo bat. When the group returned, the men laughed as Collie tried to start a fire, equipped only with a dull knife and dried bamboo stalks. After his hands were full of bamboo splinters, the oldest of them, a leathery little man they called Ja, pushed Collie aside and spoke to the other three in a high strange voice, causing them to laugh even more. Within a minute, he had the fire started.

The Negritos treated Collie as one of their own. Things like property, vanity, and ego were all foreign to them. Whatever they had was Collie's. All he had to do was ask. They seemed to gain their satisfaction just from being alive.

One evening, Collie and a small group of tribesmen went out to check the snares. The men led him down into a deep ravine, where the morning rains had created a small river, flood waters churning chocolate brown toward the Olongapo River. Close to the water's edge, a group of monkeys played, running back and forth on the trunks of fallen trees that stretched from one bank to the other above the swirling water. A somewhat larger group of primates sat in a mangrove thicket, looking on while grooming one another. Collie reached in his small pack, digging out his snare lines. However, one of the tribesmen stopped him, motioning that he sit and stay quiet. Collie figured these men were planning their own trap, something much more effective than his small snares, but they never moved any closer. After a while, the men made their way back up the hill and returned to camp, empty-handed.

“Why didn't we set any traps? There were at least fifteen monkeys there,” Collie asked.

The leader of the group turned to him and spoke in broken English.

“To-day, family. To-morrow, monkey.”

He then spoke to the others in a quiet voice and they all nodded. Collie smiled and nodded as well.

With the help of Ja and the others, Collie started catching monkeys by the end of the first week. At the end of the second week, it was two per day. By the end of the fourth week, he had delivered forty-nine macaques to the ARP coordinator for relocation to the outer islands, all unharmed.

As the month drew to a close, Collie dreaded leaving. The Negritos and their jungle home felt safe to him in a way he'd never known. Everything made sense there. On the last day, Ja walked Collie out of the village to the main road that would lead him back to the squadron. Without a word, Ja motioned to the road ahead, indicating which way to go. Collie looked in the direction pointed out and nodded. When he looked back, he was surprised to see that Ja was already walking away.

“Goodbye, Ja,” Collie said. The little man never turned around.

Collie returned to the squadron at the end of the month, expecting everyone to be very pleased with his accomplishments. This was not the case. While there were a lot fewer monkeys left in the area, the attacks continued. The large monkey, that everyone now called Kong, was still wreaking havoc. The squadron doubled security at night, but every morning they would find at least one aircraft fruit bombed, defecated on, or both. One morning, after the C.O. inadvertently sat in a fresh pile of feces during a pre-flight, he came to the Avionics hut with a proposition.

“Sgt. Minko, this has to stop. We are becoming the laughing stock of the base. I want you and Collie to make this thing your top priority. I don't care if either of you fix another AVI gripe this deployment, as long as you catch that son-of-a-bitch.”

Minko looked over at Collie and then back to the commanding officer.

“Well sir, I sent PFC Sullivan to guard duty yesterday, and since we sent our other three AVI techs up to Okinawa to support those war games, that really doesn’t leave anyone else here to do the work,” Minko said. “Maintenance Control isn’t going to like that.”

“Leave Maintenance Control to me, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll get on this right away.”

“Good. Two weeks off plus a MAC flight home, when you get him,” the C.O. said.

“That would be great incredible sir,” Minko said. “Do you think we could check a few weapons out of the armory? It sure would make things easier.”

“No guns, Sgt. Minko,” the C.O. said. “The Base Commander is still up my ass for the last time. Your man caught the rest of them out there. Have him do the same thing here.”

“Yes sir,” Minko said.

“Very well. I suggest you start right away. If there’s any special gear you need, let me know.”

Minko and Collie nodded and the C.O. left the shop.

Minko turned to Collie and smiled.

“Well, you heard him,” Minko said. “Go get your voodoo-monkey-trapping-shit from the barracks and get back down here, before he makes the same deal with somebody else. You’re going to catch that fucker for me and get me the hell out of here, or you’ll sure wish you had.”

As Minko finished his sentence, he pointed both index fingers at Collie, thumbs to the ceiling, his body in a mock-gunslinger stance. He pretended to fire both pistols, blowing make-believe smoke from the finger-barrels of each.

“You get my drift?”

“Yeah, Sarge.”

An hour later, Collie returned and the two of them began to scout the portion of jungle closest to the flight line, looking for a place to set up surveillance. Collie, having learned that the best way to catch these creatures was to watch them from cover and then set up snares along their travel routes, was convinced that they could catch Kong if they could just figure out his routine.

Two hours of searching in the midday sun didn't turn up near as much evidence as Collie had hoped, however. He found a few places where the grasses were pushed apart, but there were no distinct trails leading away from the stands of gooseberry and wild banana trees. After the second hour, Minko's patience had run out.

“I'm done,” Minko said. “Scouting a damn monkey, it's total bullshit. We're going to set up over in that thicket, where we'll have a view of the fruit trees and the flight line. You can set up your little snares and shit wherever you want.”

Collie nodded and headed for the spot, surprised by the logic of Minko's plan and his apparent involvement. However, when he reached the thicket, the sergeant was gone. Looking out across the flight line he spotted the big man, walking back towards the AVI hut, leaving Collie to do all the work.

