

No Brass, No Ammo: a novel

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For Nancy, always

“Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.”
— *Mark Twain, The Mysterious Stranger*

King of the Basement

We were the Army's disposable people, the soldiers (one each) to be discarded after the proper paperwork had been filled out by bored spec-fours, stamped by sergeants, and signed by an officer who was just high-ranking enough to make it official.

We were the malcontents, the miscreants, the broken, the failed-to-adapt. We were stowed in a barracks basement and given only enough work to feel completely useless. We buffed floors, replaced light bulbs, polished door knobs.

We were the dregs of the Cold War Army, and I was their leader.

The summer of 1990 was supposed to be the beginning of a new era—Pax Americana. We were America the Triumphant, America the Final Superpower. Decades of peace and plenty lay ahead of us. The peace dividend! We'd defeated the Evil Empire. Thank you, brave soldiers of the United States Army for standing on the bulwarks of freedom! And now... You're fired!

#

The First Sergeant gave me a bit of advice when he put me in charge of Building Maintenance and Services (a.k.a. BMS) down in the musty basement of Building 406, Fort Myer, Virginia: "Don't get attached to these broke-dick soldiers. They're like a basket full of puppies with a big 'Take One, They're Free' sign on the side. Even the ugliest one is going to be gone soon enough."

#

The First Sergeant called me up to his office on the first floor. I climbed the stairs from my basement kingdom, each step thick with decades of paint, and trudged down the command corridor, my footsteps echoing off cinderblock walls, painted a minty green, and brown floor tiles coated in industrial wax and buffed to a high, swirly sheen. One of the fluorescent tubes buzzed and

flickered. I made a mental note to have SP4 Pepper, or one of my other reliable non-shammers, replace it.

I walked into the command suite, smiled at the secretary, a GS-05 civilian named Doreen. She said, “Top is waiting on you,” with a cheerful tone that had the slightest angry edge to it—like she was waiting for someone, *anyone*, to argue with her over the most minor point.

“Thank you, ma’am!” I chirped. Good rule for a soldier: Do not fuck with the CO’s secretary. She will take you down.

I rapped my index knuckle on Top’s door, which was open. “First Sergeant,” I said. “Permission to enter and speak.”

“Come in, come in,” Top said, waving, his mouth formed into a version of a smile. He kept his head shaved down to stubble. His BDU’s—the baggy Army tree suit that we all wore—were so crusted over in starch that they could have stood on their own in the corner if he’d propped them up there. On his right sleeve was a prune with a lightning bolt in it. On his left was the patch we all wore, a Pentagon with the national eagle in the middle of it. Officially, we were Headquarters Company, United States Army. Unofficially, we were the innkeepers for all the enlisted troops who worked in the Pentagon. On his chest, he wore jump wings with a star on top, and a combat infantry badge, too. His feet were under his immaculate desk. Atop the desk were two bins placed strategically: 1SG IN (the one on my right), and 1SG OUT (left). 1SG OUT was stacked high with thickly stuffed folders. 1SG IN had one folder, marked, “LISH, ROY, PFC (E-3) REGULAR ARMY.” “Close the door.”

I closed the door, but not before I received a sympathetic glance from Doreen, who quickly looked down at her own immaculate desk and tsk-tsked, shaking her head dramatically. “Oh, Lord,” I think she said. “Mercy.” The door clunked shut.

“Cop a squat, sergeant,” Top said, nodding at one of the chairs facing his desk.

I sat down at the position of attention, bolt upright with my damp palms flat against my knees. I waited for Top to say something, but he only stared over at me expectantly, like I'd called this meeting and not him.

Finally, perhaps a very long minute later, he broke his silence. "There is not one goddamned thing wrong with marrying a fucking foreigner," Top said, his face fixed in determinedly serious expression. His clean-motor-oil eyes locked on mine in an unnerving fashion. "Not a goddamned thing. You get me?"

"Yes, First Sergeant," I said.

"Relax, will you?" he went. "You're freaking me out a little." He un-eye-locked and returned to his approximate smile.

"Top—"

"Oh, now it's 'Top' is it?" Back to serious.

"I mean—"

He laughed. "Just fucking with you! Goddamn! This ain't the first time a soldier went AWOL. Won't be the last. I give you a bunch of dicked-up soldiers to try to turn around, and I figure if one or two actually make it through their first enlistment without getting into more trouble or dropping fucking dead, you and me will be fine," Top said. "Jesus, you're one nervous-in-service soldier!"

One question you don't want to ask about leadership is "Is this guy out of his mind?" The answer to that question is not optimal for continued mental and career health.

The air seemed more crisp and clean inside Top's office. The window looked out at the same courtyard that my quarters looked down on. He turned and pulled the blinds shut.

"I don't know where Lish is," I said. My palms were sweating through my BDU trousers. Baggy fucking tree suit. I thought that in garrison, I'd be allowed to wear my Class B's, a short-sleeved polyester shirt and green trousers. I rubbed my hands dry a bit on my knees.

#

The missing soldier in question, PFC Roy Lish, was a horn dog and a sham artist of the highest order. He was laziness personified. He was born to work hard not to work at all. I was relieved, momentarily, when he'd run off two days prior. After he didn't show up for PT formation, and subsequently first formation, and after I'd checked with sick call at the Rader Clinic (his usual destination), I drove my rust-decayed Ford Pinto over to his apartment, off post, and knocked on the door. His wife, a blonde Polish woman with an inscrutable accent, said *something-something-something* in an agitated manner indicating that Lish wasn't there and that she was probably upset by that. I nodded and left, and reported it all to leadership, possibly with a "this is what he gets for hooking up with some fucking commie" lilt to my voice. Detente and Glasnost be damned.

"Have I ever told you about my first wife? How I met her?" Top asked. He laced his hands behind his head, and a genuine-seeming smile began to perpetrate itself on his sinewy mug.

"No, Top," I said, sensing that I was about to be treated to yet another Army story. I'd heard hundreds since I was a youth, from my father, the Colonel, from my father's friends, from my ROTC instructors in college, and from my fellow soldiers during the past five years of my enlistment.

"Ah, she was the prettiest little thing I ever seen," Top said. He licked his teeth and peered over my left shoulder, dreamily, a hint of a smile coming across. "During Team Spirit 1968, I was a PFC, just like Lish is now. Well, not *just like*. I was airborne. I took pride in being a soldier. I wasn't a motherfucking shammer. You ever been on Team Spirit?" Team Spirit was the big annual Korea exercise.

"No, Top," I said. "Two Reforgers." Reforger, Return of Forces to Germany, was the big annual NATO exercise.

"Right, right," he said. "You were a Fulda Gap soldier."

#

For my sins, the Army sent me to the Fulda Gap for two years, the crossroad between East and West Germany. The Soviet invasion narrative sold to all U.S. Army Europe soldiers during the Cold War envisioned a massive tank battle in the spot where I spent two interminable years. I spent much of that time standing on a wooden tower erected in the middle of a tiny camp. The tower was slightly higher than our twelve-foot-high storm fence. The fence itself was covered over in camouflage tarp. I manned a pair of binoculars during the day and a starlight scope at night. The camp itself—the eastern fence was three feet from East Germany—was big enough for a small barracks of sleeping quarters, two Armored Personnel Carriers, the observation tower, and a basketball hoop with a half-court of crumbling concrete—the whole shebang about fifty-feet square with a squadron of armored cavalry nestled on the inside. Up on the tower, what I saw before me were waist-high poles, white with a red top that demarcated East Germany from West Germany, three feet away from our fence line. I saw Federal Republic border guards and Democratic Republic border guards plodding along on either side of the little poles, walking in pairs past each other, sometimes shoulder-to-shoulder. In the distance, through a polluted haze, I saw a Potemkin village that evinced no signs of life. It was about a kilometer to the east. On our side (y’know: Freedom’s side), I saw little wooden crosses where East Germans running for freedom had died. But what did I fixate on? Oh, well, the object of my fixation through the long months and years was an expensive-looking camera on a wooden tripod just across the border from us, pointed directly at me. I took this photography personally, though the camera was rarely manned. *Take my picture, will you, you goddamned commies!* On my last duty day, my two years up, standing watch on our wooden tower, I brought along a Zebco rod and reel that I’d bought at the PX specifically for the purpose of theft. I fashioned a lasso out of fishing line, and after three tries I managed to drop a loop around the camera, tripod and all, and reeled it in like a Northern pike. I had no use for the tripod, so I unscrewed the camera from it and whipped the tripod back over the fence. There was part of me that thought: *Hey, I’m creating an international incident! Maybe this will get me kicked out of the Army.* But there were no immediate

repercussions. We were always up there in pairs and I'd promised the newbie PFC next to me that I'd make sure that his ass would get kicked every day if he ratted me out. Understand: I don't like threatening fellow soldiers. In most instances I am an Ishmael, but when it came to that camera, I'd become an Ahab. By that time I was an SP4-P (the "P" standing for "Promotable"), meaning that I was on the verge of becoming a sergeant. In my MOS, 19D (pronounced *Nineteen-Delta*), that promotion was almost unavoidable. In order to become an E-5, the required promotion points were 450. This was out of a possible 1,000. A perfect PT test score netted me 300 promotion points. My three-and-a-half years of college netted me another 100. Easy-as-shit correspondence courses netted me yet another 100. So I was already over the top. Then there were the handfuls of points from the promotion board, Primary Leadership Development School (a.k.a. PLDC), etc. I could have gone to the promotion board, belched heartily and nothing more, and still would have been promoted. One of the soldiers I served with at the border, SP4 Erickson, would never make sergeant. He was a 31C (pronounced *Thirty-One Charlie*), a radio operator, and their points were set at 999. It was impossible to accumulate that many points. The Army knew that. There were too many E-5's in his field for him to move up. "Basically," he said to me one time, as we stood gazing through a pair of starlight scopes at the glowing-green Potemkin village across the *Deutschland nacht*, "I'd have to blow up a school bus filled with E-5 31-Chucks to have even a remote chance of getting my stripes. Don't think I haven't thought about it, too. A lot."

#

"Yes, Top," I said. "Fulda Gap."

#

After Germany, I'd spent two years at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, wearing a Soviet uniform, riding a motorcycle, popping wheelies, and getting "shot" at by National Guardsmen, poppity-pop, with blanks and MILES gear (a.k.a, the "Multiple Integrated Laser

Engagement System,” the Army’s version of laser tag), before receiving my inexplicable orders to Fort Myer, adjacent to the Arlington National Cemetery, across the Potomac from Washington, D.C.

Fort Myer is also a short walk from the Pentagon, where my father somehow smuggled in a loaded M1911 pistol and shot himself. He performed this final act in his office in the E-Ring. The office, I hear, has a modest bronze plaque on the outside declaring it the COLONEL HENRY J. BEAN, SR., UNITED STATES ARMY, MEMORIAL OFFICE SPACE. My father worked for the Assistant Undersecretary of Defense for Logistics and Manpower. The Colonel did a good job of killing himself, aiming the pistol up through the roof of his mouth. He was always a thorough man. The well-placed shot ejected his brain matter in great globs into the acoustic ceiling tiles above his immaculate desk. How do I know this? Let’s say that friends of the Colonel did not take well to my flunking out of college, and sullying his name with my failure. So they sent me copies of the crime scene photos anonymously, accompanied by a typed note implying that with a loser son like me, no wonder he killed himself.

I don’t think the Colonel ever loved anyone, but he was a dutiful creature. His inbox was empty. His outbox was filled with all of his outstanding projects, signed, countersigned, stamped, coded, etc. He’d thoughtfully covered them over in plastic.

He left behind a note, rolled in his typewriter—as his handwriting tended to be less-than-immaculate. The Army chaplain who came to my dorm room handed it to me. It wasn’t the actual note, it was a photograph of it.

My boy Hank,

Pop quiz, Tiger. If I'm not digging being alive, and you insist I must remain alive so that you can feel good, who is being the selfish one? Conventional wisdom says that I'm being selfish by doing myself in (that is, if I can drink enough of this shoe polish remover to overcome my Catholicism and pick up my sidearm here and aim it properly). But really, if you're the one insisting that I should be alive, aren't you the one being selfish?

So I guess this is my last pop quiz for you. Try not to think about me if it makes you feel anything other than mildly nostalgic. If you start feeling angry, or sad, that's just a bunch of fucking bullshit, Tiger. That kind of negative shit, if it accumulates, will make you want to blow your brains out. Take it from someone who knows.

Love, your old, tired, dead Dad

P.S. Sorry about the closed casket, but it was unavoidable. -
Dad.

Yeah, the Colonel was always laying his pop quizzes on me. Example: “Who won the Battle of Dien Bien Phu?” Answer: Not the fucking French.

I wasn't the only one he called, “Tiger.” I think he called everyone that. Or “Coach.” Or “Big Guy.” Or “Bub,” if he didn't like you. As in, “Hey, Bub, you gonna pick up that cigarette butt?” to a random PFC as we transited across whatever shitty post the Army had dispatched him to. Or, “Hey, Bub, you call that a salute?” to some cheese-eating second lieutenant who got on his nerves.

It was him and me through my childhood, summers mostly, when I wasn't bunking with his parents back in Smithville, Illinois and going to school there. My mother ran off when I was three, or so, to (the Colonel claimed) some sort of hippie (or fellow travelers of the hippie) commune. I have never heard from her. It is just as well, as I have nothing to say to her. My grandparents were, um, old. They were closer to being roommates to me than anything else. They occasionally took a casual interest in my schoolwork, to make sure that I would be departing their company in a timely fashion, methinks. I think they resented the half of me that belonged to She Who Had Become a Hippie Or a Fellow Traveller Thereof.

Whatever.

I was supposed to walk in his footsteps, Army-wise, and had been matriculating in the ROTC program at the University of Illinois—Round Lake (UIRL), but the Colonel couldn't wait until I finished up my schoolwork to cap himself, right after my six-week-summer-fun-time-vacation-post-junior-year with my ROTC mates at Fort Pickett, Virginia, an un-air-conditioned slum

of an Army post in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. Post-Colonel-suicide, I spun into a depression, naturally, flunked my schoolwork, and found myself owing Uncle Sugar two years of service for every one year of school that my good Uncle paid for via ROTC scholarship. Six years total, for those of you not math-inclined. Soon enough, I found myself as an enlisted man in the Army.

I was sent by my beneficent Uncle to OSUT (One Station Unit Training) at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Most will remember Fort Knox as the place where Goldfinger was going to irradiate all of the U.S.'s gold reserves in the eponymous James Bond movie. But mostly, it is the home of armor—tanks and such. OSUT is combined Army basic combat training and advanced individual training. I was trained first as a soldier and second as a cavalry scout in one long bout of training. Yes, there is still such a job as a cavalry scout in the Army. And, fuck you very much, I was not Randolph Scott clopping around on a palomino wearing buckskins. A cavalry scout is an observer, and a quiet one at that. We sneak up to the enemy, take a peeky-poo at him, and report what we see, using the SALUTE acronym as our guide—Size, Activity, Location, Unit, Time, Equipment.

Army basic combat training, by the way, is a course of instruction covering killing techniques and shoe polishing. To that date in my Army career only the shoe polishing had come in handy. By January 1991, of course, the killing part would come into play out in the sandbox. But that has almost nothing to do with this story.

#

Top leaned back in his office chair and clunked his size twelve jump boots up on his Eisenhower-era metal desk right next to 1SG OUT. A landslide of folders flopped across his desk. I stood up and righted them, and sat back down in a slightly more relaxed position than prior. He continued his story of Army-style romance.

“We were right over the drop zone. C-130 opens up. Beautiful fucking day, seriously,” he said. He licked his teeth, in full-on savor-the-memory mode. He steepled his fingers in front of his face. The ring finger and pinkie finger on his right hand were zigzagged with broken-then-poorly-

repaired-ness. “I’ll tell you about Korea—the weather there changes more than anywhere I ever been. Any-fucking-where! I’m halfway toward the ground, my chute open above me, and the wind picks me up like an angry hand and chucks my black ass in a rice paddy. You know what’s in a rice paddy, mostly?”

“No clue,” I said.

“Shit! Human-fucking-feces! So I’m up to my ankles in human shit and out comes a Papa San with a big-ass grin on his face. I’m thinking, goddamn the Army that they didn’t give me no rounds, because I would have shot his ass in that very moment,” Top said. “You dig?”

“So you didn’t kill him?”

“I did not, young soldier,” Top said. “Behind the man is a tiny woman. Full grown, mind you. But tiny.” He rippled his two sets of fingers like he was caressing her tiny body. “Not any bigger than that PFC in your office down there. What’s her name?”

“LaRouche,” I said. “PFC LaRouche.”

“The sickie,” Top said. “What’s she got?”

“The Army hasn’t figured it out yet,” I said. “They’re experimenting on her at Walter Reed.”

“Probably want to weaponize whatever she’s got,” Top said. “Anyhow, Papa San points at my watch, and then at the tiny woman, and then back at my watch. It dawns on me, right there, that he wants to sell me the tiny woman for my watch.” Top smiled. “Well, it *was* a Seiko! So I say to the old man, ‘Boom boom, or wife?’ He smiles at me, ‘Wife!’”

“Fuck me!” I went aloud, not meaning to.

“Yeah, shit,” Top said. “He probably only wanted the watch for boom-boom, but now he has the opportunity to get rid of the undersized offspring. She’s no good for the field, too fucking small for agriculture, so he probably couldn’t marry her off.”

“Sounds about right,” I said.

“Married her, brought her back to Schofield Barracks with me after the exercise, knocked her ass up, and then deployed to Vietnam,” Top said. “While I’m gone, she learns English, and subsequently women’s liberation. She divorced my ass and took half my money. I had to pay for the kid, too, until she was 18.”

“Shit,” I said.

“Black man can’t win in this society,” Top said.

“I hear that,” I said.

“Don’t go thinking that you know what it’s like being black just because you listen to Public Enemy,” Top said, a slight warning tone bubbling in his voice.

“No, First Sergeant,” I said, sitting up.

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you that it’s not a big problem losing this Lish character,” Top said. “I know you’re one of these soldiers who obsesses on the smallest things.” What he meant to say was: “Your father committed suicide in his office, and I don’t want you to do the same.”

“Yes, Top,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Make sure you replace that fluorescent bulb out in the hallway,” Top said.

“Roger,” I said, standing up.

The Shittiest Prize Ever at the County Fair

When I returned to my basement kingdom, I only found two of my BMS staff awaiting me. SP4 Pepper, the artist, and PFC LaRouche, the schoolteacher turned soldier.

“What did Top want?” LaRouche asked, her bare feet propped up on my desk. She had taken it upon herself to be my right hand, which was just as well, as she was a 71L (pronounced *Seventy-one lima*) and as tough as a sack of nails. She had decided not to put on her duty uniform, her BDU’s, opting instead to remain in her morning PT gear, the gray t-shirt with black block lettering stating, blandly, **ARMY**, and the gray shorts. Her socks and sneakers were next to her. The bottoms of PFC LaRouche’s feet were traffic-cone orange, like she’d been treading across a floor covered in Cheetos dust.

“Go take a shower and put on your BDU’s,” I said in reply.

“I’ve got all these forms to fill out,” she said. “We need more fluorescent bulbs, for one thing.”

“But not more floor wax,” Pepper said, his high-pitched boy’s voice gone all snarky. He seemed to delight in the worst aspects of the Army. I alternately liked Pepper and wanted to punch his lights out. I think most soldiers in my employ felt the same way about him.

“What now?” I went.

“Oh, it’s *bad*,” Pepper said, half a giggle sneaking out. “It’s incred-i-bad! Ha, ha, ha!”

#

Pepper was a 25Q (pronounced *Twenty-five quebec*), an illustrator, who had pending orders to Pentagon Graphics, where he would eventually create, overnight, the morning briefing charts for the Secretary of Defense, the Honorable Dick Cheney. The only hitch was Pepper didn’t have a Top Secret clearance, and it was taking Uncle Sugar some time to process it. So Pepper was stuck in the

basement with me in the meantime. Pepper did anything I told him to, but he had a fucking mouth on him. He was from some burg in Florida called Sarasota, the winter home of the circus and the spring home of my beloved White Sox.

On the bright side, he had a college education, and could talk for hours on a wide variety of subjects, which made him ten times more interesting than most of the other basement soldiers. He also had a vast collection of vinyl in his quarters, and could lecture in an interesting and animated way on the history and significance of his favorite bands, while playing samples of the music. I brought him some beer one night, and learned more about the album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* than I ever imagined I'd want to know. From my perspective, it was an album filled with electronic bleeps and bleeps and chanting weirdoes.

The first time I met him, I went up to his quarters to let him know he'd be working for me. I knocked and received no reply. This loud, atonal music came vibrating out through the door. I knocked again, loudly. I beat on the door with the heel of my fist. No response. I tried the doorknob, and found that it was unsecured, so I pushed my way into his quarters. I found there a naked little man, covered in splatters of paint, thwacking at a six-foot-high by three-foot-wide canvas with the kind of paintbrush I associate with cutting in corners on baseboard. He was all ribs and bones. The paint was thick and multicolored up to his elbows. His ass was even speckled. At least he'd bothered to tape newspaper to the wall where he had the canvas propped up, and had tossed a sheet on the floor. On the canvas was a gigantic naked woman with the head of a rooster. She had Christ's wounds. I tapped him on the shoulder. He was startled for a moment, and then went, "What?"

"That's, 'what, sergeant,'" I said.

"Right," he said, looking over his shoulder at me expectantly. I held up his TDY (temporary duty) orders, assigning him to the barracks staff in lieu of his eventual assignment to Pentagon Graphics. "Oh," he said.

“I’ll see you in the basement in one-half-hour,” I said, as sternly as I could. “Specialist.”

“Yes, sergeant,” he said, and came to the position of parade rest.

“Good fucking God, man,” I said, looking him up and down. “Get cleaned up. And put on a uniform. From my understanding, you’re still in the Army.”

He’d been a good soldier despite his attitude. He seemed to find tragedy hilarious.

#

LaRouche was a magnificently shaped little woman—a five-foot-tall Jayne Mansfield in BDU’s. After college at San Angelo University in Texas, she’d taught high school for a year back home in Louisiana before joining the Army, and I can only imagine what kind of hell those hormonal teen boys put her through during her teaching year. She told me that she’d decided to join the Army for the learn-to-kill aspects of the training regimen. Combat arms was not open to women, so she went to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis for her follow-on training as a clerk-typist, where she had her first Mystery Disease attack. Her joints swelled, she became nauseous, and her skin turned color. All very scary, she informed me. I had no idea about all this before her first attack at Fort Myer.

The first time I met her, she showed up in front of my desk, the desk she would soon take over for the most part, with a pinched little judgy-judge look on her high-cheek-boned face, her ginger hair cinched into a tight ball on the back of her head. Judgy-judge was her normal facial expression, and in time I came to appreciate it. “The First Sergeant sent me down here,” she informed me in her clipped Cajun accent. “You are Sergeant Bean? Am I correct?”

“I am Sergeant Bean—yes,” I said. “Private.” I was attempting to fill out a requisition form for a box of Skilcraft ballpoint pens, and failing miserably.

She sat down and watched me for several minutes. Finally, she said, “May I, sergeant?”

“You may,” I said, and shoved the form across to her. She filled it out, asking me questions along the way, and then took a clean form over to the IBM Selectric, nudged me out of my office chair, and filled the thing out in triplicate.

That chair soon had the impression of her ass and not mine in it, an improvement in many ways. Instantly, she was indispensable.

On the morning of her first attack at Fort Myer, I found her at my desk doubled over, her hands transformed into those of a 90-year-old woman. “I’m sorry,” she said. A rash had formed across her cheekbones, and across the bridge of her pointy little nose.

“Can you walk?” I asked her.

“I think so,” she said.

I led her out to my Pinto in the parking lot across the street from the barracks, and gingerly placed her in the passenger seat. A three-foot-high brick wall separated Arlington National Cemetery from the parking lot. About one hundred yards away, at the little chapel near the gate to the cemetery, I saw a horse-drawn caisson awaiting a coffin. An Old Guard soldier stood ramrod straight next to it in his dress blue uniform. I saw her peering through my dirty, cracked windshield at the scene.

“So pretty,” she said, as the Pinto’s engine chugged to life.

“The horse?” I went.

“Yeah, the horse, too,” she went.

After the Rader Clinic looked her over, they recommended that she be taken to Walter Reed, and pointed out a bus that would have taken hours to get there, making many stops along the way. I drove her to Walter Reed, a fair distance from Fort Myer, through a cold spring rain. She leaned up against the passenger-side door, her eyes closed, hugging herself. In a tiny voice that I was unaccustomed to, she told me about her first attack, about how the doctors had no idea what was wrong with her, and that was why she was assigned to Fort Myer, so the docs at Walter Reed could put their collective heads together and figure out her come-and-go illness.

In the emergency room, I managed to flag down a nurse and got her admitted. They paged the doctor who’d been assigned to her. I waited around, even though I figured she’d have to stay

overnight. I realized that I was becoming attached. Basket of puppies. My mistake. Eventually, a nurse waved me into her room. She'd been admitted for the night.

PFC LaRouche lay in her hospital bed, looking up at me with her goddamned moist eyes. "Thank you for being my friend, Hank," she said, reaching for my hand.

"Sergeant Bean," I corrected, yanking my hand away. "Private."

#

"So we're running the buffer on the third floor, getting it nice and shiny," Pepper started out, smiling like he'd won the shittiest prize ever at the county fair, and loved it. "And Sergeant Craven says, 'I don't like the sound that buffer be making.'" Pepper did a fairly good impression of SGT Craven.

"Oh, God damn it," I said, not liking at all where this was going.

"It gets better," LaRouche said.

"Shower," I said to her. "Uniform."

"Yes, *sergeant*," she said, in her most judgmental tone. She slipped on her sneakers and strode out the door.

"Man, I was enjoying those legs," Pepper said, sulking.

"Just continue, Pepper," I said. "For God's sake."

"There was nothing wrong with the buffer," Pepper said. "At least not at first."

#

SGT "Cold Steel" Craven had been in the Army three times as long as I had, and so outranked me, but Top placed me in charge of him anyway. SGT Craven was a feeling, not thinking, creature, as thinking proper thoughts had been made impossible by a long ago blow to the head. He was being processed out of the Army because the Army had discovered, after he'd served for seventeen-and-a-half years, that SGT Craven was functionally illiterate. He knew how to write out his name, rank, Social Security number, and so on. But it was akin to drawing a photograph that he remembered, and not writing out letters and numbers.

SGT Craven had an incredible talent for barbecue, however, and the First Sergeant, being from Memphis, had a taste for barbecue. So SGT Craven was sent down to my little basement kingdom in a last ditch attempt to keep him in the Army. LaRouche, the former schoolteacher, was to teach him the written version of the English language.

SGT Craven, back when he was PVT Craven, had fallen out of the back of a deuce-and-a-half in Vietnam as the truck transited uphill and gears were shifted. His steel pot, not secured by his chinstrap, fell away from him and the back of his head hit the ground, *crack*.

Somehow, even brain-addled and illiterate, SGT Craven had managed to remain in Uncle Sugar's camping club. He explained how he passed his advancement exams: "Member them 'lectronic football games with the little red dots that was 'sposed to be them players? How them little red dots went from side to side? That's how I filled out them dots on the exams! I pretended I was playing that game goin' from one side to the other running down the field for a touchdown!"

Pepper hooted and danced, much pleased, at this description.

LaRouche, sitting at my desk, bowed her head, closed her eyes and rubbed her eye sockets with the heels of her hands

"He's all yours," I told LaRouche.

"Sure... why not?" she muttered.

In addition to being functionally illiterate, SGT Craven was clearly out of weight standards by about fifty pounds. To get around this, the First Sergeant had instructed us to "tape test" him, the alternate means of measuring body fat. An honest tape test agreed with the scale. A dishonest one was another story.

So I ran up-and-down the post with SGT Craven three times a week, as he huffed and puffed and chugged along at a not-so-steady clip. We were both from Chicago, and both were White Sox fans, so I talked about that as we slowly trod along. I escorted him to the Tri-Services Dining Facility, where I had instructed the cooks to serve him nothing but iceberg lettuce and cottage

cheese until further notice. After a month in my employ, I saw no noticeable improvement in either his cognitive abilities, or his girth.

#

So, long story short, SGT Craven, having imagined he heard something wrong with the buffer, disassembled it right there on the third floor of the barracks, the hallway half-buffed, the rest glooped with industrial floor wax in a most unshiny fashion. He explained to Pepper, who had been manning the buffer (and I imagine slamming it loudly against every door as it skimmed back and forth across the floor, as was his custom), that he, SGT Craven, was a 63S (pronounced *Sixty-three sierra*) and therefore very much capable of repairing something as simple as a buffer. It is my understanding that even though SGT Craven had been, in title, a heavy-wheeled vehicle mechanic for his entire tenure in the Army, he had rarely worked in his MOS, instead being given duties such as hosing down the motor pool and motor park, and the vehicles therein, putting tools away at the end of the day, driving a duty vehicle, and, for the most part, cooking barbecue every Friday, usually in a fifty-gallon drum that he, himself, had turned into a cooker. The barbecue was so good that each command he served in did its best to keep him around.

The First Sergeant had been SP4 Craven's NCOIC at Bad Toelz many years before. When SGT Craven reported to our unit, Top said, "Don't you recognize me Craven?"

SGT Craven looked at him with uncomprehending eyes. "No, I sure don't, First Sergeant!"

"You still make the best goddamned barbecue ever, Craven?"

"Yes, Top!"

"We'll get you squared away. Don't you worry about that!" Then Top smiled over at me. "This young man here? Sergeant Hank Bean? He's your new supervisor. What do you think about that?"

SGT Craven had been staring out the window, his face gone vacant. After a long moment, he looked around the First Sergeant's office as if he'd been beamed in by Scottie off the Enterprise. "Where'm I at?"

"BMS," Top said, rubbing his eyes with thumb and index finger in a way that showed off his fucked-up fingers. "Sergeant Bean will be your supervisor."

"Fine! Outstanding! Fine!" SGT Craven said, smiling, probably relieved that he wasn't going to be in charge.

The first Friday after he'd constructed his 50-gallon cooker, I ate some of SGT Craven's barbecue, and I can tell you that he is, despite being in a fog otherwise, a genius of meat.

#

On the third floor I found SGT Craven sitting with the disassembled buffer between his knees, cradling it like it was a child that he'd accidentally backed over with his Buick Skylark. "Oh Lord!" SGT Craven went. "Bless me, Lord!"

"THIS IS THE LORD," Pepper intoned through cupped hands. "THOU HAST SINNED."

"At ease that shit, Specialist," I snapped. I stood looking at the scene, hands on hips, shaking my head like I'd found a child who'd marked up the walls with crayons. "Sergeant Craven..."

"I know I fucked up," SGT Craven said, looking up at me, moist-eyed. The unnerving thing is that his eyes didn't match. The one that looked at me was hazel; the one that looked up toward the acoustic-tiled ceiling was dark brown.

"We'll make this right, Sergeant Craven," I said.

"Everything is going to be fine, Cold Steel," Pepper said, not unnicely. "Sergeant Bean will square it all away."

"I've told you soldiers to stop calling him that," I said. "Have some respect."

"Yes, sergeant," Pepper said.

“Give me a second to think,” I said, scratching my chin. I heard some footsteps behind me, and turned quickly, thinking the jig was up. But it was LaRouche, in uniform, the little quick-change artist. She tossed a large cardboard box across the hallway. It slid to a stop next to Pepper.

“I have an idea,” I said.

“A caper!” Pepper said, hopping up once and clapping twice, biting his lower lip.

“Oh, yes,” I said. “There *will be* a caper.”

A Caper

I am not averse to a caper, if the caper helps out a soldier in need. That the soldier in need was SGT Craven, who was already a needy soldier in so many ways, made it that much more imperative that the caper be done, and done expeditiously, with a maximum of cunning.

We all knew who on post had all the money and all the newest everything—the Old Guard, the Third Infantry Regiment, that battalion of pod-people soldiers who tap-danced out in the big cemetery in front of the Tomb of the Unknowns for the enjoyment of the camera-wielding public. Members of the Old Guard all are between 5-foot-11 and 6-foot-1 and are uniformly 160 to 180 pounds. They look like they were grown in identical petri dishes in an insane Army experiment at Fort Benning.

“Grow me some soldiers, scientists!” some sad lonely general barked.

“That’s a roger,” the scientists replied.

“Make ‘em medium height, thin and dumb,” the general added.

“Fuckin’ A,” the scientists replied.

The sad fact of the matter was that the old buffer originally had been stolen from them. It even had, “PROPERTY OF 3D INF REG” stenciled in drippy white spray paint on the side.

Pepper loved to tell the story about how he had tried to check in at the Pentagon, but was turned away because his security clearance was not finished. He’d decided to cut through the cemetery after missing the duty bus. The way he tells it, he had no idea that he’d forgotten to put his garrison cover (a.k.a. “cunt cap”) back on his head after departing the indoors world, leaving it slipped under an epaulet. As he reached the chapel gate, an Old Guard soldier reprimanded him. So Pepper put on his cover. This wasn’t enough for the young corporal, who continued laying into him about military bearing, putting on a good show for the public milling about the cemetery, etc. So

Pepper, being Pepper, said, “I’m an E-4, too, you beanpole cocksucker! And unlike you, I work for a living.”

“I’m an NCO!” the corporal shrieked. “You will stand at parade rest! What’s your name? What unit do you belong to?”

“My name is ‘fuck you!’” Pepper sang out to him, as he skipped away. “And my unit is, ‘up your ass!’” Then Pepper quickly ran back up, leapt up, snatched the corporal’s cover off his head, and ran zigzagging away, giggling like an idiot.

I would have thought this was hyperbole, except that I overheard it from the aggrieved corporal himself one evening while bowling. Over the crash of pins, I heard the corporal telling the exact same story to one of his sergeants, as they bowled in the lane next to mine. I didn’t look over, not even for a second. I didn’t want to know what the dude looked like. His version was not told with little yips of laughter. At the conclusion, the corporal vowed that he would find “that little shit, and kick his weaselly little ass!”

I muttered to myself, out of the corporal’s hearing, “Goddamn you, Pepper.”

#

LaRouche’s ex-boyfriend was an Old Guard soldier who, while they lounged around illegally (no males allowed in female quarters, mind you) in her quarters, airily informed her that he was a “real” soldier, unlike her. She sat up in bed and made him repeat it. He informed her, once again, that it was nice that she had made the commitment to the Army, but there was only one actual soldier in that bed, and it was he. She informed him that he needed to leave right away. He waved that off, telling her that he wasn’t ready to leave yet. She informed him that he’d better leave. She got up, put on a robe and stood staring at him. He leaned back in bed and said he was comfortable. She walked over to her Hot Shot electric kettle, filled it with water from a pitcher, waited for it to boil, and then poured the boiling water in his lap. He shrieked. “Not so comfortable now, are you, *soldier*?” she said, and bashed open her window and threw his clothes out into the courtyard.

Top told me about watching the naked soldier climbing down from the second floor toward his clothing, his crotch steaming, while LaRouche razzed him from the window. “See all sorts of things from my office,” he said. “Best you have a talk with your PFC.”

#

We placed the buffer inside the big cardboard box and hustled it down the emergency stairs to the basement, unseen. Step one was to consolidate all of the machinery inside the former buffer.

PFC Clowes, a tow-headed, fake-lame, apparent dimwit who claimed to be good with machinery (probably so he could spend hours not-mending broken things), fortuitously stumbled into the office on his crutches.

I said, “Clowes, put that thing back together.”

“Yem, sar-int,” Clowes mumbled in the direction of the light switch. He put his crutches aside and sat on the floor next to the buffer, pretending like he knew what he was doing. He was one of those soldiers who was always at sick call, and thus had been dispatched to BMS.

#

Pepper had claimed on more than one occasion to have seen Clowes moshing and pogging at the 930 Club in downtown D.C., but Clowes denied it each time, mumbling that he looked like a lot of people, while giving Pepper the stink eye.

“Could have sworn that was you, Clowes,” Pepper said.

“Maw,” Clowes went, chin tucked in chest. “Maught me.”

“You were doing the Batusi, I’m pretty sure,” Pepper said. He danced like Adam West to demonstrate.

“Man,” Clowes went. “Man, man.”

Once, while indifferently polishing the front door knob with Brasso, Clowes saw, in the hazy reflection off the knob, the company commander walking up behind him. Clowes, instead of

snapping to attention and saluting him, fainted (or pretended to faint) and rolled conveniently out of the CO's way.

The CO informed the First Sergeant, who informed me.

Top told me, "Do something to him. Something to instill discipline."

"Like what?" I asked him.

"If this was Vietnam, I'd say, 'Choke him out.' But it isn't. So, I don't know. Choke him out?"

#

"It doesn't have to work," LaRouche informed Clowes. "Get the guts back inside." And suddenly Clowes was quick about reassembling the buffer in the shittiest fashion possible. The phone rang and LaRouche picked it up, "H-Q, U.S. Army," she sang out. "BMS department. This line is not secure. PFC LaRouche speaking. May I help you, sir or ma'am?" A moment later, she waved the receiver at me. "It's for you, Sergeant Bean."

"Good fucking God, what now?" I went. I snatched the phone from her. "Sergeant Bean, may I help you, sir or ma'am?"

"Oh, hello, sergeant! Greetings! Listen, I have the most valuable information for you on your Private Lish. Hello, are you still there?" this male voice went. He sounded very cheery, whoever he was.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Good, good!" he said. "I could meet you somewhere. I understand you like to bowl, yes?"

"Ye-e-s-s," I said, suspiciously. "Who is this?"

"A good friend of the American Army! Of that you can be sure!"

"Swell," I said. "You have a name, 'good friend of the American Army?'"

"Oh, yes, how stupid of me! I'm Gus! Call me that. You can count on me. I will give you the whereabouts of your Private Lish. No charge or anything! I only want to help out the Army."

"Thanks, Gus," I said.

I peered around the room. LaRouche and Pepper were cheering on Clowes as he slapped parts inside the buffer. “Clowes, Clowes, Clowes!” they chanted and clapped in unison. SGT Craven was studying the Soviet tank identification poster scotch-taped to the wall like he may have to answer a pop quiz later. If dear dead Dad had been around, he probably would have pop-quizzed that poor, brain-damaged soldier.

“So let us say we shall meet at your bowling alley at ten p.m.” Gus said. “That would be twenty-two-hundred hours, in your Army lingo.”

“You have access to Fort Myer?” I asked.

“Of course, of course! I would not have suggested the bowling alley otherwise,” Gus said. That relaxed me a bit.

“Sure, Gus,” I said. “You can call me ‘Hank.’”

“I shall, Hank! The pleasure has been entirely mine. I much look forward to meeting you and giving you this valuable information, for which there is no charge!” Gus said.

“Okay,” I said. “Um... goodbye.” I hung up. “Hmmp.”

“Yay!” LaRouche and Pepper went. The two little soldiers high-fived each other. The buffer was reassembled. Sort of. They applauded Clowes and then chanted out in unison the old bit of Army doggerel, “Sick, lame and lazy! Airborne crazy! Drive on, Clowes! Drive on!”

He stood up to accept their applause and then, suddenly realizing he was unsupported by crutches, toppled over like a fainting goat.

#

Step two in this caper: Requisition a GOV, a government-owned vehicle. Pepper and I walked across the street to the parking lot and browsed what was available. HQ, USA had three vehicles: A Chevy Cavalier, a rust-bucket pick-up truck, and a CUCVEE (a Chevy Blazer spray-painted in camouflage). After some mental calculation, I picked out the pick-up. Neither the CUCVEE nor the Cavalier would contain the buffer neatly.

“We shall go under cover of darkness,” Pepper said, standing next to me. “We shall move like ninjas, silent and deadly.”

“Bullshit on that,” I said. “We shall go in broad daylight.”

“You’re kidding,” Pepper went.

“I’m not kidding,” I said. “And you’re going to stay in the vehicle.”

“Aw!”

“You don’t look the part,” I said.

#

Sadly, I *did* look the part. A retired sergeant major who cut hair at the PX reminded me of that every payday when I’d go in and get my standard Army taper cut. “Are you in the Old Guard?” he asked me every time.

“No,” I’d say.

“Because if you’re in the Old Guard, you have to get a high-and-tight,” he’d say, clippers at the ready to do their absolute worst.

“I am not in the Old Guard,” I’d tell him. “And I don’t want a high-and-tight.”

“Are you certain?” he’d ask.

“I know what unit I’m in, and it’s not the Old Guard!”

“I’m a retired sergeant major!” he’d say, shaky hands coming at me with clippers. “Show a little respect!”

Today, he’d get a different answer to his question. That was step three.

#

I came back from the PX with a high-and-tight newly shaved into the sides of my skull, went upstairs to my quarters, and returned wearing a brand-new PT uniform along with a pair of expensive running shoes, neither of which I’d never worn before.

“Why the PT uniform?” Pepper asked.

“I get it,” LaRouche said. “Look at him. If you never met him before—”

“Holy shit,” Pepper said. “He looks just like an officer.”

I banged around in my desk drawers and found an olive-drab map case, which is what civilians refer to as a messenger’s bag. Every junior officer carried one of these around. I stood up a little straighter. Narrowed my eyes like everything and everyone I saw was trying to put one over on me, but I wouldn’t let them, because I was smarter than all of those stupid monkeys.

PFC Clowes came tapping down the hallway and into the office.

“You!” I bellowed at him, performing the knife hand gesture I’d been taught in ROTC. “What’s your name?”

Clowes, not recognizing me, tilted over and hit the floor.

“I like where this is going,” Pepper said. He walked over to Clowes and gave him a little nudge with his boot. He made a pleased little sound like “Hmm!”

“You gotta have sand to pull off a caper like this,” I said. “You can never, ever say, ‘I’m an officer, obey me.’ You can’t wear an officer’s uniform, either. You can only act the part. Besides, this isn’t stealing. It’s all Army property in the end, isn’t it? You get the keys to the pick-up, Pepper?”

“Yes, sir!” he said, and snapped off a salute that almost looked genuine.

“That’s the spirit,” I said.

“Mug fug,” Clowes went, struggling to his feet.

#

Fort Myer is built in a semi-circle around the cemetery, like a cradle rocking our war dead to sleep. Our barracks were on McNair Road, closer to the cemetery itself. The Old Guard barracks were on Sheridan Road, parallel to McNair and farther away. We drove the long way there, choosing to take McNair almost to the Hatfield Gate, and then swinging onto Sheridan.

As he drove, I started to tell Pepper what he should say should someone ask him why he was parked there at one of the barracks. But he already knew the answer: “Dunno,” he went, in an approximation of every bored Army Spec-4 I’d ever met. “Some officer told me to park here.”

“Outstanding,” I said. “I may make you into a soldier yet.”

“I doubt that,” Pepper said.

We drove past each of the Old Guard’s barracks and picked one that seemed to be mostly abandoned.

We parked in a spot marked “CQ.” I popped the tailgate, looked around and made sure no one saw, and hustled the buffer inside, leaving it in the middle of the hallway.

I walked into the duty office and found a soldier sitting there, his back to me, flipping through a copy of *Spy* magazine. He was snickering at a photo of Woody Allen with a pee stain on his pants. “What’s that buffer doing in the middle of *my* hallway?” I barked at him. “Is that where it’s supposed to be?”

He looked up from his magazine and then snapped to attention. “I don’t know, sir!” he yelped.

“Come with me,” I said, and turned on my heel. We walked out into the immaculate hallway to find the sad, busted buffer there. “You call that putting away government equipment?”

“No, sir!”

“Don’t you respect government equipment?”

“I do, sir! I do!” he shouted, and picked it up so as not to mark the floor. I followed him to the supply closet, where there was another buffer, a beautiful functional buffer, awaiting us.

“That must be the buffer that’s broken!” I went.

“Maybe it’s this one,” the private offered, setting down the old buffer.

“Are you calling me a liar?” I asked him.

“No, sir!”

“There’s a specialist in the duty driver’s spot out there who *claims* to be looking for a broken buffer to take to the repair shop. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s someone parking in the duty driver’s spot!” I said.

“Yes, sir! I’ll take the buffer to him, sir!”

He picked up the shiny, new buffer and carried it out to the pick-up truck, dumped it in the bed.

“Have you been to chow?” I asked the private.

“No, sir!”

“I have to PT!” I slapped the side of the pick-up and said, “Go!”

Pepper started the truck up, nearly backed over the private, and took off in the general direction of the Hatfield Gate.

“But, sir... My relief isn’t here yet.”

“Chow!” I shouted, and jogged off in the opposite direction from the Hatfield gate, toward the Wright gate.

“Yes, sir!” I heard him shout behind me.

Step four complete.

Caper complete.

I jogged back to the barracks, took a shower and changed back into my BDU’s. Just another duty day in the greatest Army the world has ever known.

SGT Craven's Moment of Clarity

I was on the way over to the mess hall with SGT Craven when the bugle call for retreat sounded across Fort Myer. The version of retreat that played over the loudspeakers was on a tape that had long ago degraded to the point where it was distorted, as if the tape had been stretched and deformed from having been played once a day since 1965.

The only time of day that I ever saw any of my soldiers hustle was seventeen-hundred hours. If a soldier were caught outside during retreat, he would have to stand at attention and salute the post flag as it was lowered and the bugle call played itself out. The whole process took all of thirty seconds. I have seen soldiers injure themselves and others while sprinting toward the indoors trying to avoid retreat.

SGT Craven and I both stood at attention and saluted like you're supposed to, while several soldiers who worked for me sprinted past us toward the mess hall as if a cocaine-fueled Manuel Noriega was riding a black stallion bareback behind them, brandishing a pitchfork and firing a flame thrower at their backsides, swearing vengeance on "Los Yanquis."

After sad-ass retreat finished, SGT Craven and I moseyed past my favorite haunt, the bowling alley, and on over to the mess hall.

"I think them soldiers who run past during retreat is on latrine detail," SGT Craven said. "You want me to kick they butts?"

"No, Sergeant Craven," I said. "I think latrine detail is punishment enough." Soldiers, for one thing, do not know how to flush toilets, probably from too much time spent in the field. Every time I went to the latrine during the day, I'd flush five or six toilets brimming with shit and as many urinals yellow with piss. The stench could be incredible.

"You right bout that, Sergeant Bean," he said.

Inside the mess hall, we showed our ID's to a Spec-4 who worked for me, off and on, mostly off. He sat on a stool next to the little podium at the door. I'd placed him on permanent detail to the mess hall because I didn't like his face.

"Sar-int Bean," the specialist went, and his face cracked open to reveal an open-gapped smile full of twisted teeth.

"Army dentistry is free," I pointed out to him, as SGT Craven signed in.

"Yew always say that, sar-int," the specialist said. "Haw!" And his hideous smile went wider.

"Get right, specialist," I said. I signed in.

None of us in the Army actually enjoyed a meal in the mess hall. We were food shovelers, slamming fatty, gravy-laden cuisine down All-American throats through which it transited into the dark depths of our patriotic guts.

"What's in the breeze, Bean?" SFC Gauld asked as I stepped into line behind SGT Craven, who was given his customary serving of a scoop of cottage cheese atop a pineapple ring and a ruffle of iceberg lettuce, garnished with parsley and topped with a glowing red maraschino cherry.

I knew the NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) of the mess hall from way, way back. SFC Gauld, MOS 92G (pronounced *Ninety-two golf*), had been my father's aide when the Colonel was CO of Fort McNair, and had fought alongside my father during the Tet Offensive.

"Not much, sergeant," I replied. "What's on the menu tonight?"

"Steamship round," SFC Gauld replied.

I peered past the line of soldiers at the huge portion of cow. A soldier was down there shaving it with an electric knife. Madness. "Inspection time, eh?" I went. "How's it going?"

"Not bad, not bad!"

During their quarterly inspections by the post veterinarian, the Tri Services Dining Facility served up their best spread in an attempt to impress the young female captain. No amount of

explaining could convince SFC Gauld that she was there to make sure he wasn't poisoning us and had no interest in whether the food was any good.

SGT Craven and I carried our trays over to the table that BMS always occupied. I overheard Pepper explaining politics to the three preggos assigned to BMS, who he'd dubbed Moe, Larry and Curly. The three of them somehow neatly fell into those roles, and often committed hilarious acts of violence upon each other.

"One party loves America but hates Americans, because we're all lazy. The other party hates America, but loves Americans and encourages us to all be lazy," Pepper said, while carving a design into his mashed potatoes with his fork.

LaRouche sat next to him, smiling inwardly, her food untouched. Her current medication was fucking with her innards. As I sat down next to Pepper, I noticed LaRouche pinch him on the knee, like he was her naughty little brother. I felt some kind of sad love for them pinwheeling inside my chest, throwing me off kilter for moment. Basket of puppies moment.

I knew that I shouldn't have favorites, not as their section leader. My loneliness sometimes got the better of me. But I'd never had a brother or a sister, or anything resembling a family, and there the two of them were. It was like finding a pair of diamonds washed up on a beach.

They would both leave at some point, and soon, and I would be left with only memories—two more ghosts, like dear dead Dad. When people move on from the military, they get gone and stay that way. I would never see them again, my fake little brother and fake little sister.

"Didn't Lish say the same thing?" Larry asked Moe. Her frizzy red hair was unneatly corralled on the back of her head, possibly in a net.

"Lish said he loved America and Americans, and that we're the smartest and best people on earth," Moe replied to Larry, and she smacked Larry in the forehead with the flat of her butter knife.

"Ow!" Larry went and elbowed Curly.

"What did you do that for?" Curly asked Larry.

“Ask *her!*” Larry said, gesturing at Moe, who gone back to sucking down her meal in an expeditious manner.

#

Moe, at Pepper’s suggestion, had dyed her hair black and had it fashioned in a bowl cut.

The first time LaRouche saw Moe with her new haircut, down in my office, LaRouche whacked Pepper with the stapler on my desk.

“What did you do that for?” Pepper asked, leaping back and giggling.

“You *know!*” LaRouche went.

Moe did not notice. She was too busy wondering where Larry and Curly were.

“Those knuckleheads!” Pepper suggested. “Why you oughta...”

“Yeah!” Moe went.

And LaRouche hit Pepper again.

I had to tell them to cut the shit and get back to work. I left the office so I could enjoy the laugh. Later that day, I heard Top ask Moe if she’d gotten a free bowl of soup with her haircut.

#

“Damn it,” I said, involuntarily. I saw SFC Gauld moving toward our table. SFC Gauld insisted on telling stories about my father, and about myself as a teen dipshit—a goth-dressing, depress-o bookworm. And because he outranked me, I had to sit back passively absorbing these tales, silently resenting the intrusion. Because of SFC Gauld, everyone in my company knew about my father having been a colonel, and about his suicide. These seemed like far-too-personal personal details to have running amok. SFC Gauld had what looked like a photo album under his arm. This could not possibly, even in the best of all possible worlds, turn out well.

“What you got there, Sergeant Gauld?” Curly asked. All three preggos were unattractive in their own ways. Curly was the least attractive, having the head of a large baby with wisps of blonde hair twirling from it, and no neck, like she was giving birth to herself between her shoulders.

SFC Gauld placed the photo album at the head of our table and flipped it open while we all looked on. "It's my picture book from Vietnam. Brought a instamatic with me over there and kept snapping away the whole time," he said. "Wanted to show you a photo, Sergeant Bean."

Great, I thought. There goes my good mood. Seeing a photo of my father usually sent me into a funk for days. Half a decade on, I was still angry with the old man for taking his leave of humanity, and me.

"Now let me see here..." SFC Gauld said, licking his thumb and then flipping through the pages. I could see, upside down, endless photos of some Vietnam mess hall with giant metal pots steaming, and men in chef's hats and stained white aprons. Several photos showed glimpses of Saigon, Vietnamese people on bicycles, market squares, and then there was an entire section featuring what appeared to be a bloodbath. He stopped. "Here it is," he said, and turned the book and shoved it in front of my tray. And there was my father, after having pinned a medal on SFC Gauld. They were shaking hands and staring into the camera as my father handed Gauld the certificate that came with the medal. Both were wearing the old fatigue uniform, with the gold on black **US ARMY** tape over one pocket and their names in blue on white over the other. Both wore olive drab baseball caps, my father with a gold oakleaf on his, and SFC Gauld wearing the stripe and rocker of a PFC on his.

"Is that a bronze star?" I asked him.

"That's a bronze star," SFC Gauld said. "Never know what you might be called upon to do in this man's Army. Even if you just a lowly cook."

My eyes involuntarily wandered over to the old man, who was young in a way that doesn't occur to you as a child. But there was his familiar, ungenueine smile and hooded eyes that seemed like they wanted to retreat down an interior tunnel he'd dug all the way in, so far in that you would never see him again.

"Are you all right?" LaRouche asked me.

“Yes, I’m fine. Why?”

“Because you’re crying,” LaRouche said.

#

I started to shove the offending photo album away, but then dragged it back to myself. “Wait,” I said, wiping my eyes with a napkin. “Who’s this?” I pointed at another familiar face in the album.

“That’s—”

“It’s First Sergeant Jackson,” SGT Craven said, in a moment of clarity that was as startling for him as it was for the rest of us.

“Hoo, wee,” SFC Gauld said.

We huddled around the photo. Sure enough, smack dab in a group photo of all the award recipients was a very young Top. “How’d he end up in this photo?” I asked SFC Gauld.

“How the fuck should I know?” SFC Gauld replied. “Never even recognized him. Been here all this time.”

“Been in the Army all this time,” SGT Craven said.

“Look at him,” Pepper said.

“I can’t see,” Larry said. She and her two cohorts had waddled over to our side of the table, trays in hand, ready to take them to the scullery.

“Let me see,” Moe said.

“Get out of my way,” Curly said.

“Take those trays where they belong,” SFC Gauld said.

“We’re pregnant!” Moe said indignantly.

“Woo-eee, shit. I can see the fucking glow,” SFC Gauld said.

“You can see the mop and glow,” SGT Craven said.

Everyone laughed. SFC Gauld put his arm around SGT Craven's, gave him a little shake. The Stooges walked away slowly, swearing. "You should work for me, Sergeant Craven. We could turn this place into a barbecue joint. Install a juke box, or maybe bring in a band."

"That would be *awesome*," Pepper said. "You should do that! You should totally and completely do that!"

"Ah, Specialist Pepper," SFC Gauld said, a smile making itself at home on his well-worn face. "If only I could." He looked toward his cook line and saw the young veterinarian with her clipboard. "I gotta go," he said, and snatched up his photo book.

"Crazy," LaRouche said. She picked up her tray and started toward the scullery.

"You didn't eat a thing," Pepper said, blocking her path. "You should at least eat the mashed potatoes. You'd keep them down."

The momentary irritation became resignation. She sat back down and tried eating her potatoes.

We all sat silently, munching away.

"Maybe I should take up being a criminal," Pepper said, out of nowhere. "I'm so ordinary-looking that no one could pick me out of a line-up." He smiled inwardly at some private joke. "But the mentally ill, children, and police all take an interest in me on sight. I've never been comfortable with this. I see people on TV making a fetish out of being unusual. They don't know what it's really like. It is not an enviable position to be in. I open my mouth and say things and I don't want to sound like I'm strange, but I am, and I can't help it and there is no help for me. I cannot embrace my unusualness as a lifestyle, despite the loud propaganda for it on MTV. I love David Lynch—he is my brother, we share a soul—but I wish that he'd never made *Blue Velvet*. There is such a thing as sharing too much."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Buzz?" LaRouche asked him, outraged somehow. She hadn't touched her mashed potatoes, had only pushed them around on her plate some more.

I was emotionally fragile at that moment, having seen the Colonel pictorially. I was afraid that if I sat there for much longer, watching her struggle to eat goddamned mashed potatoes, I'd start to bawl in a highly unmilitary manner. I looked at my watch. "I gotta motor," I told them, and picked up my own hardly touched meal. "Class tonight."

I dumped off my tray on the stainless steel rollers and slid it back into the steamy washroom.

On my way out, I passed by the table manned by my latrine soldiers, stopped myself, and walked back over to them. "Gentlemen," I said, rapping on the table, gaining their attention. They looked up at me expectantly. "If I ever see you running away during retreat again, I will personally slam each of your dicks in a door. Got that?"

"Yes, sergeant!" they all shouted, twitching uncomfortably in their seats.

The Rosicrucians, Of Course

After five years in the Army, I'd finally managed, while taking courses at the Army College Office, to piece together almost enough credit hours for a bachelor's degree through the University of the State of Illinois. USI wasn't a real college, but the degree was as real as one coming from a real college. It was a degree-granting credit hour bank available only to legal residents of Illinois. As long as the college you did your actual schoolwork through was accredited, you could transfer your hours there, and then you'd have a degree when you hit one hundred twenty credit hours. I was officially at one hundred seventeen credit hours.

I was taking my final college course at the Army College Office through Northeastern Virginia Community College. It was a three-hundred-level course called, "The History of Lebanon, 1950-1985," taught by a genial crackpot going by the name of Professor Hubert Pointer, Ph.D. He'd written a book about the Korean War armistice, *What Really Happened at Panmunjom!*, that had been embraced by the burgeoning underground of American paramilitary paranoids cowering in mountain compounds out west.

I'd gone back to the barracks and changed into my civvies—a polo shirt, jeans, and a pair of white and neon green Reeboks with air pumps built into the tongue (that I'd spent far too much money on to chuck into the nearest Dempsey Dumpster). The air pumps were supposed to give the shoes a better fit by inflating the shoes as I walked. As far as I could tell, the air pumps were a bunch of marketing horseshit.

On my way toward the Army College Office, I watched a gold Chevy Impala with sparkling chrome wheels trundle slowly along the road, blasting bass notes haphazardly toward pedestrians and buildings and squirrels and other cars, waking the dead in the massive cemetery, while a female voice implored us all, dead and alive, sentient and non-sentient, to "get your booty out on the dance

floor tonight.” My booty would do no such thing. I doubted that the Spanish-American War dead from the USS Maine, the nearest graves on the other side of the wall from Fort Myer, would feel much like shaking their booties either. The invitation was there nonetheless, vibrating through the leaves on the trees and shaking the concrete sidewalk.

My new haircut was making the sides of my head itch. I thought I should have worn a hat.

#

“For big governments to last, compromises have to be made and every compromise means another small death for liberty,” Pointer said. “So big governments necessarily are totalitarian. The moment Gorbachev announced Glasnost, the Soviet Union was doomed.” He patted his bad comb over with one hand. He reached into one of the pockets of his three-button suit, a blue-verging-on-purple number, to remove a white handkerchief, which he used to wipe his sweaty brow.

“How do you explain the United States?” I asked. I shuffled uneasily in my seat. It was a small classroom with a green blackboard. A pulled-down screen for movies that obscured most of the blackboard had vexed Pointer before class began. He gave up trying to get it to roll back up after five minutes of jerking and swearing. We sat on aluminum-framed molded plastic chairs with a fake wood half-desk bolted in place. None of the seats were lefty friendly. I, and the rest of the class, the ten of us, jotted notes on spiral notebooks with stolen Skilcraft pens all labeled **PROPERTY OF US GOVERNMENT**.

“The United States is a totalitarian nation,” he said. “The people of this country are so stupid, they don’t even know that it’s totalitarian. Behind the scenes, in Congress, those boobs don’t argue. They laugh at us for buying their Democrats versus Republicans pantomime. They talk a lot about freedom, but there is no freedom in this country. No real freedom, that is.”

“How do you explain that you’re allowed to stand here saying this?” I asked.

“I’ve been denounced in the media, by our secret rulers, as a nut, a crazy, a loon,” he said. “And therefore very few people pay attention to me. I’m allowed by our rulers to make a sort-of

living selling my books and teaching at a community college, so they can use me as an example of why anyone can say anything in this country, and then they can denounce me as being clearly insane. In a truly free society, I'd be on radio and television, my message undiluted by those despots." Aside: Five years later, he would have his own syndicated radio show.

"Who are these secret rulers?" I asked him.

"The Rosicrucians, of course!" he said triumphantly. "They've been running the Western world since 1614!"

"Rosicrucians?" a female sergeant asked, exasperation bubbling in her voice.

"They do not want you to know their dark secrets," Pointer said. "I've been informed by their apparatchiks installed in Northeastern Virginia Community College that if I mention them again during my lectures, I will lose this meager position. So I will only talk about them unofficially outside of class. I will say that the fact that you do not know who they are only underlines how deeply they have infiltrated Western society and have remained secret!"

"I think you're making them up," the female sergeant said.

"They cracked cold fusion in the 19th century!" Pointer shouted, shaking his fist in the air. He turned his back to the class, bent over and groaned like someone had kicked him in the balls. He recovered after a long silence, dead air crackling all around us, and turned and faced us. "Let me ask you all something... Why does the world care so much about what is going on in Lebanon, a tiny nation that should not even be a nation, but was created by Western powers? I'll tell you why. It's because the French installed the Maronite Christians to rule over the Muslims in that country using one of their own, President Camille Chamoun, who was a Mason, a secret order taken over by the Rosicrucians in 1782 by the way! And Ike, his fellow Mason, sent in the Army and Marines to protect him in 1958 when the Muslims tried to take back their country and reunite it with the rest of the Arab world, something the Western powers must stop in order to keep their New World Order of divide and conquer and then unite under the banner of the Rosy Cross, which they've turned into

the Red Cross, which, ostensibly, is an organization that wants to help in times of need, but the truth is that it is part and parcel of the entire Rosicrucian New World Order! Yes, everyone loves the Red Cross, don't they! Aren't they nice! But if you knew what they are really doing, behind the scenes, you'd know about their end game, the one in which every freedom-loving person around the globe falls under the hegemony of the Red Cross, a.k.a. the Rosy Cross of the Rosicrucians!"

"Is that why there's an ad for the Rosicrucians in the back of every comic book I ever read as a child?" I asked.

Pointer's face lit up like a bonfire. "Yes, yes! Now you understand! That's how they get their adherents! And every comic book is filled with their philosophy of 'supermen' saving the innocent and helpless, so it is a fertile field for them to sow the seeds of our subjugation! It's a long game, my friends. A long game that we, the mere 'innocent and helpless,' are doomed to lose! This 'freedom'—our elections, Congress, state governments—is in actuality a ludibrium, a game that the Rosicrucians have set up for us to play to keep us busy and give us the illusion of freedom, which we do... *not*... have! No, they retain all the power for the Invisible College, where all real decisions are made."

All I have to do is keep lobbing him softballs and I'll get an "A" in this course, I thought.

"So the Soviets are free? Is that what you're trying to tell us?" the female sergeant asked, rolling her eyes. She'd end up with a "C" if she didn't watch out.

