

New Nonfiction by John Darcy: “Hypothermia”

The email takes me to a link that takes me to an article displaying two mugshots. The mugshots take me back to winter. It was a southern snow day, at least five inches of accumulation and more flakes still falling. It was 2014. I believe weather records for the region were broken. I believe it was a Thursday.

In my mind the day has a mirror's shine, everything reflective. The ground stretched out in a pureness of white, like one great flattened pearl in the sun.

We were not supposed to be out. Ft. Bragg was closed. I was junior enlisted at the time, a Specialist, twenty years old, a team leader in charge of a fire team within a Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition Squadron of the 82nd Airborne Division. Mostly this meant paperwork. I never did get used to jumping out of airplanes. I never fired a shot in anger.

The 82nd is famed and storied, of course. Sicily, Normandy, Panama, Fallujah. Its mission statement boasts an ability to deploy anywhere in the world within eighteen hours. Often it's referred to as America's 9-1-1. And yet the base was shuttered and training halted for a few inches of snow.

Well, not all training was halted. We were out there in the snow.

We were lacking in cold weather gear but the Captain wouldn't hear it. Our unit's forefathers fought the Nazis without coats or gloves at the Battle of the Bulge; sometimes without boots or even bullets. Protests about weather were certainly blasphemous, possibly heretical. But the temperature was

starting to dip toward the upper teens. And it was a wet snow, dense with a chill that leached through our uniforms like a reverse blood-brain barrier, totally porous. These camouflage uniforms, of a digital pattern now retired from service for their failure to blend into any environment, were made of a mystical material that sweltered you in heat and froze you in the cold.

I was close with our platoon leader for having served as his radioman before my promotion. I told him maybe a third of the guys had the proper gear, and this was a situation likely to turn hairy and soon. He concurred, and together we got a fire going. Hypothermia lingered on the horizon like a sunset, and all of us knew it. He told me the Captain would keep us out here as planned.

One of my soldiers was back on base and quarters-confined with a staph infection. To fill some other equally random staffing issue, the empty slot in my team was filled by Private Underhill. He was a SoCal kid and five years older than me. Whenever he wasn't in uniform, he wore a flat brim hat etched with some variation of the Oakland Raiders logo.

After the platoon leader and I got the fire crackling, I went back to check on my guys. They looked frosted but generally okay. They liked to curse me for cluttering up and weighing down their packing lists, but today they were grateful, and I felt like a father finally vindicated for making his family arrive six hours early to the airport.

Underhill, prone in the snow, as a last-minute addition to my team did not have any of that same gear. Water draws heat from the body four times faster than air of the same temperature, and he was dripping, drenched. His teeth chattered with a strange music. We'd been out there almost twenty hours. His face was a glossy blue.

At the extreme ends of body temperature, motor functions begin

to fail. Underhill spoke like an Adventist in tongues. There are videos online of non-English speakers acting out what an English conversation sounds like to those not fluent. They are uncomfortably strange clips, these sort of auditory illusions, like an Escher sketch for the ears. You can feel your brain almost literally stretching out to make sense of the nonsense, so close is it to being discernable. That was how Underhill sounded. And worse than the meaninglessness was his face, serious and concerned. A face that seemed absolutely certain of his speech, awe-struck that I appeared unable to understand.

I stripped him naked but for his boots and wrapped him in my poncho—not promising, but it was the only dry item I had. I got one of my guys to collect his gear, and we started back toward the central staging area where I'd met with the platoon leader, and a fire awaited. It was maybe not quite half a mile. I was maybe not quite certain that Underhill would make it.

With the base closed, there was some hiccup in getting a medic to the scene. Underhill, now in dry clothes and around the fire, was still stammering a stream of incoherence. There are stories of people so infected by cold that, when they finally draw near to a fire, they end up singeing themselves in their desperation for warmth.

I tasked one of my guys with making sure Underhill didn't topple into the fire.

I told the platoon leader I'd never seen hypothermia, real hypothermia, before. He said that neither had he. I said I didn't know how long he'd been like that, how far along he was. I told him this was my fault for not making frequent enough rounds with my guys, which was true.

