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Golfing The Ho Chi Minh Trail

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I. Basic Training

1966

Burtus, the family cat, committed suicide shortly after Hank Beckham returned from Vietnam. She ended her days in the upstairs toilet bowl. There was no connection between the two events – the homecoming and the departure – at least none of which the family was aware. There may have been certain similarities, an analogy of sorts, but no real cause and effect.

So it was a surprise years later when Rita Beckham told their adult son Jack she’d never been sure if Burtus had sensed something about Dad, something she had missed; if it hadn’t been a warning of sorts. The two sat in the backyard of Jack Beckham’s suburban family home, drinks in hand. Rain scented the spring air and young lime-green maple leaves were a moveable fresco against the greying sky.

“I didn’t know your father all that well when we married,” Rita admitted, “I wasn’t sure about him right from the get go, about who he was or what he really wanted.” This hadn’t shown when she’d sheepishly nodded, but never actually said yes to Hank’s marriage proposal. Rita was a student of mixed signals. And Hank,

unable to read in other than black and white, would never have noticed. With no steady boyfriend by nineteen, perhaps Rita feared he might be the best she could hope for. Besides, Rita was pregnant. “I wondered,” she told Jack, if Burtus was too.”

What exactly was she nodding yes to? Was it, yes, I love you, I really do? Or, yes, I guess if you say you love me then I must love you too? Or a bit of, yes, though I’m not sure if there will be anyone else I might love more because, honestly, I have no idea what love is or is supposed to be, but you’re here and besides, maybe this will help you feel better before going to Vietnam? And, to be honest, there may have been a bit of, yes, and will you think of me and the baby as you look up from the ground, all bloodied by your young sacrifice as life ebbs away? Will you hand your buddy a note for me and gurgle my name through your final blood-soaked sentence and I will read it later and cry? At nineteen, drama can feel a lot like love, just as going to war can feel like patriotism. But why would she already be thinking of him dead?

In the drama she took for love she couldn’t say *no* because she couldn’t deny Hank the fullness of his heroism. Why bother going off to war if you’re not leaving behind a wife and infant? Besides, Rita felt a great responsibility to the expected, the socially acceptable. She still does.

It was 1966, and Hank was 21. By late August he’d be on his way to Vietnam and Rita, his new wife, a freshman in a small town college. In the pictures he is kind of a looker except for his teeth which were a bit bucked out. But he was tall, dark and otherwise handsome. Rita had her strong points as well, lovely auburn hair and a creamy complexion. Her eyes were a gentler green then, not the stare-you-down hue

they’ve become since. Without announcements or invitations they went off and married. By way of telling their friends the two came back wearing wedding bands, Hank introducing them as Mr. and Mrs. Hank Beckham. “Just didn’t want to make a big thing of it is all, what with me going away so soon,” Hank said, “and Rita being pregnant . . .”

“Oh you should have said something,” they all clamored. “We’d have celebrated. But wait. What? Rita’s What?” The families were stunned by the betrayal, the sin. “You kids believe in God or not?” Hank’s father wanted to know. “You can’t control yourself boy, least you could do is wait ‘till you’re over there.” Rita’s mother cried quietly in the corner, not wanting to upset anyone, mourning the lost hope of something different for her only daughter.

At college, Rita’s housing was covered by student loans and scholarships and after graduation a job would pay enough for a small apartment. “It’s all I need,” she told her friends, “until we can buy a house. I’m saving for that.” A house in Munsey Park with a back yard and a jungle gym; the mansions of Strathmore the next step.

She felt special on campus, a married student, pregnant, her husband off in Vietnam, serving. Life had purpose. Heroism buoyed everything, carrying her in its current toward the future they’d planned. There was a journey to take and a reason to take it; someone with whom to share, even from afar. Someone to love and uphold in the struggle and glory of it all. At times she felt noble, her hallmark, needing to feel special in order to feel equal.

And then there were unexpected times of the exact opposite. A void and vacuous foreboding; floodwaters and dark swamp-like uncertainty.

The late August morning Hank left for Vietnam – actually Fort Dix, New Jersey – the Manhasset sidewalks were blistering, the air a typical Long Island mid-summer mix of heat-borne humidity. Rita drove the ponderous family Buick down Plandome Road, taking her husband to the train to see him off. She wore sandals and a flowery summer shirtwaist. She’d put on make-up for this beginning of their journey to the hero’s life. From the time they left for the station Rita had forty minutes or so before her own life ended. She too was giving her all for her country: her husband, her love, the father of her child, her hope for a family, her future.

For Hank, of course, life was just beginning. He wanted to get to the station at the last minute fearing a long good-bye. He couldn’t have stood the tension, expecting the train to barrel down the tracks any second, only to look out toward the horizon and see nothing but underbrush. He couldn’t have stood the on again off again angst. Neither wanted their friends to come. Rita would have no one there when Hank left and she turned from the tracks to climb the metal stairs back up to the station house without him.

A waiting passenger took pictures for them: in one, Hank’s hand clutches Rita’s, the other holds his duffle. In another photo he has set it down to hug her.

And then the train was coming and she panicked. She couldn’t do it. She was nothing without him. Hank took hold, straightened up and kissed her fully, as any departing soldier kisses his wife just before leaving. “Be strong,” he said. “Stay healthy for our baby.” He did everything but salute. She absorbed his strength. It seeped into her body from the fullness of his kiss. She could do this for him. She could make him proud.

Then Hank said something Rita did not hear and would forever wonder about. She’d missed his last words. He pulled back from her, she grasped at him but he was already hoisting his duffle. He was already walking away. Then she remembered her role and straightened herself, courageous at last for her viewers. Rita still experiences emotions this way, looking at them from a safe distance, figuring out what others expect from the scene and how best to play it.

Before she reached the station house the glory buoying her dispersed into humidity. Thick on the summer air, the smell of grease and coffee from the Station House Grill caught her. She never made it to her father’s Buick, anchoring the parking lot. When she awoke on the grass and sidewalk at the head of the stairs, the police were already there and her parents were on their way.

Young Rita kept on saying it was just the heat, but perhaps it was more about emotions. She couldn’t get a read on what she was supposed to be feeling. At nineteen she would have longed for her boyfriend to comfort her, to weep on his shoulder, his arms around her for reassurance. But that was the problem. Her boyfriend was the husband gone to war. She’d just said good-bye to her first substitute self.

Day by day she reminded herself that she was married to a hero waiting for his moment. She didn’t have to feel aimless, abandoned, like others do when they send their husband’s off to fight, wondering where they’ll be in the future. She already had a future. It was taken care of. Everything was taken care of. And, oh, yes, she was pregnant, she was going to have a baby, they’d name it Jack if it was a

boy. And it was a boy, her second substitute self, so soon on the way. Still, that feeling of being special was ebbing.

Two months later, Hank was due home on leave. He’d have eight more weeks of Advanced Infantry Training before being sent to Oakland and on to Vietnam. Rita was grateful, of course, but found herself, every once in a while, wondering why Hank wasn’t at war yet. That was the starting point of their relationship, wasn’t it? He’d fight. She’d wait. He’d return, a hero, with slight wounds and big stories. They’d invite the neighbors over to hear the tales and see the children playing. It had all started with Vietnam; the relationship, the rush, the pregnancy, the proposal. But, just now – and she was grateful for this really - he was returning from New Jersey.

“Rita, Rita, I’m home.”

1973

Rita made sure there were big celebrations for Hank’s homecomings, and plenty of tears when he left. But no one asked the children if these arrivals and departures were okay, no one warned them. When she was five, Lally asked if her mother or Jack knew Daddy was coming and forgot to tell her or if he just arrived, like a surprise package all wrapped up in brown paper. There was a party with candles. When he picked Lally up he smelled like cheese and cigarettes. Rita remembers the look on her daughter face and fears these are Lally’s earliest memories of her father, sudden arrivals, departures, candles, bad breath.

She watched from the car one kindergarten afternoon as Hank walked onto the playground to pick up Lally. The sun like fire on the asphalt, their daughter glistening

with sweat seemed nearly air-born on the end of Crack the Whip. Rita watched her noticed Hank, release herself into the breeze, fight for balance, then lay as if paralyzed on the asphalt. Rita saw Lally make a decision, choose to lay there rather than go to Hank. She doesn’t know, thought Rita, if he will take her home or away someplace that isn’t home. The hot asphalt is safer.

When Hank leaned down and scooped Lally up she stiffened and Rita began to get out of the car. “Relax,” Hank said, bouncing his daughter in his arms. “You can call me Gully if you want. My friends call me Gully, but you’re the only kid I let do that. I don’t let Jack do that.”

Rita did her best, the adventure of children beginning to wear as raw as Hank’s heroism. It seemed every time Lally or Jack studied a war in class, Hank was fighting in it. Since the children didn’t have him at home, the least he could do was make them proud at school. And he did, almost every year. On the kitchen wall Rita hung a shellacked wooden sign: “Fighting for Freedom in...,” it said. On a hook below, a laminated card named the country where Gully was stationed: Laos, Grenada, Honduras... Sometimes Jack and Lally decorated the card with stickers from school; flags, Iwo Jima, the crucifix. Between God and country, the hook was never empty.

In third grade, Lally’s teacher prayed for God to send more workers into the vineyard. “It means soldiers into battle,” Gully told her when she asked where the closest vineyard was, and Rita watched Lally figure out it was God sending her Father to war.

“I’m giving a speech in class,” Lally announced at Hank’s 1979 return from El Salvador celebration. Rita always cooked the same thing for these homecomings: lamb chops, mint sauce, mashed potatoes, Hank’s favorite desert.

“El Salvador,” Hank instructed Rita. “First, they need stability.”

“Mint jelly? Jack, pass your father the jar.”

“I’m giving a speech in class, it...”

“Lovely people, really, but the unions, the leftists, it’s a problem. You kids don’t know how good you’ve got it here.”

“We’ve got unions here,” said Jack.

“That’s different. Democracy first, then unions. But the place first has to be stable. It’s all about stability. The embassy’s at its wits ends. They’re a good bunch of guys, they get it.

“Are there still d-e-a-t-h s-q-u-a-d-s?” Rita asked.

“Mother,” Jack said, “we can all spell. Even Lally. She’s eleven now, Dad.”

“Yes, and it’s a problem but why be afraid if you’ve done nothing wrong?” Remember that, Jack.” Hank plowed his fork into his mashed potatoes and gravy, some dripped on his shirt. His excitement made him oblivious.

“I’m giving a speech in class,” said Lally, and stopped even though everyone was looking at her, waiting. The room had gone silent while she’d been listening intently, pretending it was an army briefing. She knew the words, El Salvador, stability. Her Dad had been there. “Jeeze,” she said, “We studied that country. But my speech is...”

“Don’t say Jeeze,” Rita corrected her. “You’re taking the Lord’s name in vain. I’ve told you before.” But Rita would come to understand that Lally learned something quite different during this meal. She learned that stability, whatever that meant, was more important than being home, she got that, just like it was more important to be dead than Red. She also got that stability came before Democracy, she just didn’t understand what kind of government stability was.

1977

There were times Rita would watch through the kitchen window as her children played in the back yard, unawares. There were the moments they were most themselves. When watched they were rarely themselves, afraid perhaps of upsetting the fragile balance in the house; knowing, as children do, what balance costs.

The Beckham’s paired off as commonly happens; Jack and his mother, Lally and her Dad. Lally was strategic like Hank. Jack more reluctant, like his Mother. Lally even looked like Hank. She walked like him, as if her back had been broken and became stiff from it. Jack slouched, much as his mother did. Hank said it was because Jack hadn’t had enough challenge. Apparently neither had Rita who, more and more, looked as if she was disappearing.

They had their own little wars at times, Hank and Rita, even when he was out of the country. And often what they argued about was not the real argument, that was somewhere underneath; a mine in a mine field waiting to go off that neither Hank nor Rita wanted to trip. The more they argued about the children, the less it sounded like they were talking about the same family, as if each one had had a different dream and had been disappointed by a different failure. It was all about righteousness and courage for Hank, family and consistency for Rita. She liked that word, consistency. And if she needed a good laugh, she’d ask Lally,

with her missing teeth and braces, to say it. Then Jack would have her say *righteousness* and the three of them would laugh and fall into each other and remember they were a family. But even so, Rita never trusted them with certain truths about herself, not the medications, not the timely drink, not the bluish aura that periodically interrupted her life. These they would have to find out for themselves.

1984

“You kids set for Saturday?” Rita asked a day or two before Hank was due home from Grenada, or was it Honduras again. Lally looked at Jack who raised his eyebrows. It was all there on the kitchen calendar. Lally had the car Saturday from noon till 5:00. She was sixteen and ready for the day’s junior varsity basketball tryouts. Then Jack got the car in time for a wash and polish before his 7:00 pm senior prom. One car. A mother. Two teens. Over time they’d worked it out.

Jack reached for the green beans. “You like those French cut, don’t you?” Rita asked. “Wish I’d figured that out sooner. All those dinner spats. Used to drive your Father nuts.

“Yeah. They’re great.”

“Good day at school, Lally?”

“Yeah.”

Rita did not expect more from her children. They’re going through some stage or other, nothing serious, but neither would Rita waste energy trying to get them to talk. Really, they were very annoying.

“I heard from Dad,” she said. He’ll be here Monday so we should plan his special dinner.”

Lally agreed that would be fine. “So we should take the fighting for freedom sign down then?”

“I’m not home Monday night,” Jack informed them. “How about Friday.”

“You’re not home on a school night?”

“Studying with Alf.”

Lally said, “Sure. When did you and Alf get to be friends?”

“Cram it.”

“You cram it.”

Rita decided that maybe Friday was better. “We’ll be more relaxed anyway with the weekend coming up. Do you know what would be fun? If we cooked smokies on sterno like we used to do when you were kids. And made that popcorn in its own foil pan on the stove. Remember on Sunday nights. You thought it was such fun.”

“I can’t do it Friday,” said Lally. “I have drama.”

Jack said she didn’t need any more practice with that.

“It’s either Friday or a weekend night. Which do you want?” Rita demanded, and tossed her napkin onto the table.

“Friday.”

“Thursday.”

“Thursday is not the weekend Lally. Mother said Friday or the weekend.”

“Well, I can’t do either. I can do Thursday. Doesn’t that matter to anyone? Or you can have the little celebration without me. Really, I couldn’t care less.”

Rita closed her eyes, breathed in, breathed out.

Early Saturday morning Rita left for the hairdresser. Sitting in the salon chair, she thought about a recent conversation with Marge Holder, about how Marge said sometimes she just hated her husband and children for consuming her. She loved them too of course. Loved them to death. But just the other day, Marge said, when Alf, her oldest, yelled back that he hated her, Marge told him straight to his face, “Yes, and I hate you too. Have for the longest time.” Rita was appalled. She rejected this approach entirely. No, she had never hated her husband or children. It wasn’t right. Really, the entire conversation was very upsetting.

Sitting there in Marge’s living room, Rita thought perhaps her friend was teasing her, trying to shock her just to get a laugh and they’d both shake their heads at the absurdity of the idea. But Marge hadn’t laughed at all, though she did wait for a response, and when none came she alone shook her head as if disappointed, or worried about something.

As it happened Rita did not get the car back in time for Lally to go to the tryouts. By 12:20 Lally was frantic. She stood on the front lawn, arms folded, ready for war, until a friend came to pick her up. “She’s done this intentionally, it is so like her. She manipulates everybody to get what she wants and then is all innocent.”

The tryouts were well underway when they arrived. There’d be no junior varsity for either of them that year. In the meantime, Rita returned home and since no one was there, left again to go shopping.

“I’m so sorry,” Rita said later that evening between the time Lally walked in the house and slammed her bedroom door. “Don’t you be rude to me, Lady Jane. Your brother needed me to shop for him. Don’t take it out on me.”

Come dawn, Jack returned from his partying to find Lally sitting on his bed, his wall posters on the floor, their scotch taped corners still stuck on the wall, his box of Trojans, his cash, loose change and phony I.D’s strewn on the floor. And there in the middle of it all was Lally, smoking his cigarettes and drinking his bourbon.

“Have a nice time?”

“What the fuck?”

“You screw with me and I’ll screw you right back. We had a plan and then you told Mom to go shopping for your shit. And I’m just supposed to go along?”

“I didn’t change anything, you did. She said you told her you didn’t need the car. Then she stayed out till 6:00 and left me no time to clean it.”

“I never said that. Why would I say that?”

The door opened. Rita stood there, drowsy, annoyed by the commotion.

“Why did you tell Lally I asked you to go shopping?” Jack looked at his mother then moved to block Rita’s view of the Trojans..

“Hey bud, watch your tone. I thought that’s what you said. You told me what you needed for the Prom. It took me all day.”

“I didn’t ask you to buy anything.”

“Are you accusing me of lying?”

“We had a plan for the car. Lally’s off junior varsity.”

“Well, that’s not your mother’s fault is it? You kids can’t take responsibility for your schedules, don’t blame me. Your sister’s old enough to take care of her own

schedule. We’ll figure this out, Lally,” Rita said. “We had a misunderstanding, that’s all. I’ll talk to the coach.”

“There was no misunderstanding. And don’t talk to anybody. You’ve messed things up again.”

“Don’t talk back to your mother.”

“I’ll say it differently then. Jack, tell Mother to play her games somewhere else and leave me the fuck alone.” She pushed past Rita and left the room.

1986

And so you will appreciate what the dinner hour held for Hank and Rita one breezy evening in May 1986. Big news from their little girl just turned 18, big news a month short of her high school graduation.

Cheers is on the living room TV as Jack researches law schools and filters for household emergencies. A key turns in the backdoor lock.

“Rita, Rita, I’m home.”

She comes from the kitchen her hands greasy with mayonnaise. She’s been mixing dressing through the chunks of potato, onions and celery, lightly, careful not to make a mush of things. She leans in for the exchange of kisses, her hands held up like a football referee after a goal’s been scored.

Lally is both apprehensive and excited. She’s tried her news out on Jack and is ready to handle the parents although her timing could have been better. Before everyone is even settled down at the dinner table she says it, “Army recruiters snagged me at the Town and Country Mall today.”

Up until now she’s talked of her future in terms of research biology, her office a mass of beakers, burets, pipettes and test tubes, all organized around a Darkfield microscope, the lens of which would immerse her in the secrets of life. That was supposed to be her graduation present, that Darkfield microscope. Hank and Rita have been paying on it all year.

“The army recruiter thinks I can be a pilot, maybe a colonel.” Suddenly biology is boring. “Besides, the army will pay for my education and maybe post-grad too. They say you’d go for that.” She looks at Hank.

“Cool Lally,” Jack says. “And the parents were only afraid you’d go out and get yourself raped.”

Rita looks ready to banish him from the table. As it is, it’s all she can do to hold herself together lest Lally leave instead. “Dear, don’t you owe them so many years for this?” Rita asks. “You’re financially indebted to them. We’re at war all over the place, Lally. What happens after you graduate? They own you.”

“How about Libya?” Jack suggests. “We bombed them last year. Maybe you can go there.”

Lally tells him, “We bombed them because they messed up the military exercises we’d gone all the way over there to have. Shows what you know.”

“Can’t you just imagine us letting Libya do their military exercises in the Gulf of Mexico?”

“Jack, please.” Hank insists, then looks at Rita. “Now hold on honey, no one is trying to put one over on her. It’s all been explained. It’s all in the papers. They explained it all, right, Lally?” He held out his hand for the papers which, truth be told,

Lally had glanced over but not read. She hesitated, then seeing pride flash in her father’s eyes, seeing she was safe with him, she handed them over.

“Which she’s already signed,” says Rita. “What’s been explained to her is the romance of army life, the technology, the bravado. How many soldiers do you know who find much romance knee deep in mud carrying their buddy’s leg?”

“For God’s sake Rita, we’re at the table.”

“Which I already signed because I’m already eighteen so I can do that, Mom. So don’t be dramatic. No one’s going to pay for my education and then send me somewhere dangerous. I figured that out before signing anything.” She’d thought it all through. For God’s sake, she’d been at the recruiter’s office all afternoon. She’d had plenty of time to think.

“Do you know Dave Hayes?” Lally asks Hank, thinking it wise to build bridges. “He says he knows you, or maybe his father does. Dave’s the recruiter. He’s so cool. I could go to South America you know, or maybe Europe. But I think really I want Africa. And Libya is no joke. They attacked our exercises over there. You think we should just take that?”

“Yes, you certainly could go anywhere,” Rita said. “I just wish you’d talked to us first.”

“It’s okay Sugar. You’re Mom’s just surprised, that’s all.”

Isn’t that a misplaced modifier? Rita thinks. “Just surprised? The children studied that grammatical error years ago. Third grade? Fourth? While they were learning how to diagram sentences. Do they do that anymore? Diagram?” It is written on her face, as if surprise can be modified; mollified by the fact it is just itself.

There is nothing else going on, just the shock of it, the idea that her daughter, not even an adult yet really, starting out to make her own way, is convinced by a complete stranger, someone who does not know her, does not know what she likes for breakfast, or that she cries at commercials or that she still sleeps with a stuffed bear, that the entire course of her life is better plotted by a stranger. And what a course he can offer: free education, free travel, free wars, free lodging. But nothing is free. It can cost you your life, or maybe your marriage. This is what Rita is thinking.

“My daughter’s life or limb?” says Rita. “Yes, I’m just surprised. But there’s plenty of time to get used to the idea.”

“And, you know, this is the time really, to help spread Democracy,” says Lally, “don’t you think so? Dave and I talked about that, how we have a mission, it’s almost like a religion with him, to fight this Communism stuff.”

“Communism’s on the slide, Jack tells her. “It’s about done.”

“Well, baby,” Hank begins, Remember that....”

“I want to do that. I want to be on the side of the angels. That’s what Dave calls it.” “Whose side are you on,” he says, “The angels or the devils? The good guys or the bad?” “I feel like my whole life has led to this.”

“What about biology?” Jack asks. “Last month your whole life had led you to biology.”

Rita stood to clear the table. “We’ll have pie later if anyone’s interested.” She piles the plates and utensils as good as any bus-boy hoping for a tip, and leaves for the kitchen.

Lally does not look at Jack. He tries to clear the bewilderment from his face and put on something more inviting. Still she won’t look, won’t answer his questions. She doesn’t owe him anything, isn’t obliged to explain herself to anyone least of all a brother who’d used her for humor bait her whole life. She owes him nothing, and just when he wants to collect.

“Dad,” she asks, “Dave says he can get me into Potomac Point for like an internship or something. What do you think?”

“Whose Dave? Oh Dave,” he corrects himself brought up short by his daughter’s instant dismay. “Sorry honey. Potomac Point? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Do you know the Cedars? Or Ivanwald? They’re in D.C. some-place but they’re all men. Potomac Point is where the women stay who have prayer groups and help out at the Cedars.”

“The Cedars are all men? What?”

“It’s like a retreat place for people from government and their families. You meet all kinds of people there, you know, Senators and stuff like that. I don’t know about the President and Vice-President, but Supreme Court Judges go there. They have prayer meetings with Bibles and meals. Lots of famous people go there. Dave’s been to Ivanwald and the Cedars and he goes just to be livened up, that’s what he says. Livened up.”

“So you want to go to this place, this Cedars?”

“I want to go to Potomac Point, that’s where the girls go. And then get to help out at the Cedars and meet who’s ever there. Dave says you never can tell who you’ll

meet but if you’re in the military, it’s a great place to be seen. I’m just thinking of my career.”

“So it’s a career now?”

“Think big, that’s what Dave says.”

Hank shifts his chair back enough to turn sideways and cross his legs. He looks at his daughter as if remembering his younger self, all idealism, no self-knowledge, the pregnant girlfriend his father beat him raw for; the years waiting for heroism. He wants to ask her why, why such a change, why so quickly. What does she hope for? What’s her dream, her image of herself down the line? Not that he isn’t proud. But there is something else. How quickly she changed her plans. How quickly she acted. Was it just to show her independence? Of course it was. But she has lost all that now. She’s joined the army.

He knows anything he says will be taken as messing in Lally’s business, at least that’s how she’ll phrase it. Then he smiles.

“You’re laughing,” she says to him, “You think I’m just silly. I’m . . .”

“No,” he says, “not at all. Do you really want to know what came to mind?”

He waits for the go-ahead. “Mold,” he said, “your first science fair exhibits. I’ve never seen so much mold on poster board in all my life.” His eyes tear. Jack saw it. You don’t miss something like that.

“Are you okay,” Hank asks. “Do you want me to see about those papers? I keep thinking of that microscope you’ve wanted so long.”

“No, I don’t think so, Dad. Dave says this is what God wants, to win the world for Him. It’s why we’re here. It’s God’s will and Dave can prove it.”

They never did have pie that night. Each of them drifted off to their separate rooms as if the news could only be absorbed alone, in pieces. No one wanted to hear their fears echoed by anyone else’s, least of all Rita. She’d had her fill of heroism. And it wasn’t just the fear of losing Lally to war. It was that they had already lost her to something else none of them knew or understood, and she’d never even said good-bye.

2. On The Side of the Angels

1988

In Arlington, Virginia, at the highest point of the Potomac River, an imposing colonial-style mansion watches sphinx-like over Washington. The Cedars, named after the trees that surround it, sits in a neighborhood of quiet meandering residential streets and well-trimmed yards. Within its walls gather members of the governing class who pray to the evangelical God and study his Bible. It is the home of The Family, formerly The Fellowship, sponsor of the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC, and much more.

On Fridays, women from near-by Potomac Point cook, serve, and clean. Men from Ivanwald do yard work, and maintenance. By custom, or maybe rule, the women wear red lipstick and long skirts. Lally had brought both.

She unpacked and arranged her Potomac Point room, purposely leaving her Walkman in its case, the quiet a welcomed distraction. Lally glimpsed The Cedars in all its suburban splendor, a neatly angled view through her window. She felt chosen, a calm anchoring certainty within her, although she didn’t know yet what she’d been chosen for, or why. As a child she’d prayed in school for workers to be sent into the vineyard, and here she was, an enlisted woman, the answer to her own prayers.

But sometimes a concussive jolt shakes her confidence, like a sound bomb. She feels alone, stranded, an isolate among strangers. It was a mistake going from stranger to stranger, to new squad or platoon or company. It feels like failure, and why should it? Except loneliness always feels like failure to Lally. It means no one likes her and she has no idea why.

“It’s an opportunity to meet Christ,” Dave told the group at their one and only meeting before the Prayer Breakfast trip. In preparation for the February 4th event, they’d learned the background of the event, the who and what and why of it. How it gained congressional sponsorship, for example. “That just doesn’t happen,” Dave insisted, picking tuna detritus from his teeth. “It took hard work and the hand of God.” The history was in their blue and gold binders, neatly arranged and tabbed, the Army insignia on the front of each.

As in past years, the breakfast was scheduled for the D.C. Hilton. Hilton himself had been an early supporter, a Fellowship forbearer. The invitation promised some 3,000 guests from all over the world. “Imagine it,” Dave had said, “you’ll meet world leaders, oil barons, CEO’s, financiers, congressional folks, Supreme Court Justices, military officers, and us, right there in the middle of it all.”

“Yeah, and for only \$425 a breakfast,” Roy said, just back from basic. “That’s some kind a bacon.”

“You don’t think it’s worth it, the exit door is open,” Dave answered and there were no further comments.

He’d gone to his first National Prayer Breakfast at age 11. It was 1972, and the military brass around the table outshone everything but the silverware, ten settings

per table, tables as far as you could see, big and round. You weren’t just sitting down the line from your father and mother at either end, your twin across from you causing trouble.

“There’s Suharto’s man,” someone said and Dave had looked for Sue Harto and her man but didn’t see anyone who fit his imagination. As a matter of fact, all he could see were men. Dad said if these people were given enough power, they’d ruin the world.

“Ruin it, Dad? Why would they ruin the world?”

“I said run the world, son. Run it for God sakes.” Dave, Sr. looked at the others, ran his stubby fingers through his hair and shook his head. “Kids.”

“Covenant is power,” someone said and the conversation got going again. “A covenant for Christ.”

The boy met Mrs. Nixon and was courteous and manly enough to make his father proud. When he extended his hand to shake hers, she kissed him on the cheek. “Wait till your mother hears,” Dad whispered. He met William Rehnquist just sworn-in as the 100th member of the Supreme Court; an odd looking man named Bhutto and Dave started to laugh then covered his mouth; a military man from Chile who talked about student protests; a man who looked Chinese but said he was from South Vietnam; and an American man named Grace who said his company had the smarts to cut and run from Peru before the protests against the U.S. got too bad.

Back home the boy could name a surprising number of breakfast topics for his mother. “No one liked Sanford and Sons,” he said. “The Presidents’ going to

China, Chile is unstable and needs to be fixed; Israel’s getting 42 Phantom Jets and we’re paying for them even if we call it selling and we’re all under a cover-net.”

“Well, said his mother, smirking at her husband, whipping at the corners of her mouth that is quite a lot.”

“And who kissed you, son,” asked his father, “Go ahead, it’s time to confess.”

“Mrs. Nixon.” He finished his ice cream, his spoon knocking against the china until his mother put her hand on his wrist. “I shook her hand and she kissed me.”

Dave Sr. told the boy to read the President’s speech like he had in the car and little Dave whipped his mouth, picked up the program lying next to his plate, stood and straightened his pants. “Then as we hear those words,” he said, “we realize that words can mean nothing unless our thoughts go with them. So, we think of our thoughts...but we have a long way to go.” He stopped, a momentary blankness to his face. His mother checked the program. “Go on,” she said. “That’s what it says.”

Later, when giving this speech in school speech contests, little Dave would spread his feet as if to better anchor himself to the earth. “We do not want any countries economic subversion or even submission. We want for them what we have, in their way as we have in our way, one nation, with liberty and justice for all.”

The audience would roar. He felt like God.

Only Dave could have pulled this off. The man was magic. He’d gotten 12 relatively new soldiers into DC from their respective training, mission, and vacation sites. And this was over and above his recruitment responsibilities, time off the clock.

Lally herself was just back from the Persian Gulf and Operation Prime Chance where she helped protect U.S.-flagged oil tankers from Iranian attack during the Iran-Iraq War.

At Washington National Airport Dave rented a van then turned it into a classroom. “We’ve got the Prayer Breakfast itself and then the seminars afterwards,” he told them, sitting on the console between the front seats. “I want as many of you as possible to stay for those. I want you to see and be seen. The seminars are about Christ’s message for our leaders. Might be about what Christ wants from the military, or business, or political leaders. My guess is this year’s focus will be on financiers. I don’t know. I’ve not seen the agenda yet.

“The President and his wife will be there, President Reagan and Nancy. She’s in a prayer group. That’s how high this effort goes to bring our leaders to Christ. You’ll meet Doug Coe, the man behind The Family. And when you’re not talking with anyone, step back and observe. Take it all in. And why? Because someday you’ll be those leaders.”

“Are we all Christians here, Sarg?” one recruit asked.

“Look around Sam, I believe so son. I believe so.” Dave jumped into the driver’s seat and delivered the men to Ivanwald and the various homes of his Pentagon friends, and the women to Potomac Point.

Before Lally had finished unpacking, a women knocked on her door. “You have a visitor downstairs,” she said. Dave she thought, how sweet of him.

“Oh my God, how did you know I was here?”

“Blame, Mom.” Jack handed her a baggie of pepperoni slices, a joke between them. “I won’t take your time. Just had to come by, make sure you got in okay. I’ll call Mom, tell her I did my duty.” Jack smiled; a somewhat phony grin and Lally knew exactly what he meant. A student at near-by Georgetown law school, he’d been sent here by parental edict. “I’m guessing you won’t have time for a dinner together or anything.”

“I have to eat here. I’m sorry, it’s just a quick trip and all group stuff. That’s why I didn’t tell you I’d be in. Are you going to the breakfast?”

“Ah, no.” Not my cup of tea so to speak. Besides, I’ve a moot court competition tomorrow which I have to ace. How about we take a walk around before it gets too dark and then I’ll let you be.”

“Absolutely.” She ran up the stairs to get her coat, gloves and hat. Jack looked around. Every flat service seemed to have its own Bible. A group was gathered in a large living room. He could hear them mumbling, a song started.

“How’s school?” Lally asked half way down the stairs again.

“Almost over. That’s how.”

“But you like it, right?”

“Love it. My friends are fantastic. The teachers are good, mostly.” He opened the door and the cold blasted past them to mix with the scent of soup cooking, homemade bread baking. I smell something hot, with berries in it. No wonder you want to eat here.”

They wrapped up tightly and walked to the Cedars. “I remember when you told Dad you wanted to come here; the night you bombed the dinner discussion.”

“And I made it. Something good is going to happen. I can feel it. Look at the place, it’s beautiful.” She shook her head. I can’t believe it Jack. My life is just what I wanted.”

“And the breakfast?”

“I can’t believe that either. I’ll be a part of all those people.” She shook her head again as if trying to clear away gnats.

“Good, because I’ve heard that next year Shoney’s is running it and it will called the National Breakfast Buffet.”

Lally grunted.

“Not funny, eh? Look Lally, I didn’t come here just cause Mom told me too. I want to show you something.” He walked towards The Cedars’ back yard and Lally followed, fascinated by the landscaping that enchanted even in winter. The scant snow still on the ground perfectly highlighted the spent seed pods and browned ground cover. In the back yard she saw tennis courts and a heated swimming pool.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” she asked somewhat disappointed.

“Just this. Just in case the mansion itself isn’t enough. I want you to be clear on this, what you’re getting into. On what these folks count as God. On the people that populate this place, your Family here. You’re not dealing with folks like us, Lally. Nor with folks who really need you or care. These are the winners, just wanting to be confirmed by God in case they have anything to fear on the afterlife. You have nothing to fear, Lally. Keep it that way, okay.”

“Don’t start Jack. The Family is not about fear.”

“No, that’s true. You’re right. It’s about power.”

“These folks need God too, just like you and me.”

“Yes, but what God, Lally? I’ve been to their breakfast.”

“You have not.”

“I have. It’s kind of expected. My first and last. A general from Bolivia prayed, Basser or Banzer, or was it Brazil? Military all over the place come for promised meetings with the right people. Our embassies invite them. Nice, eh? Not to mention the oil barons.”

The first person Lally saw the next day at the Prayer Breakfast was the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan himself. It was an accident of course, no one was supposed to see him, he wasn’t even supposed to be there yet. But a door opened and shut and, in between, she saw him, people milling around him as he talked to a man in an odd-fashioned cape and hat. He looked up, saw her, caught her eye, the door closed, but Lally thought he had smiled at her, had almost beckoned her in. Had there been time, she would have saluted.

Her image of that ballroom ever after would be of white lights and gold, spaciousness and noise. She found Sam at a table near the back with nine other people. They’ll wonder, she thought, what the two youngsters were doing there but hoped the military dress would put everyone at ease.

Seats were filling. She saw African chiefs, military in full dress, men who strutted as she imagined a tycoon would, lots of foreign looking people, all apparently wealthy. She hadn’t known there was so much wealth in the world.

Sam was saying that in his hometown, a U.S. Army chaplain from Fort Bragg was the guest speaker at the Prayer Breakfast. “He served with the special operations command.” The Rick Webb Family was providing music, and Carter Brothers Barbeque was bringing breakfast. Cumby’s Family Funeral Services was also a sponsor.

Lally spoke when spoken to and otherwise sat quietly, listening as if she were seven again. A man sat down to her right, introduced himself but seconds later she’d already forgotten his name. He asked her name, rank and serial number as a joke, and she saluted while answering, a joke as well. He was in oil, he said.

Conversation was critical of the new Sandinista Constitution, mourned the death of 16 people in a Maryland Amtrak collision, and celebrated the Dow Jones Industrial’s recently record-breaking close above 2000.

There was a spirit here, a camaraderie. If the world could only be like this, she thought. They sat for the opening prayer, stood for the pledge of allegiance. The keynote speaker talked about poor black children in Africa. Lally used the time to observe the room, so huge, she couldn’t even see the dais. She noticed Dave standing along the left side wall, further toward the front, talking to someone. The Wheaton College Men’s Glee Club sang two hymns, and the President of the United States was introduced.

Lally remembers few of the President’s comments. He read a prayer he said was sent to him by a woman who had lost her husband in WWII. The prayer had been written in a shell hole during the war and expressed a soldier’s fear of dying. Reagan said it was found on the body of a dead Russian. And he’d recently received

five other letters from Russian soldiers in Afghanistan who had deserted and each one expressed to him their belief in God and unwillingness to follow unholy orders.

Reagan and Nancy got a standing ovation. All of a sudden music started up and the crowd sang Happy Birthday to the President, about to turn 77.

“I’m running one of the seminars,” the oil man on her right said as they sat back down. “What seminars are you going to?”

“I’m not sure yet. We only got the program today so I have to see what’s available and what my group’s plans are.”

“Oh, you come in a group? There are more of you?”

“We’re twelve.”

“You’re twelve, and so well developed?” He laughed, sipped his coffee, nodded at someone across the table. “What did you all think of the White House memorandum last month,” he asked no one in particular.

“Of all the stupid things,” said a military man.

“Links between U.S. arms sales to Iran and release of the American hostages in Lebanon? Why would you make that public? Put something like that in writing?”

“Well someone must have been on his tail,” said the oil man. “You can bet he didn’t do it voluntarily.”

“Bob McFarlane attempted suicide,” a man said.” I commend him to your prayers.”

“The former National Security Advisor?” Lally asked, finally participating.

“No honey,” the oil man said, “the singer with the dreds from Jamaica.”

“That’s McFerrin, idiot,” laughed a woman in a grey business suite while finishing her bisque medley. “And he’s from Manhattan.”

“I’ve seen him here in the past, poor soul,” someone else added. “I mean McFarlane. You just never know do you.”

Lally observed. She took in the topics, the themes, the tenor of discussion. It seemed an odd mixture, different from the military and foreign policy that she expected. Someday she would participate more. Still, to be here, able to listen and watch, this is what America was all about.

The oil man’s left hand, big and liver-spotted, grabbed her thigh. He squeezed until she felt him in her bones. With one touch he controlled her. He scooted his chair back a bit and leaned down as if to retrieve a fallen napkin but his other hand was under her skirt. Just momentarily, just enough, and still he held her thigh.

That hand rubbed her. Back and forth, back and forth, and each time closer, each time higher, and all of it hidden by the table cloth, while he finished his bacon.

When she tried to move her chair back from the table, he gripped harder. When she tried to lean back, he pulled her down. She felt paralyzed, completely controlled. And if she opened her mouth he’d make a fool of her. But oddly, she was more concerned about embarrassing him. Was this just part of it all, something you put up with in good company? Something taken for granted at the top. She didn’t think so. She really didn’t, but what was she supposed to do? If she screamed, Dave would have a fit.

“You ain’t twelve are you sweetie?” he whispered in her ear. And he rubbed higher on her thigh. “Feel a little wiggle cumin on? A little tremor?” His wrist brushed her groin.

Lally turned toward him, put her hand to her forehead to stop a sudden pain, and vomited her prayer breakfast down his front, the cherry from her grapefruit stuck like a tie-tack on his shirt. That is the last thing she remembered, wondering if the cherry would stay there or eventually slither off. That and the fact she’d not been able to spot Dave as she scanned the room during the ordeal.

In a flash the oil man was up. “You bit . . .,” he began but caught himself. “You best lie down, here, someone help her would ya.” But Lally was already on the floor, having fainted and taken some of the tablecloth and silverware with her. Others at the table jumped up to help while the oil man mopped his shirt front with his napkin. Waiters came running. Gradually the table companions found it best to let the waiters take over and drifted away to nicer environs.

Lally looked for Dave again as she was helped from the floor and the room and again could not find him.

3. Sleeper Cell

1990

They arrive at the Old Goat Tavern on New Jersey Ave, not far from Georgetown, to let off steam, clear their heads, discuss the world as they know it. It’s Friday and Law school is not an easy slog. Jack will drink Guinness, Steve his Corona through the lime wedge in the neck of the bottle, Ed likes Irish whiskey in his coffee, and the others will share pitchers of Budweiser. A young waitress, also from Georgetown, will automatically bring a one pound order of fries and a new bottle of ketchup. She knows these guys. Because it is Chinese New Year - the year of the snake - they will order crab Rangoon with their usual hot wings. Both will be consumed in bulk. There will be a shooting. None of these law school friends will be responsible but one will be hurt. These things happen. Jack’s best friend will be sitting across the table from him, his back to the fracas. If the police reenact the scene they’ll find the bullet that went through the T4 point of Ed’s spine burrowed in Jack’s own chair, millimeters from his kidney. But no one will reenact the scene. The bullet will remain in the chair for ten more years until someone on a demolition crew sees a glint and finds the bullet and thinks it a fitting souvenir of his work. Jack will never know the turn his life just took.

“A fucking unemployed high school dropout hot-head Puerto Rican drinking off his buddy’s dime,” I tell Robinson, the Law School Dean who, from the sound of his voice, I’d woken from a heavy meandering sleep. “The police have him. Somewhere after the perp’s fifth rum and coke he found his girlfriend, Salandra, drinking off his buddy too. He’s in jail on a bunch of charges, some current, some old. We don’t know if Ed will make it.” I can hear Robinson trying to interrupt me to get grounded in this conversation but I can’t stop talking. I plow right over him. “The police called Mayer and Ed’s mother. I’ve not been able to reach her. We’re taking turns in ICU. Do you want to come down? Ed’s mother will get in from La Guardia, around noon, twelve hours or so. Steve will pick her up. I’ll be in court. Do you want someone from the Law School faculty at the airport?”

“Let’s see, Jack,” he says. “Let me check with President Meyer, we don’t want a crowd down there. We don’t want to scare her.”

Scare her? For fuck sake? Now I know why I didn’t want to make this phone call. Robinson’s a fool, brilliant perhaps, but a fool all the same. The fuck can’t help it. Scare her? The woman’s in shock. “Maybe one or two of his friends who know her should go with Steve instead.”

“Fine,” he says.

Three of us pace the ICU hallway. Christ, we’d just gone out for a drink, to relax, clear our heads, it’s the end of the week for God’s sake. An hour later Ed’s paralyzed or dying or both. Nobody’s telling us anything.

“You just don’t think this is going to happen to you,” I say as if its news or something. “These things happen to folks being stupid, asking for trouble. Ed was

just sitting there. How could this happen?” That is what I don’t understand, can’t get my head around. If this can happen to Ed, on the Dean’s list at Georgetown, it can happen to anyone.

Paul says, “We’ve been to that bar a thousand times.”

Kevin says, “He didn’t deserve this”

None of it matters and we all know it, still our mouths keep saying things.

Steve is with Ed in ICU. The rest of us should go back to our dorms and bathe, eat, go to class or work. Something holds us, rivets us to the hallway linoleum, our shoes are tacked through their souls to the pathways we’ve etched on top of other pathways. We are powerless.

Steve comes out and says Ed keeps asking where he is and why and doses off again. None of the nurses know anything. They’re nice enough, they’re just not talking. I go in and say I’m Ed’s brother and would they talk to our Mom if I can get her on the phone. I start dialing, their faces sag like over-heated putty. “It’s better if we wait for the doctor,” one says almost pleading. Ed’s mom doesn’t answer and I don’t leave a message.

“I’m his brother,” I tell her. She knows I’m lying. I look nothing like Ed but I pull a photo from my wallet, me with Ed and his mom, the three of us at their family summer place. Ed looks like his mom and that seems to work. The nurse is a bit motherly herself. She gets it.

“Some of his organs were affected. With this kind of thing it’s impossible not to happen. The spine too, she says. “He made it through surgery.” This we already

can see. “For now, we just want to keep him stable. He’ll need help,” she says, “you guys; a lot will depend on you guys.”

She’s been vague enough to tell us everything. Back in the hallway we hold on to each other as if at the huddle’s core there is something to save us, buoy us up. We are drowning. Grasping for breath. “He keeps asking what happened,” Steve says over and over again. I go in for my shift.

This will sound stupid, really stupid, but I’ve never been in an ICU before. I feel dishonorable, as if I am going somewhere sacred without the formal training, the rite of passage from neophyte to believer. To whom do I pledge myself in return for my friend’s life? To whom do I bow and ask forgiveness for going into a bar, for thinking it safe. What sacrifice will earn back Ed’s spine. Any of us will offer it.

“Just a few minutes, please,” says the nurse I’d talked to a minute ago, as if she has forgotten me already. She points to Ed’s bed. It is all one big room here, a warehouse of machinery with beds in between. Each machine makes the worst noise I’ve ever heard, an inharmonious grunting tug of war with death.

“Have you boys had anything to eat,” she asks. “You’ve got to keep your strength up. You’re brother needs that, especially from you.” Did she actually believe me before or are we using an secret? “Your mother called,” she says.

My mother called? Oh, my mother. “Yes, she’ll be in this afternoon. Thank you.”

“She asked if Jack was here. I assumed that was you and told her....

Ed’s eyes flutter, he is briefly conscious but dopey. That’s okay. I have no idea what to say to him anyway. Inside the half-drawn curtain there is a chair. When I

sit there is no room to cross my legs. My feet are flat on the floor, my elbows on my thighs, my head in my hands. I am a scene from General Hospital. I look up and Ed is asleep again.

The Spic who shot him, by accident I should add, but what the fuck does that matter, is in danger. The entire Spic nation, their entire Spic culture is in danger from me. I could blow the fuck’s head off in court and it would be worth the consequences. I’ve planned it all. Just the feel of it calms me. Just planning it keeps me sane. To take from him what he has taken from us, and more. There is a need for more. “I have to get ready for court,” I tell the others when my shift ends and I tear free from the linoleum.

I have two cases today in immigration court. You’ve got to get clear on this. No one in their right mind gives a law school intern a political asylum case. They’ve given me two. Political asylum is to immigration what capital cases are to criminal law; people’s lives are at stake. If my clients lose they are deported, they are dead, one in El Salvador, the other in Nicaragua. Did the folks at Legal Aid think I was the best person for the job? It’s nice to think so but no, that has nothing to do with it. I have these cases because I showed up. This place can’t afford enough attorneys. Reagan hates us. It’s personal with him. Legal Aid in California beat him on a Medicaid case when he was Governor. Then he became President. The man carries a grudge. You’d hope for better but there you go. So some schlepp like me signs up for a poverty law internship and gets to practice on someone else’ life. On the other hand, since we’re scared shitless, interns try that much harder than attorneys. Maybe it evens out in the end.

I complained to the director about getting these cases, how I’m not ready. A heavy-set Jewish man with bad eyes, he might as well have been Nero Wolf tending his orchids. We call him the Hindenburg, “Right, he said. “Right. Hand me those files over there will you.” I’d already lost the argument. I stared at him, reached for his files and realized I was in a whole new world. My lawyerly dreams were becoming a nightmare.

Isabel Alvarez has Mayan features but claims to be from El Salvador. Mayan’s are from Guatemala. “Donde nacio,” I’d asked her again and again in my best high school Spanish. Where were you born? Folks forget what they’ve told you so you ask the same question more than once. I learned this in class. “En que paiz?

“Usulután,” she’d said but there is no country named Usulután.

“La pueblita San Ramon circa la ciudad,” she’d said, but this was no help at all. Who cares about the name of her neighborhood?

“Donde esta Usulután? I’ve looked it up; every country in Central American has a Usulután. It’s like Riverside in the U.S.

Silence. A quizzical look. Was it my Spanish or had it dawned on her this was the fifth time I’d asked the same question? She claims never to have been outside Usulután before, so how in God’s name did she make it to the U.S? But that’s not really the point is it, how she got here. The point is, if she’s lying, she’ll make a fool of me.

There was absolutely no similarity between her story and what I’d been taught about El Salvador in school, read in the press, heard from Dad. He’s been there, not that that means anything. He’ll parrot the foreign policy line till the end of his days.

Still, how am I to believe this woman whose story is telling me more about my own country than hers?

In my last internship I learned that a victim of crime, of any trauma really, begins to relax once they know you believe them, they’re more forthcoming, less fragmented. I must have appeared absurdly strange to Isabel, frighteningly tall and white, in a ratty office building larger than her neighborhood. Why should she talk to me at all, believe that I could help her? But she did. That helps me relax.

This is what I have: Isabel Alvarez, 23, Salvadoran, fears political persecution back home due to union organizing at the Coke factory, left three children with her mother when she fled, university student husband disappeared two years ago, father found hanging in the house last year. Two months later she was gang raped, beaten, cut, threatened with worse. Police protection in Usulután was not an option.

This is what the immigration attorney will argue: Isabel Alvarez, 23, Salvadoran (maybe), fraudulent entry into U.S. Three children back home with mother. Client reports no harm to them since she left, husband’s whereabouts unknown, father dead, possibly criminal activity. Salvadoran government asserts most of the so called disappeared are in U.S. looking for work or in Cuba training for the revolution.

By 11:00 in the morning the D.C. Metro might as well be a music store for all the boom boxes and musicians playing in the echo chambers of its tiled, honey-combed walls. I’d love to do that, be a subway musician singing Phil Collin’s *Another Day in Paradise*, folks walking by to my beat, tossing a dollar or two into the proverbial hat at my feet. Or maybe playing Houston’s *I’m Your Baby Tonight* on my

tenor sax and I know exactly what body moves I’d make to accompany the mood I’m going for. Soon Johnny Carson’s scouts will be down here looking for me. When I see them coming, and I’ll know its them, I’ll do a medley of late ‘80s songs, playing some, singing some. People will stop and sway, some dancing slowly off to the side. But wait, they’re escorting me out, without even asking what I’d prefer to play on the show. In fact, they are lecturing me about the law and licenses to play in the subway and threatening several of us with arrest if we come back. Thank God I studied the law and know what of this is bunk and what is true. “Hey,” I ask before we all disperse, “how does one get onto the Johnny Carson show?” Even the plainclothes police laugh as we part company. I am singing *Another Day in Paradise*, for real because I know the law. I know they can’t arrest me for singing although the irony is, I play a better sax.

The Judge begins promptly by asking if I know the law student who was shot and how he’s doing. “Wrong place, wrong time,” he says. “These things happen. It’s a shame.” He seems to acknowledge the horror and deny it all at the same time. He’s categorized it for himself under “happen, these things just.” For me it is still horrific. It fits no category. These things just didn’t happen where I grew up. I read about them, sure, but was somehow protected. Nobody I knew ever got shot. That kind of shit happened in New York City or overseas.

To the Judge’s questions during Isabel’s hearing I answer that there is no documentation of the rape in Usulután, no doctor’s report. There is no letter confirming the death threat, no one arrested or charged. We have documented, however, the condition of human rights in El Salvador, the treatment of union leaders,

the fact of people disappearing with or without all their body parts. The State Department’s latest Human Rights Report admits death squad activity. These things happen.

Isabel does not mention the rape when she testifies in this courtroom full of men. I cannot get her to say the word though she describes the attackers in detail from the etchings in her mind. She just says they broke in and beat her and she’s pregnant. She offers to show the scars on her arms and legs but who’s to say how she got them. Who’s to say how she got pregnant.

“Counselor,” the Judge says to me, “you have to give me something to hang a grant of asylum on. Without more, we’ve just got hearsay.”

“The applicant’s testimony is consistent with what we know of El Salvador,” I tell him,” with what we know of how dissidents are treated by the government.”

“Yes,” says the government’s attorney, it is all consistent. Too consistent if you ask me. It’s like she read the book or something. Or maybe her attorney did.”

Ed rustles the covers. He is lying on his back. I take this as a good sign even with all the medical paraphernalia. “Hey,” he says. “Hey, I say back. He smiles. “Was it something I said?” he asks in a voice not his own. “Was I eating too loud?”

I know the doctor has talked to him. I don’t know what he said. I don’t know how much Ed remembers of what he said. “Some jackass with fucking bad aim,” I say. “The target was right in front of him. Your Mom’s been in. Did you see her? She can stay with me, you know.”

“My sister’s here too. They’ll get a motel. Fears of animal house; dirty togas lying around.” Ed smiles and closes his eyes. A different nurse sticks her head in and checks the machinery. She offhandedly glances at Ed. I hate her. She gives me a thumbs up and smiles. I think she is the best nurse I’ve met yet. I doze, Ed stirs, I startle, we both go back to sleep. Paul wakes me at 3:00, cramped and wrinkled. “Everything stable?” he whispers.” I tell him there’s been no problems.

Some night,” he says. “Some unforgettable night.”

“At least we were together.” Each of us would rather have been there than not.

“There goes Ed’s semester,” Paul says.

Ed smiles. “Big test ahead, my friends. Big fucking test ahead.” The left shoulder of his hospital gown hangs from his body as if tired of its task. It looks disrespectful. I lean over and ease it back up. We’ll all be tested over the next many months no matter what happens.

“You want to see it?” Ed asks. “Later,” I say, “when it’s easier for you to move.” But it may never be easier. We all know this by now, Ed knows it too, we are pretending. It is the second stage of denial.

“I want a picture of it,” he says.

“You got the bullet?”

“No. Whose kids would I give it to?”

The chemical discoloring of his face and shoulder makes me imagine more vividly what his back must look like. I ask if he is in pain. He says he’s not.

My second hearing begins at 4:45. I need to run and there’s no chance for daydreaming on the rush hour metro. It’s a short preliminary hearing, a pleading. It goes smoothly enough, and yet it too is all wrong. Pablo Metron, 20, Nicaraguan. A self-confessed Contra, the folks we paid to overthrow their own elected government. Reagan’s Iran-Contra Affair is still all over the news. This client’s given me a front row seat. This is all an education for me. I’d thought better of us.

Pablo’s an amputee. He and his brother received death threats from a Sandinista policeman due to either Contra or criminal activities. It is unclear which. It is unclear which is worse. The man’s English is surprisingly good though he’s hesitant to tell me where he learned it. The CIA comes to mind, but I catch myself on the dramatic assumption.

We go through the cordial preliminaries in court. Immigration’s attorney takes a more deferential approach to this client. He doesn’t assume the man is lying but rather asks for his political opinion on the Sandinista government. It’s almost like the attorney is doing my job for me. I have no objections, except to the tone of the proceedings; the feeling that we have all become brothers-at-arms in a struggle against a Communist foe I doubt exists. My client is nothing more than a terrorist. But he’s our terrorist. I feel suckered into a scam, playing a part in Reagan’s need for headlines. The man is stalking my life.

This too might be a reason for giving such cases to interns: we have not yet learned that you can lose what, by every right, should be won, and win what should be lost. Politics, I am learning, has a way of infiltrating the law right down to the lowest level, which is where my cases go to court.

Ed’s listed as unstable, if you call and ask. He keeps slipping in and out. They won’t let us into ICU anymore, only his Mom. What does it mean, the waste of it, the loss? It rolls over me like a river whose current tears up the gravel bar of my life, displacing it. I’m crying for God’s sake, right in the middle of the hallway, I am God-damned crying, tacked back onto the linoleum.

Ed’s legs won’t move. Something is severed between his brain and the lower half of his body. The connections are gone. They don’t fucking work. And that’s the good news. That is the news if he lives. News for you Mr. Puerto Rican rummed-up macho man. Mr. Cool with your hair done up like greased lightning, who couldn’t hit the side of a barn, let alone someone standing right in front of you, but could hit the slim spinal cord of my friend, not an inch wide, not a half an inch, at the spot called T4 and rip the life out of his legs. Nerves, no more than threads, fucked at a distance of feet. A real marksman. A pro. A fucking candidate for the death sentence. A contestant for the chair. When it’s time, I’ll represent you. Maybe Salandra can earn enough to pay my bill. Maybe I’ll do it for free, just for the pleasure of losing. There are a million ways to kill someone.

What was I supposed to tell the Judge who kept on accusing Isabel of variants on, “Well, that’s impossible, how do you expect me to believe that, I’ve never heard of such a thing, things like that just don’t happen?” He found her not credible not because he has proof she was lying, but because he has no proof her world exists; that such things happen, only hearsay. Hearsay is inadmissible. His nerve endings won’t let him admit it. His worldview rebels. A daughter does not go to the market in the

morning and come home to find her father’s torso hanging headless from a sagging rafter. Not on his tax dollar. Not by soldiers we trained. Not by the Democracy we paid for. The problem wasn’t the facts of the case; the problem was his fear of truth; his own self-defense. If what she says is true, what he believes is not. The Judge decides Isabel Alvarez must be lying. He denies her case and his own fears at the same time. There is no legal basis for this.

“You packing it in already? After one defeat?” It’s the Hindenburg. “No,” I tell him, “just cleaning up after the hearings. My desk is a mess.” The Hindenburg’s eyes are the exact opposite of the Judge’s. He is a man driven by something other than fear. It is what I want, those kinds of eyes, the kind that can tell the difference between truth and illusion. I’d prefer not to project myself all over the place just to be tripped up by my own defenses. There is a killer in each of us. It is better to face it. These things don’t just happen.

“I hear you won one and lost one, a draw.”

“Yeah, and both were bad decisions. Justice was not served.”

“That happens. About fifty percent of the time that happens. I guess that’s not bad, 50 percent. Could be worse.”

“It stinks. That’s the best we can offer our clients; you’ve got a 50/50 chance depending on the Judge, the day, the weather, the bias of the political moment. I’m appealing the Alvarez case and getting the judge removed from the bench.”

“Be careful Jack, vengeance can backfire. You can tip the scales without it. We need heavy weights on our side.” He grinned and pulled back from the doorway. I felt the ground react to his step. He’s a good man, the Hindenburg, I can learn a lot.

Knowing nothing more than a bullet’s worth about the Puerto Rican I will let him live, which is different than forgiving him. He has revealed the killing fields in my own desires, my own sleeper cells. What is the difference really between the Puerto Rican and the Judge, the Contra and myself? If we could get away with it, we’d all kill to save our skin, to get what we want or regain what we’ve lost. We can call it defense, blame ourselves on someone else, but murder is murder.

“There were complications,” the ICU nurse tells me. “He’s back in surgery.” Robinson is in the ICU waiting room in his fine suit and goatee, looking like an ad from Lord and Taylor. The man never lets down. I remind myself to give him a break. We all survive the best we can. With him it’s facial hair and clothes.

“There were complications,” he says. I nod and see in his face the same exhaustion I feel in my body. It is unbelievably global; there is nothing moving in us after the last 24 hours, no signs of life. “Do you want coffee?” I ask.

“I’ll wait here for his mom,” he says. “She’s gone to make some phone calls. The guys are getting dinner downstairs. It’s going to be a long night.”

“I’ll get you some coffee.” He gestures, a nearly imperceptible nod, a sag of the shoulder. Somewhere in there he is saying he’s grateful. He just can’t get such things into words. He really is doing the best he can given what he has to work with. “Cream and sugar, a roll?” His body parts aren’t answering.

On the way to the cafeteria I look for Ed’s mom in the surgical waiting room and yet I know that as long as I don’t see her I can keep on pretending. She won’t have needed the nurses to tell her anything to give her the chances between paralysis

and death. She’ll have known the future as soon as she saw her son. Her eyes will know everything. Ed’s mother opens the door to the waiting room. For several seconds she does not see me, but it is too late; I have seen her eyes.

4. Golfing the Ho Chi Minh Trail

1993

It was 1993 when Hank Beckham first read the *New York Times* article about a new golf course opening just west of Hanoi. *Lakeside*, it said, was the first of seven courses slated for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Before finishing the story, he swore he’d golf ‘em all. He’d do it in the order of construction rather than location, which his son Jack took as a sign of self-knowledge.

“Just keep your mind on the course,” Jack said. “The geography could distract you. You might run into one of your own sand traps.”

Hank knew the geography by way of having helped re-contoured it years ago, watching it melt away under napalm sorties.

“Location, location, location,” Jack suggested, “is not what you’re interested in.”

According to the article, Lakeside was one of two courses at the Kings’ Island Golf Club. Nestled in the now-verdant Kings’ Valley, it met all international standards.

“That means no unexploded ordinance,” Jack said. “Unexploded ordinance can be hell on a golf ball. And *visa versa*.”

“Go to hell yourself,” Hank suggested.

The two were not close, had never spent much time together what with all Hank’s wars. Jack was 26, married, on the way to having twins, and intent on becoming an Administrative Law Judge.

“You’re a God damn lawyer,” his father yelled as Jack left to join his mother in the kitchen. “What would you know? When have you fought for your county’s freedom?”

“When have you?” Jack answered as Hank settled back to read about upscale golf carts and women caddies in classical cone-shaped hats trained in pitch-perfect doffer-English.

“For God’s sakes Mom, he’s got a bad ankle and detests flying. It makes no sense.” Jack began carving the dinner roast he’d share with his parents. “After all his wars, Dad still needs the battle, or at least the battlefield. He’s addicted. Golf’s just the next best thing to a skirmish.”

“Not too thick,” Rita warned. She’d long stopped paying attention to cooking technique and the venting of offspring. The recipes were all by rote now, written into her muscles. “He’s getting older,” she said. “It gets his blood going, exercises the warrior in him. Let him be. He’ll lose some weight.”

“But the Ho Chi Minh Trail, for God’s sake, it’s a grave yard. He lost friends there. Don’t you think he did? Think of the Vietnamese.”

Rita said she knew the history, the symbolism, that some things should be sacred. “Yes,” Jack said, “exactly.” And Rita turned to put the potatoes into the microwave.

Still, without his fix, Hank’s withdrawal thing happens. He caves. The melt-down begins with a pain in his right ankle, the one he almost lost on his first AWOL attempt six months into Vietnam. A resolute hardness creeps up the back of his thigh. His back muscles stiffen. They tense to the point of rigidity eventually squeezing off the blood supply to his neck. Then he loses himself.

At least that is how Rita describes it. Loosing himself. She remembers the lostness during his first home leave from Vietnam. Aimless, he couldn’t focus mind or energy, like a child without structure. She’d watch him roam their apartment, then pace, tension finally turning him into a caged animal. He’d storm out with no word to her or anyone else.

He was lost, she said, because she could not imagine Hank acting like this and so it couldn’t be Hank at all, could it? It must be something else acting inside him.

“Let’s do something,” she’d say. Bonnie and Clydes’ playing downtown. Let’s go.”

“Why would I want to see that?” He practically laughed at her, or maybe he did laugh, as if such a thing were beneath him, a degradation he was angry at her for suggesting.

“Then let’s do something else. It was just an idea. You must have some things you want to do.” He sat in their oversized Barco lounge by the phony fireplace accessorized with faux end irons and fireplace tools in their bronze-like stand. She stood in the kitchen doorway, her capri pants not quite suited to her pear-shaped figure, too much worry on her face, or at least what Hank took as worry. Rita might have called it puzzlement, confusion.

“Or we could get some pizza and beer in. How about that?” Before Rita had finished, Hank was up, squeezing her jaw, puckering her mouth into silence.

“Or you could just shut up. Or I could break your jaw. You wouldn’t believe what I can do, Rita, when I want to. I don’t want to go out right now, or eat pizza or drink beer. I want to sit right here, with you someplace else leaving me god damned alone. Got it?”

It didn’t improve much over the years although she learned to leave him alone. He preferred beer with his friends. Oh, oh yes, she knew that he drank unendingly with his friends. It seemed almost an endurance for him to be home until it was time to drink again and then finally to go back to his war buddies who he seemed to miss terribly. That was his first home leave from Vietnam. As far as she knew, he never did call to her from the mud of the battlefield as he’d promised.

A month after his forty-eighth birthday, Hank flew into Noi Bai International in northern Vietnam and headed for the King’s Island courses. Beyond the golden cypress and contoured vegetation he found the dock along Dong Mo Lake with the promised high-speed motor boat to ferry him to *Lakeside*. He’d never been this far north before. His responsibilities ended at the DMZ.

As their boat approached The Kings’ Island Clubs, Hank saw the rock face of Ba Vi Mountain. The brochure the Captain gave him like a door prize when he boarded said Ba Vi was visible from most any of the 866 acres of courses and resorts. *Lakeside* and *Mountain View*, it noted, make up the first 36 hole facility in Northern Viet Nam, pioneering the game in the environs of Hanoi. The lake is Nam-blue, as

they used to call it in the South, and harbors countless islands. The Captain points to where a cultural village is being built to show-case Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

Just as the *Times* described, there is an air-conditioned clubhouse, a driving range with putting greens and practice bunkers, a pool, sauna, and Jacuzzi. Hank knows he’ll have to join up with guys he meets at the hotel or clubhouse, figures they’ll all have war stories and are there for more than golf. He is not the kind to trade memories with old vets, men who returned to Vietnam to get the monkey off their backs. He’s not there to find some part of himself left in a ditch. He wants to play golf. If he wanted war stories, he’d go to the VA hospital, those places are crammed with stories, some told, some not.

“Come on Beckham,” a few doffers say the third day he’s there. “We’ll kill the night at the bar. You too good for that?” He knows they order up companionship. “You got a favorite caddie, Beckham? Someone who helps your strokes?” He’s not interested. Hasn’t been interested since he left Vietnam the first time.

Hank had failed himself in Vietnam but gradually gained the respect of his buddies. He was not brave, nor honorable. His first time out they found him huddled in a ditch. Gave him the name Gully. He saw and did things that would haunt the rest of his life. His heroic self-image dissolved into weeping on the battlefield; the gallantry into fainting. He could never again be honest with his wife or friends, least of all with his children.

Mikey Lombardi was killed within a week of arriving; the rest of Hank’s years in that God-forsaken mud trap of a country, not worth shit to anybody, were for the purpose of revenge. He treated himself to it sparsely at first, then allowed it to

become an addiction, then his addiction became a career. It grew in him like lichen on stone, spreading over more and more surface as one buddy died, then another. It grew in him until all it took was the Vietnamese themselves to tighten his jaw, set his fists clenching and his gut craving blood. They had done this to him; made an animal of him while all along *they* were the animals doing unspeakable things, these foreigners whom Americans had come to give their lives for. He became everything he hated about the gooks so that he could torture as well as anyone, their cries feeding a lust in him he could not name – almost sexual – and never imagined himself capable of. They had done this to him.

It was on the battlefield that Hank first found himself; the good guy and the bad, the hero and the coward, the adventurer and the bed wetter. Off the battlefield he can’t even take a good piss. These things no one knows.

But it is the camaraderie, the brotherhood-on-a-mission that his mind allows him to remember. A kind of filmy façade has formed a cataract of sorts that fogs up everything else. It shrouds the revenge and lets the camaraderie give life meaning. “Remember,” he’ll say if he meets a war buddy, “remember when we pulled Bonders out, the hellfire, all that stench.” The cataract serves as well to blur life’s otherwise utter dailyness. Off the battlefield nothing makes him feel noble, not his children, not his wife, not his work. There is nothing to make up for the smallness of him. In the meantime he has golf.

Vietnam was his first. Then Cambodia. Then Korea after two American soldiers were killed cutting down a tree in the demilitarized zone. In 1980, he was part of Operation Bright Star in the Sinai as part of the Camp David peace accords,

the first U.S. military forces in the region since World War II. Later in the 80’s it was Central America. He met John Negroponte while doing shadow work in Honduras. Should have kept in touch, he thinks. Maybe Negroponte would have hired him after 9/11 when he was National Intelligence Director. All part of the war on terror. How ironic, he thinks. Hire the man with the most experience.

In 1989 it was Panama. Then a country or two in Africa no one even knew America was involved in. He saw combat, if you can call it that, doing groundwork for the 1991 bombing of Iraq’s retreat from Kuwait. Highway 80’s six lanes and all they carried, incinerated for miles. It was like one long junk yard by the end, except for the smell. The smell was nothing like a junk yard. Incinerated tanks and trucks, jeeps, buses. Skin and bones. Lots of skin and bones and boots, lots of burned up boots on the ground. Then he went back to Iraq for a stint in ‘03. He was on the aircraft carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln when George W. Bush landed. God what a sight. America was back. Mission accomplished. He remembers the shiver and tears of glory.

He never made it to Afghanistan or Pakistan. Didn’t matter. “Once you’ve seen war,” he’d say, “they’re all the same. Only the rationales change” He didn’t serve at Guantanamo either and didn’t much care. “Nothing new there,” he said. He’d seen it all before, just less centralized. Less public.

And from time to time, he’d golf the Ho Chi Minh Trail, this course or that as they opened, at least the ones in the North. He played *Dalat Palace* with its tree-strewn jungle vistas and memento wall-hangings of the country’s last emperor, Bao Dai, – his golf clubs to be specific. *Ocean Dunes* was sometime in the late 90’s. In

2003, *Chi Linh Star Golf and Country Club* absorbed his attention. An hour south of Hanoi, it spreads over 800 acres of breathtaking valley if you add in the five-star hotel, 300 villas and the sporting and recreational facilities. The club house sits on a hilltop with a vista of fairways, fast greens, strategic bunkers. And then there are the lakes, the rolling hills, the diminishing rice paddies. The ads say it leaves the golfer with a lasting impression.

Eventually Hank will retire and become the military analyst for WNEWS, with affiliates in 17 U.S. cities. A time or two he’ll have an editorial in the *Washington Post* or *Times*, but he is not a writer. He’s a fighter. At least on the news he gets to work with maps, videos, the facts of war. He can explain the weapons, the technologies, the strategies, the chain of command.

“And now our military analyst Hank Beckham,” the anchor will say. “Fill us in on Afghanistan.”

He’ll have a minute max to do the job. On the screen behind him viewers see various areas of battle, various maps and photos, various world views. Like his co-workers in weather forecasting, all Hank will see is a lighted backdrop. With one hand he’ll point to what he estimates are the environs of Kabul. “Taliban struck the UN offices,” he’ll say, “in another failed attempt to intimidate local and coalition forces.” With the other hand he’ll click a button on a hand-held device and a new view he cannot see comes on the screen. “American forces near the southern city of Kandahar fear a new round of car bombings.” He’ll point to the invisible Kandahar. “Given the terrain and a constraining political environment, here’s their most likely strategy....” It *is* kind of like doing the weather.

In 2009, Hank will play the newly completed Monty Links, the course furthest south so far. It’s used up the most rice paddies and sprawls between Marble Mountain and the East Sea, the first 18-hole course in the Central Coast region. The playing conditions are hard and fast, according to the brochure, the wind blustery.

“Gettin’ close,” Jack will warn as he drops him off at the airport. “Careful.”

Hank isn’t sure what to call the comfort he gets on the golf course. It’s not a question of making sense of things. Everything makes about as much sense as it can. If nothing else it is a balancer, it calms the powerlessness cradling the revenge at his core.

He’d forgotten the South’s shade of green, how it plays off the Nam sun, how it seems a perfect complement to the South’s particular shade of sky. The map in the club house shows a strangely contoured course, veering where it shouldn’t, dipping where he’d expect a rise, banking where he’d expect a straight shot. The place is pot-holed with bunkers.

According to the clubhouse video, the most memorable hole is defined as much by the stunning backdrop as the hole itself. He’s looking forward to it. Marble Mountain, with its mix of vegetation and rock, the video emphasizes, is particularly vivid from Nos. 12, 16, and 17, while the sleek, 3,000-square-metre clubhouse frames Nos. 15, and 18. He’s ready. This return to more familiar ground is surprisingly easy, almost reassuring. It is all so unexpectedly serene; the silence on the course dulls his defenses.

Hank meets his caddie after the video session; she’s all smiles, long sleek hair and charm, a conical hat. “Welcome to Monty Links,” she says, “you play Titleist,

you play Calloway?” He smiles, nods, this is always an awkward moment for him. He doesn’t know how to talk to the caddies here. “Yes,” he says, “Titleist.”

She drives the golf cart. He would have preferred to but says nothing. “First hole, par five,” she says. She produces a wood with its long shaft and bulbous-shaped head. “This driver good,” she says. “You try.”

He does. He takes it, feels the shaft of it. He weighs the head in his hands, walks up to the tee, takes some practice swings, closer, closer. Focus on the ball.

“Watch contour,” she says. “East wind.” She clears debris away.

It is Marble Mountain that displaces him, and long before the 12th hole. He doesn’t belong here. Neither does his caddy. He doesn’t belong home either and suspects her home is a lot different than Monty Links.

He’s never understood any of it on its own terms and is no closer now. But he wants to. Would give his life to. Something in him has known about the façade all along, the cataract too.

The power of him has been reduced to controlling a ball. It feels fitting, a size he can handle, like when he shot a 2 under par on the 3rd hole. He feels like he’s accomplished something and he has, just not what he started out to. He can fire it down the fairway, he can avoid the bunkers, the rough, he can sink it under par. It’s a battle, just against a ball this time, a ball on a battlefield. It is a brief release from his other wars. Without that release he’s not sure who he is. Without that release he may be no one. It’s why he golfs, to give the chaos in him a chance to play through.

He doesn’t even know his caddy’s name. He asks her in Vietnamese just to show some camaraderie. He hasn’t done that in the past.

“Linh Thi,” she says but he’s not sure she’s told him the truth. Maybe they’re not allowed to. But there is a thawing in him, or maybe in her. He’s glad he tried.

They’re on the 9th hole where the web site boasted an abandoned gun emplacement pillbox overgrown with vegetation flanks the tee. It’s a short, downhill par 5 where the strategic question is, according to Linh Thi, “you lay up or go for it?”

The day is perfect; the light, the look of the air, the scent, the greenery. He consults with Linh Thi whose advice so far has been impeccable. They discuss the merits of this driver or that, this iron or that, the bend of this fairway, the bunker that could end it all. There is no rush; there is no pressure as they strategize. And it hits him in a way only the obvious can: a sense that he no longer needs to be who he is not. It isn’t necessary, this duty to be exceptional. It’s gummed up his right leg, the muscles in his back, his neck, his head. He can’t even put it into words for himself but, for the moment, he feels no more than, no less than, on par.

5. Your Buddy’s Back

1995

The parade grounds were emptying, graduates drifting off to join family and friends. Lally joined her husband, Dave Hayes, Jessica Middleton was walking off the field to join them.

“Oh no. Oh God no.” Dave said looking beyond Jessica to mid-field, his eyes a mixture of disbelief and awe. Jessica paled, turned, and saw an over-sized wreath of roses marching toward her, a fluttering gold sash announcing “Congratulations 2LT Jessica Middleton.” Above the wreath, blond hair ruffled in the breeze. Below, her husband’s unmistakable graffitied desert boots struck the beat of a slow march.

“Get away from me with that thing,” she cried. “Get away or I’ll run.” Adam picked up speed. “Halt,” he said. “Halt or I’ll kiss.”

Lally leaned helplessly into Dave, her dress uniform permanently wrinkled after the over-long Officer Candidate School graduation. Tears blurred her vision. Dave doubled over. Jessica hid behind one of them, then the other, turning them like gun turrets. Finally she gave up and stood still for the presentation.

The two couples became friends during the fourteen week course. Jessica was a different light than Lally had seen by before. She refracted differently, illuminated possibilities Lally would not have come to on her own. Jessica was a role model of

sorts, older by a few years having earned a masters in political science before enlisting. She was independent, sure of herself, but not at others’ expense. And while Lally felt she had nothing to offer Jessica, apparently she did. The two began a friendship that would last well beyond OCS.

There was a lot for Lally to admire in Jessica who seemed able to intuit what was genuinely important and ignore mere training trivia, responding with different segments of herself at stake. Whether she failed or triumphed in a ritual test of skill or endurance was unimportant. When her real mettle was tested her response came from an entirely different part of herself. She never competed with others and so had no need to win or lose. She competed only and always with herself and took from the outcome what she needed.

Their relationship was not physical although they’d tested that. It was something quite different, if similar in release. It was an emotional bond both women found unachievable with men. It led to an entirely different quality of knowledge of the other, a union of soul as well as heart. For the physical, they had their husbands. The foursome would use the women’s graduation from the course at Fort Benning, Georgia as an excuse for a vacation.

Lally came up behind Jessica and hugged her. “It’s over.”

“Congratulations to us,” Jessica said, clapping. “I dreaded the ceremony but will adore the pay grade.” Later at dinner, they toasted themselves. Both teared-up. Who knew when they might see each other again. As it turned out, they would go on to serve together twice, once in once in Desert Storm and once in Columbia. After that, Jessica’s career would go no further.

That night in a lumpy motel bed Dave told Lally, “I envy you two, the ease with which you relate. There’s an honesty. I don’t know, men aren’t like that. We don’t have it in us,”

“Oh yes you do. It’s the culture that’s against you, not to mention the military.”

“Are you kidding, we can’t even be that honest with women.”

“You’ve got a point there. You could practice you know. You could practice with me.”

“I’m honest with you.”

Lally looked at him, “I’m not complaining.

“You should. Maybe you should.”

She held him, rocked him gently. Felt the hardness of the muscles in his chest, his thighs, his groin. Why was she taking care of him like this, she wondered, as if he were a helpless child. A victim of some sort. Why did it always come down to this kind of caring. How did he do this to her? Or was it just what turned her on?

“What are you feeling right now?” she asked. Right at this very moment?”

“Just that I love you.”

“How?”

“What do you mean?”

Like, how? Am I your wife, your sister, your mother, your girlfriend?”

But of course Dave could not answer. Whether he knew the answer or not, he could not answer, it was not within him to do so. “I can show you how I love you,”

and he pulled her under him with a strength she was helpless to resist, had she wanted to.

“How is that for love?” he asked, spent, sliding onto his own side of the bed. It was great as far as sex goes, thought Lally. But she did not know how to answer his question either. “It was great,” she said.

The foursome headed out the next day for a hike on the Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail in the North Georgia Mountain foothills not so far from Fort Benning. They’d use Amicalola Falls as an entry point since neither Dave nor Adam had seen it, hike the eight miles to the southern boundary of the Appalachian Trail on Springer Mountain, then spend the night in a cabin.

“I guess this is like mail carriers going for a walk on their day off,” said Adam. “What in heaven’s name are we doing this for. We could be lounging in a bar. