

S. Frederick Liss

ON HEAVEN'S SCENES

If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven's scenes,
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines.

The Marines' Hymn

"Move!"

The woman's voice boomed from inside the SUV as if it were being channeled through the vehicle's audio system. Holding his stop sign in one hand and his red plastic flag in the other, Dale DuFresne, the back flagger on the paving crew, walked over to the SUV. It was so high off the roadbed he had to look up at the woman perched in the driver's seat. She had a pale face, this woman, pale and pasty, as if she were allergic to daylight; but as Dale approached he realized it was cosmetics, too much powder too hastily applied. Since returning from deployment, since being released from the hospital with a pat on the back from his team of surgeons, faces obsessed him.

"I have to get my daughter to daycare so I won't be late for work."

The woman had the tired voice of a government bureaucrat who only knew one answer. The muscles around her mouth puckered her lips into a perpetual "no." She reminded Dale of the harpy in the veteran's office who refused to explain why he had been denied disability benefits even though his facial disfigurement was so grotesque a wiseass in an airport bar once taunted him by saying he had a face that made the Orcs of *Lord of the Rings* look handsome. He pleaded *nolo* to a charge of assault and battery and the judge let him off with a \$100.00 fine, suspended, because of his service to his country. She wore, this woman, a necklace of child's pop-up beads, red, white, and blue. A red, white, and blue barrette pinned her hair above her ear. If you're so patriotic, Dale thought, why drive a German SUV.

"Sorry ma'am."

Because of the surgeries on his throat and mouth, Dale's voice squeaked as if he were one of Alvin's chipmunks. He now had to think about the pronunciation of each word, each syllable, before he uttered it or people would not understand him. His slow deliberate speech made him sound as if his mind were as deformed as his head and face. At times he wondered how much easier life would be if it were. What you don't know won't hurt you and all that rot. "You will have to wait until the front man stops oncoming traffic."

“Don’t look, pretty girl,” the woman said, shielding her daughter’s eyes with her hand. Dale was hardened to such rejections. Children, he had learned, were curious about his appearance, not repulsed. They asked questions, listened quietly to his answers. Some, the more venturesome, reached out to explore his face with their fingertips. He was truthful, but discrete, knowing that children often feared what they heard more than what they saw. Repulsion came when adults intervened.

The woman edged the SUV forward. Dale jumped in front of it, raising the stop sign. The SUV’s front bumper kissed his thighs above the knees. He rapidly raised and lowered the stop sign, then laid it on the hood of the SUV and held his ground.

Kenny Louro, the crew foreman, hobbled by shattered tibias and fibulas suffered when he triggered a tripwire mine in Vietnam, approached. Medics had saved his legs, but the bones never knitted properly and he refused to let the doctors re-break them so they could be reset.

“Problem here?” Kenny’s voice had the strength his legs lacked.

“I have to get my daughter to daycare,” the woman pleaded, “so I can get to work and . . . he won’t let me pass.”

“Well, ma’am,” Kenny said, “how many open lanes of traffic do you see?”

“I’m not blind.” The woman coughed out the words like an adolescent trying to smoke for the first time.

“And which way is the traffic flowing right now?”

“What is this, twenty questions?”

“When the oncoming traffic clears and the front man shuts down the highway from that direction, you’ll be able to pass.” Kenny spoke with the calm voice of a patient parent trying to explain the obvious to a recalcitrant child.

“Tell him to close it down now,” the woman demanded.

Or, I’ll call security, Dale added in his mind. The woman in the veteran’s office had threatened to call security when he insisted on an explanation. In the civilian world, his Purple Heart wasn’t worth the cheap ribbon it hung from.

“My pleasure,” Kenny replied.

Kenny hobbled up the highway past the rollers and spreaders and mixers, past the loaders and pavers and dozers, past the excavators, to where Barry Walega waved traffic through with a red plastic flag. Kenny whispered in Barry’s ear and Dale knew until another car or truck pulled up behind

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the SUV, perhaps a third car or truck, the beaded lady would sit there. Dale lifted the stop sign off her hood and turned his back to her. It was early in the day, less than an hour into his shift, and already it was a scorcher.

Hours later, the woman and the SUV having faded from his memory like a superficial scratch, Dale felt as if he were being cooked alive. Or, was it baked? This word or that, it did not matter. Words did not change his reality. The soles of his feet, he figured, were well done by now, his calves medium well, his thighs medium, buttocks and trunk medium rare, his shoulders rare. Only his face, his unfeeling face, its nerves incinerated along with its flesh when he was trapped inside a burning humvee after a suicide bomber's attack, was uncooked or unbaked although the sun had reddened the skin to the color of oak leaves during the peak foliage season. Once autumn was Dale's favorite time of year. Now he no longer had a favorite time.