“Semper-fuck-your-buddy,” Collie said.

An hour-and-a-half later, Collie had the blind constructed. It was a decent setup, a bamboo lean-to with palm fronds woven in between the green stalks. The flooring consisted of bunches of grass covered by additional palm leaves. To conceal the enclosure, Collie hung a camouflaged ghillie blind, courtesy of the C.O.'s Recon Scout connection. Once it was finished, Collie ran to the squadron and grabbed two pairs of binoculars from Flight Equipment, two

canteens of water, and four MREs. His arms full, he walked past Maintenance Control on his way to blind. As he passed, the Quonset hut door opened and Sgt. Minko and the C.O. walked out into the afternoon sun, the two in mid-conversation.

“We’ve already set up a blind in an area where there’s been a lot of animal activity,” Minko said. “There’s my man now, just finishing up.”

Collie just nodded as he passed. Yeah, *we* are just amazing.

“Great work, Sergeant,” the C.O. said. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“You coming, Sarge?” Collie asked. “We wouldn’t want me catching Kong by myself.”

“Screw you, Dog. You got those snares set up yet?”

“I’m working on it. You’d think I’d have them finished with all that help you gave me building the blind. Just fucking the dog, I guess.”

“Keep it up, Collie, and you’ll have an accident out there in the dark. It would be a shame to lose such a *model* Marine.”

Two hours later the two men sat inches apart in the blind under threatening skies, scanning from jungle to flight line with binoculars, paying specific attention to the areas where Collie had set up six snares and a spike-less kill box. A steady rain followed and water began to leak through the make-shift roof in steady rivulets, causing each man to scramble for a poncho.

“Great job on that roof, Dog. The Negrito-boys taught you well.”

Ten minutes later, Minko’s patience ran out. Handing the C.O.’s NVGs over to Collie, he whipped back the ghillie netting and exited the blind.

“You stay here in your leaky teepee,” Minko said. “When you get that fucker, you better come find me right away. Try to screw me out of this deal and...”

“You’ll destroy me, kill me, eat me, some shit. Yeah, I got it.”

Collie watched as Minko wove his way back to the flight line. When he reached the tarmac, he stomped and rubbed the bottom of his spit-shined boots on the concrete's edge, cursing the mud aloud. Collie smiled, happy that the only sound now was the rain in the jungle.

This was his new routine. He spent hot days working on aircraft and humid nights sitting under the lean-to, waiting for a ghost.

Sgt. Minko seemed thrilled with the arrangement. Each afternoon he spent the last hour or so hanging out in the blind, maintaining the team-effort appearance. As night fell, however, Collie was ordered to relieve him. Minko stayed in the AVI hut for an hour, long enough for the officers to all leave. He'd then skulk out himself, and head to the gym. Each morning, Collie gave him a pass-down, which Minko then took, alone, to update the C.O.

By the end of the first week, Collie was a wreck. Averaging about four hours sleep, he decided to approach Minko and demand some help. It was Friday and flight ops wrapped up before lunch. Knowing his boss would leave soon too, he turned in his tools and headed toward the AVI hut. When he stepped inside, he was greeted by Minko and several of his work-out buddies from the flight line shop, camo tops removed, arms and necks bulging in a strained, unnatural way. There were four other Marines there too, similar in stature, from the neighboring Harrier squadron. They stood around a make-shift arena, Conex boxes pushed together to serve as the outer boundary for a five-foot by three-foot open area. A large brown rat, about a foot in length, and a scrawny yellow cat were in the square, staring at each other.

"Dog, check this shit out," Minko said. "These fuckers from Lawn Dart 231 bet us four cases of Red Horse that their scraggly-ass rat can take our cat."

The two animals circled one another, keeping their distance. Minko, evidently growing tired of waiting, grabbed a clear capacitor from the supply box and charged it using a large,

square flashlight battery with wires attached to each terminal. When the capacitor began to glow light red he pitched it toward the rat, creating a loud pop and sending sparks across its dirty brown body. Even more startled, the cat tried to jump out of the ring, but Minko caught it by the hind legs and pitched it back in before. The cat then ran at the rat, nipping its ear and then biting its stubby tail. Collie felt a jolt of happiness, thinking the cat might actually win, not knowing before that moment that he had a rooting interest. The cat went in too close and the rat sank its yellow teeth into the feline's small neck, biting repeatedly until dark blood ran over the matted fur. Collie jumped into the ring and tried to pull the rat away, but it was too late.

Minko shoved Collie hard from behind, causing him to flip over the Conex boxes, the bloody rat still writhing in his hand as he hit the deck. Collie rolled over on his back and tried to shake the rat, its teeth still gnawing into the webbing of his hand. Minko towered over him, nostrils flared and eyes closed to slits.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing? Drop the rat.”

He opened his hand and shook it, sending the greasy animal flying as its teeth tore loose.

“Don't you have somewhere to be?” Minko asked. “Get your gear and get the fuck out.”

Several minutes later, Collie sat beneath the bamboo lean-to smoking, waiting for Minko and the others to go. His hand trembled as he held the cigarette, half from being traumatized and half from the bizarre experience. The whole scene, the men all cheering, their eyes hazy and gone, the cat's death, it all played out again. After he finished his cigarette, he pulled gauze out of a small first aid kit and poured water over the wound, hoping it might help wash away whatever diseases the rat had likely given him.

