

A Poem from Colin James: “Dinner at the Masocis’t Hand Peninsular”



FLOTSAM / *image by Amalie Flynn*

between
fingers
unmistakable
aches
like an ocean’s despair
awarded
significant status,
abutting
in the flotsam
credit for, or
an investment share.
can sit
and not smell it

The smell
is
and now my head
at not being
the stigma all
that takes
Sometimes you

few days
in the short year.
suggested long walks
exploding within legal limits
more
unique smell, most fair.

but for only a
I have already
until suddenly
all over your a

Three Poems from Suzanne Rancourt



EXPLODE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The Shoes That Bore Us

It is a dream of kind slippers that coddle bunions appeased
by hands mittened as the same kind slippers
holding warmth as forgiveness for all the combat boots
sogged by brackish muck of wars
when not hoisted in the occasional stilettos of never regrets
a conundrum of cognitive dissonance stabs the dreams
of where ever we had been, we escape to now over racked rails
rocked goat paths and deer runs you think it's a man's world
until

it is not

a sidearm presses to a right hip as cupped palms to iliac crests

walking boundaries and borders skirting domains of possibilities

that astrological forecasts stagger out on slow printed pages like stammering promises spoken by the dead selling real estate,

“Check Mate”

no choice is a lie when the inevitable is an illusion, no freeze to suffice

that fighting, although futile,

is still taking a stand

Unhinged Again

a stone leaves the hand that flung it-air escapes
constricted vocal cords – a vomiting wild – enraged urgency
and angst

kinetic makes contact – leaves bruises the color of bludgeoned fists
pounding flesh is quiet. I can't remember if I was screaming

my face and shielding hands turned overripe plum purple
sweet with sticky juice that dribbles down chins

attracts sugar bees you swat in autumn sun
that smells of maple leaves red with change

this hammer drives the firing pin into a child's memory, my
memory, of cap guns

explode a thousand times greater than a simple pop & puff

a chunk of lead propelled, is unhinged
from the mansplaining – the antagonistic prod of condescending
joust

I was stuck in a ring of double fisted doubts: leave don't
leave

I didn't know that I was a prisoner of white picket conditions
like my mother. Was she also a prisoner? A side bar of
recollection
a nursery rhyme my mother sang to me:

“Peter, Peter, pumpkin-eater, had a wife and couldn't keep
her
He put her in a pumpkin shell, and there he kept her very
well.”

I know my Mother knew when I was being beaten
there – my face laying with one ear pressed to cold linoleum
the other, an upward funnel catching my Mother's vengeful
whisper
“get up...get up...fight”

to be marginalized – a side note or comment, placed in the
periphery, only seen
when the reader desires or deems worthy of notice

only one of us walked from that house that day
to be silenced – a voice, a room, a home, a door closed upon
it

a mind made up, barred entrance, not worth the time to view,
hear, acknowledge

I'm writing this and telling you words are a privilege

voice is a human right thrown as stones – they fall from the
wind

Crying Over Continents

windfarms

white wake of ferries
channel crossing

a nonstop jack hammer knee
Morse code through time zones
pounding out instructions, the next destination

I'm not letting go like I used to. I feel heavier
in my gathering of nuances, intimacies –
You watch someone for hours, days
you learn what time they take their dog for a shit
turn on the garage light – the one just right of the workbench
and always with their left hand
You learn to recognize the screams of a woman
in an upstairs back bedroom being struck
or the subtle moans of make up sex easing across the back yard
from windows never locked and left half open

Or maybe,
it's the man in the downstairs apartment under yours
that you watch shaving his son's head before forcing
the kid to wear a chain and crucifix bigger than the kid's
malnourished chest with ribs that break at 0200 hrs
when Dad comes home drunk, no sex, and vile. The mother
died mysteriously, they say, in a different town, a different
country

Intimacy is being there as a ghost
being fed the compromise of "I'll never do it again"

Intimacy is being there at the end
and being held in the mantle of a dying eye

New fiction from Taylor Brown: Excerpt, 'Pride of Eden'

The following is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of Taylor Brown's newest novel, [Pride of Eden](#), out March 17th, 2020. Reprinted with permission from St. Martin's Press.

Lope knelt before the fire engine, rag in hand, polishing the silver platters of the wheels. An old song rose in his throat. Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf, begging his baby not to go, not to be her dog. Lope let the words hum against his lips, unvoiced. There was heat in the blues, he knew, as if the singer's heart were held over the blue hiss of a gas flame.

Lope started to part his lips, to sing to the sleeping engine, when a whistle rose in accompaniment, like the train songs of old. A turbocharged diesel came whining up the drive, a black Ford dually with smokestacks risen over the cab like a pair of chrome horns. The truck skidded to a halt before the firehouse bays, rocking on its wheels, as if summoned here.