"Oh Lord, no!" Pointer said. "But at least they're upfront about not being a free society. Here, in the West, we pretend that we are free, but we're not. Not by a long shot, madam!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement in the little window in the classroom door. Focusing on it, I saw that it was LaRouche's head bobbing up and down. She must have been leaping up to peer in the window to see if I was in there. "Professor," I said. "I think we're past our break time."

"Yes, let's take a break," he said. He checked his watch. "We'll reconvene at ten after eight."

I was first to the door, and sure enough it was LaRouche. “Sergeant,” she said, out of breath, “I thought I should come here and warn you.”

“About?”

“There’s some guy in a cheap suit walking around the barracks, asking questions about you,” she said.

“Great,” I said. “CID?” CID is short for Criminal Investigation Division, the Army’s version of the FBI and Secret Service.

“If he’s not CID, I’ll eat my shorts,” she said. She sat down on a bench in the hallway. I sat down next to her.

“I’d settle for you eating your mashed potatoes,” I said.

“Oh,” she said sheepishly. “Yeah. I know. It’s my medication.”

“I know, I know,” I said. I resisted the urge to give her a reassuring pat, instead looking down past my laced together hands, wrists on knees, at my ludicrous sneakers.

“Do you think it’s about the buffer?” she asked.

“Christ,” I said. “A missing buffer is hardly a CID-level crime. Besides, buffers don’t have serial numbers or property tags. They only have that spray stencil. Everyone rips off buffers.” I peeked over at her. She wasn’t buying it. Her lips were crushed together and eyes narrowed into extreme judgy-judge. “They can’t be that bored at CID that something like this would get their attention.”

“Then what?” she asked.

“Maybe they’re tracking down Lish,” I said. “Maybe Lish has something. That might be what that weird call today was all about.”

“What weird call?”

“You took it and handed him off to me,” I said. “Strange sort of voice. Called himself ‘Gus.’”

“Was that when Clowes was putting the old buffer back together?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah, I remember. That voice was kind of weird,” she said. “Almost like a foreign accent.”

“He’s meeting me at the bowling alley after I’m done with class, so maybe he’s the CID guy,”

I said.

“No, the CID guy sounded different. Like he was offended at everything,” LaRouche said.

“Maybe it’s his partner then. Good cop, bad cop,” I said.

“Makes sense,” she said. People were starting to return to the classroom. “I guess I ought to leave.”

“Did you walk down here?”

“No, I drove,” she said.

“You own that old VW bug, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a piece of crap, but at least I know enough about it to fix it,” she said. “Thank God for the JC Whitney catalog. You should see Pepper out there with me when I’m working on it at the auto hobby shop. He stands around looking confused, trying to crack wise. You should come with us some time, hang out.”

“I’m not sure how proper that would be,” I said.

She pursed her lips some more. Sighed. “I worry about you sometimes,” she said.

“You shouldn’t,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“You didn’t look fine at dinner,” she said.

“That’s nothing to worry about,” I said. “You should worry about taking care of yourself. Tell those doctors to give you something for your nausea.”

“Yes, sergeant,” she said.

We stood up as the rest of my classmates filed back into the classroom, all of them stinking like an ashtray. “Get along, LaRouche. Try to get some sleep,” I said. “And thanks for coming down here.”

Professor Pointer appeared at my side, and watched her walking down the hallway. She was wearing sneakers and baggy little shorts. “Did you call her ‘LaRouche?’” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Any relation?”

“Relation?” I knew where this was going. I’d heard more than one person ask her if she was related to Lyndon LaRouche, the perennial candidate for president who was incarcerated at that moment for tax fraud. His followers assumed that he was a political prisoner. His followers also thought the Queen of England, Henry Kissinger and the Ayatollah all wanted him dead. They were protesting outside of post offices. Lyndon LaRouche’s home was somewhere in Virginia.

“Never mind,” Pointer said. “Did I hear that you’re going to be meeting with government agents tonight?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Would you like a little company? I’m getting very good at spotting government agents, having been followed by enough of them.”

I thought about it for a second—Why not? I figured it couldn’t hurt to have him nearby in case things went pear-shaped. I mean—you never know.

“Do you like bowling?”

He beamed. “I do!”

“Then you should come along,” I said.

The KGB's Required Reading

As Professor Pointer and I walked back toward my barracks, he continued to babble about various conspiracies involving the Rosicrucians: Their understanding of physics that went beyond anything in science textbooks, their plots against the Roman Catholic Church, how they shot Kennedy and made Reagan convert to Protestantism so no Catholic would ever be president ever again, and so on.

It's easy to make fun of someone like him, and maybe I have been. But I always wonder what could have happened to a person who believes in such things—what could have made the world seem so horrible that they end up having no faith that real life is real, and instead choose to believe that some wicked puppet master is pulling the strings in the background. I would have asked him, maybe I should have asked him, but I don't like to pry.

The bowling alley was conveniently situated near my barracks. I'd often drink a pitcher of Bud while rolling twenty frames on a weeknight or three, and then stagger back to my quarters, read half a paperback novel, and pass out. I alternated that with taking in a movie at the Fort Myer Theater, which cost a dollar for a second-run feature. It was a perfect evening when no one spoke to me. This one would be less than perfect.

I said, "This is it up here," gesturing at the front door, and Professor Pointer drifted back behind me. "Whatcha doin'?" I asked. "Break a shoe lace or something?"

"No, no!" he said as I walked back to him. "Go in, and I'll follow." He placed his briefcase on the sidewalk and dug around in it and found a tiny camera. "I'll hang back and then take a photo of this... this agent! We shouldn't be seen together! Go quickly!"

I shrugged and went inside. Frank, the counter guy, nodded his head at a gent sitting at a small table in the snack bar area, scarfing down a chilidog. His hair and eyes were jet black. His skin the opposite. The hair was too long to be military, and slicked back all shiny with maybe Brylcreem,

or a Brylcreem substitute. His suit, cheap and baggy, was charcoal gray. He wore a red tie. He was hunched over that chilidog, going at it like he hadn't eaten in a year or two. The chili was oozing all over the paper boat the chilidog had been served in. A wax paper cup of soda with a straw sticking out the top sat next to it. A pile of paper napkins stood at the ready. He looked up and saw me, and he lit up like I was a long-lost friend. He swallowed and slurped his drink, wiped his face with one of the napkins, and said, "Sit down, Hank, my friend!" gesturing to the seat opposite him.

I pulled the seat out and copped a squat. The area was blindingly lit, enough so that his hair seemed to be reflective. He wiped his hands with a napkin and reached across the table to shake mine. I shook it.

"So you've been walking around the barracks asking about me?" I said.

"No, no!" Gus said. "This was not me, Hank, my friend. Absolutely not."

"You're from CID?" I asked him point-blank.

"No, no! I'm not from CID, no," he said. "Allow me to show you my papers." He pulled out a bi-fold wallet of sorts, red leatherette, with Cyrillic letters in gold and a Soviet crest and handed it to me. I opened it up, and there was a photo of Gus in a Soviet officer's uniform, stamped twice, and more Cyrillic writing on either side.

I dropped it on the table like it was a snake that had bitten me, and glared over at him in horror. "How'd you get on this post?" I asked him.

He snatched up his KGB credentials and stuffed them in his inside jacket pocket. "Hank! My friend! We're all friends now! There is no Cold War, not anymore," he said, his hands spread out. I was afraid that he'd want to lean over the table and give me a hug, so I kind of cringed backwards away from him. "Glasnost, baby!"

"I have to report this contact up my chain of command," I said.

"You should hear what I have to say before you do so, don't you think, Hank, my friend?"

"Stop calling me that! I don't even know you!"

"I'm Gus!" he said, looking around the nearly empty room like there may be spontaneous applause coming his way.

I saw a flash of light on Gus' face and turned around. It was Pointer, and his camera. "Damn it!" Pointer went. "Forgot to turn the flash off!"

"You would never make a good KGB agent, Professor," Gus said, waving at him. "Hello! Hello!"

"So how did you get onto this post?" I asked him.

"I walked across the cemetery and climbed over the wall," Gus said. "Easy peasy lemon squeasy!"

"You seem awfully happy for a man from a failed state," Pointer said. He was standing behind me.

"Professor Pointer, this is a great honor!" Gus said, standing up. He walked over to Pointer and embraced him in a bear hug, lifting him momentarily off the ground, and depositing him back down. "You look just like your photo on the back of your book!"

"You-you've read it?" Pointer said, aghast.

"*What Really Happened at Panmunjom!* is required reading at the Red Banner Institute of the KGB," Gus said. "In the Soviet Union, you are considered a great man!" He went back to his seat.

"I... um... huh?" Pointer went, steadying himself with a hand on the back of my chair.

"A visionary!" Gus said. "Only one other American writer is considered greater than you."

"Who's that?" I asked. "Hemingway? Faulkner? Oh, I know, Jack London! Jack Reed? Noam Chomsky?"

"Dale Carnegie!" Gus said. "I always assumed that he was a Russian writer. *How To Win Friends and Influence People* is possibly the greatest book ever written. At least the KGB thinks so! It is part of the standard issue for an illegal agent, such as myself." He looked back and forth at both

Pointer and me, beaming like he was the guy Johnny Olson told to “Come on down!” on *The Price is Right*. Finally, to Pointer, Gus said, “You should sit down, my friend! Take a load off!”

“I cannot sit down with a... I mean...” Pointer said, backing away. He half-tripped over a chair and quickly righted himself. “I have your photo!” he shouted.

“I hope you treasure it always, as I will always treasure this meeting with you, Doctor Pointer!” Gus said.

Pointer put his camera back inside his briefcase and fumbled with the locks. “I... um... Goodbye!” he went, and sprinted toward the door.

“Oh, dear! Goodbye, Doctor Pointer! Take care driving home! Toodle-oo!” Gus called after him, fluttering his hand. To me, he said, “Such a great honor! I’m so glad you brought him with you! I wish we all could have taken a photo together, but I don’t have my camera with me. He was in such a rush, wasn’t he? Oh, dear. Oh dear, me!” He lunged at the remains of his chilidog and scarfed it down, and then licked the paper boat clean. “Waste not, want not,” Gus said. He took another slurp off his soda and let loose a satisfied belch. “Do you want to grab a lane?”

“I’m tired,” I said. “And you’re a commie. So just say what you came to say, and let’s part ways.”

“All right,” Gus said. “Fair enough. But some advice for you, my young friend: ‘Do not kick over the beehive if you want honey.’”

“What is that? Some sort of Leninist euphemism?”

“It’s a Dale Carnegie saying, Hank! Try to keep up!”

“Right, right,” I went, looking around, and then rubbing my closed eyes with my fingertips. I half-expected Allen Funt to appear from behind the counter. I opened my eyes and Gus was still there.

“Your Private Lish is trying to sell me a ‘little black book’ that is in his possession. I do not want this thing, nor do I want him to show up at my embassy trying to sell this ‘little black book’ to me. I believe this book comes from his whore-wife.”

“The Polish gal?”

“She is not Polish, Hank. She is a plant. She is a Stasi agent, an East German spy, pretending to be a Pole,” he said, suddenly becoming very serious. “You must believe that we do not want these Stasi fanatics running around America creating havoc. America is no longer the main enemy. Instability is the enemy! We need stability throughout the world for the Soviet Union to remain a nation. That is our only goal right now.”

I rolled my eyes, and snorted.

“Ask around to your soldiers, the boy soldiers, and see if your Private Lish has offered to have them marry ‘Polish’ brides,” Gus said. “You will see that I am not lying. He is trying to set up a Stasi spy ring right here in America. These Stasi are fanatics, Hank! Fanatics like we haven’t had in the Soviet Union since the days of Stalin. We are a tired people, sick of this Cold War. We don’t want it anymore. We want sausage and bread! We want chilidogs!”

“So what do you want me to do about it?” I asked him.

“Private Lish has set up a meeting with me at the 930 Club tomorrow night at ten o’clock. That’s twenty-two-hundred hours,” Gus said. “I am to come alone this time.”

“Go on.”

“I am to meet him near the stage,” Gus said. “I think you should meet him near the stage.”

“This is probably something for CID to sort out,” I said. “Or the FBI. Not me.”

“He may seem stupid, this Lish, but he is actually a wily rascal. We were to meet last night, but he must have seen my team behind me, so he ran. He won’t run if he sees you, Hank,” Gus said. “He trusts you, my friend. You are a good man. Anyone can see that written on your face. So you go

grab him and bring him in to your people. Your people can have that 'little black book.' I want nothing more to do with him, or with this matter.”

“I’m still going to report this contact to my chain of command,” I said.

“I expect nothing less than for you to do your duty,” Gus said. He stood up.

I stood up.

We shook hands.

“Tell Doctor Pointer that I will be visiting him some night,” Gus said. “I will sneak in his window and kiss him on the cheek.”

“Seriously?” I went.

“Just kidding! I like to fuck with people!” Gus said, grinning and chuckling, making his hands into pistols and waving them up and down. “To the Batmobile!” he said, and briskly strode out the door. Then he stuck his head back in for a moment and called out, “Goodbye, Hank! Goodbye!”

I waved goodbye to him, and he disappeared.

Frank, the counter guy, was pretending to wipe the counter. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Fuck if I know,” I said.

#

Back inside the barracks, I found the soldier manning the CQ desk snoozing unpeacefully in his office chair, his head tilted back and mouth wide open, cutting z’s like a bandsaw. I knocked on the counter, waking him up. “Oh, hey!” he said, snapping awake and knuckle-rubbing his eyes. “What time is it?” Big yawn. Stretch.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I said.

“Sergeant Bean,” he said, standing up, suddenly completely awake. “Some CID agent was here looking for you.”

“Did he leave a card?”

The CQ orderly looked around and found it hidden beneath a copy of *Penthouse* with Madonna on the cover. “Here you go, sergeant.”

I picked up the phone and placed it on the counter between us, and called the number. After five rings, an answering machine clunked to life. “You have reached the answering machine of CID Agent Larry Crumb,” Crumb droned. “Please leave your message after the tone. If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial nine-one-one.”

I left him a message.

I hung up and dialed the First Sergeant at home. His wife answered, and then she shouted for him. He came to the phone. “This better be good,” he said.

“Oh, it *is* good,” I said.

Inside My Quarters

I unlocked my quarters door on the male NCO's floor. All of the sergeants had their own quarters, no roommates for us. That was one of the perks of being middle management, I suppose.

Inside a room that was meant to house two—or maybe even four—soldiers, I sat alone on a lounge chair I'd filched from the dayroom. I propped my feet up on my twin bed, covered over sloppily by a green Army blanket, and closed my eyes for a moment.

I had four wall lockers that were built into the walls in each of the corners. Beige-painted cinderblock walls on two sides, a heavy wooden door in between two wall lockers. A ten-foot-high-by-six-foot-wide window, between the other two wall lockers, framed in brick, provided a view down into the courtyard. Beneath the window was a metal vent that dispensed warm or cold air, depending on the season. Against one wall was my desk, with a Mac Plus computer on top of it, hooked up to a very loud dot matrix printer. A wooden desk chair on rollers. My schoolbooks were on the shelf above the computer set-up. A dresser contained my thirteen-inch TV, rabbit ears jutting from the back, atop a VCR. An all-in-one stereo placed next to that was tuned into the local classical music station. I had a few records on top of it on loan from Pepper, and had not listened to them. I probably had no intention of listening to them. No, that's not right. I definitely didn't. The music he liked was too harsh for my nerves.

A brown Army-issued towel hung on a towel bar next to the wall locker I used for clothing.

My shoes—chlorofram low quarters, two pairs of highly glossed quick-lace boots, my jazzy new running shoes, shower shoes—were lined up under my bed in military order.

I suppose I could have put up posters, or something, but I couldn't think of anything that I'd want to have to look at all the time. So one space on the wall was dedicated to a map of D.C.

Two of the wall lockers that I didn't use for clothing contained stacks upon stacks upon jumbles of books—mostly crime books. I was particularly enamored of the works of Charles Willeford, who had been in the Army back in the brown-shoe days. I liked Raymond Chandler, too, Chester Himes, Ross MacDonald, and Jim Thompson. I'd go to used bookstores and buy as many of the yellowed and falling apart Ace paperbacks from the 1950's and 1960's as I could fit into a backpack. When I got back to my quarters, I'd upend the backpack's contents into the wall locker that was for unread books. Once I read a book, it moved over to the read pile in the other wall locker. I kept the books hidden away like they were porno.

I could feel my loneliness occupying the room, like another soldier. I did my best to keep everyone at a remove. I tried to keep my conversations with people at the superficial level. And still, every once in a while, I'd start feeling for someone, which is hard to stop doing once it creeps into you. It's like allergy season. If I don't take my pills before it starts, I end up sneezing for months no matter how many pills I slam down my throat.

I started to unlace my bullshit Reeboks, when I heard a soft rap on my door. There was no peephole, so I had to open it, and in pushed LaRouche, wearing baggy shorts, shower shoes, and a WHFS tank top. "Before you tell me to leave because this is inappropriate, let me say something," she said, one hand behind her back.

"Go ahead," I said. We stood inside the door.

She pushed it closed and leaned up against it, like she was holding it shut against some outside enemy. She pulled her hand out from behind her back and waved a handle of Jack Daniels at me.

"Come on in," I said, and gestured toward my lounge chair. I found two coffee cups in my desk drawer and gave her one. I rolled my desk chair over and sat across my bed from her.

She sat down. "So this is your room." She poured herself a stiff drink. I held out my cup and she filled it.

“Yes,” I said, and took a sip. I needed this.

“I hadn’t planned this far in advance,” she said. All the judgy-judge had gone out of her.

“Take your time,” I said. I paused for a moment, tried to smile at her, put her at ease.

“I’m scared,” she said. “I can’t sleep or eat, and the crap they put me on at Walter Reed turned my feet orange...”

“It’s okay to be scared,” I said. “I don’t know how you do it, honestly. I think you’re heroic.”

She looked over at me in a way that knocked down my defenses, because she had dropped hers. “I’m... thank you,” she said in a voice so small.

“So tell me a story about being a teacher,” I said, trying to put her at ease. “What was it like?”

#

She didn’t tell me a story about being a teacher, not really, but she did tell the story of how she ended up in the Army. We, all of us, had that story. For a soldier it was *the* story.

For the Vietnam guys, it was easy: “I was drafted.”

But for the volunteer Army... I remember my drill sergeant in basic training saying to us, “Only an *idiot* volunteers, and since this is the all-volunteer Army...”

#

Her story started with a boy, but not really. The dude was a middle-aged man, an unreconstructed hippie who taught art classes at the high school where she taught. The hippie would wander down the hall and chase away the teenaged boys who stayed after class, wanting to cop a feel off the hot little teacher. “Hey, man! Not cool!” he’d tell them, and push the little horn dogs away from her. In my mind’s eye I saw this shaggy character with huaraches on his dirty feet, hemp clothing, and a riot of hair gushing out of his scalp, face, nose holes and ear holes. And stinking like wet gym socks. He wore round, purple sunglasses in my imagination, too, because he was always hung-over from his hippie drugs.

Their relationship went quickly from dining at vegetarian restaurants to moving in together in his immobile mobile home at a trailer park peopled mostly with oil workers. “He called them environmental rapists,” she said. The trailer had four flat tires. “If he’d ever tried to get it going again, it would have probably ripped in half,” she said.

My mind filled in the blanks again. I could see a green ecology flag flapping on the side of the trailer. Inside, on one of the walls, hung a black-light poster of Jimi Hendrix. One of those elaborate marijuana-smoking gizmos sat next to a dog-eared copy of Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* atop a cable spool coffee table. The fridge was full of recyclable cartons filled with spoiling tofu. The bookshelves were jammed with commie claptrap and back copies of *High Times*. A Moody Blues album plays over and over on the eight-track. A futon couch, the mattress filled with sawdust, is the only place to sit. A massive waterbed covered by a garish bedspread occupies the entire bedroom, save for a nightstand, whose only function is to provide a resting spot for a pulsating lava lamp, because hippies don’t own alarm clocks, man.

So the two of them lived together for most of the school year in connubial bliss, in a haze of dope smoke. She did not like the stuff, and refused to join him. This was one of many sore spots, along with him reminding her daily of the wonderfulness of the 1960’s as compared to the late 1980’s, how idiotic and ungifted the current generation of slackers were, his refusal to wash dishes, laundry, etc.

What she didn’t know was that his ex-girlfriend, a sales clerk at the local Buy and Bye retail outfit who made money on the side selling Mexican speed to oil workers, was suing him for an accident on board his boat during a fishing expedition, a tiny pleasure craft. High on speed, she was wrapping and unwrapping her thumb with the boat’s anchor chain. When he punched the button to drop anchor, her thumb popped off at the first joint like a Champaign cork and her blood spurted all over him. The thumb was never recovered. She sued his insurance company for \$250,000, and the two of them broke up officially. Unofficially, the hippie and the speed freak were waiting for the

check to clear, which it did at the end of the spring term. The speed freak came by while LaRouche was at school and leapt into the hippie's arms. They piled up LaRouche's stuff on the vacant trailer pad next door and changed the lock. It was, I'm guessing, the greatest amount of manual labor the hippie had ever done in his life. Or maybe the speed freak did it all.

LaRouche came home, found her pile of stuff, tried the door, heard the slosh of the waterbed and inane giggling and whoop-tee-do of sex, and promptly set his VW microbus on fire.

She joined the Army the following day.

#

I told LaRouche about my dead dad, about growing up as the Colonel's son and my distant grandparents, no mother—all that sad bunk that I try not to think about. I was drunk. That's my only excuse.

I also told her about the KGB agent, and how I was supposed to meet Lish at the 930 Club the following day, a Friday night. She invited herself along and I didn't say no. She also told me that for weeks, Lish had been slipping Polaroid shots under the door of her quarters.

“Of what? His cat?”

“No,” she said. “His Johnson. Actually, he referred to it as his ‘love rod’ in the poetry he wrote on the back of the photos.”

“Were you supposed to be irresistibly drawn to him because you'd seen his junk?”

“I guess,” she said. She'd kept the photos in a shoebox, as evidence. She'd told Pepper about the photos, and his suggestion had been to create an art installation called, “Touch My Love Rod.” Pepper thought she could get a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

She told me that her mother was coming up for a visit on the weekend. I stumbled over to wall locker #4, the one without books or clothes in it—my attic, if you will—and found my old camera, the Soviet Leica clone. “You need a camera,” I said. “A real camera. Take pictures of your

ma and you having some fun and throw out those pictures of Lish's junk." I was on my fourth cup of whiskey, and the room had gone a bit wobbly.

"How do I use this thing?" she asked, turning it over and over in her hands like a Rubik's Cube. She apparently possessed a hollow leg, because she was stone cold sober, like she hadn't had anything to drink at all.

"Ask Pepper," I said. "All those illustrators know how to use cameras. Part of their MOS." I flopped onto the bed. The room rotated slightly to the left repeatedly. The ceiling began to rise away. "I'm not used to drinking this much."

She sat there on my lounge chair still, studying the weird camera. "Where'd you get this?" she asked.

"Fishing," I replied.

I must have passed out. When I awoke sick as a dog at zero-five-hundred-hours, I was alone in my darkened room—one shoe on, one shoe off. My heart was heavy. I yearned for the impossible.

Doctors' Notes

The Army likes to remind its soldiers in repeat-after-me fashion how little soldiers enjoy the Army.

During the morning formation run, as we trotted up and down the streets of Fort Myer, the soldiers of HQ Company, U.S. Army sang, echoing our First Sergeant:

*Up in the morning
Fore day
I don't like it
No way.*

I saw Pepper and LaRouche up ahead of me, their little heads bobbing in unison as we traversed the road. Next to me was SGT Craven, sweat oozing through his t-shirt and gushing off his forehead. He was out of breath. We'd barely gone half a mile.

"C'mon, Sergeant Craven," I said, cheering him on while attempting to ignore my own nausea. "You can do this."

He stopped and let the formation run past him, and vomited on the asphalt. It seemed like the reasonable thing to do, so I joined him. We were a pair of cheery E-5's, upending our guts into the gutter.

The First Sergeant had SFC Gauld take over cadence and jogged back to us. "Look at you, Craven!" he said to him. "I think you're making room for all that delicious barbecue you'll be cooking up this afternoon."

"Mercy," SGT Craven said, spitting. "I'm fixing to catch up with the formation."

"You go on ahead now," Top said. "Don't let my jaw-jacking stop you."

"Yes, First Sergeant!" SGT Craven said dutifully, and stumbled lead-legged toward the formation, which was rapidly getting away from us.

I stood up straight and shouldered my mouth clean with my t-shirt sleeve.

“That’s some fine haircut you got working there, Sergeant Bean,” Top said. “It’s like you’re in the Army or something.”

“Thanks, Top,” I said.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you did for Sergeant Craven yesterday,” Top said. He tapped his noggin with his index fingertip. “It’s been noted in my master file on you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Top,” I said.

“That statement is now on file as well,” Top said. He hadn’t stopped jogging in place, but I had. I stood there with my hands on my hips, feeling only slightly less shitty after regurgitation. “Let’s forget about your buffer caper for a moment, shall we, and discuss your brush with our Soviet brother.”

“That fucking guy,” I said. “He loved that PX chilidog, I can tell you that.”

“I’ve heard all those motherfuckers are radioactive since Chernobyl. Chilidog ain’t gonna kill him,” Top said. “He may grow to be fifty-feet-tall and attack Tokyo or some shit.”

“He quoted Dale Carnegie at me,” I said.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Top said, shaking his head. “They’re worse off than we thought.”

“He knew that I like to bowl,” I said. “That’s some weird spy shit right there.”

Top stopped jogging in place and put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t let those CID motherfuckers jam you up,” he said. “They get brownie points for every soldier they stick in Leavenworth. They come see you in your office, you tell them that your First Sergeant has to be in the room with you. Bring’em upstairs. You get me?”

“I get you, Top,” I said. “And most appreciated.”

“I know you think you’re passing through, that you’re not going to stay Army. But I’ll tell you something. What I’m doing now, here at the end of my career, is training my relief. That’s *you*, you dumb fuck,” Top said. He made actual human eye contact with me.

“Top—”

“Ah, come now, young sergeant. Don’t get all Tammy Faye Bakker on me,” Top said. “Your mascara will run.”

“I’ll try to contain myself,” I said. But I could feel myself blushing, and that weird warm feeling spreading from the middle of my chest.

“Let’s catch up with that formation,” Top said, turning away and beginning to run. “And try not to vomit on me,” he called out over his shoulder. “I’m too pretty to have vomit all over me.”

“Roger,” I said, trotting behind him.

He stopped and placed a hand on my chest, stopping me. “And one more thing,” he said, all serious-like. “Fix the goddamned fluorescent light in the command corridor.”

#

After the morning shit, shave and shower, and after escorting SGT Craven to breakfast for his plain egg-white omelet and dry toast, I held my standup in the basement to give everyone their assignments for the morning and to remind them that we had to go to the range at Fort Belvoir after lunch. My zoo crew shuffled around mumbling and grumbling.

To Pepper, I gave the light bulb assignment. He tried to point out that he was too short to be messing around with overheads. “That’s why the Army provides us with stepladders, Specialist,” I told him.

Moe, Larry and Curly objected to their assignment, which was applying Brasso to doorknobs throughout the building. “My baby could get hurt by the fumes!” Moe said. Larry and Curly concurred after much jostling and poking and smacking between the three of them.

“Tell you what,” I said. “You each bring me back a doctor’s note testifying to that, and I’ll take you off Brasso duty.” They took this to mean that they should go immediately to the Rader Clinic in search of said note, which they did. I shrugged it off. Better than having to listen to them bitch all morning.

SGT Craven's assignment for the day was an hour of school provided by PFC LaRouche, followed by a late-morning to late-afternoon assignment of transforming raw meat into tangy succulence. I'd sent him out to sign for the range a week prior, and he'd returned with a shot-up set of silhouettes, so he was good-to-go for his rifle qualification.

I went into the office and found SGT Craven and LaRouche huddled over a copy of *PS Magazine*, the Army's official comic book for mechanics. *PS Magazine* showed soldiers how to repair vehicles via non-super-heroic comic book characters. I peered over their shoulders while SGT Craven sounded out cartoon SGT Windsock's advice for filling out a DA Form 2404 correctly. "Luh-luh-lis... ten?"

"Listen."

"...up... true... troops!"

"Very good!"

Maybe he was making progress, I thought.

Pepper arrived with the dead bulb. He waved it around like a light saber, making the accompanying sound effects. "Strike me down, Vader, and you will only make me stronger!"

"Quit fucking around," I said, too late.

The bulb exploded, leaving behind a weird metallic scent.

"Shit," he went.

"Clean it up," I said, shaking my head. Even my good soldiers weren't all that good.

As he swept up, in stepped a man with a poorly trimmed mustache wearing a plaid sport coat that was about ten years out of date, a rayon tie with a glowing mustard and ketchup swirl pattern, a white button-down shirt, pants that belonged on a golf course and nowhere else, white loafers and a matching belt. A Smith and Wesson .38 was clipped to his belt. He showed me his badge, while glaring impatiently around the office. "Nice little preschool you got going on here," Agent Larry Crumb said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Bean... Pepper...” he noted, reading our names off our blouses. “What’s your name, sweetheart? Tomato?”

LaRouche was going to say something curt, but I tossed her a warning glance, so she said nothing, and went back to teaching SGT Craven his A-B-C’s.

“Let me get this straight,” Agent Crumb said. “You’re in charge of all this.” He waved around grandly. “So the KGB decided to get in contact with you. Naturally, they want to crack the secret of how we keep our floors so shiny.”

“It was something to do with the wife of one of my soldiers,” I said. “She’s Polish. Gus told me that she’s an East German Stasi agent who wants to plant sleepers all over America by marrying them off to soldiers.”

“Gus?”

“That’s what he called himself,” I said.

“Are you having a good time yanking my chain, Bean?”

“We should go upstairs and talk with my First Sergeant.”

“I don’t want to talk to your First Sergeant. I don’t want to talk to you either,” he said. “But here we are.” He sucked on his teeth for a moment, yawned. Shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “What’s this missing soldier’s name?”

“He’s AWOL,” I said.

“I didn’t ask that. I asked what his name is,” Agent Crumb said.

“Lish. PFC Roy Lish,” I said.

“And he’s AWOL,” Agent Crumb said.

“Yes.”

“Christ! This just gets better and better. Where’s this broad he married? They live in on-post housing?”

“They live off post,” I said. I gave him the address.

He wrote it down on a pad. It was the first thing he’d written down. “I suppose I’ll have to bring in our FBI brothers. What did this KGB joker look like?”

“Black greasy hair, slicked back. Baggy suit, red tie. An appetite for chilidogs. No discernible accent, but he phrased things strangely.”

“Uh huh,” Agent Crumb went. “He show you any ID?”

“Yes. It was all in Cyrillic.” I described its contents, while Agent Crumb tapped his Skilcraft pen on the pad, glaring at me like I was a monkey who’d suddenly and inexplicably mastered language.

“And you didn’t think of reporting this to the MP’s? Maybe have this guy arrested or escorted off post?”

“No,” I admitted. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Uh huh,” he went. “Fuck me in the heart. *Soldiers.*” He shook his head despondently.

