

# Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Memory and Memoir in Afghanistan

The opening of this month's column repeats much of a Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature post I wrote in 2018. The rest updates and expands upon that post by reflecting on two recent Afghanistan memoirs by veterans who served in the same area of Afghanistan as I did in 2008-2009. Reader, read on!

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My tour in Afghanistan as an advisor to the Afghan National Army was not over when I returned to the States in November 2009. Many things have happened since that have extended its reach deep into my post-deployment life. The list includes:

-the infiltration bombing of Camp Chapman in Khost Province in December 2009, a FOB I often visited before leaving Khost in July 2009.

-the awarding of the Medal of Honor to a fellow US Army advisor I knew from our train-up together at Fort Riley.

-a long article in a major weekly profiling the commander of the advisor unit two or it that referenced many people and places I knew well.

-the WikiLeaks release of classified combat reports, several of which recounted by the advisor team I led.

-a visit from Army Criminal Investigation Command (CID) telling me that they had detained a Russian-born jihadist who had attacked us in Khost in June 2009, killing one of the members of my team, who was the gunner in a truck in which I was a passenger. (The last I time I checked, the jihadist was

still in jail in America.)

-a visit from another CID agent doing a background check on one of my linguists who was now translating for an American one-star general—this after emigrating to the United States, serving a tour in our Army, earning an Associate's degree, and gaining his citizenship.

-a visit from two lawyers on Bowe Bergdahl's defense team, because my name figures in the Army investigation report of the severe wounding of one of the soldiers involved in the search for Bergdahl.

-a profile in a major media venue of an Afghan National Army officer whom I knew in Khost who has since emigrated to the United States.

-the chance to offer comments at the dedication of the Chicopee, Massachusetts, War on Terror Monument, a chance that arose because one of the six men honored by name on the Monument had been a member of my advisor team.

-efforts in August 2021 to secure the evacuation from Afghanistan of Afghans with whom I had served, efforts that largely failed but which continue today.

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According to this Statement of Wartime Service, I could wear any one of eight different patches on the right sleeve of my uniform to signify the unit I belonged to while in Afghanistan. Just knowing your chain-of-command, let alone supporting them, was difficult.

Now, within the last two years, I've become aware of memoirs written by two veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Paktika-Paktia-Khost ("2PK" in military-speak) region at the same time I was there. One is by an Army sergeant who was a member of my Embedded Transition Team (ETT) in Khost province: Sergeant Major (retired) Chad Rickard's *Mayhem 337: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Afghanistan*. The other is by an Air Force lieutenant who served on the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Paktia province where I served out the last five months of my tour on a nearby FOB: Lauren Kay Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. Together, Rickard and Johnson superbly describe the two spheres of activity that concerned me most: fighting the Taliban and supporting Afghan governance.

I offered glimpses of my day-to-day activities in Afghanistan in my first blog *15-Month Adventure: Advisor Service in Eastern Afghanistan*. But those blog posts were written in the heat-of-the-moment and suffer from lack of detail and insight on the events I experienced. Further, I seem to lack the instinct—or the courage—for memoir, and I've never since tried to deepen and thicken the narrative of my own deployment or link the many separate episodes into a cohesive whole. Both *Mayhem 337* and *The Fine Art of Camouflage* do that for their authors in ways that bring my own memories rushing back and help me understand them better. Rickard and Johnson recount many events of which I was aware and sometimes those in which I also participated. Each does a great job establishing the overall ambiance of the mission and the physical characteristics of the operating environment. Both authors write perceptively about the factors that made success in Afghanistan difficult (and ultimately doomed it), while conveying a welcome lack of self-righteousness and self-aggrandizement in the face of the challenges we encountered.

Sergeant First Class Rickard (as I knew him then) impressed me from the minute we met in my first week as advisor team chief on Camp Clark in Khost in 2008. A rawboned former college

football player who was now a member of the California National Guard, Rickard exuded competence and a quiet can-do spirit. He was an infantry veteran of two tours in Iraq, and my team lacked both infantry grit and combat experience. We were all willing, but I knew the coming months would be tense. Rickard immediately volunteered for our toughest mission—serving on a much smaller very remote combat outpost on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border—and as the next few months transpired, I learned to ensure he was in the thick of whatever fighting was to be had throughout our sector. It was an unfair burden for Rickard to shoulder, but my thought was that our operations stood little chance of success without his presence. And as *Mayhem 337* recounts, Rickard eagerly embraced these challenges, with little thought at the time of the consequences on him and his family in the years afterwards, which *Mayhem 337* also documents.

Speaking frankly, and perhaps enviously, Rickard had the kind of tour most infantryman could only dream of. Duty on Spera Combat Outpost brought near-daily engagement with the Taliban enemy, and Rickard's account of working alongside Brigade Combat Team soldiers, Special Forces units, and most of all the Afghan National Army are both riveting and highly instructional for any infantryman who might face similar circumstances in the future. Many episodes stand out, but for me most illuminating were accounts of in-battle coordination with Air Force jet pilots and Army attack helicopters, along with Army artillery, to bring American firepower to bear upon wily and determined foes. While in Khost, I often sat by the radio tracking Spera COP battles, feeling mostly helpless and anxious—reports of small Army outposts being overrun elsewhere in Afghanistan were never far from my mind. As I monitored radio reports, I was aware of how crucial air and artillery support were for saving Rickard and his men from death, but *Mayhem 337* reinforces the point that for those in action their lives depended on allies in the sky. But don't take my word for it, here's Rickard's account from his Acknowledgement:

*I want to personally thank each and every pilot and aircrew member who flew in support of combat operations I was involved in throughout my time in Afghanistan. I would not be here today if were not for the daring courage of the pilots who supported our ground combat operations.*

And here's an excerpt illustrating that support in action:

*Soon after the departure of the Kiowa's, two F-15 fighter jets reached our location. The pilots conducted their fighter check-in as soon as they arrived. They let us know their call signs, what planes they flew and what weapons they had available. They also told us how long they could stay and help. This team flew a pair of F-15s; their call-signs were Dude 1-1 and 2-1. Dude 2-1 was actually a female fighter pilot, not a "dude" per se; she operated as the flight lead that night... We confirmed that all US and Afghan forces were within the [infrared] glowing perimeters on the mountaintops. After confirmation we said "Roger Dude 2-1, you are cleared to engage." And engage she did. She dropped a 500 pound [Guided Bomb Unit] and scored a direct hit on that group of enemy fighters...*

Lieutenant Lauren Johnson was Air Force, too, though by her own account anything but a hot-shot fighter pilot. Rather, she served as the "information operations" staff officer on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Paktia province. I make small cameos in *Mayhem 337* (Sergeant Rickard thankfully goes easy on me), and though I'm not in *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, I may well have been in the same meetings as Johnson at many points. Provincial Reconstruction Teams were composed of military and civilian specialists charged with governance and infrastructure projects meant to enhance the "legitimate government of Afghanistan." During my last few months in Afghanistan, I was one FOB over from Johnson and largely involved in much the same business. Specifically, our time in 2PK was marked by the run-up to the 2009 Presidential election. We all worked hard and worried endlessly about

ensuring the elections were safe and fair, even as we strove to let Afghans “take the lead” as a measure of our faith in their capability and independence. That didn’t happen, unfortunately, and the disappointments and vexations associated with the endeavor foreshadowed the complete collapse of western-style Afghan governance in 2021. They also proved personally devastating to Johnson. The projects she was in charge of came to naught, and several experiences destroyed her idealistic attitude toward the overall mission and general faith in the competence and integrity of the military.