Little Anse Caulfield jumped down from the cab, his backcut cowboy heels clacking in the gravel. He was a square-jawed bantam, built like a postage stamp, bowlegged like the old jockey he was. He wore a bush hat, the brim pinned on one side, and the small round eyeglasses of a small-town clerk, his nose smashed broad and flat against his cheeks, as if by God's thumbs. His eyes were iron-gray. In one hand he held a double rifle, like for shooting elephant. He stood before the open bay, squinting at Lope.

"You ain't seen a lion, have you?"

Lope stood from the wheel. He snapped the rag at the end of one long, dark arm. "Lord," he said. "Not again."

*

Her name was Henrietta. She was a golden lioness, born on the grasslands of Africa, sired by a black-maned king of the savannah. She was still a cub when poachers decimated her pride, killing the lions for their teeth and claws and bones. The cubs were rounded up and sold on the black market. She became the pet of an Emirati sheikh, who later sold her to a Miami cocaine lord who enjoyed walking her on a leash amid the topiary beasts of his estate, ribbons of smoke curling from his Cuban cigar.



“Heracles Slaying the Lion.” Roman mosaic, Liria, Spain.

After a team of DEA agents raided the place, she found herself under the care of Anse Caulfield. His high-fence compound on the Georgia coast was a sanctuary for big cats and exotics of various breeds. It was located an hour south of Savannah, where the dark scrawl of the Satilla River passed beneath the old coastal highway—known as the Ocean Highway in the days before the interstate was built. On this two-lane blacktop, laden with tar-snakes, tourists had hurtled south for the beaches of Florida while semis loaded with citrus and pulpwood howled north. Sometimes they’d collided. There had been incredible wrecks, fiery and debris-strewn, like the work of airstrikes.

Now traffic was scarce. Log trucks and dusty sedans rattled past the compound, which was set back under the mossy oaks and pines. Behind the corrugated steel fence, there lived a whole ambush of tigers, many inbred or arthritic, saved from roadside zoos or private menageries or backyard pens. Some surrendered, some seized, some found wandering highways or neighborhood streets. There lived a duo of former circus tigers, a rescued ocelot, and a three-toed sloth once fenced in a family’s backyard jungle gym. A range of smaller big

cats—servals and caracals popular in the exotic pet trade. An elephant that once performed circus handstands, a troop of monkeys, and a lioness.

Anse called the place Little Eden.

No one knew why he kept the property, exactly. His history was vague, rife with rumor and myth. Some people said he'd been with an elite unit in Vietnam—a snake-eater, operating far behind enemy lines. Others said a soldier of fortune in Africa. Some claimed he was a famous jockey who'd fallen one too many times on his head. But Henrietta was his favorite—everyone knew that. He'd built a chain-link enclosure for her, sized like a batting cage for Paul Bunyan, and people said his big dually truck cruised the night roads, rounding up strays to feed her. Others said it was Henrietta herself who stalked the country dark, loosed nightly to feed. Why she would return in the morning, no one knew.

“You reported it yet?” asked Lope.

“What you think I'm doing now?”

Lope got on the radio. The schools would be locked down, the word put out. The county cruisers would begin prowling the backroads along the river, looking for tracks. The firefighters would take their own personal trucks. When he emerged from the radio room, the firemen had paired off into two-man search teams. Anse stood bouncing on his boot heels, grinding his teeth. The odd man out.

“I'll ride with you,” said Lope.

They aimed up the old coastal highway at speed. Lope had one long arm extended, his hand braced against the dashboard.

“This fast, ain't you afraid you could hit her crossing the road?”

Anse was hunched over the wheel, his chin pushed out like a

hood ornament.

“Serve her right, running out on me again.”

Lope eyed the elephant gun rattling on the rack behind their heads.

“Where’s your tranquilizer gun?”

Anse sucked his lips into his mouth, then popped them out.

“Forgot it.”

They passed the old zombie neighborhoods built just before the market crashed. Satilla Shores, Camden Bluffs, King’s Retreat. Whole housing developments killed mid-construction, abandoned when the housing bubble burst. Their wrought iron gates stood twisted with vines, their guard shacks dusty and overgrown, vacant but for snakes and possums and the odd hitchhiker needing shelter for the night. Their empty streets snaked through the pines, curling into cul-de-sacs, skating along bare river frontage. They turned in to one called Plantation Pointe, the sign weedy and discolored. The community was neatly paved, with greening curbs and sidewalks, periodic fire hydrants standing before overgrown lots. There were four or five houses built, pre-recession dreams that petered out. They were empty, their windows shining dumbly in the morning sun, their pipes dry, their circuits dead. Squatters had been found in some of them, vagrant families with their old vans or station wagons parked in the garages, the flotsam of Dumpsters and thrift stores strapped to the vehicles’ roofs. The vagrants cooked only at night, in fireplaces of brick or stone, like people of another age. They kept the curtains drawn.