I told him about the meet that Gus had set up with Lish, and that Lish supposedly had a codebook of some sort in his possession. Agent Crumb shrugged. “I don’t care about Lish. He’s not even a deserter yet. I especially don’t care about this bullshit ‘little black book.’ You want to go fetch him at this rock club? Knock yourself out. If he has a ‘little black book’ on him, bring it to me.” He handed me his card and I placed it on the desk in front of LaRouche and SGT Craven. LaRouche took the card and put it in a drawer.

“Don’t you want to put a wire on Sergeant Bean? Or at least follow him?” Pepper asked, broom clenched in his hands.

Crumb turned to me and asked, “How do you *not* punch this little fucker in the face every day, Bean?” jabbing the pen toward Pepper. Crumb spat on our floor, which was still speckled with cloudy bits of glass. “Maybe the Pope will visit you next week and tell you you’re up for sainthood.” He started out the door, and then stopped himself and turned back around. “KGB agents! Little

black books! Of all the horseshit I've had to listen to from soldiers for the past 14 years as a CID agent, this is the horseshittiest!" He turned back around and stalked off. We watched him stomp off down the hall.

"That went well," Pepper said.

"Better than I thought it would," I said.

"Can I come along tonight?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging, feeling bitter. "Why not? The more the merrier."

"Fill... in... box... twuh... twuh..." SGT Craven read.

"Two," LaRouche said.

"Two!" SGT Craven said.

Med Board

I went upstairs, passing by the stepladder and the open light box in the ceiling, now missing one long tube, and into the command suite. Doreen sat sucking on a mint, typing up a letter for the CO to sign. “Miz Doreen, how are you today?” I asked her.

“Oh, Lord,” she said, mint clacking on teeth as it went from tongue to cheek. “Top is not happy with your little man!”

“Pepper?” I went.

“That’s the one. Little smart-ass you sent up to change the light. Don’t know what he said to him, but Top in a bad mood now,” Doreen said, clackity-clacking on the IBM Selectric as she talked.

“I’ll consider myself warned,” I said. I walked over to his closed office door and gave it a rap.

“Enter,” I heard Top say.

I opened the door and found Top and Agent Crumb having the best of times, Crumb sitting with half-an-ass on Top’s desk.

“Here he is now,” Top said.

“Secret Agent Man,” Crumb said, snickering. He slipped off the desk. “Sayonara, bud.”

“Later date, Larry,” Top said.

Crumb slipped past me, shot me a wink. I watched him leave the office, snark a few words at Doreen, and depart.

“I *was* coming up here to let you know that a CID agent spoke to me, but it looks like I’m too late,” I said.

“Larry’s all right,” Top said. “You got nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” I said. “You and Pepper have words or something?”

“That little half-shit,” Top said, his mood darkening for a moment. “Forget it.” Top brightened back up. “Got orders in for him this morning. His security clearance came through. He’s not our problem anymore. Off to the Pentagon with his ass.”

“Oh,” I went.

“You want some good news?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Private Snuffy Smith? That limp-dicked, crutch-crawling, shamming, mumbling motherfucker?”

“Clowes,” I said.

“The med board came back with the decision on him. He’s sixty-percent disabled, and we’re kicking him out,” Top said.

“Good,” I said.

“He has to get to Personnel Assistance by twelve-hundred-hours to start his paperwork.”

I looked at my watch. He had about an hour on a Friday to get down there. “I’ll tell him,” I said.

“Tell him at eleven-fifty-five,” Top said. “Let’s see if that little shammer can move.”

I grinned. “Yes, Top.”

“Your girlfriend’s med board results came back, too.”

“My girlfriend?” I went.

“Don’t play with me,” Top said. “LaRouche. The Cajun firecracker.”

“We’re not—” I gathered myself. “Nothing unprofessional has ever occurred between us.”

“What was she doing coming out of your quarters at zero-one-hundred-hours, then?”

“I can explain,” I said.

“Don’t,” Top said. “Don’t explain. Don’t let this happen again, either. You taking her on your little mission tonight? To find that peckerwood Lish?”

“Her and Pepper,” I said.

“Well, shit,” Top said. He spat into his metal wastebasket. “As long as you have a chaperone.”

“If anyone’s sleeping with her, it’s probably Pepper,” I said, a bit too defensively.

“I don’t want to hear your version of barracks gossip,” Top said. “Anyway, LaRouche is seventy-five-percent disabled. She’s going to be discharged. Be a nice little check coming for her every month the rest of her life.”

My mouth opened up, and then closed.

Top got serious. “What did I tell you when you took charge down there? Don’t get attached.”

“Basket of puppies,” I said.

“Basket of puppies,” Top said.

I gathered myself for a moment. “Change of subject. I have a question for you, Top,” I said.

“If this is about why I’m in a photo album with your father, we can talk about that off-line over barbecue this afternoon when you get back from Fort Belvoir,” Top said. He sat back in his chair. “Anything else?”

“When does LaRouche have to report to Personnel Assistance?”

“This afternoon if she wants out right away. Monday, if not,” he said. “I’m guessing she’ll go on Monday. She was a good soldier.”

I felt myself tearing up a bit. “Yes,” I said, my face gone hot and my voice cracking despite great effort to control myself. “She was.”

#

I spoke to Pepper first. I found him out in the hallway, standing on the top step of the stepladder, twisting the tube in place. “How’s it going up there?”

“I feel very tall,” he said. “And mighty. You might even say ‘almighty.’ Let there be light!” The tube flickered to life. He tromped down a step, snapped the light box back together, and came down.

“That’s your final act as a BMS-er,” I said. I shook his hand and handed him a file folder with his orders in it.

He opened it up and let loose a little whoop.

“Be on your best behavior over there, Pepper,” I said. “If you end up coming back here, I’ll kick your ass every day.” I smiled at him. “Swear to God.”

“What else you got there?” he asked, pointing at the two other folders.

“None of your fucking business,” I said. I slapped him on the arm. “Do me a favor and put the ladder away.”

“Do I have to go qualify today?” he asked.

“Couldn’t hurt,” I said. “You’ll end up having to qualify anyway if you don’t.”

He trotted away with the aluminum ladder under his arm, banging it loudly into the walls.

#

I found LaRouche sitting in my office chair looking none-the-worse for all the drinking we’d done the night before.

“Thanks for the whiskey and talk last night,” I said, shutting the door behind me. The door almost never was shut.

“What?” she asked, seeing my face. “What is it?”

I handed her the folder. “I can leave, if you need a moment alone,” I said.

She read through the folio of forms and letters. “What does it all mean?” she asked. “Can I appeal this?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

She flicked through page after page, and then back again, as if looking for an out. “What happens now?” she asked.

“How quickly would you like to leave the Army?” I asked. “If you want to get out by the end of next week, you can go start your paperwork right now. If not, you can wait until Monday.”

“I want to talk to my mama first,” she said. “She’s supposed to get here this evening, check into the motel.”

“So not today,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Not today.”

“You were a good soldier,” I said. I think a little emotion may have slipped out.

“Stop it,” she said, her voice gone wobbly. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“I’ll step out for a moment.”

“Please stay,” she pleaded.

“I’m opening the door,” I said. I opened it. Moe, Larry and Curly were standing there, waving signed letters from their respective doctors at me. I took the letters over to LaRouche. “File these for me, will you?”

LaRouche dropped them into the wastebasket.

“Go sham elsewhere today,” I said to the trio.

“We ain’t shamming! We’re pregnant!” said Moe, their leader.

I stood staring at them, hands on hips, patience at an end. “Go be pregnant elsewhere, then. Get out of my sight!”

They hefted themselves along the hallway, muttering aloud about what an impertinent dude I was.

“Have you seen Clowes?” I asked LaRouche.

“He’s around.” She’d opened up the folder again, and was reading it through.

I walked out into the hallway and sighed. I figured Clowes was either hiding in his quarters, or asleep in a shower stall, pretending to clean it. I found him pretending to be transiting the dayroom on the first floor, crutching his way back and forth in front of the color Magnavox that had been gathering dust there since the mid-1970's, all the colors separated out into blurry pinks and purples. Phil Donahue grilled an obese transsexual about her eating habits, both their faces doubling and twisting inside the tube.

I checked my watch. Clowes had seven minutes to make it to Personnel Assistance. "Clowes!" I shouted. He stopped and painfully twisted his neck so that his poor hurting noggin was turned toward me. He'd added a pair of thick glasses to his repertoire. His fishbowl eyes seemed like they should have been on the shitty TV behind him. "Get over here!"

He clumped on over slowly, painfully. "Muzz jus come to zee oo."

"Do you want to leave the Army next week?"

"Huh?"

I quickly explained that his med board results had come out.

He tossed his funhouse glasses off and they skittered across the floor. His crutches clapped the floor on either side of him. He snatched the paperwork out of my hands. He stared at the paperwork, flipping through it, quickly realizing that all of his shammer dreams were about to come true.

"You have," I checked my watch, "five minutes to get to Personnel Assistance if you want to leave the Army by next Friday."

He stole a glance up at me and could tell that I wasn't kidding. He hugged the paperwork to his chest. His face turned feral and mean and knowing. He sprinted out the door like a gazelle.

Range Life

The trip from Fort Myer to Fort Belvoir is only seventeen miles, and theoretically should only take, at most, half an hour. It would, if you didn't count the nightmare that is Washington, D.C. area traffic. We rode over there in an un-air-conditioned Bluebird bus, painted a minty green, with a U.S. government plate on the back and **US ARMY** painted on the sides.

In the Pre-Persian Gulf War dog days of summer, the good people of Virginia/Maryland/D.C. did not think of soldiers as saintly conquerors of evil, but rather as dull-witted, uniformed civil servants who were just as contemptible as the regular variety of civil servant. So they weren't exactly waving our bus into the lane ahead of them. More the opposite, really. As the Bluebird lumbered along, we received vicious honks and a variety of obscene hand gestures. The driver, a retired Marine Corps sergeant named Max, took it all in stride. He'd been driving buses his entire adult life, in and out of and for the military. He was used to abuse.

The bus came equipped with a radio/cassette player and a pair of tinny speakers, out of which came the insanely elastic voice of a young Mariah Carey. "She's got some pipes on her," Max admitted.

Only about half of my soldiers were making this trip. The rest had their excuses—typed, stamped, signed and in triplicate. I was heartened to see Pepper sitting behind me. He had his headphones on and a Walkman knock-off in his lap, blasting punk music into his gourd, his eyes closed, his head resting against the window. The rest of them were behaving like junior high schoolers on a day trip to the museum, throwing stuff at each other, yelling, carrying on in an unsoldierly manner. I walked up and down the center aisle of the bus, telling them to knock it off.

I decided to canvass the male troops, the ones who were alone in their seats, asking them if they'd been approached by Lish. "Fuck yeah," one after another told me. The story that emerged

was that as Lish and the notional male soldier (one each) were cleaning the latrine, Lish would say, “How would you like to double your take-home pay?”

“How would I do that?”

“By getting married!”

“I don’t know no women.”

“I do. My sister-in-law wants to come to America. She’s Polish, like my wife.”

“Shit, I don’t know.”

“You get married, and you get to live off post. You get an allowance for housing. You get all sorts of shit. Look it up! And all that my sister-in-law wants is to come to America. You don’t even have to live with her if you don’t want to! But she’s hot, I’m telling you, like my wife. Don’t you think my wife’s hot?”

“I don’t know your wife.”

“Come on over to the apartment that the Army’s paying for after work. Eat some chow that my wife fixed up, that the Army paid for! Separate rats when you get married, buddy! No more mess hall dining! There’s more of them perks, too. Look it up if you don’t believe me! All’s I’m asking for is a five-hundred dollar introductory fee.”

Lish would also offer his wife up for sexual favors for a price, these soldiers told me.

I remembered how Gus had referred to her as his “whore-wife.”

Most of the soldiers did not take Lish up on his two highly dubious offers, or at least did not admit to taking him up on them, though one soldier said, “His wife is pretty hot, but that food she made was disgusting.” I probably would have liked the food, having grown up near Chicago. Pierogi, sauerkraut, sausage and brown bread were kind of my thing. But not prostitutes.

One soldier told me that Lish said he was planning on running for Congress after the Army, that the only way to move up through the ranks in this world was by punching certain tickets, and that military service was one of them. This made Lish’s decision to go AWOL seem slightly strange.

I mean, didn't he figure that his future constituents would find out that he'd run away from the Army? I don't know.

The heat inside the bus was baking away all of my better thoughts. Luckily, I'd remembered to bring along a cooler full of sodas. I passed the sodas around, all of them dripping with ice water and condensation. We were halfway to Fort Belvoir, stuck on an Interstate tightly packed with cars scooting forward ten feet at a time.

No air was circulating save for what came from the tiny fan bolted above Max's head, which blew a cone of hot air about three feet. Max himself was not sweating. I asked him his secret. He said that he'd learned not to sweat in the Marine Corps. I said that was fine for him, but what was a soldier supposed to do? "Sweat, I guess," Max said, and he chuckled a bit. Marines have always considered soldiers an inferior breed. Maybe we are.

#

The range was an indoor one, ten lanes in all. A paper target was held with a clip. A remote control allowed the paper target to come back and forth on a wire. Each lane had a sandbag for the prone position. Each lane also came with a rifle, an M-16 modified to fire .22 rounds. The range master gave each soldier two magazines of 20 rounds each. In order to qualify, you had to hit ten tiny silhouettes with 25 of 40 rounds. I'm oversimplifying this, of course. Each of the silhouettes was a simulation of a certain distance away. The 50-meter one, at the bottom, was large. The 300-meter ones, at the top, were small. Ideally, you'd shoot each of the little silhouettes four times—twice from the prone position, twice from the standing position.

My soldiers, being the bottom-barrel troops that they were, had problems nicking the paper that the targets were printed on. The ones who didn't qualify went to the back of the line, where I showed them all the techniques that we'd been taught in basic training, and that these soldiers had clearly forgotten.

“Breathe in, and then while you’re letting it out, gently squeeze the trigger. It should come as a surprise when the weapon fires,” I said.

They all pretended to listen to me while eating junk out of the AAFES vending machines in the lobby. The latest craze was ketchup-flavored potato chips and honey-mustard pretzel knobs that were shipped in from some outfit in Pennsylvania that was obviously trying to kill off American taste buds once and for all. Perhaps the Rosicrucians were to blame. I made a mental note to ask Pointer later.

For me, it was my first time firing such a weakened version of the M-16. I usually hit 40 out of 40, but I only got 38 hits. That bothered me.

After my soldiers cycled through a couple of times, I started helping them out. When I checked their targets, I’d have my Skilcraft Bic pen out. The business end of the pen is the same size as a .22 round, so I’d poke through just enough of the targets that each of them would pass with 25 hits, and then would sign the bottom. They each signed the bottom, as well, and then I gathered up the sheets, folded them up, and dropped them into my map bag. All of my soldiers qualified that day.

I was proud of Pepper. He got 32 hits without my assistance on his first try. On his way out, he smirked at me and called out, “No brass, no ammo, sergeant!” On a basic training range, with real 5.56 mm rounds, privates report, “No brass, no ammo, drill sergeant,” meaning that they aren’t taking any expended shells (brass) or live ammunition (ammo) with them off the range.

After the whole shooting match came to a close, I found Pepper outside with his orange range plugs still stuck in his ears, happily slurping down a can of lemon-lime Slice soda. He popped out the range plugs and asked, “Where’s Eden?”

“Eden?” I went.

“PFC LaRouche,” he said. “Why didn’t she come with us today?”

“She’ll have to tell you about that,” I said. I felt vaguely guilty.

#

The trip back to Fort Myer was hot and exhausting. The soda had run out. Soldiers sucked on the diminished ice cubes they'd found floating in the cooler.

I invited Max over to the weekly HQ Company picnic. "It's our summer thing," I told him. "The NCO's all chip in and buy the meat for Sergeant Craven. He is a grill master par excellence."

"I would," Max said, "but my wife wants me to go to the opera with her tonight."

"Opera?" I went.

"Marines can go to the opera, if we want," Max said defensively.

It seemed like a strange pursuit for a Marine to take up, even if his wife was behind it. I told him so.

"You'll get married one of these days, Sergeant Bean," he said. "Then you'll find out what a wife can make you do."

#

He was wrong about that. I never did get married. I considered it once, but that would be many years in the future. I met a German woman while I was convalescing at Landstuhl Army Hospital near K-town in good old Deutschland. On a day pass, I went to a movie theater and watched *Spiderman 2*, dubbed over in German. I can speak a few phrases in German, but never bothered to learn the language. Still and all, it was nice to sit like a human being and watch a popcorn movie. I sipped a Weissbier, ate a soft pretzel that had been sliced in half like a bun and had salami and cheese and horseradish mustard inside. The waitress who'd served it sat down with me and quietly translated the movie back into English into my ear. The puffs of air that traveled along with her voice were most pleasant. I fell in love with her right away. She was shaped like a woman, with dollops of silky hair bursting from her head, soft lips, suckable earlobes, and a beautiful little jut of chin. I rented a room in a Gasthaus near K-town and turned it into our home, though she did not live there most of the time and neither did I. Before and during and after sex, I loved to run my

hands up and down her soft and voluptuous body. She purred and gasped. She made me feel gentle and wanted, like I was a real person. We went on like this for a few weeks, but she was young, only 22, and lived at home with her parents, who did not like her dating an older, hardened American soldier. They'd seen what we were capable of during their evening news telecasts. They'd lived with the American presence in their country for more than half a century. We were loud and vulgar. It was too much to bear, giving their only daughter away to an American soldier. Her father explained this to me, after confronting me at the Gasthaus with such a plea in his voice that I left her alone after that. Anyway, I didn't think much of myself. I thought of the darkness I sequestered inside. She left a teary message on my cellphone. I took the battery out of the cellphone. Soon, I was well enough to go back to Iraq, and did so.

#

I suppose it's within the realm of possibility that I could get married, but it doesn't seem likely at this late date.

"I suppose I will get married one of these days," I told Max, as the bus lurched forward ten feet and stopped and prepared to lurch forward ten more. "Maybe someday."

Picnic

“Mmm, mmm, *mmm*, Sergeant Craven! This is good barbecue!” Top said, his lips wet with sauce, his eyes lit up like Christmas morning. We were all in our civvies, our work week concluded. I had on a plaid camp shirt, untucked, jeans and my silly-ass Reeboks. Top wore a pressed t-shirt from his days at the NCO Academy in Bad Toelz. SGT Craven wore a brown BDU undershirt that was stained with grease, sweat and his homemade barbecue sauce.

We sat on a bench together at the picnic tables underneath some trees in our little courtyard surrounded on three sides by our tall barracks. The late afternoon sun splashed oranges and yellows across the road. Off across the parking lot, past a short brick wall, in the cemetery, we could see the mast of the USS Maine poking into the sky. The war dead, so many of them, were planted in the earth over there. They cussed at us. They wanted barbecue, too, I knew.

SGT Craven sat down with a stack of pork ribs, his face alight with pure joy. He was a soldier’s soldier in his heart, even though his broken head refused to cooperate. He only wanted his buddies to be happy, and once a week, all summer long, he accomplished his mission.

I stabbed at the sliced-up hot links on my plate with a plastic fork. “This notional restaurant,” I said. “Does it need investors? I have a little money saved up.” During my first two assignments in the Army—acting as a tripwire in Germany and pretending to be a Soviet soldier in an isolated Army training post in Cali—I had been able to save up quite a bit of dough. Even here, next to our nation’s capital, I wasn’t much of a spender. I loafed around in my quarters reading books most weekends, blissfully alone. Sometimes I went to one of the Smithsonian museums, which were free, carrying along with me a sack containing a food item or two filched from the mess hall. College, bowling and a pitcher of beer occupied one or two (or three) weeknights. Most of my paycheck went into a savings account. Plus, I had the Colonel’s death benefits.

“Costs about a hundred thousand dollars to start up a restaurant,” Top said. “We’ll have to get a loan.”

“I want in,” I said. “I could die fat and happy at such a restaurant.”

“What do you say, Sergeant Craven?” Top asked him. “You want to cut Bean in?”

“Ab-so-pos-i-tive-ly-lutely,” SGT Craven said. He wiped his hands using half a roll of paper towels and reached over to me.

My hands were unsullied by barbecue sauce, so I didn’t wipe mine and reached over and shook his. That was the day that Craven, Jackson & Bean Real BBQ was born. We would stand the restaurant up in Chicago, SGT Craven’s and my home, two years later. I was the unseen partner until 2010. By the end of the 1990’s, we had a photo of President Clinton on the wall, unashamedly digging in. He signed the photo, “Damn, boys! Damn!” Top posits that we were the ones who caused the former president to have a quadruple bypass. For a while after he left office, Top said, it seemed like Bill would make up excuses to come to Chicago (“I was at a conference, fellas! Thought I’d drop by! Don’t nobody tell Hillary!”) just so he could eat our barbecue. I don’t doubt it.

Agent Larry Crumb strutted over jauntily and shook hands with Top. Crumb was out of his work clothes as well. He wore a t-shirt that read, CID HOMICIDE. OUR DAY BEGINS WHEN YOURS ENDS.

He grabbed a plate of barbecue and sat across from me. After sucking the meat from a rack of ribs and chugging down a can of Bud, he peered across the picnic table and said, “Andrei Oleyevich Ostrokovsky.”

“What?”

“You know him better as ‘Gus,’” Agent Crumb said. He pulled a folded-up printout out of his back pocket and flipped it over to me. I unfolded it. Sure enough, there was a blurry photo of Gus, next to some text confirming that he was indeed a KGB agent.

“That’s him,” I said. I folded it back up and shoved it in my back pocket.

“I’m told that all of the KGB agents now outside of Mother Russia are the fuck-ups. The losers. The good ones are back in Russia, scheming to take over everything that could possibly be privatized into a moneymaking business. Whatever this joker is up to, it probably has nothing to do with KGB business.”

“Probably,” I said.

“Who knows?” Crumb said. “The FBI has been wrong before. Pass me those paper towels, will you?” SGT Craven handed him a roll. Crumb wiped his chin and hands. “If he approaches you again, let me know. If he approaches you on this post, have him fucking arrested. Think you can manage that, Bean?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Spoke with that Polish broad this afternoon. If she’s a spy, she’s a damn good one. She comes across as being dumber than a box of rocks. She offered to suck my dick for ten bucks, too. Tempting, but not as tempting as these pork ribs. Holy shit, boys. You should go into business with Craven here. You’d make a killing.”

The three of us laughed, and then looked at each other.

“You already did go into business,” Crumb concluded. “Good for you.”

#

I took a stroll among the soldiers, keeping an eye peeled for bad behavior. Beer consumption leads to bad decisions. Once, during an organizational day in Germany, a buddy of mine had a few beers and decided to tell the sergeant major exactly what he thought of him. That didn’t work out well. More recently, at Fort Myer, a drunk soldier who belonged to me stole a bread truck outside a Burger King a little before dawn after a night of drinking. The driver was inside the restaurant, delivering buns. The soldier went on a joyride, eventually crashing the truck into a retention pond. I visited him in jail. “When am I getting out?” he asked me. I told him he was eligible for free legal aid from the judge advocate, but not from me.

These kids—they get a taste of freedom away from home and some cash in their pockets and they lose their goddamned minds.

I saw Moe, Larry and Curly sharing a bench, eating, burping and smacking each other around. Across from them sat the Spec-4 who I'd detailed out to the mess hall. He smiled, and I could see every gap in his teeth filled with strings of meat. He was the baby-daddy for Curly, I'd heard. That kid was doomed.

The soldiers were on their best behavior. When the food is good, really good, I suppose it's hard to concentrate on anything else.

I found LaRouche and Pepper sitting together on the ground, their backs up against an outside barracks wall, studying the camera I'd lent LaRouche. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that looked like they'd been worn by someone who'd been shotgunned to death. The t-shirt advertised a band called The Pee Tanks. I've never seen the point of overpaying for a t-shirt for the privilege of becoming an advertising billboard. His formerly black high-top All Stars were worn through at the heels. She wore a summer dress and a pair of Keds. I crouched down. "How are we doing? Get enough to eat?"

"Jim Dandy," Pepper said with a slight edge to his voice.

"I told him," LaRouche said. "He's not happy."

"She's my best friend," Pepper said. "Of course I'm not happy."

"You don't know how to shut off your emotions," LaRouche said. "The sergeant here could teach you a thing or two about that."

He looked at me skeptically. "Why would I want to shut off my emotions? What did my emotions ever do to me?"

Judging from his face, I'd say his emotions beat him up on a fairly regular basis. "Don't get drunk," I told him. "We're going on a mission tonight. I know how much you love capers."

"I haven't had anything to drink except Kool Aid," Pepper said.

“Me, too,” LaRouche said. “Look at him,” she said, pinching Pepper’s cheek. “He’s so sweet.”

He shrugged his head away. “Hey! I am *not* sweet!”

“He’s even sweeter when he’s denying he’s sweet,” she said, giggling.

“Where’d you get this thing?” Pepper said, changing the subject. He waved the camera at me.

“Like I told LaRouche, I got it fishing,” I said. I saw Pointer out of the corner of my eye, parked across the street in his shit Dodge, the engine running, blue smoke burbling out of the tailpipe. This wasn’t his day to teach, at least I didn’t think he had an evening class on Friday. The Army College Office was on the other side of the post. “See you two later,” I told the pair. “Stay out of trouble.” I walked across the street and rapped on the closed driver’s side window. Pointer pretended, badly, that he was surprised to see me. He cranked the window down. “What’s up?” I asked him.

“Oh! Hello!” A book on tape was playing through the stereo speakers. It took me a moment to realize that it was Pointer’s voice on the tape, intoning portentously, “Nowhere in the realm of nature will one find the alchemical creations that are the hallmark of—” He popped out the tape. “I’m reviewing it,” he said. “One must constantly be on the lookout for errors in one’s own thought.”

“I see,” I said. I didn’t.

“And how are you this fine afternoon, Hank?”

“Outstanding,” I said. “I suppose there’s some reason why you’re sitting here reviewing your tape at Fort Myer. As opposed to your living room, that is.”

“I thought I might see...” He looked around, and seeing no one within twenty-five meters, he whispered anyway, “...that *man!*”

“Gus,” I said. “The KGB agent.”

“Shhh!” he went, his eyes a bit wild.

“So you’re on a stakeout, are you?”

“Hmm, yes. That’s good. A *stakeout*.” He was trying on the concept for size, wriggling his bottom on his vinyl bench seat.

“This ought to help,” I said. I pulled the quartered sheet of paper out of my back pocket and handed it to him. He unfolded it and stared into the face of evil, a.k.a. Andrei Oleyevich Ostrokovsky.

He gasped. “So it’s true!”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I said. “I’m told all the good KGB agents are back in Moscow starting their own Dairy Queen franchises. That begs the question of what this dude is doing playing Secret Agent Man in our post bowling alley.”

“Don’t let them fool you!” Pointer said. “What we have here are the last gasps of totalitarianism, the final stomp of the jackboot on the faces of the oppressed.”

“Oppressed?” I went.

“Oppressed, suppressed, depressed!” Pointer said. He ran his hand over his bad comb over. He was sweating fiercely in that car. Warm air blew into my face. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his t-shirt.

“You should come over and have some barbecue as my guest. It’s very good.” I was concerned that he’d pass out in that hot box of a car and maybe die. “At least let me bring you over something to drink.”

“No, no, Hank. I shan’t allow you to tarry on my account.”

Shan’t? Tarry? “All right. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Would you like a copy of my latest tape?” Pointer asked. “No charge!”

“I suppose.” I stepped back and allowed him out of the vehicle. He opened up the back door and pulled a cassette out of a shoebox.

“I hand you this with no small amount of trepidation,” Pointer said. “It’s my first tape in a new series of scholarship I’ve taken up.”

Peering through the flimsy plastic case was the face of Pointer, his eyes narrowed skeptically, eyebrows contorted, his mouth twisted to the side. He held up a hand, palm forward, which had another eyeball embedded in it, also squintingly skeptical. Yet another eye, less squinty, appeared in the nuclear explosion behind him. The eye came from the pyramid on the back of the dollar bill, I quickly realized. *From Shakespeare to Oppenheimer: The Concealed Conspirators, Part One*, was written in drips of blood underneath all this mess, seemingly by the world’s smallest man wielding the world’s tiniest paintbrush. I opened it up, and found an unmarked Maxell ninety-minute cassette tape. I closed the case and shoved it in my front pocket. “Can’t wait to dig in, Professor,” I said.

“You’ll find that all of my research is sound.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

He shut the back door of the car and slid into the front seat, and shut that door. “I’m keeping an eye on the wall,” he said through the open window. “I’ll honk three times in rapid succession if this KGB agent tries to slip in again. Don’t you worry.”

“Three times. Got it.”

He rolled up the window, popped the tape back in, and continued his vigil, kept company by the sound of his own voice.

#

Top was waiting for me when I got back. “Crumb still around?” I asked him.

“He took off,” Top said. “Who is that? In our parking lot?”

“That is Professor Hubert Pointer, Ph.D. He’s a crank, but mostly harmless. Teaches evenings here and spends the rest of his time convinced the Rosicrucians are taking over the world.”

“The guys with the ad on the back of comic books?”

“Yes,” I said. “All part of the plan.”

“Interesting.” Top thought about it for a second. “Well, not really.” He handed me a beer.

I took it from him, popped it open, took a quick sip. “I have about ten grand saved up,” I told him. “And I have dad’s G.I. insurance money.”

“Outstanding. That’s enough to get your name on the sign.”

“I’m handy with a mop. If you need a janitor, too.”

“Haven’t we discussed this already?” Top asked. “You’re staying in. Doing your twenty. Then we’ll talk about your mop skills.”

“I don’t know if the Army would want me to stick around.”

“Are you fishing for compliments? Because if you are, that’s sickening.” He reached into the cooler and got himself a PBR, popped it. We clinked cans. “Your NCOER’s all read like you’re a model soldier, including the one I just wrote up for you. You’re doing an outstanding job as King of the Retards.”

“Thanks, Top.” I still wasn’t convinced I would re-up, but Top was breaking me down, using his leadership mojo on me. I looked around. The soldiers sat nursing their swollen bellies. That song from the movie about the rich guy falling in love with a prostitute vibrated from the boombox. I’d seen half of that movie at the Fort Myer Theater a week or two back, but walked out. I didn’t get why people were laughing. I thought the movie was sickening. Plus, Pepper was with me and had gotten himself kicked out of the theater for arguing with the movie.

A few racks of ribs remained on a platter on the main picnic bench, the plaid tablecloth sticky with sauce, blue flies hovering about. SGT Craven smiled out at all the people he’d satisfied, sitting on the table, his feet on the bench, his hands woven together.

“When I’m a P-F-C again, it’ll be good knowing you’re maintaining the standards in my Army,” Top said. P-F-C meaning, Private Fucking Civilian.

“I’m giving it a lot of thought.”

“I haven’t forgotten about that talk we were going to have about your father. But first things first. Better get a working party together to clean up.”

“Roger.” I turned toward the table with Moe, Larry and Curly, and Snaggletooth. “Listen up! Everyone sitting at this table. You’re on my detail!”

Groans.

“Thank you for volunteering,” I said.

Exploding Pinto

The lights dimmed in the western sky, turning everything honey-colored. Top and I sat together on the picnic bench each nursing a can of beer, staring off across the street, where Pointer still sat in his Dodge. He'd finally rolled his window down and turned off his engine.

"What was it like, growing up with that man as your father?" Top asked me.