Among its other virtues, *The Fine Art of Camouflage* nails descriptions of the FOB, FOB daily life, and the stultifying and claustrophobic nature of staff work within Army headquarters. Johnson ventured off the FOB occasionally, sometimes for good, sometimes for worse, but the majority of her tour was spent in front of a computer generating the same reports she had filed the day before and in meetings with the same people she sat in meetings with every other day of the week. That business was my business, too, to a large extent. As a middle-aged middling rank officer, I did it all as well as I could and understood, kind of, its necessity. For an idealistic junior officer eager to lead troops and make things happen, such existence was spirit-killing. Though I was more senior to Johnson by far, I identified at many points with her recounting of staff-work trials-and-tribulations, and in particular the disconnected experience of trying to serve a Brigade Command Team whose commander—whom I also served—barely knew of her existence. A key episode in *The Fine Art of Camouflage* describes how a project of Johnson’s on which she worked for weeks goes to shit, and how on the nightly radio staff meeting, the Brigade Commander professes to not even knowing about it. For Johnson, being chewed out would have been better than the bemused nonchalance with which the colonel dismisses not just the project’s failure, but its worth and all her hard work:

*The commander admonished the room to do a better job supporting the others and coordinating on missions, and then dismissed me with a brusque, "Lesson learned. These things happen."*

To my mid-ranks career-officer self, I kind of get where the colonel is coming from—he's trying to be nice and not publicly crush a very junior officer—but I also understand how condescending and demoralizing the experience must have felt for Johnson. Johnson also has a larger point to make, about how dysfunctional and uncoordinated was almost everything the military tried to accomplish in Afghanistan:

*...how had the brigade commander been so unaware? The directive had come from brigade in the first place, and the plans had been in my report for a month, all the BUBS and CUBS and SITREPS and daily/bi-daily/weekly updates. As an official brigade tasking, the training had been monitored on ...[the] PRT operations tracker too. I'd worked with the Department of State representative and with Army contacts at each of Paktia's five combat outposts to finalize the attended list. I'd coordinated with pay agents, air transport, security, intelligence, convoy operations, and the mission commanders... the crossed lines of communication were worse than the tangle of network wires winding through my office...*

As the leader of a small element operating in support of the same large brigade, I also often felt marginalized and only intermittently supported. My remote perch led me to observe the internal machinations of the brigade with wry detachment that sometimes flared into frustrated outrage. My own dealings with the brigade commander were also characterized by paternalistic indifference on his part (though in all fairness, an episode toward the end of my tour in Khost rendered a more favorable impression). Along with Johnson, for me it was and is impossible not to think that our own travails mirrored in miniature the uncoordinated and un-sustained American effort throughout and over-time in Afghanistan.

There is much more to be said about each book and both books in tandem. While in some ways the two memoirs are juxtaposed—one a combat narrative by an infantry sergeant, one a story of nation-building staff-work by an Air Force officer with an eye on how tours in Afghanistan were experienced by women—there is also much that connects them. Each book, for example, situates the author's story in the context of their personal and family histories before and after deployment; both works suggest that one reason it takes so long for memoirs to gestate is that their authors need time to measure the reverberations of their actions across the range of their closest social relationships. Also, I appreciate the authors' even-handed depictions of the Afghans with whom they partnered. Neither Rickard nor Johnson had idealistic expectations nor perfect experiences, but neither were they reduced to sputtering contempt by their Afghan partners' lack of military discipline, their potentially suspect loyalty, or their personal habits grounded in off-putting cultural and religious convictions. Finally, I've only touched on how emotionally debilitating their tours were for both Rickard and Johnson in their own long years after deployment.

There is also much more to be said about the overlaps between my own experiences and Rickard and Johnson's descriptions of places, people, and events and my own. For readers interested in my own experience of combat, the 15-Month Adventure post titled "Gun Run" describes a mission in which I too relied on life-saving air support. I describe the staff-work misery I experienced and observed in a Wrath-Bearing Tree story titled "The Brigade Storyboard Artist." Reflecting on the genre of memoir, I've always been hesitant to criticize the "self-writing" of fellow men-and-women in uniform. Every story is important, and who am I to judge?

Here though, I'll say that though I'm sorry that the authors had to live through the hells they experienced, I'm glad Rickard and Johnson have written the books they have. They

will long sit on my bookshelf as narratives that describe in familiar terms an intense period in my own life. Especially since I know (somewhat) both authors, I am happy that they have written such good books and that by their report writing them has helped them make sense of their own time in Afghanistan. Further, the appearance of the two memoirs makes me wonder how two such fine writers came to serve within my ken during my own deployment. It was obviously coincidence, but it seems like fate. The appearance of their memoirs now reminds me that my year in Afghanistan will never really be completely behind me.

Chad Rickard, *Mayhem 337: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Afghanistan*. 2019.

Lauren Kay Johnson, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. MilSpeak Foundation, 2023.

<https://petermolin.wordpress.com/2010/07/17/gun-run/>

<https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/01/fiction-from-peter-molin-the-brigade-storyboard-artist/>

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**New Poetry by Sofia**

# Tiapkina: "To Forget or Not Maybe," "Grasping the Sky," and "Airless Embrace"



THE SILENT SKY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **to forget or not maybe**

to forget or not maybe  
to fight for memory or not  
i'm here i'm she  
lying on my back underneath me  
blue cherries of bruises ten backs  
all pierced by bullets all riddled  
no one seems to cry here this defenseless death is unshared  
with any and all  
i look around at people all around still people these old  
trees outside what a spring so wildly  
blooms and dies with a scream  
i rise from my knees or maybe just  
think that i rise i was a teacher  
what remains of the school now  
walls shrubs suckle blood from the soil  
i taught them to never  
kill people and now  
i'm face to face  
with the killers of children hands and face changed the maples  
turned perfectly crimson too soon  
broke my  
spine and soul i would tell them if i still taught never kill  
anyone  
i rise from my knees call out to god

god i accept everything i  
understand the end of life  
i accept it i am desecrated  
why do you punish me  
with this life  
after death

## **Grasping the Sky**

Inside us: a piece of  
sky, blue and rusty,  
smelling of winter and  
gunpowder.

Who will see us as we crawl, chasing  
the shadows of the clouds?  
She reanimates the land.

The bombs, and bullets, and bodies took  
its breath away and send it straight into cardiac arrest.  
The scars of war are on her palms and tongue,  
but she keeps going because without the land,  
her heart will stop, too.

Land—земля—zemlia: a greenplace, a birthgiver, our bread.  
She puts her hands around it and tries to close off  
the wounds of horror and destruction and  
deathdeathdeathdeath  
that the inhumans opened with their hungry teeth.  
Sometimes, when the blood stops rushing through her ears  
or between her fingers,  
she hears the echo of “brotherly nations,” “local  
misunderstanding,”  
“child actors.”  
The land moans under the weight of  
countless bones.

We carry no

prophecies under our skin.

The silent sky  
floods our mouths.  
Who will hear us climb up  
the lifeless mushrooms?

He rebuilds the house.  
A new foundation in place of his ancestors'  
home built with tears. The missile took  
the walls, but the kitchen table is still  
standing in the middle.

House—будинок—budynok: a warm place, a safehold, our nest.  
He drinks tea at the kitchen table.  
One year anniversary,  
he feels the explosions  
reverberating through his ribs.  
His daughter would have turned three.  
His wife would have put a pot of  
lilacs by her crib.  
He drinks tea at the kitchen table of a murdered house.  
It's hot and bitter, and for a minute, he forgets  
a new future of new houses with  
no one inside.

Everything we wanted  
was in the sound  
of the sky without  
the stench of corpses.  
Who will remember us if  
the task ahead will take a generation?

They reconstruct their homeland.  
Too many questions, too little time: where  
do they fit between now and then;  
how do they embezzle millions yet fight corruption  
as never before; what are dignity and justice and fairness

if the debris of a shelled hospital hide  
the broken pieces of mothers and newborns.

Homeland—Батьківщина—Bat'kivschyna: a free place, a seeing  
glass, our hope.

They won't live to see it without blood and tears  
soaking its black ground. How do they repair machine-gunned  
hearts?

How do they rebuild a cracked-open sky?

They reconstruct their homeland as the bombs  
try to bring them to their knees. Too many  
questions, too little time. But the question,  
"Will we live?" is not one of them.

Millions of hands breaking the chains  
shout the answer louder than  
air raid sirens.

Inside us: a whisper  
of summer, when sunflowers  
grow from the ash.

Who will catch the birds  
pecking out a path between  
the sky and wheat fields?

No one. Our wings hold the glory of freedom.

### **airless embrace**

i miss you like i miss the sky  
cold so painfully blue  
angels must have  
dripped blueberry juice  
from the clouds  
i want to tether myself  
to the sky-whispers  
embrace them bury my  
face into their warmth

but it doesn't make you here  
i stalk the shore scooping  
up birds beaks  
black with blood  
you used your skirt  
to wipe off the  
red from their feathers  
why did you  
let go  
the earth drinks soot  
i'm thirsty for  
the sound of  
your smile  
under the winter sun  
on the shore  
i pick the nightingales  
curl my toes to find  
the damper sand  
the soft homes of crabs below  
i hold the memory  
of your hair  
between my fingers  
i miss you  
until i fly out of  
the soil's arms  
and the sky  
catches me  
in its thousand  
blue hands

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# New Poetry by Steve Gerson: “Our Prayers”



TEETH MUZZLE SPIT / *image by Amalie  
Flynn*

## **Our Prayers**

where are the shields  
/we need/  
to stop the blast  
of bullets Glock  
and AK  
assaults?  
that overwhelm the blue  
in our veins?  
that enter our brains our  
schools the bodies  
of children with unicorn  
backpacks?  
that enter  
our workplaces inundated  
with anger our streets  
with late-night drivebys?  
church service blood spattered  
bibles shredded  
commandments torn  
as if by raptor teeth  
muzzle spit?  
while senators say  
our prayers are with you?

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# New Nonfiction from Michael Gruber: Review of J. Malcolm Garcia's "Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful: Stories from Afghanistan"



## Humanity in Afghanistan

For the average American G.I. who served in Afghanistan, the country was of a different world. Most understood Afghans had relatively little in common with us, its would-be Western custodians. For starters, its population spoke obscure Indo-Iranian languages like Pashto and Dari, which had no share with our West Germanic-based English. It was universally Muslim, which while monotheist, had a variety of practices we found puzzling, or even less charitably, threatening, at least when viewed through the vaguely jingoistic shadow of 9/11. The day-to-day life of Afghans seemed to revolve around the dull monotony of subsistence agriculture, and moved at an unhurried, slow, perhaps even complacent, pace. Their households were multi-generational, with sometimes four or even five generations living under the "roof" of the same *qalat*. Whether in the bazaar or the fields, Afghans seemed to us frozen in amber, living a way of life that we ascribed to ancient times. Our assessment was that they were illiterate, poor, simple, and locked behind barriers of social custom and theology we could never hope to penetrate.

Much of this analysis is clearly retrograde and patronizing, but it was far more motivated by youthful hubris and ignorance than some sort of loitering colonial mindset. The average

American G.I. in Afghanistan was not college educated. The extent of our education on Afghanistan had been delivered in a vulgar *milieu* of VH1, Comedy Central, cable news, and only the most remotely accurate Hollywood renditions. Most of us didn't even own passports. In fact, for many American service members, their deployment was their first time abroad. One's ability to empathize, or to even understand the Afghan way of life, was also limited by the task at-hand, which much of the time was unambiguously dangerous. Life experience and cross-cultural barriers only accentuated this divide. To put it bluntly, as has been true for the membership of all armies throughout history, we were really just kids, and therefore had an appropriately teenage level of understanding. It is hard to assign an "imperialist" mindset to what Robert Kotlowitz terms "adolescent fervor."

Much of what we learned of Afghanistan has therefore come *since* our deployments, as a way to help make sense of what we observed. J. Malcolm Garcia's *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful* is one such continuation of this project, describing the innards of a world many of us only observed from a distance, despite being immersed in it. Garcia is a freelance journalist who appears to have a niche for war-torn or impoverished regions: his website reports he has also worked in Chad, Sierra Leone, and Haiti. The text in question is a collection of short stories that Garcia has compiled from his time in Afghanistan, all of them non-fiction.

As a writer, Garcia seems to be something of a Studs Terkel disciple, and the text is relentless in its centering of Afghans and capturing the *raison d'être* of social history: "history from below," as it's termed. In fact, we learn relatively little of Garcia himself, except for a tender chapter where he adopts and ships home an orphaned cat he names "Whistle." At least, I interpret this to be Garcia, although it may not be, as he refers to the anonymous protagonist only as "the reporter," and I can't tell if this

is Garcia's effort at rhetorical humility or his description of a third party. Elsewhere, the text is mostly page after page of Afghans in their own voice, articulating their own feelings, history, and sentiment.

It seems notable that I cannot recall a similar literary project—one which centers the experience of the average civilian Afghan or Iraqi—sourced from any of our recent foreign entanglements. It is loosely represented in other journalistic media, like occasional pieces one may have encountered in *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic*, but these are news reports, not short stories collected into a single volume. Likewise, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is historical fiction, not documentary non-fiction. Garcia's project seems unique in this regard. To be sure, *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful's* genre—which I classify as oral war history—was pioneered some 40 years ago in Terkel's *The Good War*. But texts like these, especially when written by Americans, have primarily relayed the perspective of war veterans, not civilians in warzones. This underrepresentation of the noncombatant civilian is a tremendous disservice, especially considering the horrific suffering they often endured. That Garcia's text makes this glaringly obvious is perhaps its most important contribution.

The stories shared by Garcia are wide-ranging. "Mother's House," the longest and most compelling in the book, tells of a recovery center in Kabul for narcotics addicts, likely the first of its kind, ran by a woman appropriately nicknamed "Mother." "Feral Children" gives voice to the destitute children of Kabul, who are subject to collecting cans or polishing shoes. Garcia makes observations of Afghan society throughout these stories, noting, for example, the marked contrast these youths have with their Westernized counterparts, whose libertine style of dress and flamboyant mannerisms are nearly indistinguishable from an American teenager in, say, Atlanta or Houston. And while Garcia seems

to gravitate around Kabul, commentary like this—and his occasional bravery in venturing out to rural areas, such as when he is confronted by what appear to be Taliban supporters while at “a graveyard for Arab fighters” in “In Those Days”—speaks to the unfathomable chasm that existed in Afghanistan between Kabul, where the decided minority of families who benefitted from NATO occupation usually resided, and the destitute rural poor, who did not share in those benefits. Garcia attempts to give voice to both, showcasing the country’s complexity and tremendous contradictions—ethnic, moral, economic, social, and otherwise—and how they defined both its people and the war writ-large.

In tandem with the text’s keen insights is the steady drumbeat of this book, which is poverty and relentless suffering. To be sure, the stories are varied and unique, but my sense is they begin to blend. They are stories of human suffering which manifest into clambering, scrabbling, and scavenging; people using what meager resources they have just to survive, whether from the war, disease, or hunger. But the themes become so common and consistent that I felt myself having the reaction ones does when they are exposed to homelessness or panhandling in a major city—“I’m not numb to your suffering, but this appears so ubiquitous that I don’t know how to help you address it, or if I even should, or if I even can.” I felt a sort of self-protective compassion fatigue while reading this text, or worse, that I had become a sadistic voyeur engaging in slum tourism. Perhaps this is Garcia’s intention, or perhaps it speaks to sneaking deficits in my own character as I continue to process my—and our—involvement in that country and our two-decade-long war. Regardless, Garcia has produced here a fine addition to this continued exploration, and gives us an exposure to the humanity of Afghans that we would do well to absorb.

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# New Fiction from Kirsten Eve Beachy: “Soft Target”



*For Sallie.*

By Picture Day in November, Sophie had perfected the downward stab and counting to twenty. She clenched her soft fingers around her rainbow pony pencil, raised her fist high, and then smashed it down on the practice balloons, barely wincing when they popped, scolding when they escaped. The other children rallied to bounce stray balloons back to her desk. She got *thirteen, fourteen* at last, and from there it was an obstacle-free trip to *twenty* with her peers chanting along. She hadn't yet mastered our *Go* protocol for intruders, but neither had a handful of the general education students. However, Caleb could shout *Go* instantly and often got to the Rubber Man first, tackling its knees to disable the joints. Jazzmyn was the most formidable of all the students; when the Rubber Man dropped from the ceiling, she'd grab my scissors on the way and disembowel it in two slashes.

Picture Day is tense for second-graders, with the boys trussed up in buttoned shirts, the girls eyeing each other's frilly dresses, and the lunch cart loaded with chocolate pudding and meatballs with marinara. Caleb endlessly adjusted his bowtie and Jazzmyn fretted over a smudge on her yellow pantsuit. But Sophie was thrilled with her rustling crinoline and the biggest blue bow that anyone had ever seen. When they lined up for their scheduled foray to the library for pictures, she sashayed to the end of the line, tossing her cascade of red curls and humming softly, off-key. Todd was the only one left

at his desk, digging out torn pages and broken pencils—looking for one of the pocket treasures I pretended not to notice, his tiny plastic dinosaurs. Sophie called out, “Todd, we go now!” and jabbed her finger at the spot in line behind her, right beneath our Superstar of the Week bulletin board where a large-as-life photo of Sophie scowled at flashcards, surrounded by an array of exploding stars.

Todd pretended not to hear her. They used to be the best of friends, building tiny dinosaur colonies in the sandbox and sharing their turns to feed our guinea pig, but then his mother met Sophie at the Food Culture Festival last week, and he had ignored her ever since.

“Come on, Todd!”

He turned from his desk at last and jostled into the line in front of Sophie, muttering something that I didn’t catch.

It must have been bad, because Jazzmyn decked him. Fist to his cheekbone, she sprawled him right out on the floor, then loomed over him with her fists on her hips, her face resplendent with fury. “We don’t use that word in this class,” she shouted. “We don’t use that word ever!”

“Jazzmyn!” I swooped in to inspect the damage. No nosebleed, and his eye was intact.

Jazzmyn burst into tears when she saw my expression, then collected herself enough to run to the sink and wet a paper towel for Todd’s swelling face. Ms. Jackson, my morning aide, logged into our classroom portal to open an incident ticket.

By this time, Sophie had flung herself to the floor beside him in a swirl of yellow and white skirts. “Todd, you okay? You okay?”

Todd finally caught enough breath to begin howling.

“He’ll be fine,” I told her. “Go with Ms. Jackson so I can

take care of him.”

Ms. Jackson gathered up Sophie and guided the children down to the library for the scheduled pictures, and then I buzzed the office for security clearance to walk Todd to the nurse. He still whimpered and clutched the towel to his eye. Jazzmyn came, too—she’d be wanted at the principal’s office.

We escorted Todd to the clinic, and then I steered her toward the main office. She stopped me outside Melkan’s door with a hand on my sleeve. “I had to do it,” she said between sobbing breaths, and then leaned in to whisper, “He called Sophie a *tard*.”

That word, in all its forms, is banned in my classroom.

“Jazzie,” I said. “You can’t hit another student, ever. Not even when they say something horrible. It’s your job to protect each other.”

Jazzmyn nodded once, quickly, her lips pressed together. My policy is to not have favorites, but I loved Jazzmyn for the meticulous care she took of everything: wiping the crumbs from her bento boxes with a paper towel, coloring every millimeter of the day’s vocabulary coloring page with crayons—even the bubble letters and the background spaces—and persisting with practice drills until her form was perfect.

“Will they call the cops?” she asked, almost keeping the quaver out of her voice.

“No.” She may be Black, but she’s only seven years old.

“Will I get suspended?”

If Todd’s mother raised hell, Jazzmyn could get expelled, but I didn’t tell her that. “Let me talk to Mr. Melkan first,” I said.

“If I get suspended,” said Jazzmyn, “I will never get into

Wellesley.”

Melkan buzzed me in then, so I was spared the need to answer. I entered his lair while Jazzmyn perched in the center of a chair in the reception area, fists tucked together in her lap.

Melkan liked to carry gallon-sized promotional mugs from gas stations. That day he stirred half a dozen scoops of protein powder into his 64 ounces of coffee while I explained the situation.

“She’s out,” he said.

“Please,” I said. “Todd used a slur against Sophie, and Jazzmyn responded instinctively. She won’t do it again, now she knows what she’s capable of. Review the surveillance tape. Her aim was perfect. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We shouldn’t give her the chance to do it again,” said Melkan, but he was already clicking through the surveillance queue, intrigued. The walls of his small office were lined with large-screened monitors, barely leaving room for his collection of ultra-marathon numbers, the plaque declaring Stoney Creek Elementary last year’s Hardened Target Regional Winner, and the AR-15 hanging over his office door.

“Plus, her first quarter grades are off the charts. We need her here next week for standards testing,” I said.

“You need a genius around to offset Sophie Clark. That child can’t even count to ten. You chose her for your class. You worry about the test scores.”

I kept quiet and let him watch the video. He winced when the punch, replayed in slow motion, sent Todd flying in a smooth arc to land on the floor, where he bounced gently—one, two, three times. Melkan looped the video and leaned in closer.

At last he turned back to me. “Her aim is flawless.”

“They’re the best group I’ve had. Jazzmyn is so good—have you looked at the Rubber Man logs? They took him out in 12 seconds last week.”

He looked impressed, then doubtful. “That’s impossible. Just number two pencils?”

“Jazzmyn had my scissors. She punctured all the vital pockets single-handedly.”

“You started second graders on teacher scissors?”

“Just the ones who can handle it, if they want to stay in from recess to work. Just Jazzmyn and Caleb.”

He swiped through the logs, comparing our performance to the other second grade classrooms. We were leagues ahead of the others.

“Sure you aren’t inflating the reports a bit?”

“No, sir. You know it’s automated.”

Melkan leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and nodded to himself. I hated it when he looked thoughtful. Hated it. Something new, something ill-considered, something downright stupid was likely to result. With lots of fanfare.

But he just buzzed the nurse and asked her, “You examined the Lawrence boy?”

“He’s here now, sir.”

“His eye okay?”

“No permanent damage.”

He rang off. “We’re done here, Campbell. Send Jazzmyn in. I’ll talk to her. No recess for the rest of the quarter, but keep training her on the scissors.”

It was much better than I expected.

“But if the Lawrence boy’s mother complains...” he warned.

“I know. But I hope we can avoid a suspension. It would break her heart.”

“We’ll see.”

He actually smiled as he waved me out. I almost felt neutral about him as I left the office and gave Jazzmyn a departing pat on the shoulder, but then I remembered what he said about the test scores, and Sophie.

Sophie, short, round, and wise-eyed, had established herself as the small Mayor of Stoney Creek Elementary by the end of first grade, high-fiving everyone all the way down the hallway with her soft hands. However, she was in danger of becoming a mascot. She’d been pushed out of her class for longer portions of the day as the year went by, and by the end of the year was brought out of the resource room only for feel-good forays into the mainstream classroom. Melkan gave her a nominal placement in my class, but insisted she would do better spending most of second grade “in a more supported environment,” especially given the rigors of the new programming. I argued that there was no better support for her than the examples of her own peers. Her parents agreed, and they had a lawyer.

She became, as I hoped, the heart of our class; she would applaud when we finished with the subtraction workbook activity for the day, and the rest of the class got into the habit, too. They also caught on to her victory dance each time they vanquished the Rubber Man, with lots of stomping and fierce whoops and high-fives. The children competed for the chance to help her with her counting bears and sight words, and sharpened their own reflexes as we drilled again and again

with her, *Danger, Danger, Go!*

Parents, however, were thrown off by Sophie. Inclusion was still new. When we were growing up, the special kids were always kept in a special room, ketchup counted as a vegetable, and anyone could walk right through the front doors of the school.

The week before Picture Day, two mothers took me aside at the Food Culture Festival, each to whisper that her son called Sophie his best friend, but she hadn't realized until just tonight who Sophie was. "I mean, Leroy hadn't said anything about how she was different," said the first, over her Crock-pot of Mac 'n Weenies.

I could see the story writing itself behind Leroy's mother's shining eyes, how her son had befriended a little Downs girl, and wasn't he such a big-hearted hero?

"It's such a good thing for Leroy that Sophie took him under her wing, isn't it? He's too timid for almost eight. She's really helped him to break out of his shell." And it was true. I explained how Sophie coaxed him to scale the peak of the climbing structure in our reinforced play yard. I doubted that Leroy even ranked in Sophie's top five friends, but I was glad she made him feel at home. "She's quite socially advanced," I said.

But Todd's mother, one of the West Coast refugees, reeled me in over her quinoa tabbouleh (labeled free of gluten, genetic modification, dairy, and cruelty) and asked me to encourage her son to play with different children: "It's sweet that she likes him, and I'm glad he doesn't mind playing with a girl, but now I see that she's not the best playmate for him. You know we don't want to stunt his social development while he's adjusting to his new life. He needs strong children he can look up to."

I wound up to give her six different pieces of my mind, but by

the time I had organized and prioritized them, she had already pulled Todd out of the circle of kids gathered around Sophie for an impromptu *Danger, Danger, Go!* drill and was steering him over to Caleb's parents to arrange an advantageous playdate.