The dually rolled through the neighborhood, the tires crackling around empty cul-de-sacs. The windows were up. Lope had his ballcap turned backward to press his face closer to the glass, scanning for a flash of golden fur in the trees. “How’d she get loose?”

Anse frowned. "Same's last time."

"And how was that, exactly? I never got it straight."

Anse chewed on his bottom lip. "Look," he said, pointing over the wheel. "A kill."

*

They stood in the overgrown yard. It was a whitetail doe, or used to be. It had been torn inside out, the guts strung through the grass. The rib cage was visible, clutching an eaten heart.

"Lord," said Lope. "You been starving that thing or something?"

Anse spat beneath his bush hat and looked up. A white clot bubbled in the grass. "She's born for this. What do you expect?"

Lope looked out at the tree line. Fragments of the Satilla River shone through the trunks and vines and moss. The lioness must have stalked the doe from the woods, bursting forth to catch her across this man-made veld. Anse had the elephant gun cradled against his chest, still staring at the mess in the yard. "Used to be lions all across this country, hunting three-toed horses and ground sloths, woolly mammoths."

"You mean saber-toothed tigers?"

"They ain't tigers. They're saber cats. Smilodons. Then you had the American lion, too—Panthera leo atrox—four foot tall at the shoulder. Them cats owned the night. 'Course they disappeared at the same time as the rest of the megafauna, ten thousand years ago."

Lope shivered. "Thank the Lord," he said.

Anse's upper lip curled in sneer. "They would of ate your Lord

off his cross and shat him out in the woods.”

Lope stiffened. He thought of the hymns sung in the small whitewashed church of his youth, where his father, a deacon, had often preached on Sundays, his face bright with sweat. Songs of chariots and lion dens and flying away home. He looked at Anse. “Not Daniel they didn’t. ‘God hath sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths.’”

Anse smiled at the killed deer. “Hath he now?”

Lope could remember his first structure fire more clearly than his first kiss, than his first fumbblings for buttons and zippers in the dark of movie theaters and backseats. The stable fire peeled back the darkness of the world, so bright it seared him.

He was ten at the time. He’d already developed a fascination with fire. Under his bed, he kept a cardboard box filled with cigarette lighters he’d collected. He had a vintage Zippo, a butane jet lighter that hissed like a miniature blowtorch, even a stormproof trench lighter made from an antique bullet casing. He would sit cross-legged on his bed and thumb the wheel of a Zippo or Bic, relishing the secret fire in the house. Sometimes, after school, he would erect small temples of kindling and tinder in the backyard, then set them alight, watching rapt at the transformation—the twist and glow of their dying architecture, the chemical brightness.

The day of the fire, he followed a black pillar of smoke home from school, weaving down the shoulder of the road on his BMX bike as the fire engines roared past. His heart raced faster and faster as he realized what was burning.

The stables where his father worked.

The man had grown up on one of the sea islands, riding bareback on marsh ponies while other children were still hopping around on hobbyhorses. A hard man among his family,

but strangely tender with animals. He spoke to horses in Gullah—a tongue Lope never heard him use among men. His loose-jointed body seemed built for horseback, his seat and shoulders bobbing in time to their trots. With his long limbs, he could trick-ride with gusto, swinging low from the saddle like an Apache or standing high atop their spines, his arms spread like wings. He worked as the barn manager and groom for a local equine community.

Lope straddled his bicycle before the blaze, his face licked with firelight. Antlers of flame roared from every window, like the blazing crown of a demon, and the smoke looked thick enough to climb. An evil hiss pervaded the scene, pierced now and again by the scream of a frightened animal. Only later did Lope learn that his father had been inside trying to save the last of the horses when the roof beams collapsed.

Ten years old, Lope could not help but feel there was some connection, that his secret fascination had sparked this awful happening. His secret desires or jealousies. So many times, he'd wrapped his arms around himself and wished for the gentle touch and cooing voice his father gave only to his horses—never his son. So many times, Lope had huddled over his yard-built temples and pyres, watching them burn.

Back at Anse's truck, Lope called his wife. He told her to stay inside with the baby until she heard from him.

"Larell Pope," she said, using his full name. "I got a cut-and-color at ten. One of my best clients. I'm not canceling on her because some zoo animal is on the loose. I already have a girl coming to watch Lavonne."