I let the question sit there for a moment, gaining its own gravity. I sucked at a piece of meat stuck between molars. "I spent most of my childhood in my grandparents' house," I said. "Spent my summers with the Colonel, mostly. I don't know. Did you know him?"

"Maybe," Top said. "I don't know. I served with him twice. Once in wartime, once in peacetime." He took a sip, stretched his sinewy face around like it was something he'd put on a long time ago and kept on, even though it didn't fit anymore, and maybe it didn't fit to begin with.

"That photo. The one that Sergeant Gauld had in his album."

"Yeah, fuck." He scratched at the side of his face. "I met your father in Saigon, basically. I was on leave. Wasn't even on duty. Tet was supposed to be truce time with those little motherfuckers." He turned his head and looked at me. "Your father," he said in a harsh whisper, conspiratorially. He placed his hands on his knees. He blinked his eyes rapidly, looked down at the space between his feet. "Strange man."

#

Top had been riding around the city on a rented bicycle, enjoying his time off from the war, trying not to think about the wife who'd left him and who'd taken his baby girl with her. He pedaled around solo, enjoying the chaos and the scents of the city, the burbling motorbikes, the spicy foods sizzling, the crush of people. In an instant, he found himself on the ground, half deaf from an explosion. "Out of nowhere... out of goddamned nowhere, this Army captain appeared in a

perfectly starched fatigue uniform, a pistol in his hand!” He fired several shots in rapid succession. “I saw three, four people drop. He holsters the pistol, helps me to my feet, and says, ‘It’s time to fight, soldier.’ I say, ‘Yes, sir.’ And he leads me back to a barracks, unlocks the weapons room, and hands out rifles and ammunition to everyone there. Cooks, clerks, anyone in uniform. He tells us the embassy is in trouble, gathers us up and leads us over there, where we find ourselves in the middle of a firefight. I’m thinking, ‘Holy shit!’ But the holy shit moments with your father kept coming. I never saw no man with less regard for his own personal safety.” He stopped talking. He stopped blinking. “This is not easy,” Top said.

“You don’t have to go on,” I said. “I think I got the picture.”

“He saved my life. He saved a lot of lives. But I’ll tell you something. He was a strange cat.”

“I know, I know.”

#

I remembered digging through the Colonel’s desk drawers in the BOQ and finding his award citations, the medals in blue plastic cases, a photo of him with Spiro Agnew, and his pistol, the M1911 that he would eventually use to end his own life.

I remembered him coming home from work and saying, “Hey Tiger, want to throw the old horse hide around?” and we’d go out on the parade field and long toss to each other. He claimed it built up your arm, and maybe that was the purpose of it, but I think what it did for him was make conversation impossible.

We’d sit in front of the TV for dinner, eating fish sticks (his favorite), mushy canned corn and oven-crisped french fries. Dad covered the entire meal with ketchup.

He liked scotch. He enjoyed a cigar every once in a while. He wore a salesman’s smile, authentic as naugahyde, and took to wearing dark sunglasses when not in uniform. He swore a lot when there were no soldiers around. In front of the men, he spoke like a priest. He was as chaste as one, too. I don’t remember any women hanging around during the summers I was with him. One

morning over breakfast I asked him why. “Ah, cunts are too much trouble, Tiger,” he told me. He followed that up with, “Let’s do some side-straddle hops.” He leapt to his feet and performed jumping jacks in the little kitchenette in his sock feet, sagging boxers and wife beater. He performed twenty in loud cadence and sat back down. “Don’t let your eggs get cold,” he said, puffing, gesturing at my plate.

I remembered all this sitting there with Top, and didn’t say a word. “He was a hard man to know,” I said.

Top poured the rest of his beer onto the ground. “I got to get home,” he said. “Anytime you want to talk about your father, you come get me.”

“Roger,” I said.

#

I didn’t want to go back to my room. If I did, I’d probably fall asleep. So I sat in the dayroom watching the headache-inducing Magnavox. The guy who was on *The Rockford Files* was starring in a Western in which he was a retired riverboat gambler living out in Arizona or New Mexico. I sat and pretended to watch it. I was grateful that it wasn’t *Twin Peaks*, which was Pepper’s obsession. If I didn’t hide from him on Thursday nights, he’d track me down and force me to watch it. That may have even been the reason why I took Pointer’s Thursday night class, so I wouldn’t have to watch that show. I drew the line when Pepper popped this David Lynch movie into his VCR that involved a squalling, misshapen baby and a man with tall hair. I stood up, said, “Fuck this movie and fuck you,” and threatened to have him work in the scullery over at the mess hall if he said one word. I exited his quarters. The little bastard sat there and beamed like a lunatic. I spent way too much time with him.

Basket of puppies moment.

I turned off the sickening old TV set and went up to my quarters. I dug around in the mess of books in my unread books wall locker and found a good one, *The Murder of Ann Avery*. It pitted a

psychoanalyst against a gang of juvenile delinquents in the mid-1950's. It featured dopers and uptight company men. I took it downstairs and read for a while, and completely lost myself in it.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, and there stood my two accomplices, ready for a night on the town. Pepper was dressed the same as he was at the picnic. LaRouche was dressed in her mechanic's coveralls, two sizes too big for her and rolled at the sleeves and legs, and her combat boots. Her red hair was wild. "Mama called. Her car broke down in southern Virginia, so she won't be here until tomorrow at the soonest."

"Let's go!" Pepper said.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and jangled them. "I'm ready," I said.

#

I placed the book on the dash, and started up the old Pinto. Pepper called shotgun. LaRouche slipped into the backseat. My Philco radio started up with the car. It was set on an oldies station. The Kinks were warbling about the summertime.

Pepper reached into my shirt pocket and produced the Pointer tape. "Whoa, ho! What's this? A mixtape?"

"A gift from my college professor," I said. I pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the Hatfield gate.

"Let's listen to this!" Pepper said, becoming happily agitated. He turned on the overhead light and studied the cover illustration. He pulled it out of the case, held it up so LaRouche could see it.

"This guy's a college professor?" LaRouche asked.

"Let's hope so," I said. I looked in the rear view mirror. "He's right behind us."

Pepper and LaRouche each spun in their seats and stared out the back window. I turned off the overhead light so they could see. "You sure that's him?" LaRouche asked.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. I’d kept an eye on him when we piled in the car, watched his headlights turn on. “I’m going to try not to lose him.”

“Oh, but this car is hard to miss,” Pepper said, with reverence. “An exploding Pinto.” He shoved the tape back into my pocket.

#

The car was a gift, but not really, from my uncle Milo, my father’s brother, on my final visit to the family home in Smithville.

I’d invited myself home for Christmas my first year back stateside, after I was assigned to the National Training Center in California. A fellow soldier who was also from the Chicago area offered to let me ride along with him in exchange for gas money. I thought it sounded like an adventure, so I agreed and called my grandparents. They sounded less than thrilled, but said they’d allow me to stay there with them over the holidays. “We’re on a fixed income,” my grandfather told me. “So don’t expect anything fancy.”

In retrospect, I think they expected to get my father’s G.I. life insurance, and were more than a little upset when the money came to me, even though my father paid them room and board to keep me in their house during my childhood.

I felt no sentimental attachment to either of the old people. I felt no bond of kinship. It’s not possible to feel anything for people who feel nothing for me.

We drove the interstate system from California to Chicago, so we saw nothing of the country we were driving across, only the same state-controlled rest stops and the same set of restaurants at every exit.

The other soldier, Sylvester, possessed a love of McDonald’s that went beyond normalcy. He claimed that the flavor of the food in other fast food joints changed from place to place and that only McDonald’s remained the same no matter where you went. I did not mention to him that the

McDonald's that I had visited in Germany did have a distinctly different flavor thanks to Germany's food purity laws. You don't argue with a man's religion.

Sylvester and I had spent long hours in the field together. I felt no soldierly bonhomie with him. He was a devoted Cubs fan for one thing, which made him suspect in my eyes. He talked too much. He read books filled with get-rich-quick schemes.

Sylvester's Chevette featured a scary foot-sized hole between the driver's seat and the brake pedal. The hole had developed there, he told me, when he was a pizza delivery driver during the winters in Berwyn. "That winter salt, man," he said. "It's a car killer." At one point, he'd welded a pizza pan to the bottom, but the weld didn't take and the pan fell off when he hit a pothole.

He dropped me off in front of my grandparents' home. It was late afternoon, cold and dark. No moon or stars were in evidence, though the clouds glowed strangely. Dracula might step out from behind a tree any minute and offer to suck my blood. "Aren't you gonna invite me in?"

"Nope." I pulled my duffel out of the back seat and handed him some more gas money. "Keep the change."

"Sure thing," he said darkly. His wheels spun through the dirty snow that was crusted up on the street corner.

I walked up to the house, duffel slung over my shoulder, and knocked on the door, like any stranger would. The iron angel was still there in the flowerbed, drippy with Rust-Oleum. Every year, the first day the temperature would rise above fifty degrees, my grandmother would go to the Ace hardware and buy potted flowers, dig into the cold earth, and plant them there, as if willing the summer to come as early as possible.

The door opened and my grandfather stood there, his face fixed in expressionless expression. "Well, don't just stand there. You're letting all the heat out," he said, and opened the door wider. I stepped through and the old man closed the door behind me. "Dinner's almost ready."

“Why hello there, young man,” Uncle Milo said. He smiled at me, shook my hand, and took my duffel bag. “I’ll show you where you’re staying.” I followed him down to the basement, where the ratty old sofa contained a set of sheets and a blanket and two pillows. The old black and white set was there, too. The floor was painted gray and had a patchwork rug set in the middle of it. A lamp glowed. He set my bag down. “So I hear you’re in the Army, just like my dear old brother

“Yes.”

“Flunked out of college.”

“Yes.”

“That’s all right,” Milo said. “We can’t all be successful. Otherwise, who’d do all the work? Right?”

“Sure,” I said, grinding my teeth. I sat down on the couch. I wondered why I’d made the trip.

“You want to come work with me out on the farm tomorrow?” Milo asked.

“That sounds fine.”

Milo had been a farmer many years before, back before I was born. He claimed that Monsanto put him out of the farming business. So he went back to college and became an engineer. He worked in the oil fields in Saudi Arabia for Aramco. He leased out his farm to another farmer and made even more money that way. I wasn’t sure what working on the farm would entail, but thought that it would be better than sitting in the basement trying to make sense of whatever signals the old black and white TV could suck out of the air via the antenna on the roof.

After a mostly silent dinner, I retired to the basement and listened to Milo and his parents catch up. I dug around in my duffel bag and found an old paperback mystery and read until I passed out. Milo shook me awake. I showered quickly and the two of us drove to a diner, where Milo insisted on paying. I thought that was pretty decent of him. He talked about life in Saudi, living on a Western compound, where he made bathtub gin (called *siddiqui*) to get around the liquor laws. He grew a beard because the Saudis had more respect for a man with a beard. He’d flown all over the

world on Aramco's dime. I enjoyed all this talk, and being treated like a family member by someone who I'd met maybe three times during my childhood.

When we arrived at the farm, we drove along a frozen mud path to a great wreck of a barn. We spent the day cleaning the place, and ate sandwiches that his mother had packed for him for lunch. Inside the barn was the old Ford Pinto. It needed a little work. "Do you want it?" Milo asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"Okay. I'll sign it over to you. We can work on it tomorrow."

He signed the car over to me at the Illinois Secretary of State's office, the selling price a dollar, and I got tags for it. We swung by a State Farm office and I got insurance. We spent Christmas week fixing the car up, going back and forth to the Auto Zone to pick up supplies, which my uncle also paid for. I felt, for the first time since my father had killed himself, like maybe I had someone who really considered me family.

I should have known better.

I drove the Pinto over to my grandparents' place. The following morning, when I awoke, I found a number ten envelope addressed to HENRY BEAN, JR. containing an itemized bill written out in my uncle's handwriting on college-ruled notebook paper. It was a very thorough list. He'd even charged for the breakfast that he'd insisted on buying the first day. He'd charged \$10 an hour for his labor on the car, which was reasonable, I suppose. He'd also included a bill for room and board written out in my grandfather's hand. I wrote out two checks, placed them in the envelope, gathered my things, and drove away in my new old car. I never spoke to my grandparents again, nor darkened their door. I am certain that they considered that a kindness on my behalf.

I was in Iraq when my grandparents passed on to the next world. My grandmother died one week, and then my grandfather died the next. I received a note through the Red Cross, Professor

Pointer's dread enemy. I read it and tossed it into the com-sec shredder, where it was immediately pulped into nothingness.

Before its eventual death in the late 1990's, I put almost 100,000 miles on that Pinto. Say what you want about my uncle, he was a damn fine engineer.

The 930 Club

I circled the block looking for a parking space. Pointer circled right behind me. On the third trip around, I noticed that there was yet another car, a white Ford LTD, that was either following Pointer, or me. Or maybe both of us.

The block was populated with liquor stores, pawn shops, and porno—lots of porn shops, with creepy geezers slithering from place to place. “Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked Pepper.

“Oh, yeah!” Pepper went. He was vibrating with excitement, as if all the sleaze confirmed his low opinion of humanity. We parked in front of a wig shop, day-glow wigs in green and purple fermented atop Styrofoam wig heads in the windows. I saw something new for me—women with tattoos up and down their arms, their lips pierced with safety pins and their noses with shiny metal bolts. The men wore these things, too, but it was shocking to see women who wanted to look that way.

We all got out of the car and watched Pointer drive past, followed closely by the white Ford, which had reinforced bumpers and two white men in dark suits, dark ties and slicked back hair who looked like they’d been brought in off central casting to be government agents, the kind of government agent with an alien gray’s corpse stuffed in the trunk.

“Did you see those two in the car behind your professor?” LaRouche asked.

“Kind of hard to miss in this neighborhood,” Pepper said, stretching and then hopping up and down. “Gotta get my calves warmed up. Be careful not to step in any jism! Ha, ha!”

“Don’t be gross, Buzz,” LaRouche said.

“I’m not being gross, Eden. Take a look around. You’ll find more cum-filled condoms per square inch on this street than in anyplace else in America. Breathe it in! That’s spunk and lube in the air! That’s my America!”

She had that look on her face, like her naughty little brother was acting out again. “Ugh!”

We followed Pepper down the street. Sure enough, there were plenty of discharge-filled condoms to be found underfoot.

He checked his watch. “We have about half an hour to kill before the club opens,” Pepper said. He turned to LaRouche. “We could go in one of these porn shops. You could buy a big, throbbing rubber cock and dress it up like one of those Old Guard mutants you love so much.”

She smacked him across the face and the sound of it echoed off the old buildings. “That was one step over the line,” LaRouche said, pointing her finger in his face.

He held his left cheek like he couldn’t believe she’d done it. She took his right wrist in her left hand and led him inside one of the shops. I followed them in, a pace behind. It was brightly lit, with porn magazines up on shelves and devices behind a high Formica counter. Pepper tried yanking his hand free but she had him in a vice grip. Neither of them was as tall as the elevated counter. We all had to look up at the clerk, a badly shaven older punk rocker maybe in his early 40’s, wearing a sleeveless Ramones t-shirt that had once been black. He was flipping through a magazine, blinking like a man who was having trouble staying awake.

“Going to the show tonight?” he asked the two little soldiers.

“Yes,” LaRouche said. “Thought we’d stop by and see what you have in the way of dildos.”

“We have a wide selection,” the bored clerk said.

“She was hoping for long,” Pepper said, immediately snapping his head toward her in anticipation of another slap.

It didn’t come. “Wide and long,” LaRouche said. “That’s how I like’m.”

The clerk smiled down at her, like a beneficent god of sexual perversion. "I've got just the dildo for you." He walked away from the counter and returned with a package the size of a policeman's baton. "You remember John Holmes?"

"Who could forget him?" Pepper said.

"This dildo was made from a mold of his erect member," the clerk said, arching his eyebrows and grinning.

"I'll take it," LaRouche said. "He's buying."

"I am?" Pepper went.

"You are," LaRouche said flatly.

She let go of his wrist, which he immediately began to rub. Both his face and his wrist were red now. He dug around in his front pocket and produced a wallet that was made of fake cowhide, with fake leather shoestrings tying it all together. It appeared to have been branded with, "Buzz." He produced a Visa card and reached up to the clerk. The clerk flipped through a book with bad Visa card numbers in it. He found none matching Pepper's, and rang up the sale. Pepper signed the credit card receipt, and the clerk handed down the massive fake wang in a brown paper wino's sack to LaRouche. She pulled the mighty fake cock out of the bag and held it in her hands. She unzipped her coveralls, right there in the store, all the way down. We could see her bra and panties, her soft belly. She pulled in her right arm through the sleeve. The clerk peered down and enjoyed what he was seeing. I looked away, but caught her in the reflection off the front window shoving the dildo in her knee-high sock and into her combat boot. She could easily have pulled up the baggy pants leg of the coveralls and done the same thing, but I think she was making a point. She shoved her arm back in the sleeve and zipped back up. "Are we ready to go to the club now, boys?"

"Yes, ma'am," Pepper said.

Back out in the open air, Pepper was less like himself. We followed behind him.

We ran into three homeless men as we walked along. The first asked Pepper if he could ask him a question. “Go ahead,” Pepper said.

“Give me some money!”

“That’s not a question,” Pepper said, and we continued on.

The next homeless man looked at Pepper and shouted, “Let’s go get a bottle of Jack!” He grabbed Pepper by the front of his shirt. Pepper wriggled free, and I gave the guy a shove.

The third man stood in Pepper’s path. “I know you!” he shouted, waving his arms above his head like he was standing in the middle of the street trying to stop a semi. We stopped. He then pointed at Pepper and declared, “I can eat your sins!”

“No, thanks!” Pepper went, but the man would have none of it. He tackled Pepper to the ground. LaRouche ran up and gave the man a kick. I grabbed him by his filthy collar and hoisted him to his feet. I slammed him against the glass window of a liquor store and we left him there.

“This happens every time I go anywhere with him,” LaRouche whispered confidentially. “He’s a magnet for them. Cops, too. They can pick him out of a crowd like he’s the worst criminal ever or something.” She smiled, watching Pepper walk ahead of us. “And little kids, too. They all want to give him a hug.”

#

Above the door was a sign that looked like a digital alarm clock: 9:30. It was an old building. A bouncer checked our ID’s, took our five-dollar admission, and let us through. We entered through a long hallway, turned a corner and came upon a tiny stage. It was unevenly lit in there. Maybe two hundred people were inside, most of them dressed like Pepper. It was already loud from people’s voices and from ambient music droning out of the speakers. On TV sets bolted above us, the old Jane Fonda sci-fi flick *Barbarella* played soundlessly. Jane was floating around nude in a psychedelic spaceship. My father, had he been there, might have whipped out his pistol and shot at the screen, shouting, “Hanoi Jane, you traitor!”

I walked over to the bar and ordered a rye whiskey, neat. A photo of Deputy Barney Fife hung on the wall next to the liquor license kept an eye on me. I didn't buy anything for my two companions. I figured they didn't need to get drunk. I wasn't sure whether the pair of them would fight or maybe start making out. I didn't want to witness either scenario. We were here on a mission.

The canned music cut off, and a mad crush of humans pushed toward the stage. I continued leaning against the bar. I was as close as I wanted to be to all that madness, thank you very much.

The opening act came scurrying out onto the little stage, unannounced, and immediately started playing country music at blazing speed on electric guitars. The patrons went wild. Pepper waded into the middle of a whirlpool of punks and bounced and slammed against them until I lost sight of him. I was keeping my eye on the stage area, looking out for Lish. He must already be in the club, I thought.

LaRouche walked over and gave me a poke. I leaned down and she shouted in my ear, "You should let me approach Lish."

"Why?" I shouted back.

"You'll spook him. You still have that tape in your pocket?"

I pulled it out. Pepper had stolen the artwork. I showed it to her.

She took it. "Perfect!" She waded off into the crowd and I thought, *That little woman has a dildo in her boot.*

#

"Doctor Pointer," I said, greeting my professor, "here you are." He approached the bar.

"Here I am," Pointer said, out of breath and twitchier than he'd been in the Fort Myer parking lot.

"You don't look a bit out of place."

He was dressed in the same shabby suit, though under the lighting in the club, it seemed to glow purple. "Yes, um."

“So where are the FBI agents? I assumed they’d be right behind you.”

“You saw them, too?”

“They were kind of hard to miss.”

“I’m sure they’ll be along presently,” Pointer said. He peered around on tiptoe for a moment. Patted his comb over. “I’ve never been here before.”

“Color me shocked,” I said. “To be honest, this is my first trip here. Hopefully, it will be my last.”

“Yes, yes. It is quite loud in here, isn’t it?”

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to take a leak.” I’d had too much beer during the weekly barbecue, and the whiskey on top of it was forcing it through my kidneys. I weaved through the crowd, holding my beverage above my head, trying not to spill it. A punk nudged me in the ribs and the plastic cup leapt out of my hand and away. I made it into the men’s room, a graffiti-covered mess. One of the urinals had been ripped out of the wall. I peed into the other one. I was alone in there for a minute, which was long enough to finish my business. I zipped up, turned around and was face-to-face with two linebackers who’d been shoved into reasonably priced black business suits.

“Look at this one, Phil,” the older one standing in front of me said.

“I’m looking, Bill,” the younger one standing behind said. He lit a cigarette with a chrome Zippo and took a luxurious drag. He blew a ring up toward the ceiling. “What do you see?” Phil asked.

“I see a soldier who is courting trouble.”

“Is that trouble with a capital ‘T,’ Bill?”

“Capital, lowercase—it doesn’t matter. Trouble is trouble, Phil, old pal of mine. What’s your off-duty business with this shitbird Pointer, Sergeant Bean?” He reached over and straightened my shirt collar.

“He’s my college professor. He’s odd, but come on. I mean—”

“Are you about to tell us who is and isn’t a threat to national security, Bean?” Bill turned around to Phil. “Get a load of this guy! The guy who carries on conversations with KGB agents without batting an eye! And he’s going to tell us all about national security!”

“Hilarious,” Phil said unsmilingly, taking a final puff and flicking his half-smoked butt over the toilet stall.

“I’ll tell you what’s going to happen, Bean,” Bill said, leaning into me. “You’re going to write down every word that hump Pointer says and report it back to me. Got that?”

“What about Gus? I mean—”

“Oh, here he goes again,” Bill said over his shoulder to Phil. “I think we’re about to get another lesson from the national security expert.”

“I’m all ears,” Phil said. “Lay it on us, brother. Testify.”

“I mean,” my ears started burning. “That Gus guy is a…”

“Commie,” Bill said. “Who gives a shit? Communism is dead. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“He needs someone to tell him personally that communism is dead. Why don’t you go ahead and do that Bill?”

Bill said, “Good idea!” and he sucker-punched me in the gut.

It was a pretty hard shot, and I wasn’t ready for it. I doubled over with pain. The thought quickly floated through my mind: Glad I urinated! Bill helped me back up and pretended to dust me off. “There, there, precious! Are we feeling better? Are we getting our little head straight? Now shut your fucking mouth and listen to me—that Pointer out there, that guy you’re buddying up with? That fucker is a domestic terrorist. He’s plotting to blow up Federal buildings. He is not your friend. He is not the friend of the United States. You took an oath to fight all enemies, foreign and domestic. That seeming putz out there is a domestic enemy of this nation.”

“And Andrei Oleyevich Ostrokovsky is a fag,” Phil said.

“A pillow-biter.”

“A gay boy.”

“That’s why he’s here and not back home in Russia, getting ready to turn the country into a free and fair marketplace with the rest of his KGB brethren,” Bill said. “Keep that in mind. My guess is that queer wants to explore your Hershey highway. No one will give a shit, least of all the Russians, if you beat that faggot to death with the dildo your little girlfriend has in her boot.”

“Shit, that fag commie would probably love that.”

“Eat it up with a spoon.”

“Right off this restroom floor.” Phil spat a little tobacco at the floor.

“He’s in the Army,” Bill said. “He doesn’t know what a ‘restroom’ is.”

“Latrine floor,” Phil said.

“Fuck off, young soldier,” Bill said, thumbing toward the door.

“And not a word to your domestic terrorist pal,” Phil said.

“Remember, I want you to write down every word. Go! Be free!” Bill shoved a card in my front pocket and patted it, turned me toward the door and gave me a sharp shove.

I walked out of the latrine, rubbing my belly where Bill had punched me, feeling a bit dazed and confused.

Near the stage, I saw LaRouche standing with a tape in her hand. Lish was directly in front of her. The two swapped tape for little black book. On the floor nearby, his fellow lowlifes were trampling Pepper. He attempted to roll out of range of their boots. Near the bar, I saw Pointer shifting his weight from foot to foot, looking about as dangerous as a poodle.

It's a Small Army

I pushed through the crowd toward Pepper. Man down, I thought. One of the pogoing idiots landed on my foot. My mood had gone sour in the latrine. I grabbed him and quickly realized it was Clowes. "Clowes!" I shouted in his face.

"Ah, fuck you!" Clowes flailed and jerked himself away. He bounced off into the crowd, shooting me a double bird and smirking.

I was ready to punch someone.

I continued my way through, like an explorer hacking his way through a dense tropical rainforest. I discovered Pepper curled into a ball. A lean dude wearing a pair of pointy-toed Tony Lamas was viciously kicking him. I looked up from Pepper and saw that he was clearly a soldier, his hair cut into a high-and-tight, his eyes enraged and focused on Pepper alone. He wore a flannel shirt tucked sloppily in, cowboy jeans and a belt buckle the size of a tea saucer. It took me a moment, but I finally figured out that he was shouting, "Steal my cover, will you? Steal my cover!"

I reached through the bouncing bodies and grabbed Tony Lama by the front of his shirt and yanked him toward me. He refocused onto my face and became a bit suspicious. "Wait. I know you," he said.

"Good for you." I pulled him away from Pepper. He stumbled a bit. I held him up in a pair of fists by the front of his shirt.

"I know you from somewhere. Give me a second." Cogitation had drained all the fight out of him.

I studied his face as he studied mine. I remembered my drill sergeant in basic training warning us all, "The Army is this big, privates!" His index finger and thumb were about an inch apart. "I'll see you again." Those of us who reenlist do tend to see the same faces over and over.

The soldier snapped his fingers and smiled. “You’re that specialist who stole the camera from the Russians! I remember you now! You told me you’d have my ass kicked if I ever mentioned it to anybody!” He seemed genuinely pleased to see me again, or at least at having figured something out. He didn’t look like the kind of soldier who did that very often.

“And now you *have* mentioned it to somebody!” I shouted back to him, and smashed my forehead into his nose while simultaneously jerking him forward. I pushed him away, not forcefully, but rather like setting a toy boat adrift in a swollen rain gutter, and he staggered backwards into the crowd, stunned, and was swallowed into the whirling bodies. After the rough treatment by Phil and Bill, and seeing Pepper getting beat on, this tiny victory felt pretty good.

Pepper managed to regain his feet. He said something that I couldn’t hear. I leaned down. “I’ll be peeing blood for a week. Again.”

I helped him over to the bar and sat him down on a stool next to Pointer. “Keep an eye on him, Doc.”

“Of course, of course!” he shouted. I looked him up and down and thought—bullshit on those FBI agents. This guy’s a harmless crank.

I reached into my pocket and inspected the card Bill had shoved in there. Flipped it over, and over again. No name, no crest, no address, nothing. Just a slightly a-tilt phone number, seemingly thumped carelessly on there with a rubber stamp that had very little ink left on it.

I scanned the room looking for LaRouche. I decided to go to the last spot where I’d seen her, up near the stage. I found Lish there, twitching, panicking and then trying not to act panicked as I approached him. He decided to try out a salesman’s smile on me and extended his hand. I studied the hand, and then him. His mouth and nostrils were coated over in a white crust. His little weasel eyes were dilated and bloodshot. His peach fuzz mustache had white flecks trapped in it, like goldfish food. He wore a white t-shirt with a U.S. Marshal’s badge on the right breast, the gut stained brown.

The band stopped playing just as suddenly as they'd started, dropped their tortured instruments onto the little stage and rushed off. They received loud applause from the sweaty crowd.

“Hello, brother! Won't you shake my hand in friendship?”

“We're not friends, Lish. And we're certainly not brothers. What's this I hear about you selling out to the Russians?”

“Don't kick over the beehive if you want honey, that's what I say. Develop success from failures!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Dale Carnegie! Don't you read? I thought you were educated! Come on! Shake my hand! It's right there in front of you. You can make more friends by being interested in other people, than you can by being interested in yourself.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said.

“And Socrates! And Chesterfield! I can still get elected to Congress. I know this. I fucked up, but—” He stopped. He dropped his hand. “What happens now?”

“What happens now is you go back to Fort Myer, clean yourself up, and stand tall before the man first thing Monday morning. That's what happens.”

“Listen. If you clear all this up for me, I'll let you fuck my wife. No charge!” He wiped the residue from his mouth, mustache and nose with a thumb and index finger and then stuck the fingers inside his mouth and rubbed them against his gums. “There is nothing wrong with that, old buddy, old pal. Take pleasure in giving of yourself, of doing unto others, that's what I say.”

“Are you on drugs? Is that what this is all about?”

Lish stepped backward and sat on the little stage. “You can't prove that. You think you can prove that? Nothing has been proven. I know the right herbal teas to drink. I'll put an eyedropper with bleach in my pants. No piss test will stop me from representing New York's Tenth Congressional District.” He placed his palms on the stage, rocked back and forth a bit. “Look, I

didn't want to have to do this, because blackmail isn't my style. I believe in persuading people. If people had listened to Dale Carnegie, there would have been no Hitler. The carrot, not the stick. If you'd played your cards right, you could have fucked my wife. But no! Not Sergeant Bean! He's no wife-fucker, not him! Mister Officer's Son! Probably think you're too good to fuck my wife. Let me tell you something, my fine, feathered friend—I have the tape! You didn't think I would get it, but I've got it! Oh-ho, yes! I got the goods on you, buck-o!" He patted himself down, got a little panicky, contorted his body while searching, and then produced it from the front pocket of his trousers. "See, right here!" he said, waving the cassette around. "You wouldn't want *this* to get out, would you? It would *ruin* you!" He chuckled meanly. "I'm in charge now! Now *you'll* have to clean the latrine! Now *you'll* have to buff the floors! Now *you'll* have to shine the doorknobs! The only doorknob I'm shining from now on is in my pants! Boom-chaka-lacka! Break me off a piece of that Kit Kat bar! You think there's a God? There will be no peace in the valley!" He ass-scooted backwards on the stage and then stood up, knocking over a hi hat. "Stage dive!" He ran to the other side of the stage, stumbled over a discarded electric guitar, and leapt, but there was no audience to catch him and he bellyflopped onto the floor with a thud and an oof of air out of his lungs. The tape skittered away from him. He crawled quickly after it.

Roadies removed the guitars and brought out fresh replacements. "Check, check," they went into the microphones.

#

I thought about chasing down Lish, dragging him back to the barracks, locking him in a room. It would have been the kind thing to do. But I was not feeling particularly kind. I walked back over to the bar and found Pointer, Pepper and LaRouche sagging in place. LaRouche's illness was catching up with her again, her cheeks were turning red. Pepper looked like a man who'd been kicked while he was down.

"I need to get these two back to the barracks," I told Pointer.

“I understand completely,” Pointer said.

“I seem to have misplaced the, uh—” I thought a moment. “Your book on tape.”

“Don’t worry,” Pointer said. “I have a shipment coming in on Sunday.”