A half-hour later, he watched as the men left the shop and climbed the hill to the taxi stand, where two cars were waiting, likely called from the phone in the AVI shop. The first taxi

sped away with half the group and Collie followed its path, down the hill, past the trash dumpsters and around the curve, out of sight. As he looked back toward the second taxi, he saw something, a dark blur darting behind one of the squadron's large, dilapidated trash containers. He slapped his forehead as realization set in. Kong was living in the dumpsters.

Collie loaded up his gear and went back to the AVI shop, relieved that the gladiator arena and all evidence of it were gone when he entered. In the back corner of the Quonset hut, he grabbed the larger of his two cages. It was made of wood braces and bamboo, built to blend in with the jungle environment. Propping it on one shoulder, Collie carried the cage up the hill toward the trash dump, whistling a loud rock tune as he approached. At the back of dumpster he found what he'd hoped, a rusted out hole in the corner, bits of trash and fruit on either side. He opened up the front door of the cage and sat down to work. Then, he fashioned two snares and laid them on the floor, just inside the open cage door. He secured one snare to the left side of the cage, and the other to the right. Once finished, he got up and pushed the open cage to the mouth of the dumpster hole, placing a large rock on top of the cage and several others behind it so Kong couldn't push the cage out of the way. Collie walked around to the front of the dumpster, making sure there weren't any other large holes on the way. With a rock in each hand, he slammed into the metal sides, hitting and kicking it. There was a loud bark, followed by a shriek to the rear of the big metal box. Collie smiled and darted back to the trap.

There was Kong, spitting and biting as he tried to climb over the wooden cage, both of his rear legs ensnared inside the front opening. When he saw Collie, he pulled even harder, hissing as he approached. Collie eased forward, blocking out images of what the animal might do to him if the snares broke free. He looked at his big black eyes and sharp fangs and shivered. He was no macaque, nothing native. That was obvious. Whatever he was, he seethed with rage and

Collie could tell that the snares on his back legs weren't going to hold him much longer. Collie grabbed the back of the cage and pushed as hard as I could, pinning the animal between it and the dumpster. Kong went ballistic, attacking the top of the enclosure, splintering the wood and snapping the bamboo wraps each time he brought his fists down.

Collie pushed harder, digging his heels in, trying to take away the animal's leverage. The added pressure caused the two upper horizontal supports to give way, buckling the top of the cage and sending Collie falling forward. Then, Kong was on him. Collie yelled as he felt claws ripping into his back and heard a high keening from above. He threw his left forearm forward, aiming for the beast's head with an elbow. Kong ducked and pivoted his head up at an impossible angle, catching Collie's entire upper arm in his mouth. His teeth tore through cloth and flesh. Collie screamed as blood gushed from his arm. He yanked back, making the pain much worse. In doing so, he realized his attacker's legs were still ensnared, making escape at least a small possibility should he break free. Kong bit down harder and Collie vomited directly into the animal's face. The obvious shock and burn of the stomach acid made Kong pull back, loosening his grip. Collie rolled off the top of the cage to his right, feeling Kong's grip give way a bit more as the arm twisted in his mouth. Collie's vision blurred as his right hand closed on the rock that he'd placed on top of the cage earlier. He bludgeoned Kong repeatedly, swinging the rock until he and the monkey lost consciousness.

When Collie came to, his left arm felt like it had been ripped from the shoulder socket. Kong was slumped over the cage, blood oozing from one ear, but still breathing. Collie grabbed the animal's snout and pried his teeth out of his arm. When he was free, he loosened his web belt, intent on putting his bloody arm in a tourniquet. While he struggled with his good arm, the

squadron van pulled up and his buddy Sully jumped out. Collie smiled up at his friend and then passed out again.

Collie spent most of the weekend in the infirmary, in a haze of pain-killer euphoria. Late Saturday afternoon, Sgt. Minko came by. He took one look at Collie and punched him in his injured arm.

“Fuck, Minko. What was that for?”

“Shut up. What did I tell you, Dog. If you find the bastard, come get me. Now everyone thinks you did all this shit by yourself, selfish prick.”

“What? You’re mad? I get the bastard, almost die in the process, win you a trip home to go kill the guy fucking your wife, and you’re pissed?”

Minko eyes widened and he grabbed Collie’s bandaged arm, squeezing it as hard as he could. Collie screamed as Minko’s other hand grabbed his throat.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

Two nurses entered the room, the first going straight for Sgt. Minko. She grabbed both of his huge hands and pulled them free, turning to the other nurse as she did so.

“Carla, call the M.P.s,” she said. She slammed a hip into Minko to get him away from the bed.

“No need, ma’am. I’m leaving. We were just playing. Weren’t we, Dog? Just playing. We’ll play more later, little buddy.”

Minko winked and backed through the door.

Against his own protestations, Collie was released the next day. Still sore and loopy from all the pain-killers, he caught a ride with the nurse who’d saved him the day before. After his best efforts to convince her otherwise, she dropped him off at his barracks and ordered him to go

lie down. It was early and several Marines were still at the squad bay, getting ready for the night's debauchery. Sully was there too, but acting strangely.

