

# **Ever Deeper Never Better**

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We for whom it is too late—we for whom all bells are alive in  
their sweet tolling, proclaim: Ever deeper, never better.



The first of dawn's reluctant fingers still withheld themselves, only the red blush of her pulse warmed the chill of a perfect winter morning until the dawn relented, and surrendered a pure white ray to begin the day. The snow crept in by night and stole the sounds of morning to hush the world in a tender stillness, which the sun dared not disturb, a land asleep but awakening, about to be born. At last the silver curtain of day unfurled to behold a land white and pure as new light, where every crack and dirty rut was filled and smoothed, brightened and quieted in a gentle curve, the forgiving modest face-paint of snow on an imperfect world. Birdsong and woodland sounds rose on gentle feet to stir the air, and all the land was coming to remember itself, and awake.

Alex had not slept. His parents had been gone, and he had found an old bottle of pills in his dad's medicine chest. Really old. Things had been weighing on Alex and with his folks away, he ate the pills. He needed to think and he needed some guts, because he knew what he was going to decide, no matter how much he was going to think. Well however old they were those pills worked. Didrex, or speed to put it in English. Alex's head was alive with a thousand strange magnetic fingers, his chest was pounding and it felt great. He knew something was wrong an hour ago when he ran out of pills. Alex started to drink. Shit, he

was coming down all right. It was just dawn and he felt the sun come up like a dirty hand wiping a bad smell over his thoughts. Crap, he had to do it, so a huge gulp of whiskey would have to wash the stink away and sure enough, it helped. He felt better. Another swig and Alex opened the front door to go do the deed, and kill his hope.

Carolyn. The first thing in thirteen years to come between him and James. James was the one thing he could count on. James bailed him out of more trouble than he cared to remember. James let him cheat off his tests in AP Biology and AP Chemistry. If it weren't for James he would never have gotten his grades or his scholarship. Alex began to recite the list of all the reasons he owed James from letting him drive his car and pretend he was sixteen when he was still just fifteen so he could get some respect from Jane Forwell, and finally get a real date with a real car and some real sex, to when— James told Alex's dad that the bag of pot he found was his, like *he* brought it when he slept over and the incident nearly cost James his hide, pop was hot, and James risked his mom finding out and hating the shit out of him as well, but James said, "No Alex, don't worry yourself. Better me than you. My dad's dead and yours will beat the crap out of you, so better to blame me." Carolyn. She was the first. Carolyn liked both of them and for the first time they were at odds. Carolyn, her face was so delicate and small, and because of that, her mouth was perfect. She had one of those faces which is not remarkable for any one part, it was the whole of her, her manner and her round green cat's eyes made something complete, it was the way they belonged with each other and worked together as part of a single supple thought which brought all the ideas to one's mind which beauty and silence can conjure, and that is all of love. Carolyn held out a promise and Alex's heart was a sick black cramp. As he walked toward her home his soul doubled up in his belly and Alex stopped and puked on his leg. "Shit! I puked on my own leg— Shit!" Alex started to shake and drank some more whiskey. A real cigarette for the whiskey puke breath, and he felt a bit like a man. He puked again. It had to be done.

Carolyn was up early. Saturdays were never weekends for her. Ballet demanded half of her free time and she was glad of it. Nothing rewarded her as deeply as the simple grace which ballet had brought to her world. She was a clumsy child, but at age seven she took up the "brutal craft," for grace demands the most brutality before it is a natural comfort. Now Carolyn poured herself into the world like a liquid, fluid and sure. Through the years she had never actually noticed the change happening as it grew inside of her so slowly, only that she now seemed to fit the world, easily held its shape, and was relaxed to be herself. The brutal craft had taught her that, and she loved it. She loved the school she was in, too. The boys. Two boys. Alex and James. She knew that somehow ballet had won them for her, but her mind was on them, and not the three hours of stretching and leaping which awaited her during the early shift down at the studio. She must be in love or something, she actually looked forward to school and was drifting away from ballet. Only love or stupidity could cause such a thing. She was giddy and opened the window to a pure white silence. The dawn kissed the newborn snow, gently easing and smoothing every corner of the world, until a landscape covered in white cream was illuminated for her, a magical dawn where every dream remained hidden and filled with hope.

A light breakfast was required to hold her stomach so she could enjoy her one true vice, a cup of coffee. Carolyn had come to

cherish it. "So do vices sneak into our hearts" she thought, and cherished it the more. She noticed her mind turn again to the two boys and wondered if hope too, might be such a vice. She had learned the ancient Greeks considered it extremely dangerous. It was with thoughts such as these that she opened the door to begin her long walk through the woods to the road, and the smelly bus which awaited her.

No sooner had she begun the walk than her thoughts returned to them. Alex, the boyish funny one, and James, the strong one, the deep one. He held much to know. One is intrigued by a question mark, but afraid, too. James was smart but he had the smell of a black leather jacket about him, something was hidden beneath it, and she longed to know what it covered, just as she was afraid to know. A mystery. Alex was smart too, but light and available, no leather jacket, just sunny skies—easy to read, open and inviting. Tall. She was amazed to see the approach of a traveler upon this hidden narrow path in the woods, and more amazed when the object of her ruminations appeared as if an apparition summoned by her thoughts. It was Alex! He looked at her but did not seem to let his eyes rest on her. He looked unhealthy. His eyes were sunken and his breath stank. Alex spoke,

"Mind if I keep you company?"

"Not at all!"

"Look... uh... Carolyn I've been thinking and, well me and James have been friends for too damn long and he loves you, I'm sure of it, and whatever I feel it don't matter here because I can't screw him, I just can't. He's been too straight with me and so umm..." Alex looked white as a corpse and swallowed hard to keep from getting sick, but managed to continue, saying,

"I have a dead ripe awful crush on you but I'm going to have to tell you that...well James is your man Carolyn, he loves you. I know it, and I'm no good for you. Just don't stop talking to me huh... It would god damn kill me."

Carolyn was dumbstruck. She didn't know whether to be more impressed with Alex's nobility of character, sacrificing so much



for his friend, or flush with sheer pleasure for having been the object of such a contest between these close friends, or annoyed and petulant because she could now no longer choose for herself which boy she liked best, Alex surely showing much laudability of character if not much of a grip on his liquor or language. She weighed her words, clasped his hand then replied,

"Oh Alex...of course I understand. Thank you for giving me such a sincere compliment. Most of all I appreciate your honesty, which I will not forget. Of course I will always speak with you! I promise." Alex left, and Carolyn went to ballet, where she had never danced more poorly, or been happier.

Alex went to James's house straight away and was there by 7:45 which was pretty early for a Saturday. He climbed in James's window on the ground floor. James's mom slept it off on the top floor of the house and was rarely seen before 10:00. James was asleep. Alex felt a bit the martyr stung and also somewhat grateful so he pushed James with some of each and then grabbed his shoulder and shoved him, saying, "James get the fuck up!" Alex was staring at James who shot straight awake and sat up in bed, Alex glaring at him with a whiskey bottle and breath to stun a wild animal.

"Oh god Alex, what did you eat?"

"Look James I got something to tell you so just listen." A strange air of authority emanated from Alex, and James noticed.

"What's with you?" No sooner had James offered the objection than Alex answered at a full raging shout,

"Shut up cock-sucker! Shut It!" James was pissed and he stood up and gave his rude friend an authoritative punch in the arm and said,

"Mind your manners or I'll teach 'em to you!" Alex lit up like a stop lamp and returned the shot to the arm with a force twenty times that which he received, a blow to crush the damned to hell and break the devil over his knee. James was knocked into the wall and nearly brought to tears, stunned and wincing, unable to

respond, he had no choice but to listen, and Alex filled his vacant ear with these words,

"Shut the fuck up! James I gave you a present." Alex was in tears. "I gave her up... Carolyn. I told her you deserve her, you love her and I don't want her. You can have her, I'm out of it. Just stop hating me and I'll stop hating you... Okay?" James thought that mule kick of a punch could not have come from his friend who was too weak to have delivered it, and then knew he was mistaken, and had underestimated his friend twice in as many minutes. Wow! Alex was all busted up and James felt light as a feather! His friend who never cursed at him even once in his life called him a cock-sucker, nearly broke his arm, and then saved his life within the space of twenty heartbeats! What a friend! What a life! What a day! James could not remember feeling anything like it—Happiness! "Whoooooeeeeee!" Oh shit that had to wake up mom. Even she couldn't have slept through it. So it was no surprise when Mrs. Holdsworth emerged from her crypt thirty minutes before her appointed hour. James opened the shades and saw a day of such magnificence and splendor, the sun double bright as his arm ached with pleasure to remind him with its throbbing, each pulse reminding him of his delight! The snow was a jeweled prism, a diamond creation in the daylight, may it never melt, never fade or change! And so James inhaled and opened himself before his happiness and knew, he would always remember.

Alex watched Mrs. Holdsworth emerge from her chamber, her hangover so indelicately fractured by her son's happiness. James was not the shout out loud type, and Mrs. Holdsworth did not bear up to the change well. She looked like a broken glass. She shouldered her pain with a downward glance and the sun fell into her as a wound, a hurtful overbearing smack and sting, a bad smell and a shame too bright to avoid. She found unfamiliar company in Alex's eyes and they both shuddered. "James," she offered meekly, "What's the racket?"

"Oh nothing mom... My timid friend Alex broke into my room drunk, cussed me out, called me a cock-sucker, pounded my arm so hard it may be broken and gave me a woman. The fucking

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woman of my dreams...one who even wants me! Carolyn!"  
Even Mrs. Holdsworth was impressed.

So the days passed one into the next as a single roll of time connected and run blissfully together and the two lovers themselves became as inseparable as the minutes. Carolyn found James's mystery most compelling indeed, and he hers. A cork slowly loosened within Carolyn, and she started to trust James who showed himself with less reluctance and came to release his thoughts before her uncensored and unadorned, as she came to answer him in turn. Carolyn turned to him on a hairpin of a thought and asked James what he obviously was trying to avoid,

"How come you never mention your older brother Francis?"

"Francis is a case. He's off finishing up some grad degree on top of another for psychology, and he's a case."

Now Carolyn could not resist. How could he stop there?

"What the hell do you mean James?"