“Let’s go, kids,” I said to my two charges. I looked at my watch and saw that it was coming up on midnight. Way past my bedtime. I prodded them toward the exit and we entered the D.C. night.

I didn’t smell the cigarette smoke on me until we waded into the soupy air. D.C. was built on a swamp. I kept the two of them moving with gentle shoves. LaRouche’s back felt exceptionally warm, almost hot to the touch. “Your mother’s going to kill me,” I told her.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll take my meds when we get back. I’ll be all right.”

“Hey!” I heard behind me, and felt a poke in my ribs. I turned to see who it was, and felt more of a poke. “Don’t turn around. None of you! Or the big guy gets it, right between the ribs.” We stopped. We’d all seen the news. D.C. was a good place to get killed. “Wallets! Let’s see them wallets!”

I reached into my pocket, as did Pepper.

LaRouche hiked up her pant leg and pulled out the massive dong. “Here’s my wallet,” she said. She turned around and wagged the dong in the air. “My wallet love you long time.” Pepper and I turned around, too. Our mugger was very well appointed—from his Air Jordan’s, to the 8 Ball jacket, to the Kangol atop his noggin. I suppose he made a pretty good living scaring suburban punks into coughing up their parents’ dough. “You call that a knife?” she asked him. It was more like a shiv, a kitchen implement that had been upgraded slightly.

“Bitch?” he went. He saw that she was threatening him with a massive replica cock. “Shit,” he went, eyes gone wide, mouth curled in disgust. He skipped back two paces. “Fuck this noise.” He skipped back a couple more paces and then took off running.

We watched him go.

“I’m too tired to be mugged,” LaRouche said wearily.

Pepper and I both put our wallets away. We all laughed uneasily.

She held the big dong in her hands and then showed me the little door on the base of it. “Here’s where the D-cells go,” she said.

#

We found the Pinto where we’d left it, unmolested. It was a car too ugly and deteriorated to mess around with. It didn’t even have any sales flyers under the windshield wiper.

We piled in. LaRouche sat up front this time, with no objections from Pepper. He slid into the back seat and sat with his chin on the back of her seat. “Eden,” he said, his voice gone uncharacteristically soft. “Can I do something for you? What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, Buzz. Let me close my eyes for a minute. I want to close my eyes.” The dildo lay across her legs like a shotgun, her hands atop it. Her head turned to the side and she snoozed lightly.

“We shouldn’t have brought her along. She could end up having an attack. She was sick for days last time.”

I peeked in the rear view mirror at him. The way he looked at her, unguarded—he was in love with her. She would be going away very soon. I’d have to make sure that he didn’t crack up, or cut his ear off, or something.

Cinderella, Back from the Ball

LaRouche was out cold when we returned to Fort Myer. Pepper dug his chin in on the back of her seat the entire trip, peering down at her silently. He gave her a gentle shake when I parked the car. He climbed out behind me after I got out, ran around the car, opened up her door. He took her hand off the dildo and in his, and rubbed it gently. “She needs her medicine,” he said. He reached into one of her pockets and pulled out Lish’s little black book. He handed it to me. Out of the other pocket, he pulled out a biker’s wallet, which he unzipped. He found a pill secreted in one of the

pockets. He slid the wallet back into her pocket. He held the pill up to her lips. “Eden,” he said, a little plea in his voice. “Eden.” She wouldn’t wake up. “You have to help me carry her in.”

“No,” I said, standing a meter away from this little drama. “Wake her up.”

“I’ll carry her.”

“You won’t. You’ll drop her. Give her a little shake.”

“Eden.” He took her by both shoulders and shook her. Her head bobbed.

“What?” she went, blinking her eyes open.

“Eden, you should take your pill,” he said. “Here.”

She plucked the pill from his fingers and dry-swallowed it. “Buzz,” she said, smiling sleepily. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” Pepper said, lighting up. “Do you need some help?”

“Don’t be silly.” She climbed out of the car, wobbly.

He tried to steady her, but she gently slapped his hand away. He stood back, smiling at her, wondering at her strength. He glowed. This was the first genuine smile I’d seen on him, unalloyed with irony, curved on his face like sunshine. I’d seen him nude, but never naked. There was a sweetness about him that was painful to witness. It must be terrible, having an artist love you. I felt sorry for LaRouche having to bear it. It’s too much responsibility. He was too fragile, defenseless. Like a patient in a burn ward.

The two of them walked ahead of me toward the barracks. Lights pinpricked through the night sky. The barracks glowed and blurred through the humid summer night. She allowed him to steady her. She leaned into him, not much, but enough. They were my two favorite puppies in the basket.

This must be what it is like to be a parent, I thought. If they could succeed somehow, become what they were meant to be, I would be happy. If he could become a great artist that would

bring me joy. And if she could become—what? The governor of Louisiana? That sounded about right. That would bring me great joy, too.

I shut the passenger-side door and walked behind them. I slapped the little black book on my thigh. Opened it up. It was all handwritten in some number-based code. Hoo-boy.

#

We parted company inside the barracks. The CQ was asleep, and I didn't wake him. I found my favorite CID agent sitting in a battered Federal Prison Industries-built lounge chair watching a blurry Johnny Carson with a blurry bird on his head talking to a blurry Jack Hannah on our vintage TV. Crumb had changed back into his version of a uniform, a gaudy mass of polyester. I'm guessing there wasn't a natural fiber on his body.

"Cinderella's back from the ball," Crumb said. "What's that you got there? A glass slipper?"

"Close enough," I said. I tossed it to him. He clap-caught it between palms, peeled it open.

"Well, hell. Maybe there was something to that KGB rat's story."

"Bill and Phil didn't think so. They were more interested in my professor. Called him a domestic terrorist."

"Ah... Bill and Phil." A sly chuckle burst forth.

"Yes. Good old Bill gave me a shot in the solar plexus. Delightful gentlemen, both of them. Apparently, they like to lurk about in latrines, delivering not-so-veiled threats."

"In their defense, they're not the brightest bulbs on the Christmas tree" Crumb flipped through the book, turned it upside down, and then right side up again.

"Neither am I, I suppose."

"What?" Crumb went, looking up.

"Nothing."

"Bill used to be a CID agent," Crumb said, snapping the book shut. "When I was a young MP, serving in Saigon, he used to take me Skippy bombing with him."

“Skippy bombing?”

“Surely you’ve heard of it.”

“My name’s not Shirley.”

Crumb ignored the movie joke. “You empty out a glass Skippy jar. Put a grenade in it, pull the pin. It doesn’t explode because the spoon is being held by the glass jar. Screw on the lid. You go up in a helicopter, find some VC, and throw the jar down at them. The jar breaks, the spoon pops, and kaboom goes Charlie.”

“Great.”

“Shit, your dad didn’t tell you about that? I assumed he would have.”

“Why’s that?”

“He invented it. Great man, your father.”

I studied him at the mention of the Colonel. His face. “Were you the agent on call when my father killed himself?”

“No,” Crumb said, cutting his eyes away. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. You happen to know who was?”

“I can look into it for you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Nighty-night.”

“Yeah, you, too.”

I took my leave of Crumb and headed upstairs to my quarters. I was so tired, I thought I might sleep in until zero-six or zero-seven.

I pushed past the swinging door at the end of my hallway, marked, MALE NCO FLOOR, listened to my sneakers squeak on the buffed floor, echoing off the cinderblock walls. I unlocked my door and flipped on the overhead light.

I immediately felt like something was wrong. Something was off-kilter about my quarters. I stood stock-still and scanned the room, using my cav-scout eyes. Everything seemed to be in place.

That was what was wrong. It was as if someone had come in and cleaned the joint. A maid, or one of those people who set up model homes. My shoes were lined up under my rack, but they were too straight. My rack was made too well. I'd never mastered hospital corners, but whoever had been in my room definitely had. My towel was perfectly aligned in the middle of the towel rack. Washcloth, too.

I looked in my bureau drawers, and all of my underwear had been rolled tightly, the way we'd been taught in basic training. My socks were rolled and aligned. My t-shirts, too. My civvies had been folded into perfect squares. I opened up my uniform wall locker, and someone had not only aligned all my clothes, but had burnt off the strings with a lighter, and had pressed them. They still felt warm. So did my iron.

I quickly went to my unread books wall locker, and found the books stacked neatly. A closer inspection revealed that they'd been alphabetized by author.

"What the fuck!" I went, my mind buzzing, whirling with the violation of it all.

I went to my wall locker that acted as an attic. That was the one wall locker that looked like it had actually been violated. Everything in there was turned upside down and seemed as if it had been hastily tossed back in. Judging from the dents in the back, I would even go so far as to say angrily thrown.

I felt my computer. It was cold. So was the monitor.

Crumb, I thought. A CID agent didn't need a warrant to go through a soldier's quarters in the barracks. All he needed was a key. But why? Was he fucking with me? That was it, I decided. Crumb was fucking with me. I felt a keen bit of hatred for the man bubble through my guts and gurgle through my brain from the base to the skullcap.

I'd always heard about CID agents planting bugs in soldiers' rooms. I figured, well, fuck him. If he wants to listen in on me while I read, or write a paper for Pointer's history class, he can go right on ahead.

“Skippy bombing,” I said aloud. “I’ll Skippy bomb *you*, Crumb, you fuck. You sitting down there in the day room having a great goddamned time at my expense?” I shouted at the walls. “Are you, Crumb?” I resolved to ignore Top’s advice and not re-up. “Fuck the Army. F-T-A.”

I paced around in my quarters, not having a clue about what to do next. There was no way I could sleep in that room that night. I changed into my PT gear, snatched the pillow and blanket off my rack and went down the emergency stairs to the basement. I unlocked my office, closed and locked the door, and lay on the floor behind my desk in a sulk. The Army had taught me how to sleep on the cold, hard ground. At least I’d gotten that much out of my years of service. I fell asleep right away. The Army had taught me how to do that, too.

The Wrong Idea

Through a dense murk of sleep, I became hazily aware that a phone was ringing. I sat up, remembered where I was, and reached around for the phone. “H-Q Company, BMS, Sergeant Bean speaking. This line is not secure. May I help you, sir or ma’am,” I said on autopilot.

“Hank? My friend Hank? How are you? I hope that I did not wake you, Hank,” the voice said. A few extra seconds of processing allowed me to identify the owner of the voice.

“Gus.”

“Hank, you’ll forgive me for calling at such an hour, but I wondered how everything went tonight? We are allies now, am I correct? You did find Lish at the nine-thirty club, correct?”

I scratched the stubble on the sides of my head. The high-and-tight was already beginning to grow out. “Ah, Gus,” I said. “Men only like to count their troubles, but they do not count their joys.”

“Hank, that sounds very much like a cynical thing to say. Who would say such a thing?”

“Dostoevsky. Maybe you should try reading him instead of that oleaginous American hack you’re so in love with.”

“So true, Hank! With Glasnost so many books are coming back into the culture of my country.”

I reached up and turned on the desk lamp, gained my legs, as my back spasmed, and plopped down into LaRouche’s chair. “What do you want, Gus? You want to chit-chat about literature?” I checked my watch. “It’s two in the morning. How did you know I’d be here?”

“I didn’t know. I took a chance that you were a late worker, maybe. I thought, I should give my good friend Hank a call and see what is the what. You know?”

“You’re a strange cat, Gus.”

“It’s a lonely life, this spying shit. I am naturally a garrulous man, you know? A conversation is hard to come by in this business. The people at the embassy? They think I’m only here to report on them. No conversation can be had here. So I talk to you, Hank my friend, and I hope that you will answer.”

“Yeah. I can see that.”

“You are lonely, too. Aren’t you? But I think you are like Gary Cooper. Have you watched his movies, Gary Cooper? He plays the cowboy who does not say much, but you look at his face and it tells many stories. When I studied at the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, I watched many Gary Cooper movies. Have you seen *Meet John Doe*? This is a great movie! I have watched it many times. You should watch it, too. You learn a great deal about how Americans love to exploit one another. Barbara Stanwyck was very good in this as well.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering if he’d ever get to his point, or if he had one.

“Do you watch the movies of Pedro Almodovar?”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Oh, you should watch one of his movies. His movies are very good! *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* is playing at the Arlington Brew and View. You could drink a beer and watch this movie. Ennio Morricone did the music for this movie. You know him!” He whistled a few bars from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. “If you go watch it, we will have something to talk about next time I call. Think about this, Hank my friend.”

“Sure.”

“You are not going to tell me about Lish? I figure it is worth it to at least ask.”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to tell you.”

“That is a-okay by me, Hank. It was a distinct pleasure talking to you. Perhaps you should get some sleep, and I will as well.”

“Goodnight, Gus.”

“Goodnight, Hank!”

I hung up. I wrapped my blanket around my shoulders, picked up my pillow, and journeyed back upstairs to my quarters. On the way, I grabbed a chair out of the dayroom and took it with me. When I got back inside my room, I jammed the chair under the doorknob. That would at least slow down Crumb if he decided to visit while I was asleep, I reasoned.

#

I woke up feeling worse than when I went to sleep. I pulled up my t-shirt and saw a distinct bruise transitioning from purple to black and yellow. Recently, Gus was the only person who flashed a badge at me and acted halfway decently. I ground my teeth thinking about Crumb, Bill and Phil. I thought, fuck it, I am going to go see this silly-ass foreign movie, and if Gus calls, I'll talk to him about it.

I took a shower, felt incrementally better. I got dressed and then decided to go rap on Pepper's door and see if he wanted to go see this movie with me. Gus was right. I was lonely, too. Besides, Pepper would need something to take his mind off LaRouche, who would be out with her mother all weekend if she didn't spend the whole weekend laid up sick. So Pepper would probably need company, too.

He answered the door in his brown Army boxers, green wool socks on his feet, and a t-shirt advertising for a band called Branch Manager. His boney legs were spotted with purple bruises. “Come on in,” he said. “Don't mind my new roommate. He's praying to Jesus.”

Sure enough, his roommate knelt next to his bed in a big terrycloth bathrobe, his hands grasped in front of his face, eyes shut, prayers whispered loudly enough to be heard. “Save him, Jesus, save him!”

“Try beseeching Him,” Pepper called over. “That usually works.”

I hadn't been in Pepper's quarters in a while. More of his artwork was on the wall. I recognized LaRouche in a lot of them. In some, she appeared to be semi-nude. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Listen, she only posed for me," he said. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea."

"That you're in love with her?"

"Oh... *that*. Well, you may have the right idea there. But I don't think it's reciprocal."

"Have you asked her?"

"Um, can we talk about this somewhere else? Not in front of the holy roller over there?"

"Sure. I'm going to chow. I'm also thinking about going to see this movie that, uh, someone recommended to me."

"Someone?"

"Gus. The commie."

"Awesome! I want to see this commie-endorsed movie," Pepper said, brightening up.

"It's called *Tie Me Up*—"

"—*Tie Me Down!*" Pepper practically shouted. "Your buddy the commie likes Almodovar? That's awesome! I haven't seen it yet."

"Oh, Heavenly Father!" his roommate wailed.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Let's rally in the day room in half an hour," Pepper said. "I gotta shower off the Nine-Thirty Club funk."

"I'd suggest taking down those sketches, too," I said. "Next time we do a 'health and welfare' inspection, you might find them missing."

"Yeah, shit, I didn't think of that," Pepper said.

By the time Pepper came down the stairs, it was too late for chow, so we got into the mighty Pinto and drove over to Bob and Edith's restaurant, a diner on Columbia Pike that Pepper had fallen in love with after too many episodes of *Twin Peaks*.

We sat down and Pepper turned to the waitress and said in his best Agent Cooper voice, "Two cups of good, hot, black coffee. Black as midnight on a moonless night."

The waitress rolled her eyes, having heard the Agent Cooper gag too many times in the past few months. "And you, sir?"

"I think one of those cups of coffee was meant for me," I said. I ordered pancakes with a side of bacon.

Pepper ordered a slice of cherry pie.

"Uh, huh," the waitress went, writing it down. "That's it?" She looked like she couldn't wait to get away from us.

"Yes, thanks," I said.

She came right back with a thermal pitcher of coffee and left it on the table. She also left creamer and sugar on the table, the creamer in one of those little metal pitchers, the sugar in packets in a ceramic box shaped like a tiny Moby-Dick. Pepper poured himself a cup of coffee and dumped in four sugars and a slug of cream.

"Black as midnight?" I went.

"Yeah, well..." he went.

"I should tell you about what happened after we got back last night," I said. I told him about finding Crumb in the day room, and the state I found my quarters in. I also told him about the two FBI agents in the shitter at the club.

"Shit, I wish someone would come by and toss my quarters like that," Pepper said. "I might leave'm a tip under the pillow."

"Fucking Crumb," I said.

“I’m not convinced it’s Crumb,” Pepper said, arching an eyebrow like any number of TV detectives.

“Who else?”

“Could be those FBI dicks,” Pepper said. “What couple of assholes!” He took a slurp of coffee and slammed it down. “Goddamn it, I burnt my tongue! Every fucking time!”

“So, what happened with LaRouche last night?”

“We stopped in the stairs on the way up, sat down,” he said.

The waitress came by with our plates and set them down in front of us. She said, “We had a complaint from some customers about the profanity. Could you keep it down?”

Pepper fixed his eyes on her and said, “Yes,” with an unusual amount of venom, even for him. She backed away. “People,” he said.

“So you stopped on the stairs,” I said.

“Yeah, we stopped on the stairs,” he said. He picked up a spoon and swirled it in his coffee, clinking the sides of the cup. “I said, ‘Eden, I would like to be your boyfriend.’ Said it just like that. I’ve been gutless up until now. I was afraid of losing her friendship. I mean, really, she’s become my best friend. I don’t know how I’m supposed to—” He bit his lower lip. I thought he might cry. But he tamped down the emotions boiling up inside him, swallowed. “She’s, like, everything I ever imagined a woman should be,” he said at last.

“What did she say?”

“Well, she was non-committal, I guess you could say,” Pepper said. “I pointed out that we’d had so many great conversations. The time we’ve spent together. That sort of thing. She said that she had great conversations with a lot of people. That she’d spent time with a lot of other people, too.” He peered down into his coffee-sugar-cream slurry. “I knew when she said that, that I was licked. I think I also ruined our friendship. I ruin everything. That’s what I do.”

“No,” I said. I was unwilling to let the both of them go. “No.”

“Anyway,” Pepper said. He took another experimental sip of his coffee, and then tossed it down like a shot of whiskey. He picked apart his pie while I ate my breakfast.

I gobbled down my food like a starving man. His pie looked like an alien autopsy. I tossed some money on the table and we left.

#

We ended up in Bailey’s Crossroads at a little art supply store in a strip mall next to a used bookstore. While Pepper wandered the aisles in the art store, I nipped next door to check out their selection of crime paperbacks.

I knew that I’d found the right place by the smell. There is a distinct perfume that old paperback books give off. Maybe it’s the glue in the binding breaking down, or the pulp in the paper. Whatever it is, that scent calms me. That scent is the home that I never had, and never will have. I bought a novel by Bob McKnight called, *The Bikini Bombshell*. The cover warned, “Run for your life, lover boy!” The owner gave me a wink. His white mustache had little hints of orange and yellow streaked through it. His white hair was combed back, revealing a head splashed with liver spots. I envied him. I would give anything to be at his stage of life, owning a used bookstore, I thought. I felt like I’d been alive for a very long time already. The seemingly endless years that I still had to live stretched out ahead. It was like staring at a flat, straight, thousand-mile road.

Pepper found me sitting on the curb, reading the first chapter. He had quite a haul himself in a big, white sack. I stood up and dusted off my ass. When we got in the car, I tossed the paperback on the dash next to the one I’d been reading the day before. I watched Pepper set down his sack between his feet and thought, momentarily, that I saw a snake down there, and let loose a little yip.

“What?” Pepper went, raising his feet.

“Oh, shit,” I said, reaching down on the floor and pulling up the gigantic dildo that he’d bought LaRouche.

He took it out of my hands and considered it for a moment, like it was a prize salami. He threw it in the backseat over his shoulder, business end first, like a torpedo. “Yet another thing to remind me of what a complete asshole I am,” he said. He pulled a copy of the *Washington City Paper*, the local alternative weekly, out of his bag and flipped it open. “I think we’ve got an hour to make it over to the Arlington Brew & View,” he said.

#

The theater was a converted restaurant, that was still a restaurant. We sat at a square table that had no seats on the opposite side from us, in the middle of the theater. The screen itself was not much bigger than the kind that is pulled down in elementary schools for screenings of hygiene films and “Our Friend the Atom.” A waitress came by and we ordered a pitcher of Bud and some loaded potato skins. When she brought the beer, she asked if another patron could join us.

“Why not?” Pepper went.

And Gus sat down next to him. He was wearing blue jeans and a Georgetown t-shirt. “Hello, my friend Hank!” he said.

Pepper brightened up immediately. “Is this the commie?”

“I am, Specialist Pepper!” Gus said. “How do you do?”

Pepper and Gus shook hands like a pair of long-lost friends. After a short silence, Pepper said, “So you’re a cineaste?”

“Indeed I am!” Gus said. “And thank you for using that word and respecting my command of the language. No, gentlemen, don’t dumb it down for your old friend Gus.”

“I like him already,” Pepper said. “You may eat of the potato skins when they arrive.”

“He may end up eating them all if we don’t watch out,” I said. The two of them looked at me for a moment. “I’ve seen Gus eat. He brings a lot of energy to it.” They smiled.

The lights dimmed and the movie started right up. No trailers, nothing. The potato skins arrived and Gus immediately dove in.

I hadn't been to a movie with Pepper in a while, and had forgotten that he's the type of patron who loudly tells everyone in earshot exactly what he thinks of a movie, while the movie is still going on.

A young man is in a nuthouse, where he's having an affair with the director. He's also the handyman there. "YES, LET CRAZY HANDLE THE TOOLS," Pepper went.

The female lead is supposed to be a porn star who moved over to legitimate movies with the help of a stroked-out director who is trapped in a wheelchair, but is still leching on her. "FUCKING OLD LECHER," Pepper went. Gus peered around him to me, smiling out his approval of Pepper's narration.

The female is nude in a tub, and a little toy scuba man swims up and pleasures her. "BULLSHIT," Pepper said.

The young man from the nuthouse kidnaps the female. He tells her, "I had to kidnap you so you'd get to know me." "FINALLY, A PLAUSIBLE MOMENT IN THIS MOVIE," Pepper said.

The nut goes through much effort wooing the tied up female. "How long until you fall in love with me?" he asked her. "COME GODDAMNED ON," Pepper said.

Finally, she does fall in love with her kidnapper, insisting that he tie her up when he's about to leave on another errand. "OH GOD-FUCKING-DAMN-IT," Pepper went.

The waitress came by, took away our empty pitcher and empty potato skins plate, and then returned, knelt down next to me and asked, "Can you get your friend to quiet down? He's scaring some of the other patrons."

"No," I said.

She walked away.

The movie came to an end, with the nut, the female and her sister singing karaoke in the female's car. "BULLSHIT!" Pepper said, standing up. He looked like he was considering running up to the screen and punching it out as the credits played.

“So what do you think about this movie, Hank?” Gus asked me.

“I think you’re out of your goddamned mind,” I said.

“Be that as it may,” Gus said.

As the three of us wandered out into the sunshine, stretching our legs, the manager, dressed like a bargain basement maître d', rushed through the theater doors, pushing a few people out of his way, and took a photo of Pepper with a Polaroid. “You’re banned!” he told Pepper, shaking the photo that had ejected out of the front of the camera.

“That movie was horseshit!” Pepper shouted at him.

“Banned!” he said, waving the photo at him, and backed back inside, bumping into and stumbling over other patrons as they filed out.

“How many theaters does that make?” I asked Pepper.

“Um, are we counting the one on post?” he asked. He swiveled his head around. “Hey, where’s Gus?”

Gus had slipped away, the wily spy.

We walked back to the car in silence. I knew that if I said one word about the movie, I’d receive a truckload of invective out of the little man. I didn’t want to bring up LaRouche, either. He might start bawling, or worse.

When we got in the car, I let him tune in WHFS and play his music all the way back to the barracks. I parked. He said, “I guess I better find Eden’s new boyfriend back here and bring it up to her quarters.”

He climbed into the back seat and looked around. Then I pulled both of the front seats forward. “It’s too big to get lost,” I said.

“I think someone stole it,” Pepper said.

“Jesus! People will steal anything anymore.” I grabbed my two paperbacks off the dash, and Pepper grabbed his big bag of art supplies, and we shut up the car, and walked back to the barracks.

“Funny,” Pepper said. “I didn’t think of you as the kind of guy who reads stuff like that.”

“You mean crime books?” I said. “I like them. The bad guy gets caught. A mystery gets solved. It makes life seem manageable.”

“I love the covers on those things,” he said. “I could have made a hell of a living back then painting those covers.”

“Yeah,” I said. I clapped him on the shoulder. “I could see that. I could totally see that. Sorry about the movie.”

“No, it’s okay. I like hating a movie. It’s good, old-fashioned fun. You should have heard me at *Pretty Woman*.”

“I *did* hear you at *Pretty Woman*. We went together, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Did you get any potato skins?”

“No,” Pepper said, with a tremendous smile blossoming on his face. “Did you?”

“Not a one,” I said.

We laughed.

Fucking with Soldiers

Pepper and I parted company inside the barracks. I went back to my quarters and read for a while, sitting in my chair with my feet propped up on my rack. I'd never put padlocks on my wall lockers at Fort Myer because I didn't share my quarters with another soldier. I thought about getting some locks now, but I wondered if that would even slow down someone who was intent on peering into my shabby soldier's life. I was having problems losing myself in the book. I kept jerking my head around like someone was peering over my shoulder. Crumb! I thought. Those CID guys knew exactly how to get under your skin. They probably learned all that stuff in a special class called, "Fucking with Soldiers." Lesson One: Leave their quarters neater than you found them.

I checked my watch, a wind-up plastic-fantastic Timex that I'd swiped from the supply room back in Germany. Black face and green-glowing radium digits and hands. Dinnertime was fast approaching. I took my chow hall benefit seriously. I did not like to have to pay for a meal if I could avoid it. This would also give me the opportunity to invite SGT Craven to dinner, maybe find out what his and Top's plans were for the restaurant that I was to have a one-third stake in. I assumed it was a one-third stake anyway. Maybe they were only cutting me in on a small percentage. Three soldiers running a business! One of the three of us had better have some sense. I was suspecting it would be Top. It had better be Top!

I gave up trying to read and killed some time listening to the classical station, stretched out on my rack, eyes closed and hands clasped behind my head. "The Holberg Suite," the male DJ monotoned, like he was doing play-by-play for Sunday golf, one of my grandfather's favorite things to watch post-mass, empty pipe clenched in teeth. "Opus 40 by Edvard Grieg, as performed by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Herbert Von Karajan." I lay down on my rack and closed my eyes. The music played and I conjured up a vision of the English Channel, riding a ferry over

from Belgium, a six-hour crossing in a choppy sea. I had been in Europe maybe three months at that point, so I decided to take my first leave. I was still just a PFC. I went to the USO and bought a package that included a ticket on a tour bus that was going to London. After the long bus trip to Belgium, all of the G.I. tourists were set free upon the ferry, which was set up like a cruise ship without cabins. The hold was filled with cars. I wandered around, looking for a seat. The sky was gray and the sea was rough enough that many people became sick. I wasn't one of them. Maybe I'm less susceptible to such things. I settled into a chair next to a large window, peeled open one of my books, but instead of reading I sat watching the waves. A pair of English soldiers tried to bum a cigarette off me. "I don't smoke," I told them. They fixed me with suspicious stares and moved on. Later, I saw the two of them playing a slot machine that took one-pound coins. I was pretty sure that the pound was worth more than a dollar. They must have shoved a week's pay into that thing before giving up. The gray sky and the gray sea were very calming for some reason. Maybe I'm part Viking. Who knows what lurks in DNA? I stayed in London for four days. There were castles crammed full of furniture and art. They reminded me of rummage sales. The hotel we all stayed in was near the Tower of London and the Tower Bridge. The roommate the USO stuck me with was worried that the English were judging him. One morning at our complimentary breakfast, he sat eating a banana. He became paranoid that the English were judging him for eating it "monkey style," as he put it. So the next morning, he peeled it, put it on a plate and ate it with fork and knife, slicing it into neat little rounds and daintily placing them into his mouth. He noticed that the English kept both fork and knife in hand while eating, so he emulated their technique, studying them on the sly. I watched him do this and thought, actually, that's not a bad technique. I was delighted to find a Taco Bell near Piccadilly Circus, I seem to remember. Our chirpy English tour guide informed us that it was "Time for snacky-lunchies!" when we stopped there. I snorted out a laugh at the memory, and then took a peek at my watch. "Time for snacky-dinner," I announced to myself. I got up, still sore

from the half-night on the floor downstairs and the punch in the gut, turned off the stereo, and departed my quarters in search of SGT Craven.

SGT Craven lived three doors down from me. Neighbors were we. I rapped on his door. “Sergeant Craven?”

“Gimme a minute!” he called out.

“You want to go to dinner?”

“Be right there!” he called out.

I silently opened the door a crack and peeked in. He was busy stuffing candy wrappers into a plastic PX sack. He didn’t notice me, so I pulled the door shut as quietly as I could and waited for him. “Oh, Sergeant Craven,” I whispered aloud, in tsk-tsk mode. No point in mentioning it to him, I thought. I figured I’d lay off him. LaRouche was leaving anyway, so his reading lessons were about to come to an end, too. I hated like hell that he wouldn’t get an Army retirement check, that he was doomed to be kicked out just shy of getting there. The notional restaurant had better work, I figured. I felt responsible for him now. He had become yet another child that I needed to see succeed.

SGT Craven emerged from his quarters. He locked them up, and we strolled downstairs in a leisurely fashion. Crumb was waiting for me there.

“You,” I said to him, stopping and crossing my arms.

The friendly look on Crumb’s face melted into antagonism. “What?” he went. “You’re acting like I raped your dog.”

“You tossed my quarters is more like it,” I said.

“I did not,” Crumb said. “What gave you that idea?”

“Don’t play me,” I said. “It had to be you.” I described the state of my quarters.

“Listen here, junior,” Crumb said. He thumped me in the forehead with a middle finger snapped from a thumb. “If I’d tossed your quarters, you’d know it. Everything would be on the

floor, and I would have left my card right in the middle of it, just so you knew who was about to make your life a living hell.”

I studied Crumb’s face, and quickly gave in. “Well, if it wasn’t you—”

“Ah, look at him. He’s trying to think,” Crumb said.

“Someone tossed your quarters?” SGT Craven asked.

“Don’t *you* get started,” Crumb said to him. “Why are you still in my Army, fat body?”

“Don’t get hostile with Sergeant Craven,” I said. “Have some respect.”

“There, there,” Crumb said to him. “Did I hurt your feelings? Why don’t you go sit down over there and watch the idiot box, Mensa.” Crumb motioned toward the day room. SGT Craven, having spent half his life in the Army, complied. “Let’s go up to your quarters.”

We marched back up the stairs. I opened the door and showed him the alphabetized books, the dents in the back of the wall locker with my junk in it, the neatly folded clothes, the pressed uniforms. “So you’re saying that you didn’t do this?” I asked him.

His face twisted up in suppressed rage. “This is the gayest tossing of a room I’ve ever seen in my life,” he said. “Anything missing?”

“Nothing.”