Maybe Todd's mom wasn't always like that. I heard she escaped the Siege of San Francisco in a pontoon boat, in the bloody days after the Repeal Riots, telling Todd they were going on a picnic. I heard her husband didn't make it out, and she told Todd they got a divorce. You hear a lot of rumors these days. It's hard to know what's true.

After the Food Culture Festival, Todd stopped playing with Sophie or even high-fiving her. He took the long way around the room to get to his desk each morning. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't say anything.

When I rejoined my class at the library, picture-taking was almost over. The students were making faces at the photographer, well over the initial wariness they have of strangers in the school. We often remind them that people with visitor's badges have been screened for safety, but then we tell them they need to be alert to the behavior of every adult, even the trusted ones, because madness has no method.

Sophie clambered up onto the photographer's stool, but instead of giving her signature crooked-toothed grin for the camera, she just stared. Her face was still bloated from crying.

"Come on down, Sophie," I said, and let her initiate a hug so that I could wrap my arms around her. "Now what is it?"

"Miss Campbell," she snuffled, "Todd okay? Todd hurt bad?" She rubbed her snot-nose on my sweater.

"He'll be okay," I said. "The nurse is taking good care of

him.”

I had her wipe her eyes and nose and convinced her to try one more smile for the photo—then told the photographer we would hold out for the make-up day. When the line of students entered the hallway to our classroom, Sophie waved and took off in the opposite direction, towards the clinic.

“I go see Todd,” she said.

“No, Sophie. You don’t have safety clearance. Time to go back to class.” I took her arm.

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged away from me. I hadn’t seen that look before. Sophie’s first grade teacher had complained to me that she was unmanageable, “a real handful,” a dropper. I’d never had trouble; I got to know Sophie, so I knew what she needed: warnings about transitions, a clear routine, and as much praise as the other children. Sophie had never dropped to the floor to resist my suggestions, but now, watching her stubborn face, I had an inkling of how that might happen.

“Miss Campbell, I really need to go see Todd.” A nine word construction. I’d tell Speech later.

I got clearance for an unscheduled trip down the hall, and Ms. Jackson took the class to Bathroom Access to prepare for lunch.

Sophie greeted the nurse with her usual high-five, then tiptoed to peer around the curtain that divided Todd’s cot from the rest of the room. “Todd, you okay?”

I followed her. Todd was sitting up, holding a cold pack to his eye. He looked at Sophie, opened his mouth, closed it, and then rolled over to face the wall, drawing up his knees in a fetal position. I would talk to him about what he called Sophie later. That wasn’t the Todd I knew. I loved how Todd

chatted all through the morning gathering with Sophie, and giggled over his pocket treasures and armpit farts with her, and how he remembered to check the guinea pig's water every morning—until this week. Avoiding Sophie had made him downright sullen.

Sophie confronted the nurse. "Where's Todd mom? He need his mom."

"Can she come for him?" I asked.

"I left a message. He'll be fine. No lasting damage, but that eye might not be back to normal for awhile."

"Make-up day for photos is Monday."

"His face is going to be a lot of interesting colors by then."

Todd's mom would love that.

"Well, send him back to class if he gets bored," I said. "Or if you need space."

"It's quiet so far. But rumor has it Melkan's bringing in a gator this afternoon. I might need to clear the beds."

"So early in the year? Are the fourth-graders ready?"

"Maybe just a rumor."

Sophie just gazed at Todd's forlorn back. She didn't care about the gator, maybe didn't even know what the Gator Drill was. This is what Sophie cared about: The colony of salvaged pencil stubs in the back of her desk. Being ready to dance when the music started. Salisbury Steak day. Laughing at Todd's fart jokes.

"Time to go, Sophie," I said, and buzzed for clearance to enter the hallway.

She bent over the cot and tucked something orange into the

fold of Todd's pinstriped elbow. "Todd, come back soon."

"He okay," she told me confidently, watching for the green light above the door.

Todd peered around the curtain at her, but she didn't notice.

Jazzmyn returned in time to be kept in from recess, and Caleb opted to stay in for practice. She drew me aside while he practiced switching grips on the teacher scissors, and whispered accusingly, "You said they wouldn't suspend me!"

"I didn't know." Todd's mom must have called at last. "How long?"

"Two whole *days*. Mom was supposed to pick me up right away, but she couldn't because there's no one to watch Grandma, and Mr. Melkan said he was busy this afternoon, and his assistant said she couldn't have me crying in her office all afternoon and they sent me back here. *Without even a safety escort.*"

If I would have had the chance, I would have explained to her how lightly she'd gotten off, and how Mr. Melkan and I were impressed with her work and doing our best for her. She was a rational child, and that could have been the end of it for her, but I didn't have the chance, because the nurse buzzed Todd into our room. Apparently, Mrs. Lawrence could give Melkan an earful about Jazzmyn, but didn't want to pick up her son off schedule.

Jazzmyn had the grace to look embarrassed at his entrance, as did he. Then she shrugged. He made a half-hearted fart sound with his armpit.

"Come on, Todd," said Caleb, hailing him over to my desk.

"Okay," said Todd, and pulled out his newest treasure to show Caleb. "Check this out! An orange pachycephalosaurus!"

Caleb gave an appreciative dinosaur roar, Todd made T-rex hands, Caleb made his own, and they sparred ineffectually with their shortened arms. Then Todd asked, "Whatcha doing in here?"

"We're gonna practice with the teacher scissors." Caleb swiped them from my desk and demonstrated a slash hold. "Ms. Campbell, can Todd do it, too?"

"Why not?" I said. "I think you're ready, Todd." He had made astonishing progress in his few months at our school. This would give him something to feel good about. I would pull him aside later to talk about Sophie. "Now, remember, these stay on my desk at all times, except—"

"I know," said Todd, reaching for them.

"Start with the downward stab," I said. "Just like you do with your number two pencil, but you hold it like this." Caleb helped him adjust his fingers.

Jazzmyn stared at us for a moment, then slouched over to her desk.

"Do you want to help, Jazzie?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to be here," she hissed at me, then put her head down on her desk.

She was still glowering that afternoon after story time, when we took a break to practice Go reflexes, my own innovation on the usual training. In case of an event, I wanted each one to be confident enough to shout "Go!" Jazzmyn is usually the first one to shout "Danger!" when I pull a colored ball out of the practice basket, but she watched stonily as I lifted the green one into sight.

"Danger!" shouted Adam.

“Danger!” chorused a dozen other voices in response. Not Jazzmyn’s.

The children held their breaths, ready.

I threw the green ball to Leroy. “Go!” he shouted, before it even touched his fingers.

“Excellent response time!” I surveyed the class, looking each student in the eyes in turn. “That’s what I want from each one of you. Remember, if you are the one closest to the threat, everyone else will get ready, but they will wait for your signal. We’ll lose precious seconds if you aren’t ready to yell ‘Go!’ Remember Peoria.”

I pulled out a purple ball. “Danger!” they all shouted, then giggled when there was no answering call.

Natasha recovered first. “Danger!”

Most of them hovered over their seats, their hands eager to catch the ball. Sophie, in the front row, was bouncing up and down. I dropped the ball on her desk. Sophie loved to holler a good, clear, “Go!” Still, it took her about five seconds to register that this ball had landed on her desk, to wind up, grab it, thrust it into the air, and shout “Go!”

The other children clapped politely, because they loved Sophie, but we all knew we would have been dead by now in the case of an event.

“I’ll come back to you in a few minutes, Sophie,” I said. “Be ready.”

I turned to the rest of the class. “You’ve seen the news. We all believe that we’ll be the lucky ones, that it can’t happen here. Well, it can. And if bad luck comes our way, it’s up to us to make good luck. Good reflexes make good luck.”

I passed the orange ball to Todd.

Blue to Casey.

Pink to Jazzmyn, who couldn't help but catch it and shout "Go!" Her reflexes are too good to sulk.

I pulled out the yellow one.

"Danger!"

"Danger!"

I slammed it down on Sophie's desk. Her eyes went wide, and after barely a beat, she shouted, "Go!"

The room erupted in cheers. Even Todd joined in. "Go, go, go!" Sophie chanted, for good measure, waving the yellow ball above her head.

"Okay, balls away! That's enough for today." I passed the ball basket. "Check your pencils, and make sure they're sharp. The Rubber Man hasn't dropped today, and you never know when you'll need to be ready."