The platoon leader said we've got to get out of here. He said the Captain was on his way, having heard the call for a medic

over the net.

When I check on Underhill, his fingernails are a color I cannot describe.

The Captain arrives with a medic, who goes to Underhill directly. I hover close to the Captain and the platoon leader, a First Lieutenant. It was like eavesdropping on my parents arguing, and I remember thinking that simile at the time.

If we can't train in the snow, how are we supposed to fight in the snow?

We don't have the gear, sir. It's not that they didn't bring it, but that it was never issued.

I'm looking for some intestinal fortitude from the guys.

The base is shut down. Sir, I think we're approaching a bad situation.

We've only had one man go down.

Tell me how many need to get hypothermia before you end this, sir. Tell me what your number is, and when we hit that number I'll call you. Tell me what your number is.

It was a clash of two commissioned tectonic plates. Hearing a Lieutenant address a Captain that way seemed like a glitch in the simulation. It was the immovable object of care for the troops versus the unstoppable force of military authority.

I was preparing myself to freeze to death so I could spite the Captain. I would have done this for my platoon leader.

The whole beating, thematic heart of the collision is best illustrated in William Styron's short novel, *The Long March*. It's a forgotten little novella that I stumbled into after I left the army. It depicts the clash between the hero, Captain Mannix, and Colonel Templeton, the villain who orders his

reserve Marines, out of shape after being suddenly recalled to duty over escalations in the Korean War police action, on a sadistic and pointless thirty-six mile forced march.

The march takes place the night after a training accident—a mortar round shot short, equally meaningless—leaves eight Marines dead. My own unit's time in the shivering snow came three days after a jump fatality occurred over Salerno Drop Zone outside of Ft. Bragg. A gruesome scene, a friend who was there told me. He used the word decapitated. Four American soldiers would be killed in Afghanistan throughout January 2014.

Captain Mannix, the obvious stand in for William Styron, confronts the hell of absurdity in a similar manner as the protagonists of Styron's contemporaries: but unlike Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, or Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Styron banishes all attempts at redemption through suffering and violence, of meaning through war, of clear-eyed stoicism in the face of the absurd. "None of that Hemingway crap for me," Mannix says to Lieutenant Culver, the book's narrator.

The tragedy of the story, of course, is that Colonel Templeton is forever destined to win—even when the Colonel himself falls out of the forced march. Mannix, who steps on a nail in the march's early miles, suffers through on the fuel of his unceasing hatred for the Colonel, even as the nail shreds his foot to a bloody scrap. A few miles from the finish, when the Colonel catches sight of Mannix's blood-sodden boot, he orders the Captain into one of the recovery vehicles. Mannix refuses. Again the Colonel orders, threatening court martial. Again, Mannix refuses. The Colonel places a hand on the pistol at his hip. Still, Mannix refuses.

Styron describes Mannix in those moments as "the man with the back unbreakable...lost in the night, astray at mid-century, in the never-endingness of war." The tragedy for me, as I sat there saturated in snow, was that I hadn't yet read of

Mannix's futile struggle with the Colonel. As I watched my platoon leader argue with my Captain, soldiers far better and braver than me were being asked to die seven-thousand miles away so that the soldiers who'd died before them didn't die in vain. Others commit war crimes that will later be pardoned by the president. I thought the situation in which I found myself, as well as the situation abroad, still possessed the capacity for a just conclusion. I believed the unstoppable force of the Captain's authority could be reasoned with, pleaded with, swayed. But this belief would become something I would look back on, marveling at how very little I knew about the world. I wouldn't understand until I read Lieutenant Culver say of the fictional Colonel and his march, that my Captain was beyond judgment, because "he was a different kind of man, different enough that he was hardly a man at all, but just a quantity of attitudes so remote from [the] world that to hate him would be like hating a cannibal, merely because he gobbled human flesh." There was no exit, no alternate paths diverging in a snowy wood. Everything Colonel Templeton and my Captain embodied, the whole sluggish wheel that turned for the express purpose of turning again, was so far beyond my comprehension that it might as well have come from another planet.