Crumb stood up straight in the middle of the room, blinking. “Fuck,” he said. He got down on his knees and looked under the bed. He picked up my lamp and flipped it over, studied the base of it, set it back down. He walked around pulling out drawers and feeling underneath them. He checked my window. “You ever open this window? For fresh air?”

“No.”

He yanked on it. It was closed tight. “This is some strange shit. Alphabetized your books. Fuck’s sake. I don’t believe in coincidence.”

“Neither do I.”

“I think this joker was looking for something, didn’t find it, took it out on you in anal retentive fashion. He knew you were gone during this time, too. Had access to the post—though your pal the Russkie proved that anyone with half a brain can sneak on. And I have yet to walk in here, day or night, when your CQ wasn’t asleep, so it’s no trouble to sneak up the stairs. The locks on these barracks doors are easy to pick, too. Your intruder walks onto post, walks past the CQ, bold as brass, comes up here, searches through your shit, doesn’t find whatever he’s looking for, and goes on a neatening spree. Sound about right to you, sunshine?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s what I want you to do: Describe the condition of your quarters when you came in last night, time and date, *etcetera*, and write it up on your fancy computer over there and then sign it.”

I booted up my computer, launched MacWrite, typed the statement out. The printer loudly buzzed the words onto the paper scrolled in my printer. I tore off the perforated bits on either side, signed it with a Skilcraft pen and handed it to Crumb. He folded it into thirds and deposited it in the inside pocket of his hound-toothed sport jacket.

“Do you think it was Bill and Phil?”

“Not Bill’s style,” Crumb said. “Not the Bill I knew, anyway. He had a certain love of locking up a suspect in solitary for twenty-three-and-three-quarters hours a day. For fifteen minutes, he’d bring them into an interrogation room, leave a pad and pen in front of them, and not say a word. Four or five days in, he’d have a confession. ‘You just have to be patient, Larry,’ he told me.”

“Lovely.”

“I’m betting that your sergeant down there is getting hungry. I imagine you’ll want to take him over to the chow hall.”

We started to leave and then I said, “You think the intruder was looking for the black book?”

“Shit, in all the excitement I forgot to tell you what an asshole your friend the KGB agent is. That black book from Lish? It took about two minutes for our cryptographer to crack, as it was in

some sort of bullshit grade-school code replacing letters with numbers. It's a real little black book. Lish was rating the fuckability of every woman he ever met. Tits, hair, face, legs, ass. He gave your little girlfriend a very high rating. Five stars across the board."

"Jesus! Did I tell you that Lish took Polaroids of his dick and shoved them under LaRouche's door?"

"That's a little detail you may have forgotten to share. How did she know they were from him?"

"He signed them. Wrote poetry on the back."

"Outstanding. She keep them?"

"She did."

"Have her bring them to your office. I'll come get them. If he ever comes back, give me a call. I'll personally lock that little fuckstick up in the stockade and throw away the key. Pandering, pornography, drugs. You certainly rub elbows with a better class of soldier."

"The sick, lame and lazy. That's who ends up in my basement."

We departed my quarters. He watched me lock up. On the way downstairs, I told him about Gus's two a.m. call, and about him showing up at the movie.

"Stop talking to that guy. If you have to, hang up on him," Crumb advised. "Nothing good can come out of it."

"Roger." And then I asked, to change the subject, "Out of curiosity, where do you get your clothes?"

"Don't *you* start. I have well-armed men in my office who give me shit every day of the week." He smirked. "My wife picks them out. I think they come from the Ed McMahon collection, or some horseshit."

"Right."

“What the hell do I know about clothes? I spent my entire adult life in the Army. I’m a chief warrant officer.”

I should have been calling him “sir” all along, I quickly realized. “I didn’t know that, sir.”

“You weren’t supposed to know that. You’re supposed to look at my buzzer here,” he flipped out his badge and ID, “and shit your pants. And don’t call me ‘sir’ again, or I’ll arrest you. I’ll figure out what the charges are later.” He put the buzzer away. He pulled out his Smith and Wesson and cradled it in his hands. “The Army’s going to take away my .38. They’re replacing them with that piece of shit Beretta. Fucking pop gun. When I shoot a man, I want him to know it. I think the Beretta’s pretty much the last straw for me. So I’m retiring this year. Bill seems to think he can get me in at the FBI. I don’t know. I’d rather work for the Marshal’s service.”

“Why the Marshal’s service?”

“They deal with criminals who are already convicted. Kind of takes the muss and fuss out of life when you don’t have to build a case.” He holstered his weapon. “I’ll admit something. I was ready to not like you. But you’re a lot more like your father than I thought you’d be.”

“What did you think I’d be like?”

“The snotty son of a full-bird colonel. A jerk-off Army brat who flunked out of ROTC, serving out the time he owes like a prisoner. But it turns out you’re a soldier like your dad.”

I was touched by this, but didn’t let on. “I suppose so,” was all I could think to say.

We found SGT Craven where we’d left him, sitting in front of the TV. *Star Search* was on. Ed McMahon was trapped somewhere in all the zigzagging lines in the ancient Magnavox, urging people to vote on their favorite new singer. SGT Craven stood up upon seeing us and rubbed his considerable belly. “Hungry!” he said.

“You see anyone come in or out of Sergeant Bean’s quarters on Saturday night by any chance, Craven?” Crumb asked him.

“No,” SGT Craven said immediately. “I’m hungry.”

“Right,” Crumb said to me. “You better go feed your business partner.”

I shook hands with Crumb. He seemed startled by the gesture, but he shook my hand anyway. He had a firm handshake, but not a bone-buster. The Colonel was a fan of the handshake, believing that it told you volumes about a man. I got nothing out of it but a weak sentence: This guy's okay. “Let's go, Sergeant Craven,” I said. “Saddle up.” We departed Crumb's company wordlessly outside. The day's heat simmered off the concrete. I would have hated to have been clothed in polyester in all that heat, like a plastic-wrapped supermarket burrito, but that's the life of a CID agent, I suppose.

Every Fresh-Faced American Boy's Plan

I surprised SGT Craven by allowing him to eat whatever he wanted. Weekends were when the b-team took over the mess hall. On order were some leftover steamship round beef slices simmering in broth, cooked-to-death vegetables, mashed potatoes the consistency of library paste, slices of stale white bread, and dollops of banana pudding in small bowls with a soggy vanilla wafer jammed in the top. SGT Craven took it all. I made a sandwich with the gray slivers of meat and two slices of white bread. I drank a glass of diluted cherry Kool Aid and watched SGT Craven dig in.

“If you don't pass your next PT test, I think you're done for,” I told him.

“I know,” he said, a spray of mashed potatoes coming out. “Lasted lot longer'n I thought I would. Army finally catch up with me.”

“You think you can read well enough to fool someone?”

“Naw. That ain't happening neither. Made a good living off the Army. Guess it's time to leave.” All of the rest of us were more upset by his upcoming non-retirement than he was. “You staying in?”

“I don't know. Maybe.” I tossed my makeshift sandwich onto my plate. I looked around me, at all that institutional life. “Probably.”

#

One of my concerns about returning to civilian life was that if I died suddenly, no one would find out for days, possibly weeks, until the stench lured them to wherever I lived. I don't know why that was a concern, as I would be dead. I suppose that I do not want my death to be as messy as my father's was. I want to pass from this world as quietly as possible, causing no trouble. The thought of my corpse being the cause of someone else's distress is appalling to me. That wouldn't be a problem in the Army. Miss one formation, and someone in your organization will start looking for you, even

if you're a slippery character like Lish. Even if you're a nobody like me. The institution of the Army simulates caring well enough that my corpse would be fresh and unmolested upon discovery.

My suicide plan at that time was pills and a plastic bag. Didn't every fresh-faced American boy have a suicide plan? I'd sprained my ankle on the ice in Germany once, and the Army doc prescribed a vial of Percocet for my pain. I took one the first day and was amazed by how I felt. I don't recall whether or not the pill eliminated my pain. What I do recall is that, for the first time in my life, the noise of my existence quieted down and I did not care about anything, especially my ankle. So I kept the pills, twenty-nine of them in a brown vial with my name on it, inside a plastic bag in the drawer of my nightstand, along with a Depends undergarment. I figured I'd drink a fifth of Old Crow, take the pills, put on the adult diapers so I wouldn't leave a mess for someone to clean up, pop the plastic bag on my head, secure it with one-hundred-mile-an-hour tape around my neck, and do the big sleep. I'd do it on a Thursday, our training day, so that I would be missed. I'd already paid two-hundred dollars to the Neptune Society for my non-funeral. My corpse would be incinerated and the ashes and bone bits would be dumped at sea. I would be as non-obtrusive in death as I was in life.

So, strangely, the thought of my decaying corpse was one reason I stayed in the Army as a lifer. That, and the institution making most of my decisions for me—what to eat, what to wear, what to do with myself.

#

I saw Top walk in the mess hall and walk right past the private they had working the sign-in podium. I caught his eye with some waving and he came over. "Look at you on post on a Sunday, Top," I said. "We go operational or something?"

"Not likely," Top said. He sat down next to SGT Craven. "You give up on the diet, Craven?"

"Guess so," SGT Craven said.

"Larry told me about what happened in your quarters," Top said.

“Crazy shit,” I said.

“You all right?”

“Outstanding,” I said. “Never better.”

“Outstanding,” Top said. “How about you, Sergeant Craven?” He slapped him on the back, gripped his shoulder and gave him a shake. “Chicago ain’t Memphis, but then again we won’t have to compete with fifty other barbecue joints.”

“Huh?” SGT Craven went.

“Our restaurant,” Top said.

“We still doing that?” SGT Craven asked.

“What the fuck else you gonna do, Craven?” Top snapped.

“I don’t know,” SGT Craven said, his voice gone wobbly like this was yet another test he was failing.

“Am I taking a one-third stake in this thing?” I asked. “I still have the Colonel’s G.I. life insurance. And I’ve saved a lot of money eating in places like this.”

“Army legal is helping me draw up the incorporation papers for Illinois,” Top said. “Once we get that done, it’s a matter of scraping together the money and finding a good location.”

“If Sergeant Craven cooks, they will come,” I said. “My only concern is adequate parking.”

“Damn straight,” Top said.

SGT Craven wiped his plate clean with a piece of white bread and crammed it into his mouth. He looked up at us. “What?” came muffled out of his mouth. It seemed impossible that we were staking our futures on this man.

#

After dinner, I walked over to the bowling alley alone and rented a lane and a pair of shoes. The motif of the bowling alley was some sort of abstract pink and turquoise design work, swirled on the walls. Even though the eighties had come and gone fairly recently, the place already looked dated.

But that was the nature of Army post life. Everything looked like it came from another time. I picked out an eight-pound ball that fit my fingers, and got my customary pitcher of Bud. A good game for me was not rolling a gutter ball, maybe getting a 180. That was only possible in the first game. I decided that my gut-bruise was hindering my game. By the time the pitcher was done, the ball wasn't performing up to standards, missing pins, clunking into the gutter, spinning strangely. I'm a lightweight when it comes to alcohol.

When I was halfway through my pitcher and about four frames into my second game, LaRouche appeared behind me accompanied by an older version of herself. I was celebrating picking up an easy spare with a little dance when I caught sight of her and her mother. Her mother was toting an oversized faux alligator skin purse and wearing a big old pair of shorts, and a green eyeshade. Her t-shirt read, "My daughter is a U.S. Army Soldier!" LaRouche wore a sundress and a massive straw bonnet, the Soviet camera dangling round her neck. Both women wore white Keds. "I hope we're not disturbing you," her mother said.

"This is my mama," LaRouche said.

"Ma'am," I went. I shook her hand.

"Ma'am!" she went to her daughter. "Eden has told me so much about you, I feel like I'm meeting a celebrity," she said to me.

"Oh," I went. I didn't know how to react.

They sat down in the seats surrounding my lane. The bowling alley was abandoned on Saturday night, so it was my favorite night to be there.

LaRouche pulled out three envelopes of developed photos, and the two little women started going through them. I continued bowling, badly. "This is a good one!" I heard Mama LaRouche say.

"Thank you, mama." A save pile was accumulating in the seat next to the junior LaRouche.

I guessed, correctly, that I was meant to look at the photos. So I finished up the rest of my frames and sat down next the photo pile. I took off my bowling shoes, and put on my Reeboks. “I’d offer you some beer, but I drank it all.”

LaRouche pushed the little pile of photos over at me. “Tell me what you think. Be honest.”

I picked up the pile of photos and began flipping through them. The ones on top were obviously the newest ones, so I witnessed their day of vacation in reverse. The photos had a strange quality to them. They were not standard snapshots. Having been through the Smithsonian museums several times each, the only term I could think to describe them was that they were art. The photos became less artsy as I headed back in time. They also became less focused. She had taught herself how to use the camera during the day, manipulating the little controls on it. When I got down to the bottom, I found under- and over-exposed photos.

I couldn’t think of anything smart to say about the photos, so I said, “Keep the camera.”

“No! I couldn’t!” But I could tell from her voice that she wanted that camera, and that it wouldn’t take much convincing for her to take it. It didn’t.

“Keep it. You know what you’re doing with it. Unlike me.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Of course I mean it.”

She leaned across the piles of photos and kissed me on the cheek. I felt a blush run through the length of my body, from my cheek to the tips of my fingers and toes.

“You have a beautiful smile,” her mother said to me.

LaRouche snapped a photo of me. “He doesn’t smile,” she told her mother. “Gotta capture these moments when you can.”

LaRouche handed me the camera. “Take a picture of me and mama,” she said.

She'd set up the camera for me. I fumbled focusing it, and finally took a photo. I handed her the camera back. "It was nice meeting you," I said. I picked up the bowling shoes and headed for the counter.

"At least let us buy you dinner," LaRouche called after me.

"I already ate," I said, not looking back. "Enjoy your time with your mother." The truth of it was, seeing the two of them together made my heart ache. My lifelong envy of people who had close relationships with their parents came bubbling to the surface. The same old envy of anyone who had a real mother. It's not a nice feeling, and not one I want to associate with people I like. I always want to remember those people in a happy way, but I never do. Not even the ones who were nice to me. Especially the ones who were nice to me. I never took any real photos with that camera, anyway. Photos lead to memories, which leads to heart ache.

Basket of puppies.

Incompetent Idiots

My Sunday ritual was walking off post to a nearby 7-11 and picking up the Sunday edition of the *Washington Post*. The post-shower walk would wake me up a bit. I'd take the paper with me to the nearly empty mess hall and sit alone at a big table by myself, drinking coffee and nibbling on toast until the mess hall staff told me that I needed to clear out.

That was my intention that morning. The moment I stepped off post, I found that I had a not-so-discrete tail in the form of a white Ford LTD with government plates. The car was covered over in gray dust, onto which someone had written on the passenger-side door with a wet fingertip, PHIL THE DICK. Phil called out to me from the passenger seat through the rolled-down window, "Get in!"

The car stopped. I leaned down and called past Phil to Bill, who was driving, "What if I don't?"

"Don't be such a cocktease, Bean," Bill said, staring forward.

I got in the backseat and slid to the middle. A mesh grate separated me from the two agents.

"Am I under arrest?" I asked them, leaning forward.

"You are assisting in an investigation," Phil said. "Voluntarily."

"Swell," I said. I leaned back in the seat. "Where are we going?"

"Like you don't know," Phil said. He turned around and glared at me through the mesh.

"Tell him anyway," Bill said, peering at me in the rearview mirror.

"Your pal the domestic terrorist," Phil said. "Special delivery today."

"Right," I said. "His books-on-tape."

"Books-on-tape, my pimpled ass," Phil said. "This shipment is coming from Utah, from his known associates out west."

“Tapes,” I said.

“That’s the label,” Bill said. “Best guess is some form of weaponry. Maybe explosives. Maybe fertilizer.”

“Fertilizer?” I went.

“Yeah, genius, fertilizer,” Bill snapped. “Get the right combination of fertilizer in a van and you can blow up anything. Especially a Federal building.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

“Listen to him,” Phil said. “It’s cute when they’re young.”

“We had Agent Crumb check you out the other day. You fit the profile of the young, domestic terrorist,” Bill said.

“I’m in the Army,” I said.

“Check,” Phil said. “And you’re a loner. Check. And you have no relatives to speak of, other than those two elderly characters in Illinois and your uncle, who is a complete fuckstick. So you have nothing to lose. And there you are in Pointer’s class, learning from the master. So triple check. Or quadruple check. I’ve lost count.”

“I am not a domestic... What the fuck? This is how the FBI wastes its time these days? Investigating soldiers? You’ve run out of communists, so you decide to slap around Americans? Am I wrong here?”

“Listen to him,” Phil said.

“Blah, blah, blah,” Bill said.

I slouched back in the seat and crossed my arms. Bill piloted the sedan around Arlington for a while, seemingly at random. He pulled through a McDonald’s drive-through and got himself and Phil each a coffee and an Egg McMuffin. They ate and slurped while I silently starved and seethed behind them.

Bill parked the car in a suburban neighborhood, lower middle class by the look of it, with beaten-up aluminum siding and missing roof shingles and crumbling, weedy sidewalks.

Bill turned around and said, "And this is where we catch your mentor red-handed."

"Uh, oh," Phil said. "Get a load of what we have over there."

I sat up and looked out where Phil was pointing, toward a white van.

"ATF?" Bill said.

"That's my best guess," Phil said.

"Those fuckers!"

"Treasury department dildos," Phil said. "They're going to ruin this whole bust. Incompetent idiots!"

"I'll go talk to them," Bill said. "You hang tight with Luke Skywalker."

Bill got out, slammed his door shut, and strode purposefully toward the van. He was not exactly inconspicuous, with his black suit and aviator shades and gun bulge. People were emerging from their homes now, picking up the paper from the end of the drive, wearing their Sunday best and loading into the family minivan to go to church, pulling weeds. They all took notice of the strange man. He knocked on the back door of the van and was quickly let in. He emerged a few minutes later looking more pissed-off than he had before getting in the van. He practically sprinted back to the car.

"Fine," Bill said, getting back in the car. "We'll let them take the lead."

I could hear a helicopter overhead. Phil could, too. I looked out the window and saw it hovering. "They have a chopper for this?" Phil asked.

"That and a battering ram on the way. Bomb squad, too," Bill said, bitterly. "Cocksuckers."

A brown delivery van came around the corner and parked in front of the shabbiest house on the street. "Right on time," Phil said. A man in a cocoa-colored uniform leapt out of the van and sprinted up to the front door with a clipboard under his arm.

“Let’s see if they can restrain themselves until after he signs the slip,” Bill said.

The helicopter hovered lower and lower until everyone in the neighborhood who was outside looked up, shielding their eyes from the blast of the rotors and the sun glinting off metal. Neighbors from around the block came rushing outdoors, too, all similarly squinting at the helicopter. The delivery man looked up.

The only one who didn’t seem to notice the helicopter was Dr. Pointer, of course, standing there in his shabby bathrobe and house slippers, scribbling his name on the sheet.

“Gotcha!” Phil said.

“Go, go, go!” Bill shouted out the window, beating his hands on the steering wheel.

A matte-black armored truck with fat cartoon tires came trundling from around the opposite corner from us, rocking from side-to-side with top-heaviness, nearly sideswiping the white van. It squealed up Pointer’s short driveway, and rammed into Pointer’s garage with what appeared to be a massive fist welded to the front. Pointer’s garage wrapped around the fist like a piece of tinfoil around a baked potato. The armored truck backed up, taking the garage door with it, revealing the smashed rear end of Pointer’s crap car and cardboard boxes piled to the ceiling.

Men in paramilitary uniforms, BATF in bold yellow on their backs, rushed toward the house from all angles, seemingly all coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

It was the doomsday that Pointer had always feared, yet he seemed oblivious to all of it, intently examining the form he’d just signed, a freaky little grin on his face. He had to have heard the destruction of his garage door and the beat of the helicopter rotors, unless he’d gone stone deaf overnight.

“Cool customer,” Phil noted.

“Or he’s an idiot,” Bill said.

By the time Pointer looked up, five Ninja agents were upon him, tackling him to the ground.

Bill popped the trunk and the two agents simultaneously opened their respective car doors and went to the rear of the vehicle. The trunk slammed shut, revealing the two of them wearing blue windbreakers with FBI in bright yellow stenciled on their breasts. Phil opened the rear door, grabbed me by the upper arm, and dragged me out of the car. “Here’s where you find out what kind of asshole you’re learning your politics from,” Phil said.

We trotted across the street toward the delivery vehicle, as the ATF agents gingerly opened the door, expecting an explosion, maybe, or maybe paramilitary paranoids wielding rifles. Instead, they found a dozen small boxes. “Back up, everyone!”

We all backed up.

I heard laughter coming from the house. It was Pointer. An ATF agent straddled him, his knee in the middle of Pointer’s back, as Pointer bellowed out cheerful guffaws.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” the agent shouted at the back of his head, but Pointer kept on laughing until he ran out of energy and closed his eyes.

The ATF set up a blast zone and all were warned to stay back. Minutes later, a red and white truck labeled “BOMB SQUAD” in gold lettering parked behind the Bill and Phil Ford LTD. A man in an enormous armored suit came thudding heavily out of the back, like Gort the robot in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He staggered over to the back of the truck, retrieved one of the packages, returned to the bomb squad truck, the doors closed, and we heard a little bang.

A radio held by one of the nearby ATF agents squawked out, “It appears to be a box of cassette tapes. Over.”

Pointer’s laughter started up again, this time with a meaner edge to it. He was sitting in his front yard by this time, cross-legged on the ground, his shabby robe shabbier, the left side of his face scraped and bleeding, his combover standing straight up on his head like a banner. The ATF Ninja standing behind him gave him a little kick. “Kick all you want!” Pointer shouted. “It won’t turn my cassette tapes into bombs!” And then he broke out into more insane laughter.

“He’s been studying Guy Fawkes,” Bill said to me, almost apologetically. “NSA has been keeping tabs on him for months on America On-Line.”

“Who the hell is Guy Fawkes?” I asked.

“Nobody,” Bill said. “Jesus Christ. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that he suckered us into this so he can sell his crap books.”

“Don’t forget his crap tapes,” Phil said.

“Thank God for the ATF,” Bill said. “Let’s get out of these jackets and get out of here before the Bureau takes any blame for this mess.”

They whipped off their jackets and double-timed it to the LTD and quickly deposited their jackets in the trunk. They hopped into the car quickly, like Batman and Robin. Phil rolled down his window. “You coming?”

“I think I’ll walk, thanks,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” Phil said. He rolled up his window. The engine started, but the car couldn’t move. The bomb squad truck had blocked them in.

One of Them

I walked for maybe half-an-hour, up and down streets, past bus stops curiously peppered with buckshot, past greasy spoons and auto repair shops and shoe stores and barber shops, until I realized that I was standing in front of Bob and Edith's. The shock of what I'd witnessed a mere half hour before finally wore off, replaced by intense hunger. I quickly went inside.

I found Pepper sitting in a booth all alone, the restaurant mostly empty save for a few tables of after-church customers blowing on coffee, wearing stiff church clothes, silently awaiting their waffles, over-easy eggs and bacon.

"May I?" I asked Pepper.

"I don't feel so good," Pepper said. He lifted up the Cramps t-shirt he had on, showing me the results of his ass-kicking from Friday night. His whole torso was purple-black and sickly yellow. He pulled his shirt back down. "I wish I wasn't an asshole."

"You're not an asshole," I said, sliding into the booth across from him. "That corporal was the asshole."

"That's what I tell myself. But why am I the one always getting his ass kicked if I'm not an asshole?"

Luckily, a waitress came by with a carafe of coffee and an extra cup. "God bless you," I said to her.

"Uh huh," she went. "You want something to eat?"

I ordered french toast and sausage. She scribbled it down without even looking at Pepper and walked away.

"You order already?"

“No,” he said flatly. “This is what it’s like being me. I’m a big hit with homeless people, cops and children though. So I got that going for me.”

“Do you want to go to the hospital?”

“No,” he said. “Nurses like me about as much as waitresses do. I’m hoping that idiot corporal didn’t bust one of my kidneys. That would kind of suck.”

“I really think you should see a doctor. I’ll take you.”

He glared over at me suspiciously. “Why do you like me? You shouldn’t like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re one of them! You’re tall and handsome. Bet you played on the football team in high school, too!”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“Nonetheless, you’re clearly one of them. You’re a normal. Why the fuck do you hang out with me?”

I looked out the window at the traffic. Clouds were coming in from the east. Rain today. “You know I don’t have any family, right?”

“Right.”

“My father killed himself.”

“Yeah,” he said, not meeting my eyes.

“I’m not a normal. I’m faking it. Just because I don’t like David Lynch doesn’t make me a bad guy.”

“I wasn’t saying you were a bad guy,” Pepper said, apologetically—almost. “I don’t know. You’re just not the kind of guy I hang out with.”

“Who do you hang out with?”

“Nobody. I guess.”

“Me, too. Maybe we nobodies had better stick together.”

He smiled, genuinely, his face losing, just for a moment, that ironic edge that kept everyone at a distance. “Thanks, man.”

He flipped over the placemat and pulled a Rotring pen out of his pocket. He shook the pen and started drawing. By the time my french toast arrived, he’d drawn an expressive and beautiful portrait of our waitress from memory. He handed it to her wordlessly. For a brief moment, her face flared with indignation, but then she saw herself as depicted by Pepper and she immediately softened. “Oh my God.” Her free hand came up to her face. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Pepper said.

“Did you want anything?”

“No,” he said. “Ice water?”

“One ice water coming up.” She walked away with the drawing in her hands, staring at it, almost bumping into a chair on her way to the kitchen.

“Maybe I’ll get some decent service in here from now on.” He thought about it for a moment and said, “Probably not.”

#

Pepper didn’t own a car, so the two of us walked back to post on foot, side-by-side on the sidewalk, Mutt and Jeff in the Army.

“I know I’m not your supervisor anymore, but I want you to feel free to call me,” I said. “Or come knock on my door. Day or night. Anytime.”

“Sure,” Pepper said, like he’d heard that one before.

“It’s a lonely fucking life.”

“You got that right.”

“You sure you don’t want me to take you to Walter Reed?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said. We walked in silence for a minute or two. “You could take me to work tomorrow morning if you wanted to.”

“You mean over to the Pentagon?”

“Yeah. If that doesn’t get you in trouble or anything.”

“I’ll take you,” I said. “I’d be happy to.”

“Thanks.”

We showed our ID’s to the gate guard, walked on post. We walked over to the PX and I bought a bag of ice and a box of plastic trash bags. Pepper went into the Class VI store and bought a bottle of Boone’s Farm Country Quencher.

“What’s the ice for?”

“For you, brother,” I said.

We walked back to the barracks and he came upstairs with me to my quarters. I upended the ice into one of the trash bags and made him sit in it on my Federal Prison Industries lounge chair. I popped open the Country Quencher and poured us each a dram into the same coffee cups LaRouche and I drank out of. He studied his coffee cup for a moment, and then looked up at me with sadness and rage.

“This is Eden’s lipstick,” he said, his hands trembling. He stood up, and overturned his cup onto my floor. “Fuck you, man! Fuck you!” He threw the cup at the wall and it shattered. He dropped into a crouch, his fists drawn up toward his scrawny chest. “I knew something was up with you and her! I knew it! Tall and handsome, that’s her thing, man! I fucking knew it!” He paced around my quarters a bit, getting himself wound-up to do something that would screw him over. So on one of his laps around the room, I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and forced him face first onto my rack and held him tight there.

“The past week, I’ve been accused of all sorts of shit by just about everyone in the metro DC area, and I’ll be goddamned if you end up being one of them!” I shouted in his ear. He struggled.

“Fuck you! You’ve been fucking her!” And he started to cry. “Why doesn’t she like me? Why can’t I be good enough for her?”

“I didn’t fuck her, Pepper,” I shouted. “You have to believe me. I did not have sex with that woman.”

“You love her, though,” he said, his voice retreating. “I can tell.”

“I’m broken. I can’t love anyone.” As soon as those words left my mouth, he went slack.

I let him up. The tears were pouring down his cheeks, his body convulsing with sorrow and that horrible fear that he was inherently unlovable. I gently led him back into the ice chair I’d made for him, sat him down, and let him cry for both of us.

“Dude,” he said, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Dude.”

“It’s okay, man. Let the ice do its work.”

I found another coffee cup in my wall locker attic and filled it up with the cheap wine. He sucked it down and I filled the mug up again. I stepped out and went down the hall to the mop room, where I found a broom and a dustpan. I came back and swept up the mess. For weeks after this incident, I’d find little slivers of ceramic mug in the most unusual places in my quarters. I took the broom and dustpan back and brought back a wetted mop.

“So, you *are* capable of mopping,” Pepper said, half a smile creeping up on his tear-reddened face.

“I am capable of mopping, Buzz. How are you feeling?”

“Better, I guess. Sorry, man, about all that.”

“Don’t sweat it, brother. You want to hear some fucked up shit?”

“Why not?”

I sat down and told him about how my morning went.

“Fuck yeah!” Pepper went, brightening immediately. “Score one for Professor Crazy!”

“I hope he’s all right.” I have to admit, I was thinking more about finishing college than Professor Pointer’s continued health.

“Sounds like he’s more than all right to me,” Pepper said. Right then, we heard a little rap on the door. “If that’s Eden, I’m not here.”

“What are you gonna do? Hide in the closet?” I asked him.

I opened up the door, and there stood PFC Roy Lish, my AWOL soldier. He looked like he’d been dragged through a mile of mud by his ankles. He was wearing the remains of a set of BDU’s, with missing buttons on his blouse, his pants not tucked into his muddy, scuffed boots. His cover looked like he’d dunked it in a puddle of mud, wrung it out by hand, and then plopped it on his head. He snapped off a perfect salute from the position of attention and said, “Reporting for duty.”

“Lish!” Pepper went, painfully twisting to look at him from his ice chair. “How’s it hanging, man?”

“None of your business, Pee Wee,” Lish snapped. “Anyways, I’m ready for my non-judicial punishment, your lordship.”

“Go sit in that chair,” I said, knife-handing at the one I’d just occupied.

He sat down facing Pepper, who said, “And by asking ‘how’s it hanging?’ I was referring, of course, to your penis. Take any interesting Polaroids of it lately?”

I quickly sprinted down the hall to the bank of pay phones at the end. I dropped in a quarter and called up the First Sergeant at home, told him that Lish was in my quarters, and asked him to contact his good friend Larry.

Top said, “Wilco,” and hung up.

I went back to my quarters to keep an eye on my worst troublemaker. Within ten minutes, a pair of burly MP’s were standing outside my quarters. I let them in. They started to grab Pepper, possibly out of some sort of cop instinct. “Not him,” I said. “The other one.”

A whining gurgle came surging out of Lish's chest and ejaculated through his throat and out his wide-open mouth as a strangled scream. The MP's each grabbed an upper arm and an elbow and jerked Lish out of the chair. "This is not! This is not! This is infamous! Infamy! I won't be treated like this!" his legs kicked out and his left foot flattened Pepper's nose.

"Fuck!" Pepper went, reaching up to his face with both hands. Thick arterial blood oozed between his fingers.

"I will not! I will not! I will *not!*" Lish shouted, the words strangling in his throat. "Rights!"

"We'll add battery and resisting arrest to the charges," the taller of the two MP's said in passing as they carried the thrashing soldier from the room.

"New York's Tenth District!" came echoing down the hall as they carried him. "I will represent New York's Tenth District! I can't be—"

#

Sunday is a no-traffic day in Washington, so it was a quick jaunt in the mighty Pinto over to Walter Reed.