"What is it Sully? You don't even look happy to see me," Collie said.

"It's Minko," Sully said. "He and some of those 231 boys are down at the squadron."

"It's Sunday, what are they doing?" Collie said. But then he knew.

"Sully, what did you do with Kong after you took me to the hospital?"

"I put him in that cage and took him to the squadron."

"Oh shit. I don't want to hear anymore."

Sully leaned forward so only Collie could hear.

"I think they're torturing him," Sully said.

"I'm going down there," Collie said. "Will you come with me?"

Sully tried to talk Collie out of it. Said all the right things about the danger, Collie's injuries, Minko's insanity, all of it. In the end though, Sully helped his friend up the steps and hailed them a cab, sliding in beside him.

When they walked into the battery room at the back of the AVI shop, Collie realized how stupid it was to have come. The gang was all there, gathered around as before, in such a blood lust they didn't hear the door open. Minko was standing atop the Cobra battery locker, blood covering his khaki shorts and green skivvy T-shirt. Others were bloody as well, none of the blood their own. In front of them was Kong, such as he was. He listed to one side, his right arm hanging limp, his torso wet with blood. Opposite him stood a three-foot tall Monitor lizard, hissing and dragging a nearly-severed tail, blood dripping from its jaws and punctured back. Collie lunged forward and yelled.

"Stop. Stop."

He never reached Kong. Minko jumped down and punched him several feet away from the action, sending the wounded man sprawling to the floor. Minko laughed and yanked Collie back to his feet, only to slam him back again like paper doll, knocking the breath out of him.

“No gunny and no nurses to save you this time, Dog,” Minko said. He gut-punched Collie several times.

Sully grabbed Minko from behind but was smacked in the back of the head by one of the Harrier guys and sent to his knees. The others started cheering as the lizard attacked Kong again, burying its head into an open chest wound and putting him on his back. The big primate stopped resisting as the lizard dug its front claws in to the hairy mess that was his stomach.

Collie drove a knee into Minko’s groin.

He then tried once again to get to Kong, but Minko, from a half-squat, spun Collie around and punched him in the face, knocking him out.

When Collie came to, everyone was gone. All that remained was his pain and Kong, slumped over in the cage. The floor was wet, indicating that everything, including Kong, had been hosed off before they all left. Incredibly, he could still see Kong’s chest moving slowly. Collie had to end it. He stumbled to the utility cabinet and started to grab an e-tool propped in one corner, but the thought of hitting the animal with the small shovel was too much for him. Instead, he got a long stretch of eight-gauge wire and started connecting Huey and Cobra batteries in series, stripping away wire insulation as he went. It was slow work with only one good arm, but he managed to hook up thirty of them before he started to lose feeling in the tips of his fingers. Then, he snaked the two, bare leads over to Kong’s cage. Just as Collie gave the animal a fatal jolt, Minko walked back in.

“What the fuck are you doing, Collie?”

He shoved the wounded man away with both hands, but it was done. Kong lay motionless.

Collie sat down, his head in his hands.

Minko just stood there, looking somewhat mesmerized by Kong's corpse. After several minutes he spoke.

"Look at that, Collie. That fucker was hung like a horse," he said, pointing to a very visible erection.

"That's just because I juiced him. You're fucking sick, Minko."

He turned towards Collie then, with a funny look on his face. Collie went to grab the wire but Minko stopped him.

"Hey man, I'll take care of this," Minko said. "You're beat to shit. You need rest. Why don't you call a cab and go back to the barracks." The big man's voice was low, even sweet, as he talked to Collie but stared at Kong.

"Go, Collie. You're hurt. Go back to the barracks. Everything will be fine here."

Collie looked down at Kong and back at Minko and nodded, not sure what to make of it. He then stumbled out of the shop and lumbered up the hill, forgetting to call a cab. After waiting half an hour, he finally realized his error and started limping back down the hill.

When Collie re-entered the shop, Sgt. Minko was sitting beside the cage, nude. Collie circled the body and jumped when he saw the big blue face and dead eyes. In Minko's mouth, was the negative battery lead. His left hand lay at his side, in a pool of water. His right hand held his erect penis, which was wrapped with the positive battery wire. The rumors were just that, it seemed, as Minko's member looked to be of average size. Maybe the dancer was right after all, *walang kaya*, a lost connection.

Collie opened the cage and pulled Kong's body out. With some effort, he managed to hoist the bloody animal over his shoulder and then grab the entrenching tool. Avoiding the water, he staggered out of the shop and carried Kong into the jungle.

Embodiment

Julie was dead. Aaron knew that now. His agent and what few friends still came by told him he was wrong to think so. They said there was “always hope,” that he must “keep the faith.” But he knew better. Faith was bullshit, and hope had been reduced to a hand jammed into an icy cooler, fishing for just one more cold one. He’d known Julie most his adult life, leaving her only three times since they’d met: his last two Air Force deployments, spent crewing C-17 flights to and from Iraq almost ten years ago, bringing home the dead, and the month-long gallery tour Morty forced him to attend, cut short by her disappearance. That was a year ago, about twelve months longer than she’d ever stay gone.