Surgeries, dozens of surgeries, had rebuilt him from the neck up, reconstructing his face from tissues salvaged from the few parts of his body that hadn't suffered serious burns. The scars of baseball stitches on his hairless head marked the boundaries where skin had been stretched to cover the plastic dome which replaced his shattered skull. Like birdbaths, the bumps and hollows in his artificial skull collected water when he stood out in the rain. Lacking lips, he was unable to pucker up to kiss Jerilyn, his childhood sweetheart, his fiancée. His eyes hid behind narrow slits barely wide enough for the pupils to peer out. Where others had a nose, he had a lump, a convexity according to his plastic surgeon, and two holes the diameter of miniature straws, his sense of smell forever muted; as was his sense of taste by the scarred flesh of his tongue. Pinholes provided entrance to his auditory canal and inner ear.

Released from Eisenhower Army Medical Center after the slowest 19 months of his life and back home flagging motorists on Highway 100 near the Monroe/Cumberland county line, such sophistry, cooked vs. baked, no longer distracted him as it had when he and the other Marines in his platoon debated the point in their tents after patrols while they scraped dust and dirt out from under their fingernails or washed it from the inside of their ears or wiped it from the crack in their butts, dust and dirt as nasty as the squalid living conditions of the local tribes who were as loyal as their latest bribe. In the four weeks before the firestorm, he had written four letters of condolence to wives or parents of men in his platoon because tribal loyalty was as steadfast as the swirling dust dervishes blown across naked fields by the wind. The letter to his parents, to his fiancée, should have been the fifth, but God in His infinite wisdom had spared him and Army surgeons had turned him into a freak.

How could he saddle Jerilyn with what he had become; but she insisted she loved him, still wanted to marry him, have his children. As children growing up next door to each other, they had joked about it; then in high school they pledged their love. At the senior prom they became engaged. The day after graduation he enlisted in the Marines so their life together would have a firm financial foundation. Now back from deployment with a medical discharge, the wedding date had been set, the hall rented, band and caterer hired, wedding cake ordered, invitations mailed and RSVPed, his Marine dress uniform cleaned and pressed, honeymoon in Aruba prepaid. Only doubt stood between him and the altar.

Dale eyed the Beggar's Banquet growing alongside the road. Once, botany had fascinated him. Once, he and Jerilyn had explored the fields and forests with National Audubon Society field guides. Once, he had planned to use his veteran's education benefits to major in it in college, maybe get a graduate degree, maybe teach or do research. Once he had envisioned a house with acreage for a garden and greenhouse. Beggar's Banquet, Adam's Flannel, Hag's Taper, Jupiter's Staff, Velvet Dock, all nicknames for *Verbascum Thapsus* or Great Mullein. His favorite was Velvet Dock. Now, the plant's flower spike, fully formed, looked down on him like the beaded woman in the SUV, obscuring the drainage ditch on its far side, the dark woods beyond. Flowers with tiny petals, sulphur-yellow, crowded the spike; flowers, gentle flowers, one of the things he missed the most on deployment.

He removed his hard hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve, wet and grimy from the hundreds of times he had repeated that sequence since his shift began at sun up. The heat of the asphalt burned through the soles of his work boots and he felt like he was standing on a frying pan. He wished he could hop from one foot to the other like those Indian fakirs who danced on hot coals, but doing so on Highway 100 made indentations in the asphalt, fossilized footprints that would outlive him, and such footprints violated the contract specs. A flagger could be fired for leaving footprints, or handprints, or carving his or her initials. If he wanted immortality, he could be buried in Arlington National Cemetery among tens of thousands of names slowly being erased from memory by the passage of time. Anonymous immortality carried no attraction for him. A child, a son or daughter, an heir to carry his DNA forward into the future, did. Whether the flames had left him sterile, time would tell.

The sun leered at him the way the men in the paving crew had his first day on the job until they learned he was a Marine, a combat veteran, maimed by a suicide bomber, recipient of an earned Purple Heart, not one awarded to the son or daughter of a Congressman's contributor who had suffered a paper cut while shuffling PX requisitions miles from the nearest

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combat zone. Kenny, the foreman, had earned his Purple Heart in Vietnam as did the two Petes who mixed the aggregate, Pete S. and Pete D. Frankie, Mike the Mick, and Rollie, the three spreaders, in the first Iraq war. Barry, the front flagger, in Sudan, Mogadishu. And himself, Dale DuFresne, the back flagger, in the Bush/Obama Afghan Follies. During lunch breaks, they swapped war stories and compared their scars, both the visible and invisible, some whitened with age, others still pink, curly and ragged if made by shrapnel or thin and straight if by the surgeon's scalpel. He had plenty of each.