"Or where he'll fall," added Caleb, testing his pencil point.

"That's right," I said. "He might fall right next to you. We'll be depending on you to shout Go!"

Half a dozen children glanced apprehensively up at the ceiling, then lined up at the pencil sharpener. Jazzmyn stalked to the end of the line. "Miss Campbell?" she snapped, raising her hand.

"Yes?"

"When will we get to have a real intruder?"

"Never, I hope, but if you're prepared, you don't have to be afraid."

"Will they have a gun?" asked Todd.

“They don’t have to. They just have to pose a danger. That’s why you have to look. That’s why you have to agree as a group that they are dangerous.”

“But most of them have guns. All of them I’ve seen on the news,” Todd persisted.

“Why can’t we have guns?” Caleb asked.

“Guns are for grown-ups,” I explained.

“Who decides that?” asked Jazzmyn, resharpening her pencil until the tip gleamed. “Oh, right. Grown-ups.”

“Yeah,” said Todd. “Why can’t we just get rid of guns?”

I said, per my contract: “People want to be able to choose to have their guns, children. It’s what we call a fundamental right.”

Jazzmyn turned from the pencil sharpener to stare at me calmly. “Grown-ups are the real danger. All of them.” She pointed straight at me. “Danger!”

Like a kid in a pool, answering “Polo” to her “Marco”, Caleb sang out a confirmation, “Danger!” and reached into his desk.

The children balanced at the edge of their seats, gripping their school supplies, unsure. I was standing right next to Sophie’s desk. She took it all in, looked at me, almost past me, and then her eyes widened and she shouted with glee, with pure delight, “Go! Go, go, go, go, go!”

And the children swarmed, pencils raised.

It was a gator. It took me far too long to realize that Melkan had deactivated the locks in our classroom door and ushered in a gator behind me. Gators are primeval and scaly and horrible, and they do not belong in a second-grade classroom. There’s a

reason that they're the only large animal approved for child defense drills. No one feels sorry for them. As it twined past my desk and then, when the wave of children broke upon it, scabbled across the carpet in a desperate bid to escape, I just stood and watched. In my defense, they didn't train second-grade teachers for the gator drill at the time. It wasn't expected. By the time I remembered that I should be using my greater body weight to incapacitate its thrashing midsection, the children had neutralized it. It wasn't dead yet, but pinned and winded, and twitching as the children caught the rhythm of the stabbing. Sophie finally found her own sharp stub of a pencil and stood at the periphery, pencil raised, looking for an opening. Jazzmyn darted in and out between the other children, stabbing, testing methodically for weak spots. McKenzie anchored the end of its nose. Caleb, pinning the gator down at the base of the tail, shouted, "Someone go for the eyes! Go deep! Get the teacher scissors!" Todd had already snagged them from my desk and was gouging the gator's flank.

"Get the eyes! Get the eyes!" the other children hollered at Todd, making way at the head. With the lateral thrust we had just practiced at recess, Todd blinded the gator in one eye.

Sophie shrieked and applauded. "Go, Todd! Go, go, go!"

Todd turned, grinning, to see her teetering at the edge of the melee, the only child without something to do, and waved her in. "Get in here, Sophie!" he shouted, and wrapped her fist around the teacher scissors.

"How?"

"Down, like your pencil, right at the eye." The other kids leaned further away from the head. A broad stain of blood was spreading across the carpet, and the gator was barely twitching anymore. "Sophie! Sophie!" shouted the children as she raised the teacher scissors.

Her first blow bounced off the bony socket and tore down the gator's cheek, but she was already raising the scissors and got it square in the eye on the second blow. She kept going.

"Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!"

Eventually it dawned on them that the gator was dead, and they fell easily into the Rubber Man victory dance, stomping and whooping. Sophie flung the scissors up in victory, and the wicked points of them lodged in the ceiling tiles, where they stayed, and she slapped Todd so hard on the back that he stumbled across the gator's body.

The children giggled and shouted, giddy with victory. Everyone high-fived Sophie. Sophie high-fived everyone. But one by one they fell silent, looking at what was left of the gator. Not much, really. "I thought it was bigger," said Caleb. I had, too. It looked shrunken, there in the spreading pool of blood, its scales torn. The only formidable thing about it was the stench of blood and feces. With its clipped claws and the duct-tape muzzle around its jaws, it had never been much of a threat. Hardly six feet long, it couldn't have weighed much more than I did.

"Did it hurt?" asked Todd, finally.

I found it hard to answer.

Jazzmyn said, "It was going to die anyway. It was a nuisance and was going to be culled. My sister is in fifth grade, and she says they give the gators drugs so they don't feel pain." She wiped her bloody hands on the lapels of her yellow jacket. The hems of her pants had soaked up four inches of red, and the rest of the suit was splattered with gore.

Bruce from maintenance buzzed in to clear up the remains, and I ushered the class down the hall to Bathroom Access, where they took turns silently signing in to wash their hands. There was nothing to be done about their Picture Day clothes,

hanging in bloody tatters of khaki and tulle. The nurse came by to apply butterfly strips to the deepest scratches. And then the children gathered around me in the authorized holding area to hear what I had to say about the drill. Our stats: 3:07 from release to probable death, twelve broken pencils, four cuts requiring bandaging, one pencil puncture wound.

For a second there, when Sophie gave the signal, I actually thought—no, I won't say it. It was a foolish thought. The children would never. At least, not to me. What we were doing was a good thing. They knew it. We were giving them a way to protect themselves. A chance to fight back.

When I was sure my voice wouldn't shake, I congratulated them. "Pretty good work. That gator bled out in under three minutes. But you'll have to do better. If it had an AR-15, at least fourteen of you would be dead by now."

They nodded soberly, but in the back Jazzmyn whispered, "My big sister's class finished the Gator Drill in five minutes, and they were best in the school."

I made myself smile then. I would wait until later to remind them that they could have flipped the gator over to quickly access its vitals. "You're right, Jazzie. This class is good. This class is the best. I am going to have that gator made into a purse."

And I did, although there wasn't enough skin left on the gator to make a purse bigger than this little coin clutch. I keep it in my pocket still, and in it, right here, is the stub of a rainbow pony pencil that Sophie gave me the day she was promoted up to the middle school, ecstatic and resplendent in another blue bow.

“For luck, Ms. Campbell,” she said, patting my cheek with one soft, gentle hand.

“We make our own luck, Sophie,” I said. “You of all people should know that.”

You see how sharp it is?

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## **New Fiction from Chris Daly: “The Rothko Report”**



*“My father’s work takes you to the edge of the abyss and invites you to look.” -Son of Rothko*

Dateline South Florida, October, 1962: It was Monday 2:00pm EST when Sister Linus began to slap the living shit out of Louie V. The original offense was, along with Richard L., “jumping like a puppet into line behind the ring-leader”, that would be one Brian B. Except to exist, Brian had done nothing in the new school year. Richard was unpretentious, almost unconscious at times, naturally refined, and not a person even the most obtuse teacher would strike. But Louie was scrawny-strong, head rising on his neck like a bird about to eat something amazingly large; him one could smack, especially when he would not stop laughing. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Today this would be so viral. The nuns were not

always wrong; Louie later went to prison, Richard became a junkie, Brian escaped to the West Coast and a long underground life as a political satirist. The three members of the puppet gang were given notes directing their parents to a meeting on Wednesday.

*Up the coast in D.C. on that same date a bit after 8:00pm EST Secretary All Hail MacGeorge was shown U2 photos of possible missile launch sites on the cold war enemy-client island "ninety miles away", and at midnight he informed Secretary Mac the K, and they decided to let J Fucking K sleep, because he might be needing same.*

Parental or legal guardian conference would not be a big deal, another adolescent pain in the ass. Tuesday after school they were down at the back-to-back paddleball court off Dixie Highway, south end of town, in time for the surprise appearance over by the concrete wall of Louie's father. Not exactly homeless, he lived by the good grace of an east coast Italian American network that did not include the nearby well-kept house of Louie's aunt; from which he was likely on stay-away remittance agreement that he was likely in violation of by showing up in the park. Worse for the gang: in his hand were their packs of cigs taken from their designated concrete cubby-holes, and he was doing a thing all kids hate; keeping them in the dark. Fairly soon they understood that Louie's father would be giving back the herbs, but of course he proceeded to fuck with them. Too bad they couldn't bring him to the schoolhouse meeting, but here's the way that worked: Louie's aunt ran a prosperous mid-size I/A grocery store, and Richard's father was a necktie manager with a wife who kept plastic covers on the living room furniture. From both of those families to the church the money flowed, actual appearance not required; for the Brian family, reverse that.