"Okay I'll tell you, but you wait till the end to let me know what you think. Promise me." She assented and James began,

"Pop died when I was young so I didn't get too much of it from him. Pop was the drunk from what I understand. Mom just started filling in once he died. Well, Francis got pop's attention growing up and that was not a good thing. When someone gets shamed and beat for nothing but the shit mood the man ape of the house is always in, and that ape needs to vent being as he is so fucking insecure well... Francis was raised hands on. Mom just

watched, and asks if everyone is ready for dinner. Well it took hold in Francis so he takes dad's place kinda like mom with the booze. He's gonna become a success and a doctor. He's got to be the superior one, the one who gets respect. He's done it too after all these years of talk, he's a "healer." Oh Christ. Well, when I'm growing up he's way older and he's always wrestling with me, showing me some new hold he learned 'cause he's real into competitive sports and knows just how to torture you. He'll hold you and control a squeeze on your breath while binding up one of your joints so you can't breathe if you try to free yourself. The madder you get, and you can't help it, the more you can't breathe and he controls it to enjoy it you know. Once he tied me up with a move and I nearly went crazy. He loved it. I couldn't do a damn thing. I never went up against him unfairly or anything, 'cause that's the only way I'd have had a chance as he was so much older...but once...God, I'll never forget it Carolyn, never. I was little and he tied me up so bad and I couldn't do a thing. He figured how to use one hand to hold me and the other to smack me real light to make me even madder and show who was boss. It made me crazy mad, nuts, but I couldn't do a thing but choke. After he let me go he starts laughing at me and says, "You ain't so bad little kick. At least you know who's boss, don't ya?" Little kick, I'll never forget it. It tripped a wire in me I didn't even know I had, and I almost did it." James paused and stared off through an imaginary spot in the wall. Silence. Glassy eyed silence. "Then what?!" "Oh yeah I was just seeing it, I was just there seeing it." Another pause. "Well there was this aluminum ball bat in the corner of the room, and Francis was so sure he had me pussy whipped, or so careless as to trust me, and I guess he was right and judged me rightly but he did take a terrible chance and turned his back and relaxed a while, while I eyed the bat. His arm over his face, facing the wall on the bed, and the bat." James was breathing heavily, his voice was getting heated and his speech more and more rapid. "I wanted to grab it and swing, a swing ten foot long and he never would have seen it coming with his eyes closed and his arm over his head, that arm, THAT ARM Carolyn, that arm that held me to his will, I wanted to splinter it at the wrist before the elbow with one huge swing and shatter the thing to splinters—splinters of bone ripped through the skin poked

through like bone quills—that filthy arm shattered and limp broken all the way back—gaping open and hurt—ruined—opened up and broken hanging limp in the air—broken beyond all hope, burst open, shattered and ruptured!—so it never works right for him again!" James had become livid, red in the face, his teeth grinding, his eyes wide in horror and hate which made his whole body shudder like a huge coil spring waiting to unwind and release the tension, unload in one explosive instant of focused hate. James was a loaded mouse trap, looking for a mouse.

After a few minutes passed in silence where Carolyn and James both remembered it was she who had asked, James had regained his normal affable demeanor and glanced sheepishly up to see how his admission was received.

"Well what do you think?"

"I think your brother is the biggest fucking asshole on the face of the earth." Man did he love this girl! Hmmm. Okay let's see how much stomach she's got.

"Want to hear another where I get a little even?"

"Sure!" Not a second's hesitation, what a girl!

"Well, Francis loved this skateboard of his and he was always showing off. I never did anything back to him cause I wanted to be above him, and because, well, I was scared of him. Mom always said 'take the high road, don't do anything, be above him.' Well I hadn't much choice so I adopted the idea. In any case, Francis was needing an audience to watch him go down the big hill over on the other side of the property, and I was it. I saw the loose nut on his wheel, and did not say a thing. I saw it spinning and I tell you now, I felt my pulse go up more than a notch. Oh yes! He makes a big deal about how fast he's gonna go, and off he sets. He could sure ride that thing, and then he's moving like nobody's business and the wheel lets go! Halleluuuujah!... It's right on time, he's got to be going fifty damn miles per hour, oh hell twenty anyway and off he sails...man that moment lasted a sweet lifetime! Ha! So he face plants it on a curb, a stone curb in the mouth! Smashes his teeth to shit! Blood, nerves and pulp showing from his teeth and suffering, oh yeah, suffering Carolyn!

He broke and I saw it. Tears! The broken little fuck yields the water for *me*! I saw it break complete– Tears! Ha! Yes! I comforted him, and helped him up, and was nice and fake like him, and I believe for the first time in my life I felt just like him, Carolyn I felt so good to see him hurt like that, and I knew what it was like to be him. He passed me a bit of dad's love, you know? For that moment, and whenever I relive the thing I feel it again and wonder if I'm not like him sometimes."

A long pause ensued, way too long. Finally Carolyn broke the silence and said, "No, you're better than him because you see that." Christ...he loved this girl.



It was nearly Christmas and the cold frost stiffened things and made old things ache again. So it was in the spirit of the season when James learned that Francis was done his degrees and his other degrees and was to arrive complete with a new car, a BMW—a perk from his new job on staff at the mental hospital. He got them interested enough to give him an auspicious title which made it sound like he was a step away from running the place. God it must be true because here he comes, blue BMW quiet as a whisper with a finish bright as a jewel—and his brother—new shoes, suit, \$200 shirt and his nose up in the air like he was looking to catch a damn bird in either nostril. He's got a remote control and points it at the car. The trunk pops open and he says, "Get my bag." James complies and fetches the hundred pound suitcase full of medical books and presents out of the car trunk. Hell, the trunk of the car looked nice enough to move into!

Soon the hour was upon them and Mrs. Holdsworth emerged to greet the day.

"Oh Francis."

"Hi, mom! I'm the new head resident of psychiatry at Emerson General, and you are the greatest mom I've got!" Francis's charm offensive had caught their mom by surprise, and she scurried into the kitchen to create some necessary distance. Francis could be overcoming. Soon he's regaling the pair with nauseating accounts of how much money he would soon be making. As he

looked around at the humble surroundings you could feel him swell at the sight of the poverty. Francis had found his day, his shining hour was upon him. He glowed a little brighter at his mother's misery.

Old Toby Renquist was shuffling down their street, slow and stiff as if the frost lived in his joints and in his mind year round. He listlessly lifted his feet but a half inch as he shuffled so slowly over the pavement. His tongue would come and poke itself out, and his jaw would stretch, open and close itself as his neck pulled strangely to one side, and he kept shuffling. James had seen others with the same walk and strange ticks, bums on the bus mostly. His brother drank in the sight. You could see it play over his face which expressed some strange subtle shadow of understanding that percolated up in him to no small effect. His smile broadened and he stretched his arms out over his head and folded his hands behind his neck, as if he had relaxed into an outstretched lounge chair and was musing upon some newly discovered secret of the world, which he would soon, no doubt share. It was true.

"James, look here at this sad shamble of a man. I ask you if you know what it is you see here?"

"No, what's up with old Toby?"

"Old Toby, has Tardive Dyskinesia James. James, get my suitcase." James got the suitcase. Francis pulled out a copy of The 7th edition of *The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics*, an old text book, and gave it to him.

"Merry Christmas. If you read that you will learn that mental patients are a pain in the ass. They are always acting up. They used to give them huge doses of antihistamines to keep them asleep. But then, they were always asleep. Something better was needed and behold: Thorazine, Haldol and all the other anti-psychotic medications are born! All with a certain risk/side effect profile. Let us speak of Haldol. Vitamin H– The emergency room...Ahhhh... People who are agitated get Vitamin H, James. It gives them a chemically induced version of first stage Parkinson's. It fucking gives 'em Parkinson's, James... Hahaha! That goes away with the discontinuation of treatment, but it also

leaves them with something more lasting, Tardive Dyskinesia, then they never stop acting like that, with the tongue and the ticks. It's permanent. The shuffle is from the active drug—from the Parkinson's it induces through a blockade of the dopamine receptors, and so we have our miracle James, our healthy miracle where now the patient can answer yes or no questions and be shuffled about, he is awake, he is called a schizophrenic and will always have those ticks from this cure. Schizophrenia is what's called a wastebasket diagnosis, an easy answer for us—and so he is manageable because he is wasted—it is easy to handle human waste! He is manageable now, too depressed from his Parkinson's to know his troubles or give us any either. He is cured! Cured of all value as a human! Hahahah! What a piece of shit worthless nothing of a man! He is a meal ticket for me though. Him and every other poor sap we inject and pill into submission so they trouble us not! No problems, just shuffle and shut up!"

James realized this is why Francis wanted to come home. Out in the world he never spoke his mind. At home he could triumph, strut and posture with an audience. So gleeful was Francis, the turd on top of the world, released to ultimate joy and in charge. James had forgotten how damn smart his brother was. He took the book and went to his room.

The season had renewed itself. Green things and smells, scents of hope and earth intertwined in James's nose, and he felt a strange melancholy tinge of hope. Every thing to be gained knows of another thing lost, and he was ready. Something new was in order and he felt as restless as the new spring earth under his feet. After his walk he opened the front door of the home he was soon to leave. He would be selecting his dormitory and classes at Emerson University some 120 miles away. Carolyn did it yesterday and now it was his turn. Today a new thing awaited him, so he appreciated the old a little more, savored it in his mind and tasted it better. He noticed the little things like the sound of his mom unbuckling and buckling the huge purse she carried, the last sign that she was going to emerge from her room at the appointed hour of 10:00 am. The door creaked open and his mom descended the staircase, each step an exercise in sheer terror adorned with the raw hollow stare of grinding pain—mom's morning look. She snapped on the entertainment box and that seemed to help. Something automatic took over and James watched her pace through the steps of her desperate morning and heard the jingle which kept her company and soothed the soul of America. Little Amy, age eight, her flaxen hair and a hint of strawberry to her cheeks with those bright blue eyes—perhaps a single pigtail or perhaps not, but always the voice—so cheerful, all of America loves those darn hamburgers and why not? Happy Burger was the best! What a relief when they took over the other

two fast food chains. The quality went way up, and the prices straight down! Well one thing's for sure, Little Amy was a doll and America could claim world superiority in many things, but two for sure. No one had better fast food, or better guns. Period. As always Little Amy was talking to her grandpa who asked her, "You sure seem to like those Happy Burgers, Little Amy." Then the familiar reply, "Yeah Papa I sure do, they're like sunshine in my belly!" Man that was a cute kid. So it was with a bit of sweet melancholy and nostalgia that James viewed this world, now more precious and near for soon being gone.

It was 2:00 and Carolyn was approaching James's house. She hadn't spoken with him but assumed he was out registering for school, and even at the new highway speeds he wouldn't be back for a while. She knew that Mrs. Holdsworth "started to glow pretty good around 2:00" according to James's description of her daily "soaking" as he put it. She remembered his remark on his mom's lifestyle, "There is some happiness in a drunk's life, but it's doubtful if they remember it." So she wanted to see it and find out. James wouldn't mind, they hid nothing from each other. She wanted to know. She had questions. Carolyn rang the bell.

"Carolyn, come on in honey!" Oh yes James was right, she was positively glowing. Drunk as a high school girl at the prom drunk! This would be interesting! Soon they were seated at a table in the living room and Mrs. Holdsworth could hardly control herself, so eager was she for company in her glowing hour. Carolyn was but seventeen and no sooner had they settled in the living room than Mrs. Holdsworth offered her a drink! An alcohol containing drink! Booze! Carolyn accepted. Soon Carolyn was feeling most strange. Having had all but naught to drink over her short cloistered life she was soon over her head and had to put the drink on the table and try to abstain, lest she lose her wits entirely. Mrs. Holdsworth regaled her with tales of how handsome Mr. Holdsworth was and offered up a photo album in which Carolyn feigned some interest, and then she asked it.

"I love James but I guess you know that. It's too late! So I was just wondering—now that I've bought the car what's up with James anyway? He's the sweetest guy on earth, no exceptions, but

there's another side when he feels used or threatened, isn't there? I mean there is in all people but James has it bad. Do you know what I mean? What happened?" Mrs. Holdsworth was just like James, she didn't blink, she just thought it over, eager to answer and her face lit up with a monstrous delighted grin, a cherry red glow fell upon her cheeks and a laugh from inside her so pure and silly, so happy in its embarrassed knowing that it was joy and prank all in one. The laughter of sheer play, the laughter of a child who knows a secret.