He left her on a Saturday, in May. She drove him from Hope to the Little Rock airport in their Cherokee. Everything was green. The air smelled of pine needles and honeysuckle as they skirted the Ouachita National Forest. She was wearing a white top, the one he could almost see through. The one she knew he liked. Her dark skin almost glowed in the sunlight. The open windows twirled her wavy, blonde hair into her mouth as she smiled.

“I’m so excited for you, Pablo,” she said.

“I told you not to call me that, Jules. I’ve sold a whopping ten paintings,” Aaron said.

“I don’t care. Morty’s right. It’s just the beginning. Soon everyone will see how incredible you are.”

He leaned across and kissed her, sliding a hand inside her shirt, causing the jeep to shudder as it strayed onto the gravel shoulder. She slapped his arm and yanked the wheel, a naughty smile passing between them.

He stretched his tattooed arms and closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the Arkansas sun on his shaved head. He'd come a long way from sketching birds in the belly of the Loadmaster, with nothing but corpses for company. Those months away from Julie were some of the darkest in Aaron's life. He spent each week confined to a compound in Bahrain, drinking himself stupid, waiting for dead passengers. The drawing, and then the painting, changed everything. Depression and suicidal thoughts were leeched away once he put pencil to paper. Images that once haunted him became the lifeblood of creation. When he finally came home to Julie for good, he had everything.

They said their goodbyes at passenger drop-off, and Aaron grabbed his bags. As jet engines roared above them, he blurted the secret he'd wanted to tell her the whole drive.

"I left you a present. It's beside my desk, under a sheet. It's a little different than my usual stuff. I hope you like it."

"You didn't. My portrait, finally?" Julie asked. She grinned and tipped her shades down, hazel eyes sparkling.

"Well, sort of, it's definitely you, or how I see you sometimes. Give me a few hours to get settled in Chicago and give me a call. I'll tell you about it."

But the call never came.

The first day, Aaron tried to ignore it, deciding Julie was sidetracked or, more likely, had misplaced her phone. She'd call him soon, apologetic and full of details about how she left her cell at a coffee shop in Prescott, or a truck stop in Arkadelphia on the way home. They would laugh, make blonde jokes and talk about the painting. He was anxious to see what her initial reaction was to a smiling Julie, staring back at a reflection of her younger self, a little girl with

wild hair and soulful eyes, the first of what he'd planned to call his Inner Child Series. Until then, he was all nerves.

Morty had him hopping. By day, Aaron attended shoulder-rubbing events at local galleries. By night, they treated wealthy art patrons to extravagant dinners in Lincoln Park. He drank too much and lied to blue hairs about being moved by the greats, his head nodding as Morty and a rich widow compared his *Yellow Night* to early Pollock or De Kooning. He wondered what they would think if he told them he'd painted it in the dark, after a mind-blowing hour of sex with Julie, both of them tweaked-out on ecstasy. He couldn't even control his hand or see what colors he was using. All he knew was that he was happy and wanted to get the feeling down on paper. He smiled at the thought of Julie's sweaty, naked body curled around him as he worked. The old woman smiled back, each blushing in turn. At the end of the night, she bought the painting, passing Morty the evening's tab and a check for ten grand. She stroked Aaron's face then excused herself, bidding them both a good evening. Morty ordered champagne and vodka tonics. He belched then raised his glass.

"To the world's next great artist," Morty said.

"To mental ejaculation," Aaron replied.

The rest of the tour was a blur of worry and self-promotion. When he wasn't shaking hands and feigning knowledge of isms, Aaron was texting and leaving Julie voicemails. Nothing was returned. The longer the silence, the more desperate and dark his thoughts became. Morty harangued him. The rotund man, with eyes too big for his face, was forever prodding.

"Will you fucking forget Julie and focus? Open your eyes, man. This is your big shot. At least Julie understands that."

Aaron could see the "I" behind all his "you's" though. Morty only cared about Morty.

The day they flew to New York, Aaron called Julie's mother and sister. Neither had heard from her. Neither was concerned. They said they weren't surprised.

"She's been running from responsibility her whole life," her mother said.

Each woman finished the conversation the way they always did, with a lecture on how the two of them needed to "stop the nonsense" and get real jobs so they could buy a house and have some children. Julie would laugh at them if she'd heard this, then later she'd tear up at how no one in her family ever cared enough to know her. It was always the same story. Here she was missing and they were still preaching their American dream, one that didn't include mediocre painters and contract nature photographers.

To Aaron, Julie's family and their entitled attitudes had always been a joke. When he and Julie started dating in ninth grade, her father had been dead of sclerosis for five years. He was a bitter drunk with an eighth grade education. Before moving to Arkansas to get help from the family once he could no longer work, he'd been a Kentucky coal miner. Julie's mother once told her daughters that if whiskey hadn't taken him, the black lung would have.

Julie's mother was little better. She dropped out of school at age fourteen and apparently had no interest in ever going back. Once, during an argument, Julie told her that if she got her GED, she could get a better job and stop blaming the world for all the stuff she didn't have. Her mother punched her in the throat and locked her out of the house for three days. Aaron remembered finding Julie that afternoon, wandering barefoot down a black top road several miles from her house. She was in nothing but panties and a night shirt, the ragged cloth she'd been washing dishes with when the fight broke out that morning still in her hand.