This was Dale's first summer flagging motorists as Kenny's crew laid asphalt along rural roads which hadn't been maintained since they were originally paved during FDR's Works Progress Administration. Thank God for the Obama stimulus money. He earned good money, hard money but good, enough to add up to a comfortable life, materially comfortable. Nothing easy about holding up a stop sign with one hand, waving a red flag with the other, except in the eyes of the public who didn't understand the science of traffic control or appreciate that the temperature of the blacktop he stood on was 300°F to 330°F depending on whether the aggregate was virgin or not. Add in the sun and the 90°F plus temperatures, the humidity, the lack of shade or shelter, the permanent weakness of the muscles of his arms and shoulders, and the money was anything but easy.

When Dale joined the crew, he understood the men were not accustomed to such ugliness, but, as a combat veteran with an earned Purple Heart he was one of them and they quickly became protective of him when frustrated drivers hassled him or tried to scare him off the road with their cars or trucks rather than wait for his signal to pass. The women were as nasty as the men.

Once a week the crew bowled as a team in a highway department league, the Purple Hearts they called themselves, fluorescent purple bowling shirts with their names in bold block letters on the front. No dainty script for them. Kenny and Dale, of course, did not bowl; but every team needed its cheerleaders. Someday, according to the therapist, he might have enough strength in his right hand and arm to lift the bowling ball off the return and roll it down the lane fast enough to avoid the gutter and knock over a pin or two.

Dale glanced at the sun. Three hours until it reached the tree line, three hours until shift's end. Heavy work boots trapped the heat as did the jeans, long sleeve shirt, and reflective orange vest, all mandated by the highway department, a uniform as uncomfortable as his fatigues. At least he was not burdened by pounds and pounds of equipment, weapons, and ammunition. Three more hours. He would be well done by then, toe to head well done.

Whether cooked or baked, he'd be well done. And tomorrow, he would cook—or bake—again.

Winters he reserved for school, college, a satellite campus of the state university close to home. It did not have a botany department, but there were plenty of other subjects to study, computer programming, information technology, graphic design, business administration. He chose accounting. He liked numbers and he liked the fact accounting had rules. Like the Marines. The school had arranged for his veterans' education benefits to cover tuition, books, fees, incidentals. He had enrolled in two courses, Introduction to Principles of Accounting and Math for Accountants, bought the books, read the assignments for the first class, then went A.W.O.L. on the first day of the semester, lacking the courage to attend because he did not feel at home among strangers who would look away when he tried to speak to them. Jerilyn said she understood, and he believed she was sincere, delusional but sincere. He would have to be rational for both of them.

Kenny hobbled up with two bottles of cold water. "Break time." He gestured toward the shade of the trees beyond the Velvet Dock and drainage ditch. "Shall we?"

The grove of oaks felt air-conditioned even though the difference in temperature could not have been more than ten degrees.

"Real bitch, that lady this morning." Kenny moistened his cheeks with the condensation on the outside of his bottle.

"Real bitch," Dale squeaked. The more tired he was, the squeakier his voice became.

"Not worth wasting energy thinking about."

"I'm not."

"So, what's eating you?"

"Heat."

Kenny shook his head.

"Heat," Dale repeated.

"You want to talk, Marine to Marine, let me know." Kenny finished his water and pushed himself off the ground. "Take an extra ten. You look like you could use it."

Dale stood. "Marines don't take an extra ten."

Mercifully, shift's end finally came. Shielded from the road by the Velvet Dock, Dale peeled off his work clothes and changed into a grey

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USMC tee shirt, shorts, and sandals. He imagined how the air felt against his skin, a vestigial memory locked deep within his brain. A miracle, the doctors had said, how he survived the inferno with his cognitive faculties intact. At times he wished the opposite were true, a healthy body and a derelict mind; mostly he was grateful his mind was intact though his body wasn't. If man were born into sin and destined to suffer, a fully functional mind was a *sine qua non*, a nifty Latin phrase he remembered from a botany text he had borrowed from the library his senior year in high school.