"Oh honey, do I! Hahahaha! Oh shit yeah I do! Well sweetheart, when I was nursing James, oh you know how it was, they thought everything man-made was best for everyone, and they hadn't got it right like they do today, so the word was..." She paused for a long gasp of air and a huge sizzling puff from a quickly disappearing low tar low nicotine low smoke high taste cigarette shaped nicotine dose delivery device and continued, "Well the word was you suck the milk out of your tits with this pump and dump it in the sink, and then give the kid this Emerson super milk replacer health increaser milk substitute product or whatever...all the doctors knew about it and mine too. So James looks at me with them eyes of his just like always when it's feeding time, but the doc said I should just dump my milk and replace it with a bottle and some of this high tech juice. Well the very first day I said no breast for you, try this bottle, sugar it was then, that's the moment it happened! Oh god it's true honey, he just went nuts. That's the first time I ever saw that sweet kid lose it. He was just a baby and he starts off like usual until I turn him away and give him the bottle instead. He starts cryin'. He turns red then the strangest thing happens, he starts ballin' up those fat little fists of his, babies got fat hands and little tiny fingers you know and ballin' up like little stones and unclenching then ballin' them up and he turns red and he's hollerin' like a little steam whistle and starts off chewing that damn rubber nipple to kill it! He's gumming that thing like he means it harm and then some. He's shakin' that little head and chewin' with a look of pure evil in his eye like a fuckin' little gremlin or something!" At this point the two are in stitches, laughing uncontrollably. Carolyn nearly peed herself.

When James arrived home some two hours later he heard a cackling like two witches coming from behind the door of his home. As he unlocked the lock he thought of the golf clubs his mom left behind the door for all these years "just because that's how dad left 'em." Well he knew where to lay hands on a weapon if he needed to defend himself anyway. What the hell was that shrieking? That cackling and shrieking? He opened the door and understood at once. There was Carolyn and mom in the living room drunk as two high school kids—sopping wet dead drunk. Oh well... It had to happen sometime. He went in for damage assessment. "So what you two pretty ladies been talking about, hmmm? Mom?" Mom had no shame and half as much sense after 4:00 or 5:00, and no subterfuge was required. Mrs. Holdsworth replied by pointing at James and then began to laugh uncontrollably while blurting out something unintelligible in between her hysterical contractions, "Little gremlin...fucking little gremlin... Hahahah!" Well... It had to happen sometime.

First James had to drive Carolyn home. "James, I'm sorry if you didn't want me talkin' to your mom about you..."

"No Carolyn, that's her greatest pleasure. She hasn't had anyone to talk to for a long time. She loves her stories. Little gremlin is one of her favorites. She misses pop a lot."

"Good, 'cause I like her. Your mom drinks and she's okay by me! Hahaha." Carolyn didn't hold her liquor any better than Alex.

After James got back home he found his mom in the traditional position: passed out. He picked her up and sighed. There were soft flat objects in nearly every room of the house. Beds, sofas, shag rugs and even a few beanbag chairs in the bathroom just in case. The house was pass out proof, any room will do but just the same, he'd rather spare her the midnight crawl into her den of darkness—her bedroom with two pair of drapes over the windows. So he picked her up and carried her in while she was still out cold. He put her down on the bed and looked at her there. Peaceful. Oh Christ mom, why didn't you do something? Why didn't you stop him? James didn't know if he was talking about Francis or his dad who had made Francis, into Francis, and it didn't matter. Oh God why didn't she do something? He looked at his dad's picture by the bed on the nightstand with his uniform from the war and all the awards and medals. He asked her why even though he already knew her well enough to answer for her.



She took the high road. She ignored it and turned the other cheek. Mom had that turn the other cheek morality thing big. It kept her going, kept her comfortable. Don't look, that's better, take the high road. Forget it. Yeah, he knew the answer.

James finished sealing his mom in her room and went downstairs to his own bed where he fell into the surrender of sleep. Plunging headlong through his dream he dove into a river which received him into its happiness where he was cleansed and free, so gladly accepted within its waters. A rock, a crag, a finger of sharp splintered flint was part of the river bottom and speared him, holding its sharp tooth in his leg, the point from which he did then struggle himself loose, and once free, so then quickly fled the river before he was drowned. The river didn't care. It saw nothing and fell lower and lower before the river bank. Now on his belly he could not move. His back was a soft clay thing, and a window opened within it, and he knew the window was pressed there into the clay of his back from an unseen hand, which put rocks into his opened back, hot rocks, burning stones of pumice and granite were placed within him and they brought a terrible pain, a longing, a fire which was sealed within him, and he cried out in desperate agony but he cried not. His mouth opened and he cried not, but spoke his own name. No cry came from his anguished lips, his soul was silent, its pain sealed fast within him. Only his own name, dull and plain, over and over did issue from the black circle of his mouth.

Suddenly sleep's mysteries were interrupted—split open by a sound. A loud clunking smacking smashing noise struck him and he sat up like a bolt...and listened. He heard a scraping shuffling sound and a stifled groan then the latch on the front door was sprung and he knew what was happening. The paper, such as it is out in the country, was full of the story. A burglar who breaks into homes and steals stuff like any burglar, but this one was worse. Instead of running or shooting when the homeowner confronted him this burglar would use a stun gun on the resident and tie them up. The paper didn't give any details because the case was still open, but the guy would torture the homeowners. Torture! So the burglar was dubbed "The Torquemada Bandit." A fucking sadist bandit weirdo, and that rang some bells with

James! James changed into something he had never before known. Now he was a shadow of death. The cleansing hand of righteousness incarnate? The Devil? No, the Devil speaks the most of righteousness and so James must be other than he, because James had no thoughts or words. A black current passing through all worlds and all objects in time, the ancient predator is a motion, a scent of following scents which leads doubtlessly into the ribs of every shadow to place its blade. So James stalked but was not James, he was a pure shadow from the brain stem of every lizard who tastes the scent of night. Into the folds between the darkness he poured his ancient soul toward the foyer. The cracks concealed him. He found utter silence and stillness within him to stop the very beat of his heart. He lived between its murmurs and found the clumsy burglar completely unaware of him, unaware as he soundlessly loosed the golf club, a driver, from the bag. No sounds. Silence and darkness cradled him tenderly in their loving hands and he was invisible before all blundering burglars and stealthless sadists. James walked behind him and judged the spot precisely, as the burglar bent over to offer himself, James took time to judge and aim, luxuriously and slowly he collected the moment and chose the vertebra halfway down the neck and swung a blow so severe, so broad and long of stroke the sound betrayed him, a swooping whistle of wind from the golf club which let the ball know it was to die. Now. The enormity of the impact was devastating as the club head crushed the neck and spine a full six inches flat to the wind pipe. James released the blow with a scream primal and absolute, a scream to bruise night into wakefulness, to slap night itself and tell it, "I have cheated you— You have missed me!" Now another blow so severe it should have beat the man's head entirely off his filthy neck, then ten more—all the same—ten more—all perfectly aimed.

Mrs. Holdsworth was coming down the stairs and snapped on the light.

"Oh shit!"

"I got the "Torquemada Bandit" I fucking killed him— YES!!"

Mrs. Holdsworth called the police and requested an ambulance. Perhaps there was some of her husband in her son after all! The

bandit was still alive. He was permanently paralyzed. He would never use his arms or legs again.

The media fell upon the house before sunrise. One paper even called him "America's Avenger" like he was a comic book hero or something! The more bashful he acted the better they liked it. He was nearly sick of telling the story by the time they all left. The sun was warming the green hills and the woods were coming alive over the ridge. The day was the same as any other day but it had a weird new glow to it for James. He breathed it in and tasted the air. He would always remember.

Carolyn was in this class. Introductory Abnormal Psychology. That's why James was in it. James was in it and that's why Alex was in it. As he read the syllabus and reading list James thought about how much more he enjoyed college than high school. Alex was sitting next to him and poked James in the ribs and not so subtly either, so they both saw the sight, the godly sight. Carolyn had told them both that she would be introducing them to her friend from ballet, the prima, the first one, the top dancer and Carolyn's role model and best friend, Eva. Eva walked without walking, looked into every eye without refusing, surely her body was the mirror of her soul, and she was perfect beyond knowing. Light itself becomes bashful and modest, blushes before such grace, warms it for its own as if the sun too is mesmerized and forgets herself, growing sweet red and over warm at the sight. Every motion a perfection, she was founded upon the very idea of beauty itself and was its unknowing vessel, pure and self-forgetting. Alex and James turned to stone, marble and salt. James recovered himself and looked into her eyes saying how glad he was to meet her and for the first time he had ever used it, meant the phrase as more than a courtesy.

"James you are already notorious! As you know no higher compliment is possible from our beloved Carolyn. You are just as she described you! And you... You must be Alex."

Alex began to breathe again and found he could not help but stammer as he stared in wonder at this waterfall which plunges and hovers, filled with a spark of wind and sun, swelling, falling, lingering and plummeting in an eternal moment, so beautiful, to catch the sun as it falls.

"I am honored. You are far more than Carolyn or anyone else could ever describe, so I will forgive her."

Suddenly James felt a catch in his heart, a thought tugged at him— What if he chose the wrong one, look here, a finer one by far, purer, better and sweeter in every way—so? What now? James gagged to know his thought and swallowed it into his secret heart, his unheard mind where such things dwell. He could not have thought it. He blushed and could not recall why. He was suddenly annoyed and felt like saying something rotten to Carolyn or Alex but the lecture began.

After the lecture ended James had returned to normal and wished Alex well for the inevitable pursuit. Alex was at the top of his game as one is when one plays against or with the best. His charm was unbridled and Eva was beguiled. Soon it was clear what had happened. Alex was a changed man. He became solid and dreaming all at once. His confidence became genuine, his charm was no longer an affect stemming from his innocence, he believed himself and grew by feet a day as a person. He also became a hopeless dreamer when his mind was not engaged. Yes, it was clear what had happened. Eva was a narcotic, the strongest there is, and every idle moment Alex was at worship, for he had found religion and the fount of all pleasure in Eva. Alex looked as if bliss had tamed him, staring off past every wall, past every horizon into himself and lived here, in Eva, in himself, somewhere past all he saw. Only the smile betrayed sentient life, and that was dubious proof at best.

"Alex, snap out of it!" and his friend would return to him, bleary eyed, flush with happiness and contentment strong enough to turn one's eyes away from the world.

"What?"

"Did you hear the news? We've been attacked again! The Xing Pao hit our base in southern Hyperboria! So we chased them back into their cave but then guess what we found?"

"What?"

"In the cave we found some plans for a high tech hit the Xing Pao have planned for right here, on U.S. soil!"

"Bullshit." Then it happened. The Xing Pao missile hit New York. It fell in the harbor instead of on land, but it had a warhead, perhaps even nuclear, and hundreds have probably already been killed. Something changed in James just to hear it. Every mousetrap needs a mouse.