Lope turned toward the truck, gripping the side mirror. "Please," he said.

"That new dryer ain't going to pay itself off, Larell."

"It'll get paid."

Lope could sense Anse waiting behind him, his boot heel grinding into the pavement. "Just cancel it," he said, hanging up.

When he turned around, the old man was sliding a giant, double-barreled pistol into a holster slung under one arm. The gun looked like something the captain of a pirate ship would carry, with twin rabbit-ear hammers and double triggers.

"The hell is that thing?"

"Howdah pistol," said Anse.

"Howdah?"

"An elephant carriage. Back in the colonial days, hunters carried these pistols on shikars—tiger hunts—in case a pissed-off tiger tried to climb the elephant they were riding."

Lope swallowed. "Hell," he said.

The old man took the double rifle from the backseat and held it out. "Can you shoot?"

Lope looked at the old safari gun. The twin barrels were huge, the stock scarred from years in hard country. He sniffed. "I can shoot," he said.



Brown, Taylor. [Pride of Eden](#) (St. Martin's, 2020).

Look for the novel on March 17th wherever books are sold. It is also Wrath-Bearing Tree's giveaway book for the month—a comment anywhere on the site enters you to win.

An excerpt from Brown's novel [Gods of Howl Mountain](#) as well as [an interview with Taylor](#) appeared in the February 2018 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree.

New Fiction from Robert Alderman: "Shaved"

This is how the fight happened: earlier that morning, while waiting on reveille to bugle from the loudspeakers across the blacktop, Harvey forced it on the new kid, Private Gilmore, as the rest of us watched, some gruff comment about his curly, black ponytail—the barbers hadn't shaved him yet. Only two days into OSUT, Ft. Benning's one-stop infantry shop, and the poor kid couldn't catch a break. I remember shaking my head as Harvey yelled out to all the knuckleheads huddled there in formation, "What the hell's this faggot thinking enlisting without a haircut?" And right along with every other shivering private, he laughed and laughed.

Gilmore had arrived late the night before from Hortons Bay, up in Michigan, and right from the start of that cold January morning, Harvey Coates had it out for him.

"Bet that bitch has some nice pussy!" Harvey slapped his battle buddy, Wilkins, on the arm. "Hey, you think the Army issues jungle-green tampons?"

Gilmore muttered, "Shut the fuck up."

Just what Harvey wanted. That Alabama redneck wasn't exactly looking for a fair fight. He just needed a quick release, all pent-up from the barracks. "Boy better not mind me tugging on that cute little ponytail tonight," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "'cause he's gettin' *fucked* up."

And just then, Drill Sergeant Malone emerged from HQ and snapped the entire column to attention, stomping into the asphalt with the heel of his polished black boot. Two other drill sergeants followed close behind. When Malone spotted Gilmore, he let out a low whistle, advancing upon him slowly. "Well, ain't you just the battalion beauty queen!"

Gilmore's eyes glanced at Malone as he approached.

"Why your eyes flickering at me, private? You see something you like?" Then the drill sergeant leaned in to Gilmore's left ear. "Oh, I think so, battle. I think this joker does see something he likes." Malone's voice got really low, then—I could only hear him because I was nearby. "Hey, private. Maybe, we can work something out, you and me. Maybe, I'll slip in the barracks tonight, when everybody's sleeping," he whispered. "Maybe I'll let you touch it. You'd like that, wouldn't you, private?"

Sweating bullets, Gilmore said, "Drill sergeant, no, drill sergeant!"

"You don't like my cock, private? What's wrong with it?" Malone's voice got louder and louder until he was screaming. "Why wouldn't you want it in the palm of your hand? You think it's ugly, private? Not big enough like you're used to?"

That poor bastard didn't know what to say. "No, I—uh, yes, drill sergeant?"

Malone threw his campaign hat at the ground and yelled down the rest of the line, "Hey, Bravo Company! Listen up!" Malone checked the kid's name tag. "Private Gilmore here asked me to slip in the barracks tonight so he can rub my dick purple. That the kind of battle buddy ya'll want in this Army? A special kind of ground pounder? Or is this joker just the typical slack-jawed fuck-face that makes up this training cycle?" He waited as the wind blew. "Answer me, faggots!"

Within five minutes, the drill sergeants forced Gilmore to wear his hair down around his shoulders. They dressed him up in a flamingo-striped civvy polo and then mix-matched it with a pair of regulation BDU bottoms. And that was just the beginning. By the end, Gilmore was bear crawling up and down the hallway, with his ass up in the air, yelling out, "I want a big, gay Viking to ride me! I want a big, gay Viking to ride me!" Their fun lasted over an hour, turning Gilmore into a rock star, a company legend.