Climbing the slope to the shoulder of Highway 100 he stepped over Kenny's shadow, a superstition which had survived his childhood. The rest of the crew had already left, the two Petes to Meshack's, a road house and barbecue pit several miles down Highway 100 where they would cool down with beer and Jack chasers, neat, and heat up with pig ribs and hot sauce; Frankie and Mike the Mick to the high school baseball diamond where they coached the local American Legion baseball team, Frankie the hitters, Mike the Mick the pitchers; Rollie and Barry to their wives and children.

"Out with it, soldier," Kenny barked when Dale reached road level.

"Out with what?"

"What's festering up your insides."

"The fire fucked up my sweat glands. That's all."

"If I learned one thing in Nam it's how to tell when something's eating a guy. Life depended on it when you were deep in the shit. You're being devoured. I see it plain as day."

Dale squeaked out a laugh. "Nothing of me left to eat."

"Don't wise ass with me, Dale. Just 'cause you have a face only an Orc would love don't give you special privileges."

A horn sounded and the SUV from that morning raced by in the opposite direction, the woman flipping them the bird. Dale flipped one back, but she had already passed. "Jerilyn's not an Orc."

"That's it, isn't it? That's what's eating you."

Dale reached for the handle of the driver's side door of his truck, but Kenny stepped between him and the door. "Shit, Kenny."

"Shit, Dale."

Dale flexed his shoulder which ached from waving the red plastic flag for eight hours. He opened and closed his fingers to loosen the muscles that had contracted into a curl from gripping the flag and stop sign. He shifted his weight to his right leg to ease the pressure on his left foot, then lowered

himself to the shoulder of the highway, his legs extending away from the road. "Combat taught me patience."

Kenny squatted on the truck's running board. "Good lesson to learn."

The shadows lengthened, then disappeared, as the trees obscured the sun and the light evened out. The chirp of field crickets provided a sound track.

"Crickets eat their own if they're starving," Kenny said. "Used to trap 'em in bottles when I was a kid. Watch 'em play cannibal."

"That what you're doing. Playing cannibal."

"Up to you what I play."

"God you ain't."

"Don't need to be."

"There's an envelope," Dale said. "Pinned behind the visor. Passenger's side."

Kenny retrieved it, 9" x 12", manila, heavy paper, a return address for Loubet Studio, a photography studio on the far side of Glasgow. In the photos, Dale and Jerilyn posed in front of one of those backdrops mediocre photographers considered arty as if it were a dark and cloudy sky over Paris rather than the muddy blue-grey sheet of paper that it was. The color reminded Dale of the mud walls of the village, the mud walls of the elder's house, out of which the suicide bomber had charged his Humvee, walls dusky and dark in the early evening rain that presaged another endless winter night. Paunchy from his meds and inability to work out, Dale stood ramrod straight in his Dress Blues, his dress Marine uniform, white gloved, sword gleaming at his side, as proud as the Marine in the recruiting commercial who scaled the cliff and triumphantly saluted the sun atop the mesa. At a slight angle, he faced Jerilyn, gazing at her like a man floundering in the ocean gazes at the lifeboat disappearing into the horizon, his feelings otherwise hidden deep beneath the artifice of his face.

And Jerilyn, beautiful Jerilyn, virginal in white with a bouquet of red roses and a tiara which sparkled in the artificial light, facing straight ahead, peering into the future with eyes so vacant it was as if her soul had been sucked out of her. The skin of her cheeks and nose and chin, the skin of her bare shoulders and arms, so smooth, so perfect, so pale and lifeless, drained of blood and replaced with an undertaker's preservative which would keep her forever young and beautiful. The filigree of the bodice of her gown invited the gentlest of caresses as did the filigree of the gown itself. If Jerilyn's body was in the photo, her emotions had fled, begging her to

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follow, all of her emotions, anger, hope, frustration, and, most importantly, love. Every photograph, Dale now understood, even that of a newborn infant squalling from the obstetrician's slap, was a photograph of a dead person.

Kenny squared the corners of the photos and slipped them back in the manila envelope. He licked the mucilage on the flap and sealed it, then flattened the clasp. He wished he had another envelope, slightly larger, to put this one in, and another larger still, and another, and another.

"Back at Eisenhower," Dale said, "there were a handful of nurses who bestowed favors on the most helpless cases. The guys had a phrase for it. Mercy fuck. Pity fuck. I don't want a life of mercy fucks. Someday Jerilyn'll meet a guy with a normal face and I'll be history. She deserves it, a guy with a normal face."

"Then what?"

"I'll drive into the woods and blow my head off in the car."

"Like the guy from the motor trade?"

Dale grunted.

"In the shit," Kenny explained, "when we finished listening to our Doors tapes, we listened to The Beatles. What you said about blowing your head off in the car reminded me of one of their lyrics."