But this was all meaning I created in hindsight. In the wet expanse, that freezer of snow where the leaf-shedded trees jutted up from the white like mutated limbs, I focused on keeping my team's temperatures up. It would be many years before I began to free myself of Mannix's Hemingway crap. I fall victim to it still.

A second truck arrived, with a second medic, who soon whisked Underhill off. The first medic told me there was no doubt that I saved Underhill's life. That before my speedy intervention, Underhill was nearing a point where his body would have no longer been able to correct its inner thermostat. At the very least he would have suffered what the medic called a traumatic

cerebral event. To have saved a person's life—possibly, probably, most likely—at the age of twenty. It felt to me like no small achievement. To have saved a life that—certainly, absolutely—should never have been endangered in the first place? This seemed, somehow, even more significant. A kind of mortal déjà vu, the sort of moral underpinning that always nagged at me, later on, when faced with the trolley problem in ethics classes; that is, in the simplest terms, why did all these people need to be in harm's way?

The article's mugshots paint a picture and a cruel one. After the army, after college, after my father fell ill, suffered, and passed away, I was living in the mountains of Virginia. A slanting summer rain fell in sheets outside my window as I read. I remembered meeting Underhill's wife when a group of us went out to dinner before my discharge. But in her mugshot she seemed changed—straight hair shortened and tinted bright red—as if the night we met she'd been wearing a disguise. Underhill looked the same, though, and I felt that I could almost hear his brain-chilled babbling.

All of the charges are felonies. Battery of a minor. Child abuse inflicting serious bodily injury. Conspiracy.

There are a few other local news bulletins. Bail set at \$150,000. The infant son on a ventilator at UNC Chapel Hill, critical but stable. The four-year-old daughter, mercifully, already recovered from her injuries. The *Fayetteville Observer* quotes a police report of this girl saying she was hung upside-down until "red stuff" came out of her nose. Another says she was so afraid of Underhill that, long after her rescue, she would wet herself at the mere mention of his name.

It's skin-chilling stuff, grizzly. I scour through the sixth, seventh, eighth page of the search engine results. I can't

find any subsequent articles about the married couple's sentencing, even now, four years after their arrest. As if they'd been whisked out of sight in the very same manner as the medic truck saving Underhill from the cold.

The whole scene really does present itself as a sort of one of a kind trolley problem made just for me. What I don't mean to do is impose an ex post facto morality. Underhill had been a friend of mine, awkwardly unfunny with his rehearsed punch-line zingers, a quality that endeared you to him instantly. And with this comes a certain feeling of being tricked, had, swindled into camaraderie by some cunning master of sociopathy.

It's the sensation, even now, of being the neighbor interviewed on the nightly news, who never could have seen it coming.

In a way it makes me feel a troubling exclusion from myself, a split-screen personhood in which each side communicates with the other. One hemisphere says stop, enough, what could you have done, it's a horrific thing but the guilt is fake, or worse, the inserting of yourself into a tragic story that should be centered on what those two children faced, and what they will have to face, as they grow up haunted by a life tinged early with unspeakable trauma; because what could you have done, let him freeze? Let him topple into the fire you made? You couldn't have let him die even if you *had* known, which means you ought to stop creating a moral quandary where none exists; how many times do you think you've held the door open for a murderer?

This hemisphere is my own personal Mannix. Righteous and reasonable, always seeing through the fray and telling me the truth in no uncertain terms.

And yet. If this is my Mannix, that makes it the doomed hero, a voice who can't alter its own fate any more than it can turn

iron into gold.

Because the other side of the screen, that other hemisphere, sings a far simpler tune: you saved a man's life and that man went on to torture his children, and something is owed for that, regardless of whether you understand what it is. Responsibility proves boundless. My own personal Colonel, who speaks inside my skull-sized kingdom with a voice oddly reminiscent of my Captain, issuing order after order inside my brain's confines with the volume fully cranked. The unstoppable force of some echoing and illusory guilt that forces me to march ever onward, further and further, with a pack whose weight never stops increasing, a march for which there's no chance of rest or respite in sight.