I didn't get to see it all. And honestly, I'm glad I didn't. Although my hair was a lot shorter than Gilmore's and I'd cut it before heading to Georgia, it stuck out like a thick mane even by the laxest military standards. That was the thing. You didn't want to be different from anybody else. And mine was just long enough to be different—ten minutes before that, while headed to the latrine for a shit, I'd seen Harvey smirking and pointing at me with Wilkins, who pretended to toss his hair like some Vidal Sassoon model. That's probably why I kept so close to the Michigan kid. It was pack animal mentality: I knew they'd go after the longest hair first.

*

Gilmore finally caught up to me a few hours later. "Lookit," he mumbled with that Michigan accent. He nodded down the hallway at this other recruit who'd gotten singled out by the drill sergeants. "Elliott's got the mannequin." Probably out of his instinct to survive—by finding someone lower on the totem pole than he was in that moment—Gilmore'd pointed out another company pretender, Tommy Elliott, who'd already skipped PT for sick-call three times in a row. Well, now they had that fat fuck sliding his duffel bags along the cold vinyl flooring with this ridiculous dummy-soldier slung across his back. A traditional hawes carry.

Officially, the dummy was known as Private Emanuel Ken—the drill sergeants always called him out during roll-call—but

they told us he liked to go by "Manny" on the block. The top-half of a faded CPR dummy from the 70's, the mannequin had been dressed up in old BDU's to look like one of us. They'd built the lower half of his body by stuffing flimsy pillows into the leggings of an Army uniform strapped to the dummy's waist, using olive-green utility rope and a spare pistol belt. A camouflaged patrol cap topped off his head. One of the supply sergeants joked that they packed half a sand bag in his crotch to help Malone pick him apart from the rest of us.

"Private Ken!" Malone would yell across the barracks at the dummy, which was propped up against the wall to make him stand. "Sound off with your name, Manny Ken!" The drill sergeant charged past us right across the bay as if he were going to hit him. "Why don't you ever sound the hell off?" Sometimes Malone yelled so loud at him, Manny's legs would cave-in at the knees like a raptor, his entire body deflating under the drill sergeant's shadow. "Since Private Ken ain't enthusiastic today like the rest a-you dickheads, I'll just have to make the whole company push!" And so, another smoke session would begin.



Wikipedia. "Drill Instructor at the Officer Candidate School."

But the mannequin wasn't just an excuse to regularly fuck us. The drill sergeants kept their eyes open for unattended TA-50. They said we were accountable for every last piece of our issued gear, so to hammer that home, when a private left a Kevlar at the water cooler and turned his back to crack a joke with his buddy, they'd swoop in, and God help you if Malone got his hands on your sensitive equipment before you did. It could be taken that quick.

The punishment was always the same: Private Manny Ken. You'd get 24 hours of light duty honing your fireman's carry, that familiar dummy weighing across the length of your back, that

sandbag pressing into it hard. Made a long day even longer. I remember Malone crooning over me the one time I earned it, "That's good training, private!" hands on his hips like a proud parent. "Damn fine training." The mannequin was heavy against my body, and a layer of sweat had started to form, but even so, I pulled it tighter.

*

That afternoon, Malone marched our entire company to the PX, the Walmart of the Army. We'd get to buy phone cards there, and buzz cuts. As our feet loped along, out of step and undisciplined, the pine trees loomed along the road like an old frontier fort's paling. The January wind had died somewhat. Then the PX came into view—a low brick building with the words *Post Exchange* in thick, bold lettering. Our phone privileges lay inside. A gang of drill sergeants stood on the street corner across from there, shooting the shit, and after taking one good look at our marching column, they shook their heads.

Malone greeted them. "When I get these jokers down-range next week, ya'll gonna be happier than fags at a hot dog stand!"

"You sure right about that," one of the drill sergeants shouted back.

"It's just too easy, battle—too easy!" Malone pulled his belt up a little higher as he passed them on by and grinned.

The entire cluster of campaign hats doubled over, and they began talking fast to each other, just low enough so that we couldn't hear them. I swear, even though they were laughing the entire time, they glared at us like a pack of hungry wolves tethered by invisible leashes, growling through rabid teeth.

To avoid mixing us with the rush of Army wives and old retirees, Malone filed the company into the PX through a side

entrance, warning us: "You will all shut the fuck up and act respectful inside, is that understood? And you'd better not be cat-callin' any teenage girls or officers' wives. If I see or hear any of that shit, it's gonna be a long fucking night, privates—a *long* fucking night! I don't give a flying titty if you've got a PT test tomorrow. I will smoke you retarded, trackin'?"

"Drill sergeant, yes, drill sergeant!"