When Julie graduated with honors a few years later, her mother was "too sick" to attend. Yet she and her equally-ignorant and lazy younger daughter acted as if they were royalty, and

Julie the family embarrassment. The image of her, standing on stage among the other top graduates, with golden ropes and wet eyes made him yearn for her all the more.

A week later, he left Morty and a room full of sparkles and bowties in a small gallery outside Boston. Morty was selling hard to a suntanned couple, both with blonde hair and lifted faces. They stood drinking Cristal and using big words to describe a blurry flock of penguins with massive feathered wings, cruising in a late afternoon sky, the frozen shoreline below them littered with naked birds of all varieties.

Aaron stood in the corner, waiting for Julie's voicemail to pick up. When an automated voice informed him the voicemail box was full, he felt cold all over. Morty motioned for him. He felt the room close in as he stepped forward.

"This is the man himself. Say hello, Aaron," Morty said.

"Hello."

"We wondered if you could tell us about this one," the woman said.

"Yes, what's it called?" the man asked.

Aaron went blank. All he could see was Julie's face, alone in the dark.

"It's *Bird Dreams*, isn't that right, Aaron?" Morty said.

Aaron remembered Julie standing in front of the painting the day he finished it, mimicking flight with her arms.

"Penguins can't fly, Aaron," she'd said.

Aaron sat in what was once their bedroom, the mattress and box springs leaning against the front wall, blocking the only window. All around him were canvases, most showing pale faces emerging from darkness. In many, the eyes were gone. In others, the eyes and mouths were

open wide, in various states of terror or sadness. The early paintings were Julie's face, peering at him through fog, out of broken windows, or from the bottom of deep holes. The paintings devolved from there, blending faces and darkness together in abstract, like smoke trapped behind tinted glass.

His cell phone buzzed, and he snatched it from the beer can and pizza box-laden floor. Morty, again. He sent the call to voicemail and dropped the phone back into the rubble. As he lit a cigarette, he heard boards creak at the front of the house.

"Aaron, I know you're in here," Morty said.

Aaron sighed and opened another beer.

"You leave me in Boston. You won't answer my calls for months. What the fuck?"

No mention of Julie, Aaron gritted his teeth and continued to fill the canvas with black.

"So that's it? No 'thanks for making me almost a hundred grand in six months, Morty.' No 'thanks for getting me a show in New York, which I fucking no-showed for, Morty.' No..."

Morty went silent. Aaron looked back, hoping he'd left. Instead he saw a man entranced. Morty staggered forward, crunching aluminum as he went. He stopped at the first painting and picked it up.

"Is this her?"

Julie stood naked in a prison cell, bars intersecting her body.

"Yes."

"And the others?" Morty asked.

"All her."

"Aaron, these are incredible. Better than anything I've ever seen. It's like I can't look away."

Morty took out his phone and snapped pictures.

“Can I take one with me?”

“Take them all.”

The police never came up with anything. In fact, they focused their first month trying to find evidence linking Aaron to the disappearance. The numerous cell phone and text messages coupled with the travel receipts and details Morty supplied eventually convinced them. When Aaron left Morty mid-tour and came home, he found everything was just the way he left it. The door was unlocked, and Julie’s keys, purse, and cell phone sat on the table. None of the messages had been checked, no money was gone, and the Cherokee was parked outside. The only thing missing was her and the painting.

He’d tried to paint a new version of the little girl in the tattered dress and sad eyes looking up at her happy adult self, but couldn’t seem to get it right. A police officer came by and took pictures of his best attempt for the file. After that, Aaron stopped trying. From mid-May until late November, he walked the roads looking for her. He went door to door, from Texarkana to Prescott, showing her pictures to teenagers, farmers, and truckers. He’d taken them a week before she’d vanished, while she was feeding the ducks at Lake Millwood. He’d swiped her camera and rattled off ten shots before she noticed. The last ones were blurry, taken on a backward run as she closed in on him. Her smile huge, her nose upturned and distorted. He liked those best.

No one had seen her.

As the months passed, he grew more and more despondent. December was an alcohol haze. He found some old pain pills from his Air Force days and started chewing them, too. For

six weeks he did nothing but imbibe, only moving from his cracked, pleather couch to piss, make a beer run or shove money at a delivery boy. New Year's Eve, he remembered the .38 the cops had confiscated then returned during their investigation, the one he'd gotten Julie for protection prior to his last deployment. He went looking for it.

He found, instead, an old box of his sketches: birds, squirrels, clouds, and nudes of Julie. He picked up a stubby, charcoal pencil and enlarged her hips, remembering he'd always made her skinnier than she was, expressing mock surprise and disagreement when she called him on it. He finished and blew the excess graphite off the thin paper, admiring the improvements. Deciding a fresh page would do her more justice, he grabbed his tablet. An hour later she'd come to life in front of him, nowhere near the real Julie with her real hips and devilish grin, but closer. The room came into focus for the first time in months. Aaron stretched and pulled at his growing beard. If a pencil made him feel this good, what would a brush across canvas do for him? Two paintings later, he remembered.

The good feelings didn't last, however. He lost the ability to paint her in a flattering light, her body on the page going cold and dark like his memories. Soon, all he could see was her specter. He chased it through his pallet until it was nothing but a change in light across a darkened landscape.

Buzzing bees attacked him, yanking him from sleep, his arms thrashing. His phone rattled across the coffee table. He answered without looking.

"Aaron, I was right. The new paintings are gold. We're going to be rich," Morty said.

"Speak slowly, I don't understand what you're telling me," Aaron said.

“I showed the jail painting to a contact of mine and texted the picture to some of the buyers and galleries from the tour. It started a bidding war, off a fucking picture. So I sent out the other paintings of Cindy too.”

“Julie. Her name is Julie, Mort.

“Sorry, Aaron. I’m just excited.”

“Bidding war?” Aaron said. “That doesn’t make sense. Wait, you told them about her disappearance, didn’t you?” His head was pounding now, anger feeding his raging hangover.

“It did come up, but that’s not why.”

“Even her, Morty? You’d even sell her?”

“No, Aaron, listen.”

Aaron hung up and slumped back onto the couch.

How could he have let Mort walk in and take Julie away from him all over again? He stumbled to the back bedroom and pulled the one remaining painting he had of Julie from the closet. It was the copy he’d made for the police. As he stared at it, he felt a wave of nostalgia. Although it was faint, there was connection. For the first time in almost a year, he remembered her smell. Like the sketches, he started to work on her, smoothing out lines here, adding depth and color there. The more he worked the more he remembered her. When Morty came by four hours later, full of fake grief, Aaron didn’t hear him come in.

To prove he wasn’t trying to exploit Julie’s memory, Mort told Aaron he would sell only the more recent paintings, where Julie’s face wasn’t identifiable. Aaron, still entranced by his earlier session with the painting he’d decided to call “Julie Returns,” just nodded, eager to be alone with her again. On his way out, Mort handed Aaron a check for twenty-five thousand dollars.

“It’s an advance. That Chicago widow that bought *Yellow Night* won the bidding. She wired seventy-five thousand to me this morning. I’m just waiting for it to post.”

Morty stood in the doorway, smiling his veneer smile, watching Aaron stare at the check.

“Seventy-five grand?”

Morty let out a cackle and slapped his meaty thigh.

“Yep, said it spoke to her, like your other one, but louder. These arties, God love them. So show old Morty a little love, will ya? I’m about to make you a wealthy man.”

A few days later, Aaron caught a flight to Chicago. He arranged a meeting with the rich widow, Ms. Canton, to discuss paintings that spoke. When the taxi pulled into the drive, the driver had to pull around a roped-in area directly in front of the house. The rope turned out to be police tape and Aaron could see a boarded-up window on the second floor, above a yellow outline below. He walked around the tape and rang the doorbell. An elderly man in a black suit greeted him with a frown.

“I’m Aaron Barsh. Ms. Canton is expecting me.”

“I’m afraid Ms. Canton has passed.”

“Passed? She died?”

“Yes. Sometime last night.”

“Did she?” Aaron began. He was cut off as the door closed, leaving him outside staring at a pile of dark glass and injured shrubbery. He rang the bell again, but the man didn’t answer. He banged on the door, realizing the painting of Julie was somewhere inside. There was still no answer. He jiggled the door handle, but it was locked. He got back in the cab and asked the driver to go back to the airport, a heaviness settling into him.

It spoke to her.

At the airport, he got on the Chicago Tribune website. There was nothing about Ms. Canton's death. If it was something strange or unnatural, it would be news. Wouldn't it?

He got back to his little house at sundown. Morty sat on the warped steps, surrounded by cigar smoke, a huge smile on his fat face.

"A million dollars, that's what they're worth on the open market."

"What?"

"The Julie paintings, I had them appraised. They're worth about a million at auction."

"What? I told you I didn't want to sell them. What about the other ones?"

"Not near as much interest, too dark, too abstract. I was only able to sell one of them, the one with the face in all the smoke, where you can almost make her out."

"I'm sorry, Mort, but you can't sell them."

"Are you crazy? I'm not letting you walk out on a million dollar payday."

"You don't get it. There's something wrong with them. The ones with her, they have to stay with me."

"What's wrong with them?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it. But the old lady that bought the first one is dead."

"Dead? How?"

"They wouldn't tell me, just that she passed."

"She was old. What's that got to do with your paintings?"

"I can't...Listen, just bring them back. Okay?"

Morty walked to a black Mercedes parked at the curb.

“You look tired,” Morty said. “Tell you what, come to my office tomorrow and we’ll talk about this. Remember, Julie wanted this for you. A million dollars, Aaron. You could build a damn shrine to her with money like that.”

The car sank as Morty plopped in behind the wheel. He gave a salute and pulled away.

As soon as Morty left, Aaron started drinking. He sat staring at the replica Julie painting, his mind returning to the pile of dark glass on Ms. Canton’s lawn. Around midnight he curled up on the couch and tried again to remember Julie’s face in the Jeep, the last time he saw her.

The next morning, Aaron was hung over and more convinced than ever that he shouldn’t sell the paintings. He dialed Mort’s cell and hung up on his voicemail three times. Maybe it was too early to demand things.

Aaron started some coffee and then set up a canvas and easel while it brewed. The house was empty without all his paintings, so he pulled out several of Julie’s framed wildlife photos and propped them against the walls. By the time he was sipping dark roast from a cracked USA mug, he was surrounded by close-ups of red-tailed hawks, roadrunners, buzzards, and a family of ducks swimming in an abandoned swimming pool. All that was missing was Julie. He had to try again to do her memory justice, to create something real, not a dark replica.

By lunchtime he’d created and destroyed three canvases, the last one still smoldering in the brick fireplace when his cell phone buzzed. It was Mort.

“Hey, Aaron, listen.”

“I need the paintings back, Mort. Today.”

“You were supposed to come by my office to talk.”

“I’m sorry, I started painting and lost track of time.”

“You’re painting again?” Mort asked.

Aaron could tell he was interested, excited even. He realized that was his play. “Yes. But I need my paintings, for inspiration.”

“Inspiration, huh?”

“Yes,” Aaron said. “I have to get her right, Mort. It’s important. And when I do, I don’t think I’ll care about the others so much. Then, you can sell them.” As he finished his thought, even he wasn’t sure if it was a lie or not.

“Promise me, Aaron.”

“I promise.”

“I’ll have them back this afternoon.”

Mort and several of his lackeys showed up around six and began unloading paintings as big thunderheads formed to the west. By the time the last portrait was safely in the house, the rumbling thunder was almost constant as lightning made jagged patterns in the sky.

“That’s the last of them,” Mort said. “I didn’t see anything new in there. You better not be lying to me.”

“They were really bad, so I burned them,” Aaron said.

“Well don’t burn anymore,” Mort said. “Let me be the judge of what’s good or bad.”

“You got it.”

When Aaron went back inside, the house was full of his work. Versions of Julie’s face were everywhere. Her shadowed face was on the kitchen counters, standing against the living room and bedroom walls, sometimes four or five deep, several were even standing up in the bathtub. He sat down on the little stool in the center of the room and shook his head.

“So many.”

As the storm pounded his little frame house, Aaron drank and painted, painted and drank. He was a wild man, haunted by things he couldn't see. The paintings and the photographs all seemed to stare at him, spurring him on. He went through canvas after canvas, his hands unsteady, his eyes red and wet. The fireplace blazed all night.

He awoke to loud knocking. In a drunken haze, Aaron pulled the door open to find an emaciated man standing on the wet steps, holding something large beneath a patchwork quilt. Aaron squinted into the darkness, trying to make some sense of what he was seeing.

“You Aaron Barsh?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

The man stepped forward and removed the quilt, revealing the original Julie painting.

“Here,” the man said. “It’s yours. I’m keeping the quilt, though. It was my wife’s favorite.”

There she was, Julie, after all this time. Her smile was so bright, devoid of shadow. He almost fell to his knees in front of her. Aaron stared at his creation as the little man hobbled down the stairs, clutching the wooden railing.

“Wait. Where did you get this?”

“My wife found it about a year ago, at the Milwood Lake. It was just lying there by the water, like someone had thrown it away. It was the day she was diagnosed. She thought it was some sort of sign she was going to make it, that the doctors were all wrong. I guess it was because of the resemblance. She was right in that. The girl in the painting looks just like our Nora, gone with God some forty years ago. Pneumonia. I swear she could have sat for you. The older one resembled Lilly too.”

“Did you see a woman there, at the lake?”

Aaron's face burned and his whole body tingled. He waited, clutching the sides of the canvas with shaking hands.

"Mister, I'm sorry, but there wasn't anyone else there."

The old man put the quilt over his shoulders and walked toward a white pickup parked up the street.

"How'd you know it was mine?" Aaron asked.

The man's shoulders drooped even further and he gave a big sigh. He turned around with tears in his eyes. "We read about you and your lady in the paper awhile back. I asked Lilly to call the police and tell them, but she knew she'd have to give her up. The cancer was all over her then, but she refused anymore treatment. All she did was sit in her room, stare at your painting and tell me all the things we were going to do once she was better. She'd always been a dreamer. Once she was gone, I knew I had to bring it back. I can't stand to look at it anymore."

"I'm really sorry," Aaron said.

"Me too, for both of us," the man said. "For what it's worth, your painting meant the world to her. It gave her hope."

Aaron sat on the porch with Julie long after the man left. At sunrise, he turned the painting around, so it could catch the light. Julie, the child and the woman, glowed once again. Above him, a line of geese flew along the horizon, stretched out in a wide V.

"Penguins can't fly, Aaron."

"No, Jules, but the can dream."

Vita

Larry Wormington was born the last of six children, in Linden, Texas. As his siblings were a good deal older than he, Larry occupied his early years devising simple ways to amuse himself. The cans he collected weren't cans, they were soldiers, ready for battle. The various stray dogs that befriended him, weren't mongrels, they were trusted companions, there for him on his many adventures not for the scavenged treats in his pocket, but out of an unwavering loyalty. In his innocence, he found wonder in the mundane. A world that gave him *Star Wars* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* colored his mind with epic possibilities. In later years, socioeconomics and base humanity revealed themselves via familial destruction and military service. It was during these times, when he needed it the most, that wonder abandoned him. Little did he know that those dark days were all potential energy, the fuel he would draw from to find awe once again. And now he writes.