"I'll get out of the car if it'll make you feel better."

"You doing anything this weekend?"

"Watching the second hand on my clock with my right hand on my cock."

"We'll leave after work Friday. You can park at my place." Kenny opened the door to Dale's truck and replaced the manila envelope behind the visor, then bowed as if he were a manservant. "Your chariot awaits, sir."

On Friday, Kenny let Dale leave early so he could prepare for the weekend. At home, Dale showered and dressed in his camos. The squiggly shapes of various shades of brown reminded him of the way the landscape in the war zone changed colors depending on the light, the temperature, the amount of dust in the air, the amount of moisture. It was a novelty at first, the unreality of the war zone, the shifting shapes and colors, but the novelty ended when men and boys bearing arms emerged from that unreality. He had not worn his camos since returning from deployment, had not planned to wear them ever again, but he decided they would be perfect for the weekend as he didn't want anyone to know his thinking.

He laid out his Dress Blues on the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles, picking off lint. With care, he folded the uniform, the tunic with its medals and ribbons, the pants with its red stripe up the side, and laid it flat in a knapsack, standard Marine issue. He added the white belt and gloves, the socks, the shoes, the hat, but stopped when it came to his ceremonial sword. It would not fit and he knew he could not carry it. Caressing the flat of its blade with his lipless mouth, he returned it to its scabbard and hung it on the coat hook behind the bedroom door. He bid it farewell with a salute. He hoped he would not be placed on report for not dressing in full uniform.

It was cool in the mountains. The stars shined brighter. Wisps of the Milky Way ribboned the sky. Light years of distance deflated the moment to the size of a sub-atomic particle. In the dark of night, the group had hiked from the lodge's parking lot into the high country. Kenny, addressed as Group Leader, led on point, the men in single file behind. Dale who they dubbed The Marine because of the insignia on his camos lagged behind, not because he could not keep up, but because he preferred solitude. If it had been a combat mission, lagging solo would be the most vulnerable position, but they were civilians, not soldiers; stateside, not in a war zone; at risk only from mountain lions or bobcats, not enemy combatants, insurgents, or suicide bombers.

The men had left their names in the parking lot locked in their pickup trucks and cars. Anonymous camaraderie enforced by arbitrary nicknames was the latest hot theory in dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, a construct designed by men and women in white coats for whom combat was but a six letter word, death an abstraction. Supposedly it made it easier to talk directly about what triggered the flashbacks, the violent outbursts. The Veterans Administration now preferred talk to antidepressants, mood stabilizers, or tranquilizers. Anyone who'd been in combat knew how cheap talk was.

Some of the men wore fatigues, others blue jeans. Some wore athletic shoes, others work boots, one or two combat boots. Some wore drab olive tee shirts with their combat units stenciled across their chests, others tee shirts which commemorated heavy metal bands or rap artists or celebrated favored sports teams. The Marine wore camos.

Group Leader subdivided the men into smaller groups, platoons in military parlance though much smaller in number than an actual platoon, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, designations the men were familiar with, comfortable with. He assigned The Marine to his group, Alpha. Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo fanned out through the woods, each in search of its own trailhead for the next day's exercises. Alpha would climb to Drowning

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Bear Cave Bluffs, some two clicks or so up the mountain on the vertical, six or seven clicks up the trail with all its switchbacks on the mountain's southern flank.

First, the men of Alpha group except for The Marine built a fire. They centered it in an open clearing with no overhanging branches to catch fire from wind born sparks. With knives and folding shovels they cleared away dead foliage and live grass, scraping a circle of dirt, then dug a fire pit two feet deep. From the surrounding woodlands they hauled rocks to rim the pit with a stone wall two feet high. They packed the niches between the rocks with mud so flames would not sneak out through the sides. They gathered kindling and hacked dead branches from the hemlock and yellow birch which surrounded the clearing. With a piece of flint and a striking stone they lit the fire, their first group activity.

The men gathered in a circle around the fire to warm themselves and eat, not MREs, but a real meal, hot dogs, canned peas, baked potatoes, cooked in and over the open fire as if they were Boy Scouts on a jamboree. They left space for The Marine, but he sat beneath a hemlock on the dark side of the trunk, not hungry he claimed, his knapsack secure in his lap, his legs splayed before him as if he were at attention. Around the fire, the men swapped tales of combat and other derring-do, a group of strangers whose only commonality was war, combat, death, pain, Vietnam, the Gulf, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, a group of strangers guarded, wary, slow to trust, fast to scorn, bonding through boasting and bragging and exaggeration, each bravery more outlandish than the last until they were all supermen, all faster than a speeding bullet, all able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, supermen who in reality did not outrun those speeding bullets, whose bodies were not impervious to bombs or mines or grenades, men who had but an instant to determine whether that child racing toward them was a friendly looking for a piece of gum or a suicide bomber wired to explode when wrapped in a hug. More than one had made the wrong choice, some more than once. The men wished they were back home, wherever home might be, in their favorite neighborhood bar where the regulars bought them rounds in honor of their service and the whiskey comforted them in a way wives or children or willing women who did not wait around for the sun to rise no longer did.

When Alpha group first formed, the men didn't know what to make of The Marine. Adhering to protocol, Group Leader refused to answer questions. The men speculated.

"He's part of the program," No. 1 concluded, "a test dreamt up by a white coat who has all the answers." He wore a Notre Dame tee shirt, its sleeves cut off, and crossed himself after he spoke. He was dubbed The Saint.

“Fucking white coats,” No. 2 said with a drawl as sleepy as a possum. “Turncoats if you ask me.” He wore fatigues and combat boots and became Zeke.

“Failed me,” No.3 said. “Big time.” His tee shirt had the scores of the last eight Army-Navy football games, all won by Navy, on the back and 54-47-9 on the front. He wobbled when he walked and they called him Seasick.

“What about you?” The Saint asked Group Leader.

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em,” Group Leader said. He spit a fleck of tobacco into the flames and sipped his coffee. Nicotine and caffeine were the only stimulants allowed on these excursions. Liquor and drugs were banned. “If you’re caught with contraband, it’s a one way handoff to the sheriff,” Group Leader had instructed them at the lodge, then excused himself to take a piss so the men could sanitize themselves.

“Make-up,” The Saint said, referring to The Marine.

“Oscar worthy,” Seasick added.

“This ain’t no fucking movie set,” Zeke said. “It’s a fucking psycho couch.”

“What do you think he’s stashed in that knapsack?” The Saint asked.

“Dope, if we’re lucky,” Zeke said.

“His precious,” Seasick suggested.

Group Leader made believe he didn’t hear them.

As the fire waned, so did the talk. One by one, the men crawled into sleeping bags. In the morning when The Saint blew on the embers to awaken the fire, The Marine was still sitting against the tree trunk, his legs still at attention, his knapsack still in his lap. The sun had yet to appear above the horizon.

“Coffee, friend?” The Saint squatted beside The Marine, resting his fingers lightly on The Marine’s shoulders, and offered a cup. Steam rose, dissolving into the morning mist. The Marine nodded his thanks. Somewhere in the convolutions of his brain a memory stirred of hot coffee in a tin cup warming his hands in the tribal lands, but the outside of this cup was, to his nerveless touch, as cold as the morning air. Jerilyn deserved a man whose fingers took pleasure in touching her. He owed that to her.

The rest of Alpha group stirred. Breakfast. Breaking camp. Returning the camp site to its virginal state. Hours of tough steep climbing lay ahead to Drowning Bear Cave Bluffs, its name commemorating the Cherokee

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legend of the great chief Drowning Bear who as a young boy tracked a bear to its den deep in the bluffs. Drowning Bear Cave was not a cave in the technical sense, but rather an outcropping eroded by the elements over a millennia of millennia, creating a recess, an overhang, over 100 feet in height which cantilevered out from what was now the mountain side a distance of some 30 feet. To a geologist it was a rock shelter masquerading as a cave entrance without opening into an actual cave.

First, a verdant mountain meadow tilted skyward like an onramp to heaven. Columbines blanketed the meadow, some scarlet, others yellow, a flower whose beauty was forever forfeit to the name of a high school. In another life, The Marine had photographed columbines for a high school science fair exhibit, the leaves with their trio of neatly scalloped leaflets, the flowers with their quintet of petals, the long spur nodding sleepily from its stalk. It's in the buttercup family he had told visitors who stopped at his table. Flowers are for pansies, his teammates on the football team had teased. He had absorbed their jokes the way he absorbed hits from defensive linemen when his offensive linemen missed their blocks. He had not seen any of teammates since his return from deployment. He wasn't good at absorbing pity.

In his imagination, The Marine weaved wreathes from the flowers, alternating the scarlet with the yellow, wreathes more beautiful than the memorial wreathes offered up by florists for military funerals, flowers of red, white, and blue, their colors as artificial as the feelings of politicians who attended to be photographed. He would ban politicians from his funeral, ban wreathes of red, white, and blue. Scarlet and yellow were now his colors of choice, columbine his flower.

On the far side of the meadow, Alpha group entered an old growth forest of hemlock and yellow birch. Beside them, Drowning Bear Cave Creek rippled. The pace slowed as they crawled over cold, moist rocks. The ascending sun heated the air. Men stripped off their shirts, exposed their skin. The Marine's camos remained closed, buttoned to the neck.

"You'll cook," Zeke said.

"Bake," The Marine replied.

An hour up the trail, they forded the creek in the shadow of the Sevier Arch, a large black slate rock that time and the elements had whittled into a natural arch. Beyond the arch the incline steepened. Loose rocks layered the trail. The Saint slipped and scraped the heels of his palms as he thrust out his hands to break his fall. The group paused as he returned to the creek to rinse the particles of stone from his wounds. The wind rustled the tops of the hemlocks and their short, flat needles rained down on the men as they waited. The weather was changing. The Saint rejoined the group and they continued

up the trail to Revelation Point, an outcropping of rocks almost 2 klicks below Drowning Bear Cave. According to local myth, in 1837 Ephraim Hayes, a moonshiner fleeing from revenuers, saw God on this outcropping and reinvented himself as a revival preacher. Over the years, more than one seeker of salvation had thrown himself or herself off Revelation Point, finding either paradise or damnation after plummeting thousands of feet. A railing had been installed, too low to stop the infirm. Above, storm clouds chinned themselves on distant mountain tops.

The final klicks from Revelation Point to Drowning Bear Cave were the steepest section of the trail, the narrowest. The men had to navigate around rocks which jutted out from the side of the mountain and narrowed the trail, forcing them to hug the rock face, the edges of their shoes or boots hanging over open air.

Zeke stopped. His breath came in quick short bursts. "I can't do this."

"Easy, soldier," Group Leader said. "Sideways your feet to the rock face and slide them along. Don't lift them."

"If The Marine can do it with his fucked up hands and feet," The Saint said, "you can do it."

Seasick started counting. "Breathe in on the odd numbers, out on the even."

Zeke's breathing slowed. He rested his cheek against the rock face. Centimeter by centimeter he inched along the narrow ledge, dislodging pebbles which cascaded down the mountain side, a midget avalanche.

"Almost there," Group Leader said. He stood on a plateau formed where time had taken a bite out of the rock face. "Another meter. Half a meter. A few more centimeters."

Zeke extended his arm to Group Leader who stepped back to give him room. "Another step. Another step," Group Leader said. "Welcome," he added when Zeke reached the plateau.

"Why didn't you help?" Zeke asked.

"I can't save you," Group Leader replied. "You have to save yourself."

They waited for the rest of Alpha group to join them.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" The Saint asked.

"Is there another way down?" Zeke asked.

Group Leader shook his head.

"You did it once, you can do it again," The Saint said.

"Can't beat this view," Seasick said.

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The men laughed. Except for The Marine. The beauty of the view, the storm clouds which looked like soot-stained cotton the way they sat so lightly on the mountain sides across the valley, cauterized The Marine's emotions. He looked down from the edge of the plateau. He dropped a stone and counted the seconds until he heard it land. Far enough. A slip. A fall. An accident. An honorable death. Jerilyn would cry. She would mourn. She would get over it. She would live the life she deserved.

"Onward and upward," Group Leader said.

Rocks incrustated the trail, rocks and more rocks, rocks too loose to scramble over, avalanche prone rocks large enough to kill small mammals caught in their path. The pace slowed. One klick. Two. A klick to go. Group Leader lagged behind, hobbled by the ache in his legs. The sky darkened. Rain striped the air above Boiling Springs Ridge to the southeast. The wind slapped their faces. The men put on their shirts, zipped up their windbreakers, unwrapped their ponchos. The storm had its eye on them.

Half a klick below the cave, Seasick lost his footing, dislodging a rock which careened down the trail and slammed into The Saint's shin. The sound of the bone cracking was as loud as a gun firing. The Saint spun around and sprawled on the trail. "Shit! My leg's broke." The Saint crossed himself.

The men gathered around. Zeke shouted, "Medic." The men tittered. The Saint managed a smile. Group Leader squatted at the side of the trail, facing the approaching rain. He did not intervene. Each man had to make his own journey. It was not his place to show them the way.

"Who's got a knife?" The Marine asked.

"My knapsack," Group Leader said.

The Marine sliced open The Saint's pant leg. "Zeke, fetch some branches, three, four inches in diameter, five feet or longer."

"I'm not going back down the trail." Zeke looked to Group Leader who sat as still as a gargoye on the frieze of a church.

"Up the trail, down the trail, you fucking chicken shit," The Marine said.