"All your fancy handbags are locked up in storage, so the Army's gonna give you a monetary advance." The drill sergeant pulled out a stack of what looked like black debit cards from his pocket. "Each of you gets a 200-dollar money card. That'll get ya'll through reception until them first paychecks hit at the end of the month. Since Mother Army don't put out nothin' for free if she ain't gettin' something back, your earnings statement will show this amount deducted."

Good ol' Mother Army.

Shops lined the exchange's main corridor inside—a women's salon, vitamin store, uniform tailor, travel rep office, food court, and barber shop. The main department store had its own double-wide entrance, flagged with shoplifting detectors. After a quick glance inside, I could see designer clothing racks, a shoe department, grocery aisles, shelves lined with Harlequin romance novels, and even a big sign for home decorating and gardening. Everything a man needed to get by.

Malone snaked us around the entrance of the barber shop in long, orderly rectangles, packing us in elbow-to-elbow and nut-to-butt. When a few of us caught glimpses of the younger wives or the older daughters moving past, we kind of puffed up and all, being that we were dressed for the first time in our Army uniforms. "Move aside for them shoppers, privates. Eyes front. Mouths shut." His inside voice was considerably lower than the one he used on the blacktop. The drill sergeant

pointed at the main department store. "When ya'll finished getting a haircut, head straight to them workers up front and buy a shaving kit." He hesitated, then rolled his eyes. "You can get phone cards, too."

"Holy shit," Elliott cried.

"We're really getting phone cards!" Gilmore said.

Our first chance to call back home. A collective sigh issued from the entire company as we grinned with excitement—all in agreement, for once.

Suddenly, Malone was up in Elliott and Gilmore's face, whispering loud enough so we could all hear: "Have you two dirty dick-beaters lost your damn mind? If you two don't shut the fuck up this instant, I'm gonna stick my foot up both your asses and wear you around like a pair of autistic flip-flops!" The drill sergeant looked the rest of us up and down, watching us squirm like kindergartners about to start recess as a pair of grannies shuffled by. He nodded his campaign hat at them politely. "Afternoon, ladies," which made them blush. When they were far enough away, he added, "And *no fucking candy*, privates. It's contraband. Makes your dick small."

The first recruits rushed into the barber shop as soon as Malone gave the word, and the old men inside directed them to the row of black leather chairs on the righthand wall, reserving the left side for non-recruits. This portly grandma wearing thick glasses waved me over after ten minutes of waiting. She was the only lady barber. "Get over here, son." My turn to get shaved and soldiered, I guessed.

I sat down and said, "A number one on the sides and a taper near the top—"

"Boy, you gettin' a monkey cut!" She palmed my head with her hand and flicked the razor on. It buzzed like a wasp as she brought it close to my ears. I felt it press against my

sideburn and shave up my temple, a rush of cool air on my open skin. Clumps of hair didn't fall like I thought they would—the razor had this vacuuming device built into it that sucked the loose debris down a thick tube. As she mowed up and down the back of my neck and head, the barber yelled over the razor's noise, "You got a lotta moles on your head, boy." I watched her in the mirror as she ran her tongue across the front of her teeth. "That's a sign of good luck."

I felt special. Then I felt a sharp pain.

"Oh. Sorry about that." She'd cut one of my lucky moles. A thin stream of blood ran down the smooth grooves on my scalp. "Just nicked you some. You'll be all right." She only slowed her handiwork to slop a hot, dripping wash cloth on my skin, rubbing it over the wound. "It'll heal." When she'd finished my hair, the barber spun me around to give me a good look in the mirror, holding a smaller one up behind me so I could see the back of my head's reflection.

I looked like a leukemia patient. My eyebrows were longer than what was left atop my head. She might as well have shaved them off, too! If there was one thing I'd taken pride in as a civilian, it'd been my thick, dirty blonde hair, all styled and gelled. Ma always said I'd never go bald. Apparently, a sliver of Cherokee blood ran in her family.

The barber slapped a cotton ball against the cut and fastened it down with white electric tape. "That's the only band aid I got, kid. Clean it tonight in the shower."

Next, I had to get my Private E-2 rank sewn on my uniform at the tailor shop. Because I was a university drop-out with over thirty college credits, the Army decided to promote me to a higher starting rank than the kids out of high school, but that meant I needed the E-2 patch sewn onto my BDU collars and my field patrol cap. This Korean lady behind the shop counter steadily worked at the needle and thread with her lined and

thin hands. She seemed to know that I was in a hurry, but took her sweet-assed time. There was a moment, when she was about halfway done with her delicate work, that the patch just hung there flimsy off my uniform as I watched. A single chevron rested on it. It made me wonder about the Asian ladies—swarms of them worked as grocery baggers, wives, and tailors on most military installations. They came from countries our soldiers had conquered. Now they labored to provide.