James was in his second year at Emerson University when the attack happened, and the whole country was rocked. On U.S. soil– Attacked! The beating of war drums permeated the media. Little Amy and Gramps let every American know what hung in the balance. It was all too confining for James, too much heat and too many little things always crowding him. Every fiber in his being, every sinew vibrated with the tension. He was an instrument, and this was his song. He needed this like America needed him. An adventure! This was a moral and spiritual obligation! It is words such as these which seduce men's souls to believe they have cause to see reason. Such words make the pulse quicken and the face flush and hot with anger. Reason sees poorly when her cheeks are red, but young men do not know that.

So James and Alex went down to the recruitment facility with their papers and school transcripts for speedy induction and advanced aptitude processing. After completing a ten page military entrance and induction application they were to report back to complete the process in two days. A dinner was planned to celebrate the event, this feverish surrender to manhood or madness which makes women such as Eva and Carolyn wonder if their men were still children who would be better served to misspend some more of their youth right here at home. But patriotism like love is a disease of the spirit and wholly blind. So a celebration it would be.

Much merriment and toasting accompanied some chest pounding and lusty embraces which led to an end typical of the evenings of those men who go to war, should they be then lucky enough to leave an heir, if unfortunate and fortunate enough not to return alive, but a hero instead...or so goes the boast. The hangover welcomed the next day and nerves were quelled in the company of well-wishers who encouraged with much flag waving and foot stomping and our other obedient bad music of the soul...the platitude, which keeps all unlooking souls afloat, a cheerful bit of wood upon which to float...stiff upper lip...do what you have to do...say what you have to say is closer to it, but we never say that. So do we all swallow our fear into our stomach and wonder if the room got colder, when we know it is not the room but we who have felt a chill. Bravery looks ahead and marches after its eyes, it ignores its stomach. And so to the base they went, buoyed by each other's good show. Naturally James was the happier of it, although still a bit nervous, so double sure in appearance.

"Okay you numbskull." Whack in arm– "I'm down here and you're over there so we'll meet down there," says James as he points to hell. Much false laughter which needs reason to laugh follows such words, which rightly cover our nervousness, and grant us the tonic of laughter. At this juncture James and Alex separated alphabetically, James in one room marked "H" for Holdsworth and Alex in another marked "B" for Bourne.

After four hours of aptitude testing which was scored on site by the main computer in the Emerson Military Personnel Evaluation and Distribution Complex, the two met again in the same hallway in which they had previously separated to discover a disturbing result—they were evaluated and assigned differently—James to Officer Candidate Academy Emerson 227 Complex D, and Alex to enlisted duty indoctrination with sub-specialty training for explosives handling. "Shit!" was the simultaneous chorus of responses as they each looked at the other's card. Well, you never know. And so they left the building and each other for whatever purpose fate may choose.



After arriving at Officer Candidate Academy Emerson 227 Complex D, James took some lunch. Then he took some more tests. Odd tests with questions that made no sense. Everyone else was then handed a green assignment card with their appropriate officer specialty group, everyone except James. He was left alone in the test room, just sitting there...alone. A man in a suit entered the room and approached him. What was a suit doing here in a military complex?

"Hi I'm George Abrahamson, doctor of psychiatry here at the base, and you are a gifted man, James! I am not here to tell you that you are crazy, because that's what all the cadets think when they see they have been left here for a shrink, so come on with me, and let me tell you James, you are a rare bird indeed! Such a score, James! We are going to assign you to "active captain brigade command" starting immediately after your training. You will be a hybrid James, part commander and part foot-soldier—a super captain! A captain-major of sorts. Not to inflate you too much but you will be in the shape of the finest athlete—someone like you can tolerate it so we will push you. You are the type who gets stronger to be pushed and we will fast-track you to it James, because our tests show that's what you want, what you need, to lead men and go, to let go and do it, but to do it perfectly—isn't that so, James?" Now the pace of Dr. Abrahamson's delivery increased. "Together we will have you out there delivering fire down into the sadists and the scum who keep

us from breathing, keep us from being free!– Keep us bound and tied up, helpless and crazy when we should be free to free the world!" His pace increases further. "Isn't it so, James? Isn't that what we have to do to be free of it and fix this thing instead of take it–isn't it!? We gotta fucking go, don't we—we have to, we gotta go fix this thing and free ourselves, unload and free the world, but most of all we have to do it now, **right now, don't we James, don't we?!**" The doc had his test scores and pushed every button James had, and James lit up like a flag, two switchboards and a Christmas tree! He could save the world, be a super captain and rain fire on all evil things which smothered, kill all evil which tormented and restrained—he could take it—he would take it—he could fix it, heal it—make right with his hurt and GO—free the spring within him and unwind the knot exactly as he must and should! This doctor sang the song of his anguished misunderstood soul and he all but wept, but instead James vibrated with a patriotic fervor which left him foaming at the mouth and all too eager to sign the papers which gave the government rights to his mind and body, so he could be trained in the most punishing and rapid advanced new program specially designed for the exploitation of exceptional aptitude—the secret quick response officer training program under the code name "Operation Reichstag," or "burning building" for short.

"You see James, it's like they lit our capitol building on fire. We have to act fast and put out the fire, and that's where you come in." James got a black tag with his assignment information.

James soon learned what it meant to have signed those papers and to be "black tagged." He was told by Dr. Abrahamson that the world he was in now was a special world—a world that he was now a key part of, a world that didn't exist. To be black tagged is to disappear.

"I won't mince words with you James, you signed away your rights when you signed those papers. You gave away your rights to protect all of America's. Nothing could be more American than that." So when he got out James would be a captain-major, but, the school where he got the rank doesn't exist. Hmmm. He went with the good doctor into an elevator with a black tag only sign, an eye with a black x covering it. His tag summoned the

elevator once it was held over a hidden scanner in the sign. The elevator plummeted down and down for what must have been seventy-five floors. Once the doors opened he was underground by a half mile and found himself in the academy proper. It was unbelievable! An entire city seventy-five floors underground lit up like day with grass in the courtyards and real light from the ceiling. James was bloody well out of doors seventy-five floors underground! Insane! These guys were not kidding!

"Well some of us have not left the building for years, James. Some of us never do. We are the unsung Americans, James." The doctor became very sincere. "If you keep a man locked up in dingy underground places he gets depressed and restless, sad and sick inside himself. We designed this facility to disappear but be healthy for the staff, some of whom must spend their lives here. They, like this facility can't exist, and so we care for them best to keep them in surroundings as like the world they are defending, the world they may never see again, as is possible. We all need sun and warmth, even those who sacrifice the most." The doctor was all but teary eyed and apologized. Dr. Abrahamson needed to get out more.

After a half hour walk they had arrived at James's training module which was a complete little world unto itself within this underground universe. Doctor Abrahamson told him it housed some eight hundred staff and trainees, complete with its own pair of generals to oversee the whole nonexistent, sunlit, underground, grassy green, bright black, invisible, high dollar, unfunded, unlimited black budgeted universe. Holy shit! Here the doctor and he parted company and James reported to the officer in charge of assimilating inductees into the outfit. He wasn't a military man either but another doctor. If not he sure acted like one and told James to pull down his pants and bend over. Well that seemed military enough and

"Ouch! What's that doc?"

"These are some shots to help you learn. You won't be effected, you won't feel anything, only an increase in your learning skills. You will learn better." So a pain in the butt will help his head? Underneath it all James thought that all doctors are like his brother. They like giving you those shots too much.

Next they sat him down for some more tests and a dixie cup full of pills which James knew better than to ask about. After a nice meal with lamb chops and applesauce which tasted funny, he felt as good as he had felt in all his life and was ready to go! First some more tests.

Dr. Abrahamson came in the room and congratulated James on getting the highest score relative to his own baseline that week!

Doc loved his work and beamed to announce I was in A group. Part of me felt big, puffed up and flattered and part of me was double scared to have made any doctor that happy. Those shots and pills worked. I was getting smarter.

I was introduced to my weapon, the Emerson 7000 Mark 2 fully self contained hand-held sustained fire delivery system. The rifle looked like a race car, sleek and functional in a mean flat black, a carbine half-size barrel length rifle, tapered and terminated with a compensator. There were two spherical chambers with ribs around them toward the rear of the gun, and the stock itself held the rounds. The rounds were just projectiles with no shells. Sergeant of arms for black unit 27-3 spoke and we all listened like open bags of empty space, we were all hungry for his words and I remember every one.

"The Emerson 7000 Mark 2 is a super ultra-pressurized munition and projectile delivery system. The projectile, a mere 17 grains in weight, is delivered into a super-tapered free bore and barrel smaller in terminal caliber than the projectile, causing an airtight fit by compressing the bullet. That means the barrel is too small for the bullet so the bullet, made of high lubricity alloy must be squeezed to fit the small barrel and leaks no propellant gas whatsoever due to the tight fit. A perfectly efficient use of propellant energy. Because there is no powder or propellant containing cartridge to use up space there is room for 2000 projectiles in the weapon's internal magazine. Each projectile fragments into 6 shards upon tissue or hard target impact and are fired in burst groups varying from 3 to 10 projectiles per trigger actuation which delivers the selected group size in virtual simultaneous discharge. Hence the characteristic sound of the weapon—"the Burp." It is deadly indeed, with 18 to 60 separate wound channels created for each mono-burst. Observe." The sergeant's arm moved autonomously and pointed the weapon downrange. A series of short burp-like bursts resulted in the whole scale destruction of three wax human heads and two melons some twenty-five yards away. They simply disappeared into a dirty cloud. The effect was staggering.

"So gentlemen, you may wonder how this unit is powered, with no powder or propellant what drives these projectiles? The

engineers down at Emerson have quite an answer for us here! They have discovered a twin spherical design which can withstand enormous gas pressure. It is self-reinforcing gentlemen, the more pressure that is put in, the stronger the containment vessel becomes. You can not over-pressurize it without violating the laws of physics. It has the capacity for infinite gas density—super solid gas, gentlemen. The engineers at Emerson have electromagnetized gas and permitted it to not only be contained to receive pressure sufficient to create a liquid gas, but a solid, and then a double-dense, super-solid gas of infinite pressure—a gaseous singularity or as the physicists say, a little "big bang" like the explosive force which created the universe is contained here to be used at your disposal. We simply insert some Emerson 751X semi-conventional, Corbadite based super explosive, packing 1,000,000 times the explosive force of nitroglycerin into the chamber, or use the mobile super-solid gas pressurization unit and in either case, press 'command' 'ignite'. You will notice there is no sound from the explosion or from super-solid gas transfer. That is because the Mark 2's self-reinforcing spherical containment chambers use the wave to contain and cancel itself. The foot soldier can carry 250,000 projectiles on his person, enough to fight for days even if alone against vastly superior numbers." It was all true. The Emerson 7000 Mark 2 was an amazing gun.