"Who anointed you?" Zeke asked.

"Where's the goddamn ax?" Seasick said.

The leading edge of the rain reached them, a wind driven drizzle that bit the skin like wind blown sand. The Marine covered The Saint with his poncho. The rain beat down. By the time Seasick returned, rivulets coursed down the trail, bubbling up mud between the rocks. The Marine removed his tunic from his knapsack and snaked the larger branches through its sleeves to create a makeshift litter. Group Leader gasped when he saw the tunic of The Marine's

Dress Blues. Using the smaller branches as splints, The Marine cut strips of cloth from his pants to create ties. Group Leader bit down on his knuckle, drawing blood, at the sight of The Marine's Dress Blues pants. The pounding of frigid rain against The Marine's camos stung his burn scars. Jerilyn had not seen him naked since his return home. Except his face. His head. What she remembered of him, his skin, the ripple of his muscles, would be driven forever from her memory at her first sight of what he now was. Standing naked before her would be a form of rape. How could he force himself on her? The Saint groaned as The Marine finished tying the splints in place.

"Pretty tough for regular Army," The Marine said to The Saint.

"Fuck you," The Saint said.

If The Marine could have, he would have winked. "Let's carry him to the shelter of the cave."

Again, Zeke looked to Group Leader. Again, Group Leader ignored him.

Zeke and Seasick manned the front, The Marine the rear. Group Leader joined him. Each took the end of a branch and lifted. The tunic sagged, but held. Group Leader called out a cadence and the men walked to its beat. Small rocks bounced off their feet. Mud stabilized the larger rocks. The Saint lay still to maintain the balance of the litter. Rain soaked through the ponchos, the windbreakers beneath, the shirts and tees beneath the windbreakers, soaking all the way to the skin, raising goose bumps, raising wrinkles. There would be no fire at Drowning Bear Cave Bluffs, no warmth, nothing to dry their clothing, nothing to dry them, only shelter whose effectiveness depended on which way the wind was blowing. The climb winded Group Leader. The cadence faltered. Seasick took up the chant.

"Didn't think you did much marching on boats," The Saint said.

"Shows what you know about the Navy."

Seasick quickened the cadence. The Marine and Group Leader struggled to keep up. The rock shelter loomed ahead, a hungry mouth eager to eat whatever the wind blew its way. Its shadow darkened the trail. At last, they crested the bluff. They nestled the litter in the overhang's deepest recess. The Marine attempted to dry The Saint's face with a soggy handkerchief, but he only rearranged the wet. Water had begun to accumulate on the bluff's hard clay floor. The wet air intensified the sulfurous stink of the overhang's walls. The Marine checked The Saint's splints. They had stayed in place.

"What now?" Zeke asked.

Group Leader removed himself to the edge of the bluff. Beyond lay the valley shrouded in rain and mist and low lying clouds. The crowns of hemlocks and yellow birch winked back at him. This was not a military

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expedition. His rank did not entitle him to give orders. The white coats had made clear the men must find their own way. Conquering post-traumatic stress disorder required that. Handholding, coddling, however slight, would reinforce what the exercise was designed to dislodge, to vanquish. Yes, it placed The Saint at risk. Yes, he would countermand the protocols to save The Saint's life if necessary. The exercise would be a failure if it were. For the time being, he would do nothing, observe, remember for the report he had to write.

"We wait," The Marine said, "for the weather to break."

"Someone has to go for help," Zeke said.

"We'll go down together. All of us." The Marine glanced at The Saint. "That's the Marine way."

"Fucking Marine way'll kill him," Zeke said.

"Who'll go?" The Marine replied. "Not you. Not Group Leader. Who?"

"I'll go," Seasick volunteered.

"We need four to carry the litter," The Marine said.

"Together," The Saint said.

The Marine kneeled beside him.

"Your Dress Blues are ruined," The Saint said.

"No matter."

"I'll get you a new set. It's the least I can do."

"No need."

The Marine stood and joined Group Leader at the edge of the bluff. He opened his mouth to the rain. He remembered how good it felt, drinking rain. Memories, at times a curse, at times a blessing.

"You were right, Kenny," he said. "Makes no sense blowing my mind out in a car. I'm going for help."

"I thought we were going down together."

"He needs medivac."

"I'll be the judge of that," Kenny said.

Dale kicked Kenny's feet out from under him, catching him to break his fall, lowering him to the wet ground, then pivoted on one heel as if he were on the parade ground and headed down the trail.

"No!" Kenny's tears salted the rain.

Whatever Dale shouted back was, like him, swallowed up by the storm.