When she finished, I paid her the four-dollar fee and moved on to the main department store to get my shaving kit and phone cards, like Malone ordered.

Gilmore—still rubbing at his own landscaped head—nudged my arm when we'd finished shopping and formed back up outside. "Bro, you might wanna get back in there and buy some Selsun Blue," he said. "Your head's ate up with mad dandruff."

Elliott laughed. "He's right! Red patches all over your scalp."

"Sons of bitches," I muttered. That was the other reason I loved having a thick head of hair—they hid my skin flakes.

But there wasn't any time for that. Malone had returned. "Fall in!" The company formed up too slowly, and it made our drill sergeant grit his teeth. But something kept his anger in check. "Hurry up," he shouted at a few stragglers. When the company was ready, he looked us over. "I tell you what," Malone said, before ordering *column-right march*. "A company of fresh-bald privates'll make even the most grizzled old first sergeant weep. Goddamn beautiful."

*

"Phone calls!" Malone came storming into the bay. "You shit-birds get fifteen minutes, the whole damn company!"

Our entire bay of recruits dropped what they were doing and

scrambled for their phone cards, stashed away in wallets and duffle bags, even their shaving kits. We pressed out the bay doors to a series of metal booths with black pay phones under white artificial lights. We still wanted our mothers to save us. Each recruit jockeyed for position. "Every man gets three minutes!" Malone yelled. "That includes dialing time." Then our fearless leader signaled the phone calls to begin, even as privates were already dialing home.

I was about halfway back in the third line. Gilmore stood in front of me, his face impatient and eager. "It's pot roast night," he said aloud to everybody and nobody. "Momma makes the best damn pot roast—I hope to God I can smell it."

Elliott was huddled against his booth one line over, trying to hide the fact that he was crying. Some of the more respectful privates just turned away, pretending not to notice. It seemed the right thing to do. But a few made sure to rub it in good.

"Be gentle with her," Harvey was saying to Wilkins. "She just needs a little something in the bay tonight to make her feel better."

I hated that motherfucker.

"Twelve minutes!" Malone shouted.

Gilmore was up. I've never seen someone dial a phone number so fast. You woulda swore he called 911. That got me thinking about who I'd call on my turn so I could dial it just as quick. My girl needed a phone call, for sure, but I hadn't told my parents that I'd enlisted yet. They still thought I was back home.

"Nine minutes!"

Gilmore's back got animated. He was talking too low for me to hear, but I just knew he'd gotten his mom on the phone. Whatever he was saying sounded really happy. Family does that

for you. No matter how many times you hurt each other, you can always push all that aside. Just be there for each other. I rubbed at the palm of my hand. The artificial lights hummed above, and for the first time, it dawned on me how quiet Ft. Benning was. Above the still pine trees and the freshly mowed grass, the American flag, towering above our complex and wider than several cars, hung limp from its metal post.

“Hurry, man. Time’s up.”

Gilmore turned and gave me a dirty look.

“Six minutes!”

“You’re done, Michigan.” I inched forward to the booth, trying to be as close to that damn phone as possible so I could get a dialing head start.

“Back the fuck up,” he mouthed to me, pissed. “I’m talking to my momma!”

“We all gotta momma.” I flashed him my phone card, as if to reason.

Gilmore shook his head and turned back into the booth. “I gotta go,” he said. “Tell Charley and Liz I miss and love them. You need any money, mom? I’m gonna send you my first check.” He listened for a few seconds. “Nah, I’ll be fine. It’s going straight into your account. Just keep your eyes open for it soon—I know, I know. But I gotta go.” He let out a deep breath. “Love you, too.”

I heard her tell him, “My big strong young man! I’m so proud of you.”

Then I pounced on that damn phone. Gilmore started throwing sass my way, but I was too busy reading the dang instructions on the phone card. It took me over a minute just to get through to the other side.

And then she picked up.

“Hello?” Her voice sharp and suspicious—it was after eight o’clock. I could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen sink.

“Ma.”

The sink faucet got quieter. “Danny? Is that you? Why are you calling from a strange number? You’re lucky I didn’t hang up.”

“Look Ma, I can’t talk long. There’s a line behind me.”

“A line? Did you drop your phone and break it again?”

“No, Ma. I didn’t drop it—”

“Well, no wonder you didn’t answer your phone last night. I tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. We can meet tomorrow at the mall and I can get you a new one—”

“Ma, *listen*. I’m a hundred miles away from there. Is Dad around?”

“You didn’t go on another one of those EMD road trips, did you?”

“It’s E-D-M, Ma: electronic dance music.”

“Oh, God, you’re at a pay phone and you’ve lost all your money again! Last time you lost your wallet I had to wire money into your account just to—”

“Jeez, it’s not *that*. I’ve got all my money, for cryin’ out loud!” My grip squeezed the edge of the phone booth. “I joined the Army.”

It sounded like a glass casserole dish struck the sides of her stainless-steel kitchen sink. “You did *what*?”

“They sent me to Ft. Benning.” I wrapped my finger around the

telephone cord. "Same as Dad." As I waited for her answer, I noticed that the metal phone booth had a clean look to it, like it had been wiped down recently by recruits that looked too bored when Malone waltzed by. Those little smear marks you always see after.

It reminded me of this one time, back in high school, when my mother had called my little brother into the driveway to help Dad carry this heavy couch she had ordered from La-Z-Boy. She came into my bedroom right before and told me to Windex the front bay window, so I took the paper towels and went into the living room like I was told, spraying that blue shit all over the glass panes. Wiping and wiping at them. When I started working the double-hung on each side, I saw my Dad and brother out there, struggling to heave that big-assed piece of furniture up the sidewalk and through the front door. Even though he was in his late fifties, Dad kept up his old PT routine, hitting the gym pretty regularly. My brother sometimes lifted weights with him, too. Ma stood outside watching them, hands on her hips, the three of them out there working. I guess I really never liked the gym anyways. As I finished my chore, I went to set the Windex bottle on the dining room table, but just then, Ma came inside and took it from me, tucking it into the shadows of a kitchen cabinet as I watched.

"Three minutes!"

"Look, I gotta go. We only get a few minutes to call."

"But—wait, Danny! When did you—? What does this mean?"

"Hey, get off, rawhide. I need my phone call, too." Wilkins behind me.

I raised my elbow at him to fuck off and give me another minute. "It means—" I uncoiled my finger from the cord. "It just means I ain't got no choice, Ma."

*

Later that night, Harvey finally hit him. It was about a minute or two into personal hygiene. Gilmore had walked up to his own bed and laid his uniforms on top of it, and as he adjusted the bags and tried to figure out how he'd store the things—maybe under his bunk, he'd said aloud—and as he talked with Elliott, who was sleeping on the mattress above him with that damned mannequin by his side, about how all the girls in the hick town he was from were easy to sleep with if you knew how to hunt or fish, Harvey rounded the aisle with a small, patriotic wall of eager recruits, their heads gleaming under the LED lights. Every last one of them savaging for a good fight. He locked eyes on poor Gilmore, that scarred eyebrow tightening on his skull as he picked up speed, and leaning forward, swung hard at the Michigan kid's baldness. Harvey's forearm bulged as Gilmore's head snapped back. The poor bastard slid along the polished floor until his body stopped. Gilmore lay there a moment, a puffy redness around his right eye that immediately began swelling. He palmed blindly at the metal bunk rails nearby.

"Get up, muthafucker," Harvey shouted. "You think I was playin'?" He reached down and grabbed Gilmore by the shirt and yanked him up, landing his rough, beefy knuckles on the Michigan boy's nose. Blood slung through the warm barracks air. "I ain't no liar—I said I'd fuck you up this morning, that's what I meant!" Harvey hit him again and Gilmore's skull whipped up and down like a fishing bob in the water. The poor bastard's mouth hung open in shock, his eyes wide with fear.

"Please—stop, Harvey!" he begged, panting heavy. "I don't want to—"

"The fuck you don't." He hit him one more time and Gilmore crumpled to the floor. Then Harvey hocked up a huge wad of spit. The phlegm shot from the roughneck's lips onto the naked scalp at his feet, and then, his face red and his blood

pumping, he stomped on the poor kid's stomach. Gilmore heaved and whimpered and fell again to the floor. After finishing, Harvey shook his head with disgust and barreled through the crowd, storming away to his side of the barracks.

The Michigan boy just laid there, crying.

We all stood around and looked at him for a while, waiting for him to get up. I went over finally and put my hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Someone muttered *man, he fucked him up* and then the crowd began to disperse, in ones and threes, until only me and Elliott stood around him. He helped me pull Gilmore off the ground and we tucked him in bed. I wrapped the sheets over his shivering form. Turning away to my own bunk one aisle over, I stripped off my uniform, piece by piece, covering myself in a thin towel. Then the shower heads in the latrine fired up, and listening to them, like a faraway rain, I drifted through the barracks until I stood underneath one, its hot lines of water tracing my exposed body and face. The thick steam roiled across the checkered tile flooring, and as the other privates lined the showers—saying little—their collective sigh rose above the running water. It came up heavy and joined the showers' mists.