Growing up in Nebraska, where I lived at Underhill Avenue as a kid, we had a small, hardcover book not unlike a pocket bible that concerned itself with famous coincidences and wild convergences of fate and fluke. Kennedy's secretary. The final recorded fatality of the Hoover Dam's construction being the son of the first recorded fatality, deaths separated by fourteen years to the day.

One of the anecdotes in this book of strange happenings took place as the Civil War was beginning to subside. On a train platform in New Jersey in the early days of '65, a man watches his train approach as others watch his face, stunned to be in the presence of a celebrity. His name is Edwin Booth. Considered America's greatest actor, he would go on to be seen as the most acclaimed Prince Hamlet of the 19th century. When the train pulls into station and bodies begin to flow from the doors, Edwin sees that a man has become caught at the far end of the platform. Edwin hustles to the man as the train begins to breathe the steam of impending motion. He manages to free the stranger, saving his life. Edwin learns some months later, after a friend sends a letter commending his swift action,

that the man on the platform was Robert Todd Lincoln, oldest son of Abraham Lincoln. The whole affair was said to have given Edwin solace after his brother, John, assassinated the president.

There is, I learned, great solace in reading about other of occasions of blind, incomprehensible chance. Because without other wild strokes of chance, all of these curving occasions and flashes of happenstance threaten to create a worldview in which the universe is constantly arranging itself in purpose-giving shapes, constantly formulating patterns and events which set me at center stage. And to believe in a universe like that, where the infinite cosmos align themselves through chance of circumstance to inform and elucidate me, to create my meaning—that's a nasty business. Having company in coincidence helps me avert my eyes from the arrangement of events that took me from Underhill Avenue to Private Underhill's random assignment to my fire team and his unforgivable crimes that were, in some secondary respects, facilitated by my actions, which extended his life. From plucking Styron's novella off the library shelf, a total coincidence, and having the book flood over me with snowy meaning. Or this: A year and a half after the snow, on the same Salerno Drop Zone where the gruesome training accident took place, myself and a man I didn't know saved the life of one Lieutenant Pedilla. We'd all jumped from the same airplane. A gust of wind on the drop zone screamed up to inflate Pedilla's parachute upon landing, dragging him ragdoll-like over the shorn grass, and preventing him from unhooking himself as the paracord risers lodged around his neck with tension. The man I didn't know chased after the billowed chute to smother it, while I launched onto the purple Lieutenant to jostle the cords free from his neck. I came to know Pedilla afterwards. I met his wife and kids. They live in Miami now, I think. Happy as happy can be.

This, however, is me waving a wand at the karmic tally, trying

to cook its books. Because the voice of the Colonel makes it clear that the internal ledger is no palimpsest. There are no revisions here. It is often said that the paths of life are winding, but this is a misconception. There is only one direction. Only the painfully straight route of a forced march.

How dearly I would like to be the Mannix of this story. To be the man with the back unbreakable. But against the flow of all my striving, I find myself dominated by the Colonel, by my Captain; bogged down inside the villain's view and ruled by an unswayable voice completely immune to reason. What would Mannix do in the face of such bewildering randomness? He'd keep walking. He would understand that the searing pain in his foot, or in his soul, or in his heart, was nothing more than passing show. No sensation can last forever, even if it insists, in its screaming immediacy, that it will. For Mannix, there is no chance. Only what should be done. And it is in Mannix's knowledge of those things which should be, which could be, and which didn't need to be at all that I find, if possible, solace. There is a kind of quiet grace in accepting the world as it is without sacrificing, in that most idealistic corner of your mind, the thought of how it might be. What if I hadn't saved Underhill's life? Well, what if the Captain hadn't put his life at risk in the first place? It isn't that these questions have answers. They don't. It's that, should I find myself some bright, snowy day not even bothering to ask them in the first place, then I know that something sinister has taken hold; that, without introducing the proper moral checkups, I might be on my way to becoming the Colonel.

And as far as the Colonel goes, I have little doubt that, faced with an event whose randomness made him question his place in the world, he would try to kill it.

I spoke to my mother on the phone a few days back. We were reminiscing about the Nebraska house on Underhill Avenue. It

was the quickest of corrections. Wood, she told me. Not hill.
Underwood Avenue.