So the days passed and James was a hungry sack too willing to be filled with every idea which was presented to him. The exercise regimen and the instruction seemed effortless because of the shots and the pills which made him sharp as a tack and hungry to the core. The words from his instructors were like rope thrown into his empty soul. He climbed each syllable to the next. They could not come fast enough. His companions in "the black race" as they called it amongst themselves in sheer pride with its attendant stupidity, was so frenetic as to allow little socializing, but at meals, it was at once clear that they were all very different. When Dr. Abrahamson approached one he seemed utterly changed in his demeanor and character compared to when he approached another. However they all seemed to be gifted, each in his own particular way. James soon discovered his gift, which he was

remiss to recognize other than his overall balance of character and aggressiveness compared to the rest. James's gift became apparent in Covert Enemy Engagement Training, or "creeper class" as it was known. Something which seemed so easy for James was impossible for any of his classmates. James was a born creeper. A super creeper. He could stalk and surprise the instructors. One almost killed him by way of a weird reflex response. He stole up behind the sergeant who had survived three jungle tours as a hands-on assassin and tagged him, winning the game. The sergeant's arm erupted from its shoulder like a bone and meat projectile—his arm exploded clean out of the shoulder socket and knocked James fifteen feet—he was out cold and had a broken nose and a collapsed right sinus. He didn't remember a thing. The story was recounted to him numerous times by his fellow cadets. The sergeant's arm had to be manually re-socketed, it dislocated “like a meat bomb” according to the most colorful of the observers. Much laughter ensued and James wondered, "What the hell was that?"

His fellow super captain classmates were different all right. Hamilton was a pain in the ass. He always wanted to get some company to back him up and go hand his ever growing list of stupid complaints about the program to the general. Man this guy was an idiot. Didn't he understand he signed away his rights? Of course they drugged him or beat him or whatever the drill instructor needed to do to show him a move. Hamilton was a whiner and a moron. Samuals was always griping about money. He wants money for his mom, for his debts, for his bus ticket, for his whatever the fuck and who cares. Doesn't he understand he's in an underground non-existent world where he's learning not just how to kill people, but how to kill them really fucking well? Who cares about money or parents or anything else, you are going to start killing people and may just die. Get it? Well Samuals was just too damn poor too damn long to get it, and so James knew that no matter how poor his mom was, Samuals was an idiot.

James was up on the third floor of D building in the compound taking some more tests. Dr. Abrahamson had them take three sets of Gittinger Tri-Variable Correlated Personality Inventory and Assessment Exams weekly. What exactly that meant James was never told so he stopped asking. On the way back from the last battery of tests, James noticed the door to General Costman's office was partly open. Strange. He wondered... There was "scuttlebutt," a rumor about the general being in hot water with the other general about his drinking, and such things are probably just talk but... James eased the door open, ready to knock if he had to, and found it! General Costman had passed out at his desk in a pile of puke! Those pills and shots must have been working because James knew exactly what to do. He closed the door but left it unlocked and went off to find his two stupid classmates.

Hamilton and Samuals were eating lunch. Hamilton was gabbing and Samuals was sulking. James slowed himself and became natural, "Hey Samuals, c'mere and talk to me for a minute." James made sure to look a little sneaky to spark his interest. They walked.

"Look Samuals, I've got \$500 for you if you do me a favor, will you hear me out?" Samuals all but died.

"Yeah Holdsworth, I'm listening all right."



"I need you to get Hamilton and tell him you've been thinking on it and you want to go to General Costman with him right now, while you have the guts up, and deliver that list of complaints with him, you know the one he's always griping about?"

"Yeah I know it all right. Really? Why? That list? It's ridiculous."

"Forget it. Look, once you're in the hallway by Costman's office start making a racket—arguing or whatever, then go on to his office door and listen to me and do what I say. Nothing will come of it but \$500, what do you say? Got to do it *right now*..."

"Shit yeah I'm on my way!"

James returned to General Costman's office. The general was still asleep in the puke. James waited. He heard the elevator door open and his "*friends*" voices in the hall. James woke the general. "Hugh...ughhhh." The general noticed his head was in a pile of puke.

"Sir...sir, wake up sir, wake up."

"Oh, cadet uhhh." The voices are coming closer and closer.

"I'm going in to see the general right now Samuals, why are you yellow all of a sudden? Costman's going to hear it from me right now!" James snaps the open door closed before the two approaching loud mouthed cadets can see, and just as much to the general's relief James puts his finger to his lips to show he's in on it too and knows what to do. The general is still coming to his senses behind his desk and James bursts out into the hall closing the door behind him just as the general is starting to wipe the puke off his face. James begins shouting.

"You two get the hell out of here! The general is on the phone to the brigade with my name on it, my command assholes—so get the fuck lost! My commission is riding on this call so *move it*—get lost! Go! Now!!" Taken aback by James's red faced bluster his friends dutifully retreat. James goes in to claim his prize.

"Sir, I'm so sorry."

"Not at all son, it's the other way around. I would surely appreciate your discretion on this point." The general had missed a spot on his chin.

"Of course sir, it's well understood, fully and well understood. Perhaps I might ask a favor of you?"

"Well boy, you can ask and I'll even listen! I owe you plain enough. What's your pleasure?"

James looked at the general. James knew drunks and he had his way with the general so far but Costman was different than his mom. He was still there, there was something left, plenty left behind the eyes. He sort of trusted the old guy.

"Well General, I want to get a front line command and get it fast."

"A command you're already assured or you wouldn't be here, but you say "front line" command and that is a loaded term son. I mean it." He looked at James to see if he wavered which he did not. "Hmmm... Okay cadet, I guess you know that, so... anything else?"

"Private Alex Bourne must be in my unit. He's my best friend."

"Hold on, son." The general found a pen and wrote it down. Alex Bourne, private. "Are you sure, son? Front line?"

"Deadly sure, sir."

"Well I'll give it to you under one condition. If you are going to have any chance of survival you will need some more training. You will not like it. Hear me, sir—*hear me cadet*—you will not like this one bit. It's a sure death sentence without it and I won't give any man a favor like that, no matter how much I like him."

"I'll do it."

"Listen son, this is double black training—terminal black. 85% graduate, the rest...terminal black. Still want it?"

"Yes."

"Sign here."

So in a squiggle of digital ink and a thumb print James was ahead of the game. James was owned. He excelled even more in

his classes. Every second could hold the information that would save his life or the life of one of his men. The ultimate goal: victory with as little loss of American life as possible. Technology, information and leadership were the answer and James absorbed it all.

A mere two weeks went by, but so information rich and dense with facts were James's days that it felt like a year. The waiting and wondering made it double slow, so James tried not to think about it. It didn't help. Then his orders came. They put him in the belly of a cargo plane with a bunch of boxes, crates, tanks, guns, ammo and technical gear along with two other black project boys bound for the same facility. Halfway through the trip a video feed came on from General Costman.

"You boys are all going to Cameron On-Site Advanced Bio-Training Facility Unit 1A. It's the only one like it. The program was three weeks long. Now it's been cut to two. You three cadets have graduated and are now the finest America has to offer. Your sacrifice is unknown and unequalled. God bless you." The screen turned off. The general looked sick. James knew for sure that he trusted him.

James kept picturing the general's eyes as he gazed into James's young dumb soul for a shred of reality to grasp onto. He could all but hear the general saying, "Son, you won't like this at all...not one bit—you still want it? Terminal black—still interested?" Similar thoughts were undoubtedly crossing the minds of his fellow recruits so they discussed nothing of it, as is the way of the fearful who have no choice but to become the brave.

When James entered the facility he entered enemy territory. This was Xing Pao land. The Xing Pao were the military arm of the political ruling party in Hyperboria. That's what Americans called the country as no American could pronounce the name in the native tongue of the inhabitants, the language of the Hyperborians being impervious to the western ear which could only distinguish a series of yawing sounds and connective grunts. The Cameron bio-training facility was in the jungle. A piece of America in the fucking jungle. James walked in to the facility and beheld a large photo of the affable face of the Scotsman whose name the facility bore, Dr. Ewen D. Cameron, once head of both the American Psychiatric Association and the World Psychiatric Association as the placard beneath the likeness proclaimed. Oh no...another doctor. It said he spoke with an endearing Scottish burr and achieved instant results in his patients with no need for years of treatment. The unofficial logo of the place was written in beneath the official information in large script lettering, "Crazy like a Scotsman." A sense of humor was definitely required out here. After trading in his uniform for a hospital gown he was shown into a room where he received a bunch of shots he knew better than to ask about, and some tests which he took with equal resign and no questions. James was getting the way of things in the military. Next he was assigned his sleeping quarters after some more injections. He was so groggy he could hardly stand or walk when they put him to bed

in his room and locked the door. He felt like his mom. When he awoke some ten hours later a recording was blaring a bunch of crap in his ear about what a little nothing he was and how he couldn't do a thing about it. He was still so dazed from the shots that he couldn't put it together. He asked and was told that these recordings were part of a regimen of "psychic driving tapes," a therapy to make him more ferocious. Okay... Next more shots, pills and food and James was going up fast! He was alive and sweating instead of dead and shuffling. Another shot and his body is relaxed like rubber while his mind goes berserk, racing like an engine with the throttle floored while the car is in neutral, while his body remained really still and quiet. Then another and everything's silent, like snow fell or something and James takes it all in with no questions, no looking just consuming. Then he heard it. The words he came to dread more than pain or hurt or shame itself. "Please step into line Mr. Holdsworth." James hesitates. He's part zombie and so the huge black dude repeats, "Please step into line Mr. Holdsworth." James does it. He's in line. He can hear it. **Thumpf! Thumpf!** and then "AAAAHHAA... Oh God please no... NO... **Thumpf!** Oh precious lord please no please...Please God no...**Thumpf! Thumpf!** AhhAAAhhh OOhhh please SWEET LORD no Jesus NOT AGAIN Noooooo!! Help me!! Stop!! Please PLEASE LORD PLEASE **Thumpf! Thumpf!** AAAAHHHHH!! Help me. Oh please help me help...**Thumpf! Thumpf!** Aaaaahhhhaaa..."

Seven at a time. The line would move in chunks of seven. There were seven conditioning racks in the martial arts repatterning facility, but there was only one super-precise pneumatic cephalic electro-stimulus-conductor implantation hammer. While one guy got it, the rest had to watch and listen knowing they were next. 150 electrodes, 150 infinitesimal plastic coated platinum wires with electro-conductive tips fired through your skull to a precise depth into the brain. 150 for each man. The thing would hammer the wires into your brain. While it is true that there are no pain receptors in the human brain, James learned that the human soul can experience pain far in excess of that which can be induced by the sufferings of the body. Each wire ruptured and desecrated—electrocuted part of your soul. You

were more of a person—then it took something from you, broke right into your spirit and stole what was most precious, sacred and irreplaceable, destroyed you at the very bottom. Each wire took more. Then the hard part was done. The nuts and bolts held your head and your arms and legs flop down as the racks you are strapped into go vertical and the exercise starts.

It was explained to us that the fastest way to learn a skill like the martial arts or marksmanship was to learn it from the inside out, to feel it done right and open the mind to receive and record the muscle memory. That's where the shots came in, to relax the body and open the mind. They took some supreme grand master of Taekwondo and three other martial arts of the most deadly variety and did this same thing to him with the wires in his skull and made him do his moves. Now they hook us up and play the tape back so to speak, they put those same impulses back into our body and presto! A martial artist instant recipe—no waiting! So you are hanging in the air and your arms and legs are jerking around doing kicks and moves and your arms are punching and blocking and all the grand master's brain impulses fire your body as you kick and punch, flopping and thrashing around in the air like a shadow boxing Pinocchio in flight. It was cruel beyond measure and somehow comical, but it worked. James remembered the sergeant's dislocating meat missile of an arm and understood.

James flew over with Gonzolez on the transport plane. They were both scared to death and twice as excited and had shared more in these few days and a week than most brothers in a lifetime. Once at the Cameron facility time had become dense, thick and double long twice over, heavy, as lead melting down your throat, too heavy to stand...too thick with fear. So he liked Gonzalez. James even felt he knew him and how could he not? They were both about to hear the words, so they were both the same inside, now exactly the same person because they knew what it meant: the brain implantation air hammer—the precision laser guided computer perfect soul destroying inhuman air hammer smashing your soul to irretrievable bits. Oh Christ. Then it happened. "Please step into line Mr. Holdsworth, Mr. Gonzalez." They got into line for their marksmanship re-patterning. Christ I wonder who the lucky marksman was whose brains they scrambled and where the pieces of it are today? James was getting smarter. Gonzalez was smarter still. Too smart. He was sweating, trembling and really knew what it meant. He couldn't fake it any more.

"Shit James they're going to fuck us with that soul smashing thing, the damn thing coming up over me, up onto me again to take more, pounding more skull and soul out and fucking my mind up with broken shit, but the broken shit's me, I'm always broke then, never me anymore—the only good stuff—the stuff you can't ever get back or replace is wrecked!"

Gonzalez started to cry and shudder. "No man! They can't have it! Not that! No one's entitled to it— NO ONE!"

Gonzalez started to look crazy, his eyes are looking everywhere and his head whips back and around, searching, his neck stretching all over looking for a way out and he's moving out of line and that huge black line boss, a 350 pounder easy with arms like a man's leg, he's always the one, the bouncer who says, "Mr. Holdsworth please step into line," and he sees what's happening as Gonzalez makes for the door. The monster black dude, man he was big, he grabs Gonzalez by the head with one hand and holds him up in the air. He puts him down and turns him around and picks him up again so Gonzalez is staring right at his huge head.

"Mr. Gonzalez step into line." Gonzalez does it. He steps into line, but he's shaking and he's going to start crying again and I can't blame him. The line boss says, "Mr. Gonzalez don't do it. You can't do it. No messes Mr. Gonzalez. Double black terminal Mr. Gonzalez. No messes. Stay in line Mr. Gonzalez." Gonzalez makes for the door and the line boss grabs the back of his neck and picks him up. Gonzalez has fully lost it, sobbing and hollering—he's just plain lost it. He's not coming back—crackpot for sure. He's whooping and biting and crying and the giant black man swings him under his arm like a duffel bag and tromps out of the room with him, then straight out the front door of the complex. Not ten seconds later, maybe five and BANG! The line boss comes back in real normal, a bit sweaty but like the top head on a totem pole, totally unfazed. I ask him,

"Sir, did you have to fucking kill him? Shoot Gonzalez? Just shoot him like that?"

"Mr. Holdsworth, what do you think you signed with that double terminal black order? That black contract...Hmmm? Once you go black, you can't come back. No messes. No complaints. No loose nuts. We don't exist so you don't matter. How could you? You aren't here. That order made you into nothing. You began as nothing, so what's the difference?" He leaned toward James and spoke quietly,

"Consider yourself.....motivated."



The words fell into James like hot stones of boiling lead, and the full meaning and gravity of James's situation only now became clear and real. Hope was stripped bare and beaten before his newly awakened eyes, so James, did very well indeed.

After eagerly accepting every invitation to step into line which he could not refuse, it was over. The two weeks and god only knows how many shots and horrendous soul splitting treatments later James was "Repatterned in field marksmanship and mixed martial arts level two enhancements." That was army speak for, "They destroyed him just right." James could not resist himself and struggled to behold the result, which he could no longer control. His soul was a barrel of locusts and wasps gathered in a ball of screaming self-annihilation, a shrieking boiling fist of self-reproaching words, the loop, over and over, those tapes in his own voice—when did he make the recordings?—over and over while he slept: He was filth, he was nothing, he was unable to stop it, it was his fault he was so weak, little kick is a treat, little kick is a fair boy, too weak to do a thing when he's bound and held because he is filth—over and over—locusts boiling over each other in a stew pot of impotence and self-disgrace. Then the other tapes in a woman's voice: "Only you can stop it, only you can help him, only you can wash off the filth and kill them, only you can free him, only you can save us, only you are strong enough to kill him, please kill him, oh please please help us, only you can save us, please help him," over and over and over until hornets upon hornets, wasps upon wasps, locusts upon locusts, a tortured cloud has replaced his soul and he is gathering, a storm cloud of torment, the atomized shriek of a man's soul once its been swatted into a stinging angry mist. As James left the facility

he saw the flag, the stars and stripes, the red white and blue, and for the first time he knew that he was part of it, he was the part of the flag which was unseen, the flag under the flag, and James now understood that the flag underneath the flag, was white, red and black.

As James and his surviving classmates were leaving the facility an MP directed the graduates to an office where General Costman was waiting. James was shown in first.

"Sit down, son." James obliged him. "I'm sorry I had to do that to you but I did. Now you can shoot, plus that kung foo crap. But at least you can shoot." James smelled alcohol on his breath but no puke. The general became very sincere. "Forget how much you hate me for putting you through that damn science experiment, forget it for a minute. Listen, I've got your fool Christmas present here—front line command. You were warned about this program and now you're warned again—hear me son—warned again...this is what you wanted. Heroes are made on this kind of assignment. That's no advertisement son, most heroes are dead before anyone pays them the compliment." James stared. "You still want it?"

"Yes, sir!" The weight of it all, the mistakes, the warnings, the truth—it was all too much, the training had worked—he had to do it—he had to explode! He had to go! It was time to unload! Now!! James erupted, "DAMN YOU! FUCKING YES SIR THE FUCK YOU SIR—YES!!!" James was livid, blood red and vibrating with rage.

"Okay son, I needed to hear it." The general sighed and his shoulders dropped in plain relief like a lead guilty weight was lifted from his being. The general slid the folder to James, who opened it up and discovered the truth. The last three captains lived three weeks, two weeks and twelve days respectively. All shot. Only the captains.

"Son, there's a man in the outfit whose been on active duty four and a half straight years, this business has been going on a little longer than most folks realize." James said he didn't know that. "Well politics are another man's headache but we fight for it. If you want a piece and you want to live to tell about it, you'd better

check into Sergeant Frank. We've offered him the captain's job and offered again but he won't have it. Sergeant only, please. Seeing how the captains been taking it out there I can't blame him but all that aside...well he's still alive and he hasn't gone nuts either. Four and a half front line active...Incredible! I never met the man and sure as hell never want to, but he's got the charm James, see what he's got to say."

"Sir, you never met him and don't want to? He sounds like a real hero, a living one, not a dead one but a real live hero, why not meet him, sir? He's the real deal." The general got real serious and looked a bit sick under the eyes and around the mouth.

"Son, anyone who lived through that has become something, and it's not a hero...not by a yard or a thousand. I never met him and never want to. A man like that is not going to be the subject of any letter you may choose to write back home to your mom, or anyone else. Son you're in the shit now, and shit stinks." The general looked really sick. James felt his blood still and understood, he had just met an honest man.

General Costman escorted James out of the office and closed the door behind him. James imagined he was getting a well deserved drink and did not blame him in the least. James had no time to contemplate his strange responses, his thoughts or his lost soul. There was only the ringing in his head, the hornet's nest of his soul was alive and boiling. His calm demeanor was as mysterious to James as it was misleading to all who saw him. He got into a waiting XV-STU Standard Ultra Light (assuming that six tons of heft qualifies as light) mobile semi-tracked personnel transport vehicle, or "the limo" for short. Six other troops were going his way on the limo and no one knew. Only James felt the drops of fire sprayed into the air like a kid with a lighter and a can of hairspray looking for an anthill upon which to vent his tortured soul. As they pulled into camp some ninety minutes later James realized he had seen none of the trip. He had noticed details but understood or cared about none. He had only one wish, wherever the fuck he was he didn't care in the least. He passed through this jungle with its green heat and smoldering wetness, so over heavy with heat and thick to breathe, all the strange scents of unknown flowers both poisonous and beautiful,

sweetness from every organ of Eden's lush creation, life's fragrant bounty and her alluring sickness so florid and over ripe filled his mouth and nose with thick forbidden scents, and the hues of our invisible palette of all description enjoined his senses, but James felt nothing of it, so ferocious was the self-immolating fire of his ruined soul, so hungry was he for an object to consume in its orange red stinging blaze. James sat quietly. He was in line.

The camp entrance was adorned with a makeshift arch of triumph made of cut-up saplings with a sign over it, "Home Shit Home."

"Welcome to "The Shit," gentlemen!" That was the real unofficial name of the camp, and all laughed approvingly. At last, the curtain is raised and we begin! James's hunger slept beneath his blank affable face. No one could tell it. No one saw it.

James exited the transport and walked toward the first private he saw, who snapped back a quick salute. "Where do I find Sergeant Frank?" The private pointed out the location of Sergeant Frank's quarters, a large super heavy duty Emerson Model 791 Multi-Purpose All-Weather Bullet Resistant Personnel Shelter intended for three people. Perks. "Knock knock," said James in his calm not a hornet's nest voice.

"Come in."

"Sergeant Frank?"

"Sir! So glad to meet you, sir! May I address you as Cap'n, sir?"

"Yes Sergeant Frank, Cap'n is okay."

"If I may be so presumptuous sir, as to break decorum and request that you address me simply as Frank, as all the men do. Although improper it adds a certain indecorous familiarity which aids the overall coherency and cohesion of the group, if I may be

so indecorous as to suggest, sir." James thought, wow, who is this guy? He's educated! Indecorous to suggest?

"Sure, Sergeant or um... Frank, sure. May we take a walk, Frank?" James had noticed an odor, a dreadful smell which he thought he could ignore, he needed this man and so he would ignore the smell, but it was too much, an odor like the alley behind the butcher shop they closed for health violations, an odor like a dead animal or something worse, lots of dead animals or a dog cooking as it rots in the summer sun. James was going to vomit. They had to walk. Air was required.

James controlled himself to appear he was not gasping and gulping the fresh air, although he was. Sergeant Frank was cheerful and composed. He seemed as a man complete, his smile not sought after, nor a grin suppressed, an honest glow about the man with an easy light stride—someone who likes the neighborhood and lives there too.

"Oh Cap'n... I see from the look of things that I forgot something. Forgive me a moment. I will return most promptly."

James was annoyed but showed nothing. Frank scampered back like a kid with a new marble.

"Cap'n, now I'm just guessing, and we just met, but I'll bet you came from Cameron, didn't you? Now don't answer cause Cameron doesn't exist, but sayin' you did, I'm guessin' you feel like you gave 'em all you had in there, and how am I doin' so far Cap'n, to beg your cooperation?"

"You're doing perfect—bullseye, Sergeant. Bullseye."

"Can hardly hear yourself think I'd bet. Well if a man is in the field without being able to hear nothin' but the devil in his ear, shoutin' and hollering his horsehair and such, well he's lookin' but he's not listening is he?— I mean he don't hear so good over the racket, and who knows what he might be missing, what he might need to hear but he can't, if you follow me."

"Yeah I guess so," said James but in truth the noise in his head made it difficult and he was almost unable to concentrate on the conversation for the distraction.