*In the western-style democratic nation-state capital that morning J F-ing K had been informed of the photos, and later at the meeting with the Macs, the Brother (RFK), the "Birds"*

*and others, options were discussed. Do nothing, as the threat of thermo-n annihilation was already completely and firmly in place, and new spots on the island, though psychologically and politically spooky, were window dressing. Another option: apply boiler-plate diplomatic pressure. Or: back-door a choice to the Bearded Man of Island Truth: split with your angel or we bring T fucking R back to life for San Juan Hill II. Maybe we can without further adieu just do that. Or at least an air-strike on the sites. (This last plea from General LeMay-I, hawk of hawks, always ready to bomb the East Wing and ask questions later – in fact all the joint big birds were doing that thing with their wings.) Finally, there was the Harvard Yard son of a whiskey runner way: set up a blockade, call it a quarantine. Peaceful co-existence as we know it on hold.*

The female parent of Brian got home from her Nurse's Aid night shift Wednesday morning and they went to school. (Da was out pushing a hack.) Brian was fairly quiet, appropriate for a celebrity in reverse, owing to a somewhat screwball-ish exit from parochial school into the public system, out of that into juvie home, then back into the arms of holy mother, all in one family-on-the-skids year; after that a year off for all concerned, and now a lecture was being delivered hard upon the kid's denial, he was about to turn thirteen, how much is he supposed to be able to explain, but they all knew that something was up and so they treated him like Al Capone. Brian later in life learned that both parents had folded in a fair amount of boozing to make it through more or less undetected. Of the three friends, his was the only in-person meeting.

*The flyboys were getting better and ID'd another site on the island that same day. The transgressor-sponsor nation was like the Brian family, with barely three hundred "Little Boys", while the Big Dog had three thousand that they were admitting to, so it was the player with the smaller arsenal who had to issue forth the official denial that any missile sites existed on the proxy island. In J Big Dog K's top desk drawer was a*

*recon photo of something in a clump of palm trees.*

At age twelve members of the criminal syndicate weren't ready for the girls they had begun to notice, except for Richard. He was not loud or dangerous or great looking or especially witty, though like his friends he faked some version of all those things. He'd learned to carry himself in a way that was beyond his age, and had a natural sweet spot for girls that they responded to, including Susan S., queen of the grade level, who had a good personality and was developing nicely. Richard, Susan and Brian hung out briefly, significantly, Thursday after school till Susan was picked up, and Richard and Brian headed home in the other direction. Louie was not present because the aunt clan had him on close watch working at the store while gypsy dad was around. Richard and Brian decided that on Saturday morning they had to get the hell out of town.

**DOOMSDAY UPDATE: OPERATION DOMINIC, JOHNSTON ISLAND, CENTRAL PACIFIC, WAS THE SITE EARLIER IN THE DAY OF AIRDROP TEST CHAMA, (PHOTO OF WHICH IS A ROTHKO); RESULTS WERE "THOROUGHLY SUCCESSFUL" WHILE THE YIELD WAS REPORTED TO BE BELOW THE PREDICTED VALUE.**

The friends did a version of the Three Musketeers sword thing on the playground on Friday afternoon and headed off separately, Louie to the well-stocked Italian American store which had great food that was beyond the Brian family budget. Richard was picked up by his creepy stuck-up mother in their creepy Buick. Richard had learned to communicate succinctly, with a word or slight turn of head. Brian hit the sidewalk feeling that the week had been a seasonal hump and getting over it was an accomplishment. The school, Little Flower, on U.S 1, was too damn small, it got inside you. In the compact perfectly square back half of a duplex mini-compound of the Brian clan he had a place by the bedroom window, fan blowing in his face, to read every forgettable book in the Little Weed mini-library. Maybe he loved Friday more than the weekend it

promised. On this particular one he looked out through the fading light and had a thought: I'm having a thought.

*Up the road the photo-op boys were getting their meeting legs. Affairs of mutually assured destruction are best settled in the heat of the moment, within a few days the first best option was declared to be the thirty-knot ocean-going blockade, though if the other guy was rushed to get in and complete set-up operations, one might later have to deal with hot targets, thank you, Brother LeMay-I.*

Richard's already gone brothers were twelve and fifteen years older, one of the curiosities of that mausoleum house was an untouchable double stack of Playboys on a corner hallway table, which entitled Richard to be unassuming. Brian was more familiar with the world of sidewalks than need be admitted. They were Saturday kids trying to not look like kids on tour down around 1<sup>st</sup> Street in Miami before 9:30 am, having bused from Young Circle in Hollywood; they hit a few elevators, people were starting to look at them, self-appointed cop-types, they escaped across the street to Bayfront Park, where a certain amount of laughter ensued, the natives, the Cubans, the queers, everyone was funny; across the water was Arthur Godfrey Beach on the spit of land known as the Gold Coast. At certain ages one can complete an adventure by 1:30 in the afternoon. They trudged back to their respective homesteads. Richard's house of sophisticated moral relativism had powerful A/C. At his de facto duplex Brian laid down on the terrazzo floor next to his bed where it was cooler. Richard was probably on the phone with Susan S.

**DOOMSDAY RECORD CONTINUED** *In the world of insanely significant meetings beware of what may follow a day when "nothing happens" except the discovery of other sites. Earlier on this particular date ninety vertical miles from a particular faraway atoll there was* **A SECOND SUCCESSFUL OPERATION FISHBOWL EVENT, ESSENTIALLY ABOVE THE ATMOSPHERE, SO**

**NO LUMINOUS FIREBALL WAS FORMED; AT THE MOMENT OF DETONATION OBSERVERS IMAGINED A GREEN AND BLUE CIRCULAR REGION SURROUNDED BY A BLOOD RED RING GONE IN LESS THAN A MINUTE, AND BLUE-GREEN STREAMERS AND PINK STRIATIONS THAT LASTED HALF AN HOUR. *Who knew about* THE DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIMENT, SAME DAY, IN THE IMMEDIATE ATMOSPHERE OF DISTANT SEMIPALATINSK, ABOVE THE FAR STEPPE IN NORTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN?**

Sunday was traditionally the most dangerous day in Brian's life, and more than twice he had been hauled in on the afternoon of the day of too much rest for normal types, and too much exposure for the new generation of under-financed freaks. After casing the church parking lot for cigs, he spent some time over in a half demolished, half interrupted construction area of a certain block where it felt "bombed out" and was interesting to be in. Get out of there, yelled a passing parishioner; Brian interpreted this as a warning from the small gods he'd learned to respect.

*On that holy day up on the porch the Big Dog determined to continue the discussion of the future of the existence of the human race on the high seas where at least there was literary precedence for wit and wile.*

Louie was installed Monday at the front of the line, the rightful place of Brian who was in the middle, and Richard was at the very end; in a barely covert manner they were all laughing because being famous is funny. Louie had a certain extra-nutty look in his over the shoulder eye and on the playground later with the dynamic diction that would later win third place (crowd favorite) in the speech contest, confessed immortal inspiration for a caper; his neighbor across the street was gone for two weeks and Louie had a key to water the plants and turn on the hose in the yard; in this domain was much cool shit, and likely in an old world hiding spot, cash; on Thursday night the whole street would be gone to a big Knights of Columbus event, and yes he would be the obvious suspect, which was the perfect alibi! Louie had missed out on

the weekend adventure, and anyway they had a rep to live up to.

*On this date in the evening J Fucking K made a Big Dog dinner time TV speech revealing that their boats were steaming this way and our boats would be cutting them off because evil hardware will not be tolerated so near the Gold Coast even if it meant putting everything on the line. The TV store crowd chewed on that and it tasted like an opinion the populations of all nations are used to concealing.*

**Same date doomsday check-in: AT 6:10 IN THE PARTICULAR TIME ZONE, TOP OF A VERTICAL ARCHIPELAGO JUST NORTH OF MOST OF THE MODERATE PART OF THE SOVIET, ABOVE CAPE DRY NOSE, ON AN ISLAND OF RED AND BLACK SHALE WITH STEEP CLIFFS FAMOUS AMONG LOONS, A THERMO-NUCLEAR POP QUIZ.**

On Tuesday after school Louie had a fight with Patrick K, a stocky individual normally of no interest to the three immortals. At first it was even but at a certain point Louie's strikes ceased to have effect so he picked up a piece of thin piping and delivered a whack across the shoulders and back, mainly an indication of true craziness. But Patrick was stocky of mind and body and barely blinked, and after that things wound down, and they even shook hands, not that any invitations to join any elite groups would be forthcoming.

*Cargo was in the water and the whole world was chattering. N fucking K the Red Dog sent an unpleasant telegram. The secretaries and the Bootleg Heir continued discussion of the options as the cabinet-level brother played pocket-pool and LeMay-I danced up the wall and along the ceiling. There were further reconnaissance revelations and "states" lined up. Adlai the Intellectual Dog (and bald icon of loss at Brian's) was working the U.N.*

Louie didn't make it to school on Wednesday and Sister Slappy made the mistake of advising stone-faced Richard and Brian to

distance themselves from their friend with the crazy disposition. You'll never learn, she said, and that's when she predicted they would all wind up in the big house, which so nearly came true. Later Brian would not remember any practice ducking under the desk that week. Did the parochial world not get the memo from a fellow-travelling power-earthling who was the first Catholic in that high office? That day Richard and Brian were allowed to hang a bit, and it was noted that it might be OK if the following night's somewhat screwy b&e caper were called off.

*Out on the briny the boats came near the other boats and a holding pattern ensued. It was poop time in the meeting rooms; invade the former gambling and good music mecca and Arthur Godfrey was probably fucked. One more thing, said Mac the data genius of the automotive business who'd been installed in the cabinet to lend horn-rimmed credibility, the incoming vessels with the barely camouflaged decks are shadowed by a sub. Che Fucking G, Island Beard #2, said bring it on; said the yankee didn't know or didn't want to know that they would lose.*

The foolish three, imagining that Thursday was a new day at school, gravitated along the lines of attraction, and so were taken to their assigned punishment places, Louie by the ear, Brian by the sleeve, and Richard, whose clothes, a version of the blue and white, one did not touch, by the little finger, whatever that was supposed to mean. In semi-covert caper-conference at recess it was decided that they would look at stuff but only take that which was irresistible. At an early hour of the night the three holy bums were spotted on the approach by a neighbor and had to veer off from the target house. They screwed around in the paddleball park for a while, waiting for the coast to clear, and then re-scheduled for Saturday daytime when walking around was not as conspicuous.

*At the U.N Adlai the Man of Loss, an intellectual vivant who kept a social apartment on the premises, had big pictures and a pointing device, and the other guy, per a flyer in the*

*original charter, refused to respond to direct or indirect questions. About that time a ship slipped red rover and made a run for the island. All right, they were warned, we know that's not a serious tub, but don't let it happen again or else. We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which we and you have tied the knot, wrote one world leader to another. N Fucking K who had pounded the international table with his shoe, might be cracking but on-site construction continued, and the Bearded One demanded the big pushback if they were invaded, for which eventuality he correctly guessed the BD was in preparation. Someone came into one of the smallest meeting rooms with word that a U2, whose existence the BD denied, had been shot down out of the other motherland's airspace, pilot probably dead. Life at the top can be embarrassing.*

After school that Friday Brian reported to the back of the nun station wagon to be delivered for an hour and a half of weed-pulling originally scheduled for Saturday. He had toyed with the idea of trying to make it on the coming weekend day from the convent straight to the break-in, but nah. Louie was attuned to craziness, Richard was untouchable, but Brian was the slightly and essentially seasoned criminal. When Brian got home he received for his birthday a small money tree to which was attached eight one-dollar bills and one fiver on top. He thought of bringing his wad on the caper and pretending to find it. He didn't exactly know why, the whole thing did not bear a lot of thinking, but he was feeling lucky.

*Brother R Fucking K met secretly with one of the opposition's Brothers Fucking K straight out of Dostoevsky, who put the parallel missiles of Turkey on the table with the one's on the Island. The highly competitive presidential sibling left the room to make a phone call.*

**Doomsday Progress Report EARLIER, JUST AS THE DAY HAD ARRIVED, AT AN ALTITUDE OF 31 MILES, 19 MILES S-S/W OF JOHNSTON ISLAND A SLIGHTLY DISTORTED BRIGHT MOON-LIKE SPHERE**

**WAS SEEN, YELLOW AT FIRST, THEN GRADUALLY SHOWING GREEN, PINK AND VIOLET HUES. BLUE-PURPLE STREAMERS WERE FORMED AND TWO OBSERVERS WITHOUT GOGGLES IN PLACE SUFFERED RETINAL DAMAGE.**

The first thing the juveniles did was get tired of watching the fresh white mouse cower in the corner of the cage of Louie's pet snake. They took a circuitous route to the paddleball court that offered the broadest operational perspective. Damn if that same neighbor wasn't about, but in a more oblivious mode. At the right moment they crossed over and entered the back part of the back yard. The grass was of a type too nice to walk on. Tom Sawyer and the two Huck Finns traversed the immaculate lawn in preparation of entry through a window left open and through which one could be boosted and then open the door from the inside. Why just use a key when one could ruin the end of a good story? In fact, at the last minute there was the sound of crunching gravel on the street, which was the residents returning a week early from vacation just because the world might blow up. Louie covered the retreat by turning the hose on the fantastic lawn. Brian spent some of his roll on fresh packs of cigarettes and soda and by the time they got back to Louie's Mr. Mouse was barely a lump in the long throat of Mr. Snake.

*It was Black Saturday, LeMay-I and his ilk of the various persuasions were bouncing off the walls and N Fucking K officially blinked, the hardware would be off the island and J Fucking K secretly blinked, the Turkey items would be removed without announcement, most boats turned back. A sub shadowing the flotilla in question was out of communication and came close to launching the first final torpedo. Apparently three guys down there argued it out correctly.*

**From the Journal of Doom WITHIN THE DURATION OF THIS PARTICULAR ROTATION OF THE EARTH, NEAR THE USUAL ATOLL THE CALAMITY DOMINIC MUSHROOM CLOUD REACHED THE HINDU HEIGHT OF SIXTY-THREE THOUSAND FEET.**

Brian determined to save his bread for a non-white shirt for the upcoming social season, a new concept, and so had a Sunday afternoon to fill somewhere besides the pinball arcade, without his friends. After eighth grade graduation the three went to separate schools and thereafter saw each other around town now and then. Louie developed a knack for hanging with an older crowd, making himself useful, and followed them into the county jail, where one time he dropped acid. Brian would rather die ten thousand deaths. Then Louie topped himself; after getting out on bail he went back on visiting day with a bag of weed down his pants to smuggle in, and on that particular Lord's Day he disappeared into the correctional system. Same thing almost happened to Brian for a bogus pot bust, the judge fucked with him and then let him go to California, where one night at Barney's Beanery he sat in a booth with visiting Richard, who was out on bail, and there is nothing like waiting for a court date. Richard had gravitated upwards, which is possible when money and a little finesse are involved, to a small group of rich kids who became practiced hedonists chasing after excellent junk in two-seater sports cars. Brian arrived at the little local deconstruction site thinking spot to find that a passing idiot had taken a dump in one of the half-finished rooms. He took a step back towards the street, and spotted just in time the front end of a patrol vehicle emerging to the left; his reflexes were sharp but he was still living too close to the line. The arcade was safe, and he could just watch.

*N Fucking K was never the same, there was the old familiar low buzz in the politburo. J Fucking K had one year to live, but this Sunday was a good day; K Brother met with Brother K to finalized the deal and have some Chinese. Someone came up with the idea of exchanging phone numbers; the Man of the Moment had an exit line out of advertising: if one invades when the same result could have come through negotiation, then you don't have a very good war.*

**Doomsday Nightly Sign-off    AT THE END OF THE KAZAKHSTAN  
STEPPE HARD BY THE SPOT CALLED SEMIPALATINSK ON THIS  
PARTICULAR DATE IN A BUSY YEAR, ONE COULD HAVE HARDLY HELPED  
BEING AWARE OF YET ANOTHER BEATIFICATION OF DUST.**