The emergency room was similarly unclogged with humanity, so Pepper was seen right away. He refused to allow himself to be checked into the hospital, so the next few hours were spent x-raying him, testing his blood and urine, and so on. I sat in the waiting room reading *The Bikini Bombshell*, which I'd left in my car.

By the time I was finished with my book, the doctors were finished with Pepper. His face was mostly obscured under a mile of white tape, his eyes swollen half-shut.

"Are you his supervisor?" a nurse asked me as she wheeled him out.

"No ma'am. I'm his friend."

"Well, try to keep your friend out of trouble for a while," she said, in that admonishing tone that only nurses, schoolteachers and the clergy can summon up.

"Yes, ma'am." I went out to the parking lot and pulled my car up to the door.

Pepper stood up and opened the car door himself and got in. Clutched in his hands was a brown-paper sack that had been stapled shut. “They gave me pills,” he said, his voice distorted into a honk. “Lots of pills! Oh, happy day! Oh, wonderful, glorious day!”

The sun was setting in the west in a blaze of radioactive colors. I’d missed two meals at the mess hall already. It seemed like I’d miss a third, too, if I didn’t hurry.

I drove recklessly through DC and finally made it back to Fort Myer with a half-hour to spare before dinner ended. I brought Pepper with me, still clutching his pills in both hands, his eyes glazed over. I guessed, correctly, that they’d drugged him up before sending him home. He smiled and bobbed his head back and forth. He signed his name at the podium inside the mess hall as “Willy Wonka.” Snaggletooth did not care.

For dinner, he chose mashed potatoes and picked up crackers from the salad bar. He crumbled the crackers onto his mashed potatoes, mixed them with his fork, and then built the mountain from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. “Do-do-do-do-dooo!” he went.

I ate the remains of the steamship round. The au jus had thickened into a sort of gravy. I had that atop mashed potatoes with a side of corn. I was so hungry that I ate everything on my plate.

Pepper ate nothing. He peered over at me and said, “I’m Baron Munchausen!”

“Baron Munchausen,” I repeated.

“I have learned from experience that a modicum of snuff can be most efficacious!”

“We’d better get you back to the barracks.”

“Roger, dodger!” he went in his newly acquired nasal honk. He stood up, unsteadily.

I took both our trays to the scullery and returned. He was once again clutching his sack of pills. He lifted the sack up to his mouth and said, “Are you in there?” He shook the pills next to his ear and made a squeaky little pill voice: “We sure are Buzz! We can’t wait to jump down your throat!” He lowered the sack back to his mouth. “Glad to hear it everyone! I look forward to working closely

with each one of you.” On the walk back over to the barracks, his voice turned from cheery to sad.

“Eden takes so many pills that her stomach is full. Have you seen all her pills?”

“No.”

“It’s horrible,” the broken little man said, his voice gone boozehound sad. “Horrible.”

He Kills People to Death

After PT, after chow, after my shit-shave-and-shower, I put on my well-pressed BDU's and my glossy boots, and went down to the basement to open my office door. LaRouche was not there, nor was Pepper. I had that old hollow feeling inside—that yearning, that need, that sadness that never stops. New soldiers would be arriving soon enough, but it wouldn't be the same.

At least I looked good, thanks to my anal-retentive intruder.

It only took the weekend for my high-and-tight to grow out enough on the sides of my head that I didn't look like a super-soldier anymore. I sat down in my chair—there was no longer a bossy PFC to push me out of it—and crossed my arms, thinking, “I'm forgetting something.”

I glanced up and noticed Agent Crumb had slipped into the room, a tentative smile on his mug. “How's it going, slim?” His sport coat was like one of those color-blindness tests that you peer into searching for a number.

I stood up and shook Agent Crumb's hand. “Fine. Outstanding.”

“Bill and Phil send their regards. Bill says that he'd appreciate your discretion.” He grabbed a chair and dragged it over to my desk, and sat down heavily.

I sat back down. “Frankly, I'd like to forget any of that ever happened.”

“Good, good.” Crumb reached into his pocket and extracted a notebook. “Your pal? Gus? You need to avoid him. According to what Bill dug up, this guy's definitely got a screw loose.”

“Considering Bill's track record, you'll excuse me if I snort derisively.”

“Ostrovsky is considered to be unsound in his judgment,” Crumb read. “His methods are not in accordance with KGB standards.”

“Too nice is he? Talks people to death?”

“No,” Crumb said. “He kills people to death. The KGB doesn’t like that, not one bit. They’re not killers, they’re persuaders. They’re salesmen. They’re not even allowed to carry guns.”

“I’ve seen all the spy movies...”

“And they’re all horseshit. Spying is boring. It’s digging through trash, buddying up to desperate people for information and paying them off. It’s sitting in a room watching people through binoculars and writing shit down. But this guy, he’s seen all the movies, too. Maybe it’s twisted him. I don’t know. He fucked up during a tour in East Germany years back and the KGB sent him to Afghanistan. Our Mujahideen contacts told us he was the last interrogator any of them wanted to see. He did some crazy-ass torture shit on them.”

“Roger. Gotcha.”

“I think he was the one who broke into your quarters. I’m going to talk to your First Sergeant today, get your lock changed and get you a bolt on the door. I’m going to see what we can do about getting him tossed out of the country. It’ll probably take a while.”

I sat up a bit. “Now you’re scaring me.”

“Good. You should be scared. This guy’s dangerous. For God’s sake, avoid him. And don’t go anywhere alone if you can help it.”

“I don’t go anywhere, period. Oh, wait!” I snapped my fingers. “I promised Pepper I’d take him over to the Pentagon today.”

“That little creep,” Crumb said.

“Yeah, that little creep. I owe it to him.”

Crumb stood up, so I did, too. “Be careful.” He reached over and I shook his hand again.

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “Sir.”

“Hey, watch it,” he said with a smile. “I already warned you once about that ‘sir’ shit.”

#

I found Pepper in the dayroom, his face slightly less puffy than the day before, sitting in a chair watching Harry Smith and Paula Zahn on the wiggly-screened TV. The TV hosts wore chef's aprons and were each enjoying a slice of pie. Pepper had on his Class A uniform. He had a couple of rows of ribbons, surprisingly.

"Sorry I'm late," I told him. I spun the keys to the HQ pick-up truck on my finger.

"I'm not due there until ten-hundred-hours," Pepper said, standing up heavily. "Wait til they get a load of me."

"It'll be fine," I said. "A lot of the senior NCO's, the Vietnam guys, like soldiers who get beat-up. Shows spirit."

I studied his ribbons. One of them was the overseas service ribbon. "Where were you overseas?" I asked him.

"Germany."

"Me, too. Where at?"

"Mannheim," he said.

"By the stockade."

"Something like that. What about you?"

"Fulda Gap," I said.

"I went on a tour there once with a group of National Guardsmen from Puerto Rico. Don't ask. Anyway, I met this Spec-Four who was obsessed with..." He stopped and looked at me in a peculiar, open-mouthed fashion. "Oh, shit! It was you! Fuck, dude! I remember you telling me how you were going to get that camera! And you did!"

"The Army," I said to him, "It's this big." I squeezed my index finger and thumb to about an inch apart.

"Ain't life grand," Pepper said, shaking his beat-up head.

"Mucho grande," I said. "Let's get you to work."

#

I went out the Hatfield Gate and proceeded over to Columbia Pike and took a left. In a few minutes, we were there. I dropped him near the Army entrance, the one that would be hit with a commuter plane in another decade, at the beginning of a global war.

Pepper reached over and shook my hand before getting out. “Man! Thanks. I would have gone insane without you. Especially the past couple of days, with Eden leaving and all. You’re a good dude.”

“Okay,” I said. “Um.”

“Yeah, dude. Shove it all inside.” He grinned at me, sadly, and slipped out of the pick-up and shut the door. I sat there for a moment, gathering myself.

#

And the door swung open.

“My friend Hank!” Gus shouted. “It is *so* good to see you!” I couldn’t help noticing the pistol he had gripped in his left hand and pointed at my ribs. He sat down in the passenger seat and slammed the door shut with his free hand. “Salutations and greetings, Hank! Now drive!”

I drove.

#

“Where’re we going?” I asked Gus. We’d been wandering around D.C. aimlessly for an hour in the old Army pick-up truck.

“I am making sure we do not have a tail. You know, movie spy stuff! From the movies!”

“Right.”

“Hank, you and I have known each other long enough for me to tell you a little secret. Would you like to hear my little secret, Hank?”

“Gus, you’re the one with the gun.”

“True enough! My secret is this: You ruined my life!”

“I ruined your life? How exactly?”

His face went from its usual joviality to something approximating mean cruelty in the blink of an eye. “You stole my fucking camera!” he shrieked.

“I stole—” And then it became suddenly, horribly, clear to me. I turned my head and looked at him, really looked at him. “Oh, fuck—” I said, recognizing him from the few times he’d actually manned the camera, from when I stood in that wooden tower, my binoculars fixed on him as he fiddled around with it. Before I could get out another word, I slammed the pick-up into the backend of a bakery truck and blacked out.

#

When I awoke, I found that I could not move. I was held tight to a four-by-eight sheet of plywood with leather straps that had been built into it. The left side of my head was bruised and crusted with blood. I was in an unfinished basement. A tap dripped, dripped, dripped. Hazy light filtered down through cloudy basement windows.

My mouth was open, held that way with some sort of wire apparatus. My nostrils were pinched shut with what I guessed was a device for a swimmer.

“My friend Hank!” I heard from across the room. “You are awake now! Good, good! I am a garrulous man and enjoy a good talk. We will talk now, my friend Hank! We will have a nice chat about all sorts of things! I will tell you about your past and your future. Think of me as one of those ghosts from the Dickens story. Do you like Dickens, Hank? Is he as good as the Russians that you have read? You are the literature snob, with your pulp books piled high in your locker, are you not? Tell me all about what I should be reading, Hank! Talk down to me.”

“Where are we? What’s going on?” I asked, gagging on the wire in my mouth, my words coming out distorted.

“We are in a CIA safe house. I am a clever boy, am I not?” He finally walked over so I could see him. He was wearing a bright red track suit with a gold star on the breast. His face was bruised.

“Your piece-of-shit truck is in the Potomac now. So I am sure the Army will not be happy with you for destroying government equipment,” he said, wagging his finger. “Of course, maybe they will bury an empty coffin at Arlington National Cemetery for you, as your body will not be recovered after your unfortunate accident! Won’t that be an honor?”

“Sure. An honor.”

“You look thirsty, Hank. Would you like a drink?” He licked his lips.

“No,” I tried to say.

“Yes? You said ‘yes’? Good!” He disappeared for a moment and came back with a five-gallon gas can. Upside down, I saw him, kneeling with a knee on either side of my head. He expertly shoved the spout from the gas can into my mouth and down my throat. I gagged. “Shh, shh, quiet Hank. Quiet,” he whispered, and then upended the can’s contents down my throat. It was water. It was water that kept coming, more and more, until my stomach distended and felt like it was about to explode. He yanked the gas can up, set it aside, and suddenly stood up. He walked over by my right hip and stepped on my stomach with his right foot, watching my face, applying more and more pressure until water came gushing back out my throat and down my windpipe and up my nasal cavity where it couldn’t escape. I was drowning from water inside of me and felt that panic that comes before death. I struggled, but was held tight by my restraints. There was even a belt around my neck, I realized. “You are flopping like a fish, my good friend Hank!” When it was over, sort of, I coughed and gagged. “It is such a feeling, Hank. Such a feeling.” He knelt down and caressed my forehead. “Poor baby. Poor Hank.”

He sat down next to me on the bare concrete floor, which was wet with the contents of my guts. He nudged some undigested scrambled eggs away with his index finger. “Eggs, Hank. You should think about your cholesterol.”

“What do you want?” I managed to say through the wire and water gurgling in the back of my throat.

“Such a capitalist question. What I want is my life back, the one I had before you stole it from me. What I want is not to have gone to Afghanistan to fight the disgusting creatures who you are financing with your blood money, these Mujahideen holy warriors. What I want, Hank,” he said, suddenly reaching over and grabbing what little hair I had on top of my head with his left hand. “Is my fucking camera back. Tell me where my camera is and I will kill you painlessly. You will die like a man, like a soldier. Don’t tell me, and you will piss your pants and cry like a coward. I am offering you this chance, my friend Hank, from one soldier to another.”

The camera was in LaRouche’s possession. There was no telling what this maniac would do to her. Soon she would be checking out of the Army and going home and he probably wouldn’t figure out that I’d given it to her. So I had only one course of action open to me: To keep my mouth shut. Figuratively, of course.

“Oh, are we keeping our mouth shut? Well, I have a little surprise for you. It is a day filled with surprises, isn’t it Hank?” He disappeared for a minute, or an hour, and returned with a flesh-colored baton. In a moment, I recognized it as the dildo that had disappeared from the backseat of the Pinto.

I won’t recount what he did with the dildo. Some things shouldn’t be recalled.

#

The third time through water cure process, Gus explained how he discovered the technique, while sitting on my left side this time, stroking my hair. “Do you know of the Philippine insurrection, my friend Hank? Freedom fighters who opposed the American occupation after the Spanish-American War fought your Army for many years. Most Americans do not have any clue about this, but I read it about it during my time at the Red Banner Institute. It was very interesting reading, my friend Hank. You Americans are the good guys, you tell yourselves all the time, and we are the baddies, but what do you call what you are enduring now? Is this what the good guys do? This technique was used to interrogate the freedom fighters by your Army and it was very effective, though it does not seem to

be working on you. Why do you not want to give up the camera?" He stood up and paced back and forth across the room. "I must put myself in your place, Gary Cooper. I must think like you, you thief of cameras and lives!" He disappeared up the stairs, his shoes squeaking and clunking on the wooden steps.

I smelled bacon and onions, my nose clip had popped off during the third treatment, but I could not feel hungry. My stomach had been stretched and emptied three times now and my lungs gurgled with water. But what he didn't know was that all that vomited water had loosened my arm straps. I stretched the wet leather bit by bit even as he was torturing me, and now my straps were almost loose enough.

I could hear his plate and silverware clinking as he ate. I could hear him washing up the dishes.

He came rushing back down the stairs. "Of course!" he said. "You gave it to Specialist Pepper! Oh, this is such good news! You would of course give it to the little shit you met in Germany! I have a photograph of the two of you together. How you must have laughed at me, my friend Hank! How you must have giggled like little girls over stealing the camera from the communist! Stick around, my friend Hank! Don't die on me! You will have the opportunity to see your little soldier friend get the same treatment. You have no idea how much fun I am having right now! It is like the county fair!" He turned and jogged back up the stairs.

First my left hand came loose, and then my right. I yanked the clip out of my mouth and threw it across the basement. I unbuckled the strap around my throat and then my waist, thighs and ankles. I stood up.

No one was going to fuck with my little bro and my little sis. No one.

I quickly transited the stairs, quietly, in cavalry scout stealth mode. My brown t-shirt was covered over in vomit and water and clung to me heavily. In the kitchen at the top of the stairs, I found a paring knife with other knives in a counter-mounted display, and gripped it in my fist.

I found Gus in the dining room, merrily whistling while cleaning his pistol, the parts of which were neatly arrayed atop a card table, spread uniformly on a white cloth napkin before him. He seemed mildly chagrined to see me, like I was an uninvited dinner guest. He was dressed in his charcoal gray suit, the bright red tie cinched under his chin, which is where I punched him as hard as I could before he had a chance to react. His card table chair upended backward, and he kicked the card table with his toes on the way down, jogging the pistol parts. The back of his head bashed a hole in the gypsum wall behind him. He tried to struggle to his feet, but a quick, savage kick to his head put an end to that. He was out cold.

Red lights glanced off the white walls surrounding me. Out the dining room window, facing the street, I saw several police cars through the gauzy drapes. The front door opened, and there stood Agent Larry Crumb and Top.

“You might want to put down the knife,” Top said.

I set it down on the table, and suddenly felt dizzy, and collapsed down and sat on the carpeted floor.

Crumb stepped over me and made his way over to Gus. “Crazy fuck,” he said, nudging him with a toe.

“You can say that again,” I said.

#

I was debriefed by a dozen or so agents from various federal agencies back at the Provost Marshal’s office on Fort Myer. They were nice enough to let me clean myself up first, and put on my PT uniform, for comfort’s sake.

I found out how they found me. After I’d been missing for two hours, Top reported my absence to his good buddy Crumb, who notified Bill and Phil, who made some discrete inquiries, which got them exactly nowhere. The DC police an Isuzu with diplomatic plates in front of a house

that was known by the neighborhood as a place where strange things happened. By the time they all arrived, I'd managed to free myself and punch out Gus.

I told the whole story of Gus, over and over to various sets of agents representing one or more parts of our security apparatus, though I did lie about one little thing. I told them that I'd lost the Soviet camera when I was stationed at Fort Irwin, during a training exercise. "It's out in the desert somewhere," I told the various agents. "It was a piece of junk anyway." I don't know if they bought it, but none of them questioned it. I felt like I'd paid for that camera, and now it should do someone, LaRouche that is, some good.

Gus was almost immediately turned over to the Soviets, and whisked home to Moscow. Over the years, I've heard many stories about what happened to him—the main one being that he lived for about a week in the basement of the Directorate of Illegal Intelligence of the KGB, was debriefed vigorously, and was subsequently taken to a holding cell with a floor drain, made to kneel before it, and was shot in the back of the head with a pistol.

The Rhythm of Nothingness

My life went back to normal, back to the rhythm of nothingness. I PT'd, I ate in the mess hall, I read my books, I bowled. My face healed, as did my bruises.

Occasionally, I'd see LaRouche during her check-out process. She was dragging her feet a bit, made it go almost a month. She'd heard that Gus had abducted me, but I didn't tell her, or anyone, that it had anything to do with her camera.

I saw Pepper occasionally wandering the halls. He'd say, "Hi," and smile, and walk away. He was hiding from LaRouche, I think, and me, too. Maybe he felt embarrassed. I don't know.

When I was a command sergeant major, many years in the future, the division PAO introduced me to a term—RTQ. When the Army didn't want to publicize something, usually something horrible that happened, the PAO would say that the subject was Response To Query only—the Army would only answer specific questions and would not initiate contact with the press or public on the subject. I realized, when the concept became clear to me, that RTQ was the way that I conducted my private life.

LaRouche appeared in front of my desk one morning, no longer in uniform, her hair done up poofy, wearing a sundress and Keds. She pushed her sign-out sheet over to me. It was complete save for a little spot marked "Supervisor." I initialed it, and dated it: 27 JUL 1990. She slid her room key over to me, and I placed it in my desk. "My car's all loaded up," she said.

"I'll walk you out." We walked out of the barracks and over to her car, side-by-side. Her little VW was groaning with the weight of all the stuff she'd accumulated. "I'm afraid you'll forget me," I admitted. I could feel my throat constricting.

"I won't forget you, Hank." She took my hands lightly in hers, and gently pulled on them. I leaned down and received a kiss on the cheek, and she let go of my hands.

I placed my hands on her cheeks and kissed her on the forehead for what seemed to be minutes. “I love you,” I told her. “Goodbye.”

Twenty years in the future—after two decades of war and pain, I can tell you that this is the warmest memory I have. This memory saved my life more than once. It was the memory of being completely alive, of having a glowing soul, for what was probably only ten or fifteen seconds.

She did write me, once or twice. But like I said, when a soldier leaves the Army, she gets gone. A week later, the Iraqis invaded Kuwait, and Pax Americana was over.

#

Surprisingly, I wasn’t one of the first ones sucked into the first Gulf War—Desert Shield/Desert Storm. No, the Army decided to send Specialist Buzz Pepper before they sent me. He never got to see combat. Shortly after stepping off the plane at King Khalid Military City, he slipped on a mess hall floor in spectacular fashion and broke his leg. He called me from Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany to tell me all about it, while I was still in charge of the basement creatures.

“I’ll never forget stepping off that plane,” he told me. “The sight of it! The sight of all those soldiers and tents. I have to paint it. I must.”

That was the last time we ever spoke. Soon enough, I received my own set of orders. I participated in the famed swinging door action that crushed Iraqi opposition, but stopped short of doing in Saddam. I’d eventually return to the sandbox for that, too, as an old soldier, an ancient in his late 30’s.

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Thirteen years later, I was part of Bush’s invasion of Iraq. Having been there before made me somewhat of a celebrity among my young soldiers, most of whom had joined the Army after 9/11 in fits of patriotic zeal. I led the invasion this time, zipping through southern Iraq in a Humvee; a PFC driver sat next to me, I sat shotgun. In the backseat, I had a radio operator and a young lieutenant. I allowed the L-T to believe he was in charge. It was easier that way.

Three or four hours into the invasion, we had made little contact with the enemy. We turned down a road, pounding with sunshine, and up ahead I saw the shape of a woman and a glint coming from her face. The driver slowed down and we pulled past her slowly. The woman was wearing BDU pants and a black armored vest with PRESS written across it in white letters. She wore a kevlar helmet with goggles. She lowered the camera from her face for a moment. I leaned out the window and stared. “LaRouche!” I shouted at her. Her mouth dropped open with surprise as we continued past her, her face browned in dust. “LaRouche!” I shouted again, my voice cracking like a thirteen-year-old’s would. She lifted her camera and shot a photo of me. I wanted to stop. More than anything, I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. I was responsible for too much.

It was her. I’m certain of it.

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Did I mention that before I left for Desert Shield/Desert Storm, I managed to finish college? It’s true! The replacement professor was very generous with her grading, giving all of us A’s. It’s like the urban legend from that time: If your roommate kills himself in college, you get all A’s for that semester. I suppose the deal was: if your professor is spied upon and humiliated by government agents in front of his neighbors, he doesn’t have to come to class anymore, and everyone in his class gets A’s.

My diploma showed up in a cardboard tube in the piles of mail I had waiting for me when I returned to Fort Myer from my first trip to the sandbox. I took the diploma to Personnel Assistance and had it entered into my 201 file. I reenlisted around that time and got my first rocker, becoming a Staff Sergeant.

I stuck around—kept reupping. What else was I supposed to do?

#

The Army offers a way to contact soldiers without an address. If you know the name of a soldier, you can send a letter to him or her by sending it to a general address. If the soldier is still in the Army, your letter will find its way to him. Eventually.

Ten years after the last time Pepper and I spoke, a letter and a half dozen boxes arrived for me at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where I was the NCOIC of a grenade range. I found the letter waiting in my mailbox in the senior enlisted quarters, and the boxes were piled up in the mailroom. I hauled the boxes upstairs to my quarters and set them in a corner.

I opened up the letter.

Hello, Old Army Buddy!

Gee whiz, I've always wanted to say that! Now I have! So now I can die!

So, yeah, now that I've mentioned dying, I'll admit that I am. I have a brain tumor, a glioblastoma multiforme is what my doctor is calling it. I have six months tops! But, you know, Gulf War Syndrome doesn't really exist. No way. Cheery letter so far, right? Ha, ha! But hey, I get some killer prescription meds from the VA. Killer... get it! Man, I'm a laugh riot! Did I tell you that my little sister was murdered? That I'm divorced? That my ex-wife and I broke up because our baby was stillborn? I'm a little ray of sunshine, right?

Well, I'll be checking into the VA hospice in St. Petersburg pretty soon. Can't wait! Yep, chomping at the bit. But first I had to do something, and I think you're the only one I ever told about this little project. You're going to be receiving some boxes pretty soon, so I should explain them to you.

Under the influence of prescription medication, I drove my shitty Saturn down to Sarasota Art & Frame and bought three dozen pre-stretched canvases, charcoal sticks and dry pigments, several red sable brushes and miniver brushes and a palette knife. I was officially almost completely broke. Hurray for me!

I went back to my apartment and hauled all my stuff up the stairs in five trips.

I had a glass-topped coffee table and a dozen eggs in the refrigerator, which would be a start.

I numbered all the panels.

I sketched up each one on the kitchen countertop, standing. The sun came up and went down and came up again. I ate a little something. I slept for a few hours. I popped more pills.

I removed the glass top from the coffee table and set it across the stove and sink. It was shockingly stable. I tapped out my pigments—lead white, Naples yellow, true vermilion, cadmium, red chromium of oxide green, cobalt blue, burnt umber, raw umber.

I cracked an egg and moved the raw egg from one half shell to another over the sink, removing the white. I placed the yolk in my palm and continued to move it from one hand to another. I placed the yolk on a paper towel and rolled it along the paper towel. I set the paper towel on the glass table top, found a paring knife and made the tiniest slit in the yolk and poured the contents of the yolk out onto the glass table top. I threw the yolk membrane in the sink.

I mixed my pigments with the yolk and began to paint—tiny strokes with my tiniest brush. I wanted detail and this was the only way to get it.

I lost ten pounds in a week.

In the end, what I had was a panorama of what I'd seen from the plane door when I arrived in Saudi Arabia, a mirage, feeling for the first time the hot breath of the desert, everything the way I remembered, one panel at a time. And in each panel, I painted a portrait of someone I knew, some tiny, if they were off in the distance, and some very detailed and intimate, if they were up close. LaRouche was the soldier getting off the plane in front of me, turning her head and smiling back at me, the viewer. My sister stood at the foot of the stairs, waiting. My grandfather was an old man NCO standing next to my sister. My grandmother was at a table. My father, oblivious, was about to be run over by a deuce-and-a-half. My mother was driving the deuce-and-a-half. You, old Army buddy, are a lieutenant saluting a colonel. I threw in old pals—Lish was the sick call doctor, har-har!—and some half-remembered acquaintances. This is what my brain convinced me that I was seeing when I stepped off that plane. It wasn't that long ago. Or it was a million years ago. I can't tell anymore.

I wrapped myself in an old blanket and snoozed on the couch for something like a day or two.

In my dream before I woke up, I was lovable. I was an affable, normal guy. Eden was my wife in this dream. She found me attractive because I was a good person, because she could see the decency inside me, and not because I was a tragic, artistic nutjob covered in paint. In this dream, Eden and I sat on the couch together and she put her head on my shoulder and I closed my eyes and felt her warm next to me, my arm around her shoulders. She asked, "What do you want to do tonight?" and I kissed her and replied, "This. Just this." And I closed my eyes in the dream and awoke from the dream, my eyes open. I was alone and knew that alone is what I would be—always, from now on. Just like you, old Hank, old buddy.

When all the panels dried, strewn about my apartment on chairs and tables and across my bed, I placed them in several boxes, upending them and dumping out all my collected comic books, and addressed the boxes to the address the Army gave me to send them to you. I figured you'd know what to do with them.

I toted the heavy boxes downstairs to my sad little Saturn. My willowy letter carrier was down there, filling our aluminum letter boxes with enveloped joy. Head sick from all that painting, and the aerosol fixatif I'd used to seal the canvases, I strutted over and demanded my mail. In my experience, it's not what's on the inside that counts—it's what's on the outside. It's small talk and frippery and clothes and ripped abs. I'm none of that. I'm all on the inside, stuffed into this plain brown paper sack. "Two-zero-five, please," I said, sticking out my paint-encrusted hand. Lead white mixed with egg yolk. Lethal smelling!

"You smell like a dead skunk," the letter carrier said in a cute little drawl. She handed me my mail.

"Thank you," I said. "Bill, bill, bill, bill. And me unemployed. How about a date?"

"No," she said. She raised up a hand to her mouth, I thought at first to pinch her nose, but it turned out she was shielding me from her smile.

"I'll ask again some other time," I said. "When I don't smell like a dead skunk."

"Looking forward to that," she said, and continued on. Short shorts.

I'm convinced that I'm not good at this. Life, I mean. It doesn't matter, now. Considering.

After mailing you my artwork, I went home and showered the skunk off me. I lay on my bed, my hands under my head and drifted to sleep and dreamt that my grandparents were still alive. I dreamt that my sister was still alive, and not long dead. I dreamt that I was not grown up, that I was not 36. I awoke, disoriented. The sun was still up, burning.

I got up and turned on the TV, clicked around the channels.

The TV flickered on and off, which was a bad sign. It was the hottest day of the year, and I was watching the day's atrocities on the six o'clock news. The A/C was making those on/off clunk noises, too. Finally, the electricity went off.

I stood up inside my apartment.

I didn't open a window just yet. I waited. And waited.

Light was growing scarce outside. Up and down my street, people were wandering out of their apartments, staring off into space. Cars turned on their lights, but there were no streetlights. I scooted a chair up to the window to watch. The last bit of cold air turned stuffy, so I cracked the windows a bit. The air blowing in was steamy, like a gym shower. Someone had left a sack of oranges in the hallway to rot and the stink was blowing in under my door. Even though the TV was off, I could hear a high-pitched squeal coming out of the cable box on top of it. Signals were squirming through. It was too much.

Down the street, out of my range of sight, I heard cars squealing and crashing, and ambulances blaring, and people screaming at each other. Across the street from me was a rest home for the elderly. Every evening, without fail, the oldsters sat in their parlor to watch the sunset and the television. I watched them watching me now. I saw their candles flickering while the flashes of headlights raced across their building.

The power still wasn't on at nine, so I went to bed. Sweat drizzled down my back. People from my building were outside now, driving in circles around streets, blasting their music. Some mariachi came by, then rap, then heavy metal. I scratched at my scalp, running my fingers furiously through my hair. It itched like I hadn't taken a shower in a week. An hour later, two hours later, still no power. I sat up in bed. "Sadists!" I shouted.

"Give it to 'em, buddy!" a neighbor shouted back, laughing.

The music in the street died out. I thought I heard gunshots, but it was probably leftover explosives from the 4th.

A bird landed on my windowsill, eyeballed me. "Coo, coo?" it went.

I waved my arms. It fluttered away.

I felt a hair curling out from inside my nose. It was tickling my nose tip, but I tried to ignore it. I was unsuccessful. Now the apartment was pitch-black, but the nose hair was irritating beyond belief. It was the final indignity.

I don't believe in planning for emergencies. It takes all the fun out of them, I think. So I don't own a flashlight. I have my apartment memorized, and—being the type of human being that I am—I often walk around it in the middle of the night without turning on any lights, so I decided to go to the kitchen and find my scissors, and clip out the offending hair. I got up out of the sofa bed, walked out of my living room and into the kitchen without disturbing a single object. I reached across the kitchen counter to where I thought I'd left the scissors and violently yanked the glass table top that I'd been using as a palette onto the kitchen floor, where it broke into several pieces.

I slowly backed out of the kitchen without stepping on a single shard of glass. I walked over to my closet and took out my vacuum cleaner and used it to block access to the kitchen in case I decided to get up in the middle of the night and wander around.

I fell asleep with the hair tickling my nose tip.

This morning the A/C was on, along with my television. My scissors were on top of the TV. I picked up the shards and vacuumed up the tiny glass bits. There was a representative from the power company on the TV. He was going on about how it was really the consumers' fault that rolling blackouts had to occur.

Kids across the street from my apartment building were playing in the old person's home parking lot, chanting, "Block that kick! Block that kick! Block that kick!"

I remembered Eden, how she threatened that mugger with the big dildo (you remember that? It was awesome!) and smiled. I remember walking through the cemetery with her one time,

looking for Audie Murphy's grave. I only knew her for four months, but it felt like I knew her all my life.

I'm very old, all of a sudden. I'm 36 and counting, waiting for the beginning of the end of my life.

Goodbye, Hank. Please don't forget me.

Your old Army buddy, Buzz.