"So Cap'n I want to keep me a Cap'n rather than make *me* one you understand, so I personally believe, and see if you don't agree sir, I personally believe that you deserve a smoke. I believe you may live longer and be happier for it, safer if you can hear yourself think. I am sure you have sacrificed a lot, a great deal sir, and I think you deserve a smoke." With that Frank handed James a large joint. James was more than a little relieved at the suggestion, and assented in the very most affirming tones.

James lit the joint. He inhaled its smoke, so thick and heavy with unknown enchantments, a familiar taste, the luxurious gulp of smoke and sugar but with something new and earthy underneath, like the scent of rich soil and a meaty bread soaked in broth and earth taste.

"Frank, what's in this? Pot?"

"Well sir, this here's got some very potent weed in it sir, that's the primary constituent but really that's just a sort of a sedative enhancer, a substrate, a vehicle for the dragon, sir. That there, is a dragon's tooth sir. No finer smoke exists in all the universe, the smoke of kings, and contented enlisted men alike." James had never smoked heroin before.

He inhaled it with all the hope of a broken drunk pulling at the bottle as if they could just drink it in deeply enough, the whole problem might turn to daylight. James felt his broken soul like a china dish set smashed in a sack, grinding striking scraping and ringing in pain, and he needed relief. What had they done to him?? Oh God, oh Christ they sure wound him up. Spinning like a demon top ready to blow and Frank was right! He'd better calm down or—POW!—he was next! So he inhaled the smoke and prayed in his heart and mind that the poison might heal him, stop the shattered bell, the broken shards and pieces of his ruined soul from their cacophonous shrieking and ringing. He imbibed the smoke and wished only for its spirit to stand between the pain he had been shattered to become, and himself, the he who was here now. Each curl and wisp of smoke was the spirit of an unknown and so most potent and hopeful salvation. Hope appears most alluring to those who need her most and do not yet fully understand her terms. James began to calm, the corners and



splinters of his world were stilled and covered in a blanket of snow and the landscape became quiet in between the sounds, and James was quiet in himself, no longer filling in between everything he heard with thoughts and pain and needs and drowning hunger and shattered longing. The mouse trap was under snow, and the world was quiet. He heard the footsteps and the talk of men, the voice of Frank and his own voice, and only a warm hum in his ear betrayed the silence in between the sounds. He was himself again. He could think.

"Cap'n, if I may introject some discussion into this most fine and still evening?"

"Of course Frank and thanks! I feel much better. You got it all right, those boys spun me like a top." James's words were spoken at a near whisper but seemed loud to him, and Frank, whose affect was entirely uneffected for having consumed his own dragon's tooth continued,

"Well I'm glad to see you took hold of it, sir. Some of 'em are stubborn and well... I suppose you heard about the last three, or really five captains come out of here as full on heroes with perfect posture—they never blink sir—they all took it: the captain's pill."

"The captain's pill?"

"Yeah Cap'n, they had the headache you just lost, the captain's headache which gets 'em shot. They wouldn't have a lick of the remedy so they went out and got the only answer left to 'em to get rid of that captain's headache—the captain's pill sir—a bullet. That quiet it down for 'em. If you won't have one cure, the headache they leave you with will get you another. You may not even start to see it yet sir, but Cap'n, this place ain't so bad, and it's sure not worth takin' no captain's pill to cure a headache." This was the hopeful news Sergeant Frank has bestowed upon James, a sure salvation had befallen him and James was James again.

There was an enormous sultry beauty in this land, Hyperboria, that ancient land of Greek myth and legend which can not be reached by foot or by sea where it is said the sun near but never sets, and age touches no one for a thousand years, by which time

they must surely welcome it. A splendor of natural abundance, still moments, full waxy leaves, voluptuous flowers with alien scents and bird song from animals which were not birds, an aged ageless chorus so squalid, bellowing and perfect which had existed for countless eons without him, seemed to suddenly appear before James as he heard the strange animals and the shuffling of new ageless unknown leaves and winds through these trees, he felt as if this world had only now sprung into being, as if he had created it in this very moment by the act of thinking and perceiving it, it had only now sprung up from nothing to fill him with its wonder and drench his ripe senses with its color and chattering profusion. So do we animate the world and feel we have created it. Perhaps we have. Perhaps Hyperboria is a place we dream ourselves.

It was with such quiet thoughtful musings as these that James had Frank assemble the men, his men, and James was feeling hopeful, even good, and might make something for himself out of this mess after all. After a cursory troop inspection and introduction James returned to his quarters and found another piece of good news waiting for him—a folder on his cot—Alex was to arrive in less than a week. Costman was paying up.

"The first patrol." That's how James remembered it, and he would never forget. He awoke and restudied all the maps and information sheets about his unit's mission. His unit's stated duty was to patrol and clear seven trails: Barlow, Alpine, Swamp, Texas, Sand Shoe, Mountain Goat and lastly, McTarnihan, named after the first casualty on the trail some three years back. The smaller spur trails off of these main trails were designated by color, aka Barlow Black or Alpine Green, etc. These trails are bordered by sheer drops, mountains, swamps and other natural obstacles which make it necessary to keep them clear so "important wartime activities," whatever those are, can continue to take place and move across the trails as need be. James did not understand why they didn't just bomb it to pieces and flatten the whole thing into a parking lot. Why spend men and money clearing the trails and then allow the enemy to re-booby trap them and again wait in ambush, so they would have to clear them again? Why leave the mountains and villages there? Why not level the place? That's what they did to most of Hyperboria... why not here? Well politics are another man's headache as the general had said, and he was going to see the business end of the thing. James's first patrol.

James and five men went out to clear Barlow Black. The jungle was thick with insects and a humming which left the mind always searching for something to swat. The clouds of bugs were driving James a little bit over the top, all the bugs, swarming,

biting, relentlessly suffocating and feeding on him, in his mouth and in his nose. James remembered the "little bomb" Frank had made up for him. A speck of heroin wrapped up in a cigarette paper with just a pinch of speed. "When the creepies get ya, take the pill—cures the headache better than the last captain's pill." James swallowed it. Before too long he began to feel better, but strange...his feet, arms and legs moved freely and easily but they were somehow detached, disconnected from him as if he no longer owned them. His head was miles away up over his body like a helium balloon on a long string, he was still and floating above himself. They walked silently. Frenchy was on point. James was next and Frank near the back. Frenchy was nervous. He didn't have a cigarette paper or a headache, so he was just scared. The rest were too, but Frenchy showed it, he was first in line and it showed. He was jumpy.

As they walked "Captain James" floated and enjoyed the strange sounds and unfamiliar greens and yellows, but his head was up so high he could hardly believe his arms were his, with those hands so far away on the end of his thin mile long spaghetti arms, and the legs a year distant from the rest of him, surely they belonged to someone else, stepping so automatically in their perfect isolation. Whose legs? They stepped. He could hardly care. He didn't believe he was there. Who was there? They pause because some of the men need a drink and a rest, and Frank asks,

"How you doin', Cap'n?"

"Weird, Frank. Fine but strange— Disconnected." Frank's eyes lit up and he gave James a hearty reassuring pat on the shoulder saying,

"Ahhhh... Then I've got it just right for you! A pinch of dust separates the mind and the body, never too close together. Let us pause and think—happiness likes us to consider her, examine her before we decide." Frank glowed. What the hell Frank meant philosophically was unclear, but James now understood the separation he felt within himself, the distance, the disconnection was due to PCP in the mix he had swallowed, there was PCP in Frank's little bomb, that's what was responsible for the head like a

balloon arms so long feet a mile off weirdness. James had no feeling of fatigue, bodily discomfort, or claustrophobic anxiety from the multitudes of flying insects as he had before he took the remedy, so James decided he was grateful. They hiked and looked, crept and stopped, lurched and jogged to the end of the trail and turned around. A first run with no casualties. Good. James was downright glad. He wanted to get back to "home shit home" and smoke a dragon's tooth. He was thinking about that very thing when a shout came from the rear of the formation. It was Frank giving the halt command with his fist in the air and a sharp yell to back it up. All halted. Frank walked over to a clump of bushes by the side of the trail. He was positively beaming, grinning ear to ear. There was a childlike quality to him even with the smell and the beard. Suddenly he reached into a bush, just as he was pretending to pass it he reaches in like lightning, like a farmer getting a chicken from the coop before it even knows to put up a fuss and he has her. Frank has this young native girl by the neck and rips her out of the bush. James wanted to think it was the strange concoction Frank had given him, but he knew it wasn't, not completely. He wanted to think it was shock, but it wasn't, not entirely. James felt the pull of a higher, lower, older intelligence, one centuries deeper than his life or his training. He felt the supreme knowledge of the group and so he did what the group told him to do, he became part of it and so knew as much as the group. All were silent and watching. All knew to be still and watch. All bodies paused, and so time was suspended, and James paused, and stopped to consider. Frank followed protocol and took the girl back into the formation for questioning at the base. James's body had sensed the unexpected and his glands and his primal nervous system responded to embrace the ancient wisdom of the group. James gave the order to march and only seconds passed, but it seemed much more, so thick were these anxious unsure moments, so sluggish with trepidation before all heard it again, and again all halted. The group is slow to relax, and slow to act, and so thinks best. Frank asks the girl a question in that language of theirs. She says some feeble thing back. Frank asks again, meaner—she says little. Before she can even move an inch Frank has raised his 190 pound six foot tall frame up in the air four feet—out of

nowhere an explosion straight up—then down, all of the force down with a kick stepping down on the point of his huge heel into the side of her leg which folds up and snaps sideways like a soft chicken bone gives real easy then the sound, part crunch part snap and the girl has his heel pinning the shattered limb to the dirt square in the center of the break—grinding it back and forth. Then Frank does the strangest thing. Weird. He drops to his knees and replaces his heel on her bloody bone protruding fat exposed shattered leg and knee with his knee on the break, now he's got his knee with all his weight on it shifting and grinding away on her smashed out leg, back and forth pressing and shifting the wound. Now he gets his face up on her to look into her face, grinding his knee into the break he gets close and he's smiling so sweet and kind, relaxed and just smiling so broad. Happy. Not pleasure, just content, open and warm— She lets loose with a wailing holler of a scream like a train whistle and she's gone, she's just a scream, pure anguish, unreachable, and he wants something from her and she's not giving it—she's not meeting his eyes and Frank's forehead wrinkles and his peaceful look is spoiled. His hands snap over her face and he takes her relentless screaming too crazy with pain and fear to reach face and the soul behind it and uses his hands like a pair of clamps and locks her head solid as cement looking right at him and shuts off her breathing dead tight. Her nose is sealed and her mouth is closed tight as a drum—she starts pumping and her eyes are bulging but she's still too far out to get at but then it's working, it's doing something to her, she's changing color, heaving and pumping up and down her chest and eyes bulge and recede pumping and struggling but no no...no air for you!—and her back keeps arching up over and over until the muffled cries and sounds slowly quiet, and she relents, surrenders, gives up, un-arches her back, and looks into his eyes. Like a present from the gods this look of peace and gratitude comes over Frank and he looks into her, like a bucket he lowers slowly into her—all the way to the sandy bottom until a connection of some kind happens and he seems so happy and innocent—overjoyed, happy like a little boy with an Emerson "all day gum pop." He lets her mouth and nose go but first he asks the question again, real soft. She's shaking less. He lets her head go and she's gasping and trying to breathe

and Frank asks again and this time it's pleasure in his eyes all right, and she sees that, and answers. Frank hands her over to Private Brechnear who holds her arm like he's got a loaded diaper. Frank comes running up the line with the gleam of true happiness in his eye. James has been frozen in place watching the movie, the real movie, and hasn't moved! He has just noticed, seen the whole picture, and hasn't moved! A thousand doubts poured themselves into James's blushing filthy soul—to have watched and done nothing. To have felt nothing for her—even now—to be standing motionless now! James flushed red and was sick to know himself—halting and tamed before this monster: Frank! Frank!—the abomination who snaps young girl's legs and he, James, the abomination's shadow. James's soul began to churn and he hated Frank and hated himself with the darkest most bitter and black poison bile of self-contempt. Even as James was hating and shaming—goring and slitting the belly of his soul open with every guilty word he heard the voice of the group speak its wisdom and he said nothing as Frank passed him—still, James watched. Still, he wanted to live.

Frank crept on his belly with his Emerson out in front of him, advancing on his belly slowly some twenty yards ahead of where the formation had stopped. James just started to wonder what that girl was doing there anyway, so long after they passed, now that they were coming back, why was she there? Hmmmm. Still moving forward on his stomach Frank nudges something in the dirt with the end of his gun and an explosion the likes of which James had never before experienced walloped him square in the chest and knocked him over. The blast sent a gray black cone of directed shrapnel and vaporized steel pounding through the jungle at supersonic velocity—shattering through trees, leaves and anything else like a fist through a newspaper. James was on his ass. Frank just saved his life! James was deaf for ten minutes and laughing the whole time. He would have had no idea! Frank saved his life! Frank was on cloud nine. James looked through the fifteen foot square hole the charge had torn through the jungle at a forty-five degree angle from knee height up straight through to punch a hole out of the dark green black jungle, a dirty tattered hole ripped right through the entire forest canopy of trees, leaves

and life, ripped straight through to the sky. That bomb punched a hole to heaven.

As Frank returned to his place in the formation James was happy to know him. Frank had saved everyone! As Frank walked closer and closer James noticed that the girl's blood had left a large stain on the right knee of Frank's pants. James saw several other stains on the legs and as Frank got closer, some more older stains, more faded and brown. Then as Frank accepted James's hand in gratitude, there was the smell.



James floated back to base camp. His ears were ringing like a tuning fork. His body was covered in filth and cuts and he had never felt better, never more alive or right there in the moment, seeing the thick green fan leaves of the strange plants wave at him, like the whole world was a pair of arms with broad welcoming hands reaching out from the living jungle to embrace him and welcome him; so joyous and sweet was the jungle, so welcoming was life, like a current going through him, an electricity in knowing it: he had lived! The cloud of death had consumed the earth but twenty yards from him and there was no chance, sure death, sure annihilation was close enough to lick him—he felt its breath and cheated it outright! He was a river of fear turned into happiness and felt the current of his life stretch out through his scattered soul and he was alive, awash and numb in knowing what he was: a small bit of meat, a scrap of nothing but water and a film of skin, so very delicate and easy to puncture, easy to poke a leak in any of his many watery organs so he'd spring a leak like that girl, just one little leak and we're all done. They left her there. She gave what was required of her and her people or the jungle would claim the rest. James thought nothing of it, so turgid and joyous was the current of his life, the numbing electric flow of his soul, every nerve was alight and every fear was a happiness crawling through him, filling him with a ringing eternal vibration, the undeniable force of the river once brought to a full froth and boil, running over its banks and

scalding the land with its electric seething song of release and affirmation, the sure turgid hissing foaming exaltation of white water and sound, the human soul and all its desperation and ducking before mortal shadows now unhinged in a flash, the breath of death and annihilation unloosed the sum of it all, a flash flood scalds the earth of James's soul boiling up his fear and guilt into the pounding river of mud and foam and its irresistible current—all feeling now born afloat and churning within each precious moment washed and scoured clean from the storm which turns and holds all feeling within itself until it bursts, the fullness of life after it has seen itself all but devoured, then as a cork up from the depths into the sun and he is the river which scours all fear into a sure motion—the boiling current of joy itself where fear rejoices to know what precious fragile thing has been preserved and can no longer, should no longer refuse itself and its current. Now all reasons are mute before the motion and power of such exaltation, the force of this white water and churning jets of mud which no bank or fear can contain—the explosive current now unleashed entire and complete—the current of life itself.

So James walked back to camp, with a dragon's breath he kissed life and filled himself with its numbing fire. Every fear clattered its profusion of joy within him—every doubt was a moving electric finger of life and he knew himself as all animals know themselves best and most beautifully after they have touched the black light of their mortality, as a lover who was close enough to give a sweet black kiss to the lips of life and so make them flush with rose, and full with the pulse which beats twice to know the nearness of its nemesis. Beauty and time itself flush hot and red to know each other, the hammer pulse of eternity quickens at a kiss such as this. So are all beings which wish to continue, and all ends which will consume them into mute blackness intertwined as lovers, within each of us.

By the time they reached base camp James's hearing was returning. He was filled with a profusion of feelings and questions. Once back in his quarters James noticed his pounding heart, sat on his bed and lit a dragon's tooth. The thick white smoke rolled sensuously over his lips and tongue and he consumed its life giving vapors as if it were a divine manna, a

nectar of salvation and a celebration of all sensual living things. The clouds he exhaled held his very life before him in glorious symbol, real and dense, fading and disappearing, breathing their essence into the world and replacing themselves with each luxurious magnificent breath. A still peace and subtle energy slowly eased in between the splintered pieces of his soul, and he was held in the tender hands and delicate fingers of pot and poppy, peace and happiness, the quiet sweetness which life offers only to kings and the most deserving, once their task has shattered them to wholeness. A strange peaceful thought. Can a man find quiet and the sureness of his life's worth and rhythm through a shattering—a smashing to shards which yields their energies—are we healed to be broken? Are we healed once we don't feel what we are, can we just become it instead? With lovely philosophical musings such as these James's soul was caressed by this quiet, the heroin laid its silent graceful snow drifts of illusion over James's boiling happiness and the world was alive, full and quiet, the brook of his happiness purred in James's ear and the blush of life's radiance brimmed, spilling over and glowing under his thoughts. Had life and peace finally found their ultimate coincidence and union here in this perfect moment?

James extinguished the last third of his dragon's tooth on the bed rail and eased his body into the vertical. Standing up so slowly and ahhh...such pleasure! Step outside into the swollen red and orange day, the sun licking his ear, he could feel her tongue on his face!

"Frank let me talk to you a minute."

"Yes, Cap'n what can I do for you?"

"I have a few questions. First off...how did you know?"

"Well sir, I keep a keen eye and ear out so I heard her breathe and saw the bush move so I snuck over past and grabbed her, that's all."

"No, no, Frank, how did you know to do that damn thing to her leg? Why did you do it—how did you know? Fill me in."

"Yes sir, naturally sir. You see, if we're on our way coming back to "the shit" there's only one reason to see one of 'em, that's if

they've swept in back of us and planted the trail, put something down to catch us like that M-47—well maybe she's just out pickin' berries or whatever, but probably not. So we go to take her back to the base. Now she's got to be thinking, due to past incidents, she's got to be thinking she's going nowhere she wants to be—I mean sir, the girl knows we're going to take her to base and torture her if she's lucky—not that we would, of course sir, but she's got no way to know that so, I see her smile. A small smile, but she grins as she sees the formation advance on the trail she smiles. No woman—no girl, or man for that matter, in her position has any reason to smile so I stop the formation and ask her, "Why you smile?" She answers for shit so I gave her reason to sing. That's all. She needed a reason."

"Okay so you did her leg to get her to talk. What's with the knee in the break and the look?"

"Sir, the knee is so I can get in for the look. The look..." Here Frank gets a real wistful sentimental kind of misty look about him and sighs. "Cap'n, it's important to make a connection with a person if you want to know 'em. Then they take you seriously. Then they pay attention and know you. You'll see it. Once you get the look into 'em, aaahhhh...then you ask right and you will hear the song..."

Frank takes a huge hit from his dragon's tooth and drifts into the bliss of memory. As James left Frank to the well deserved reminiscences of his pleasure, James walked around the camp. Everywhere he went he saw boxes of products, munitions and foodstuffs. The Happy Burger logo was everywhere—all the food cartons and burger buns, the sauce bottles and kitchen implements, the cans and counter tops were all Happy Burger, Little Amy's face beaming from every box, a sweet innocent face to remind everyone what they were fighting for, and the Emerson logo was also on all the weapons from his rifle to the field munitions and ammo—just like home: Emerson and America's precious little spokesgirl, Little Amy, were stamped and painted everywhere, adorning and sanctifying every item from the tents to the bombs. Emerson sure improved Happy Burger when they took it over—quality went up and prices went down! What a company! The insignia was everywhere and James could just

about hear it, "Yeah Gramps, I sure do love Happy Burgers! They're like sunshine in my belly!" It was just like a little piece of the U.S. right here in Hyperboria. Amazing!

Then James thought back on what Frank had just said. The bomb they had nearly been killed by was an M-47, one of our Emerson anti-tank super-shaped-charge metal vapor shrapnel delivery munitions. The Xing Pao must have lifted it from one of our stockpiles, but the funny thing was, the Xing Pao had no tanks. No tanks. Funny, that's not what the news said. The M-47 mine was developed specifically to combat the super high-tech Xing Pao armor. A high dollar munition to be sure and wow did that thing work...but no tanks.

So James was musing over the politics of the M-47 shaped metal vapor munition which had almost killed him when he entered his quarters and found another surprise to go along with his life, which he had just reclaimed—Alex! Alex was sitting on his bed and he was staring and Alex was staring and,

"Alex, how the fuck are you?"

"James, you fucker!"

Much hugging, laughter and the damp hiding eyes of friends added another new layer of happiness to this day all ready so over full with every strange new thing. Alex and James spoke but James withheld his experiences at the Cameron facility. He knew that something so unreal could not yet be understood by his friend who seemed to be so much the same, while he, was so very different.

"Alex, light that butt up will you?" Alex lit the last third of the dragon's tooth and inhaled the precious gases, now slightly yellowish in color, double thick with tars and drugs and every potent attribute which accumulates in the last of the joint after its been half burned, the roach pickled and twice strong for having been steeped in smoke. James said little and let the tooth work its magic. Alex was not filled with the hateful swarm of any captain's headache and in a few minutes he was talking his head off.

"Man I wish you were there James, this sergeant was such a damn asshole, screaming and hollering—never enough for this jerk yelling at the top of his lungs over the smallest damn thing! I learned fast though, details James— Details! That man was a jerk like I've never seen in my life, swearin' and cussin' but he got me paying attention to everything, like ants crawling over my brain I got to seeing every little damn thing, every wrinkle and spot and I guess that's why he was such a jerk and always yelling and screaming. How bout that damn Emerson 7000 Mark 2—shit, ain't that the cat's ass? What a gun!" etc. etc... Alex went on and on. After a half hour James lit up another dragon's tooth just to shut him up. James hugged his friend goodnight and sent him off to his quarters with the rest of the troops. Christ he loved that guy. James felt kind of misty. Alex was his personal assignment to himself. Alex was there because of him, and he would leave because of him. Alex was his business and he was going to keep him safe. Man, was this going to be fun!

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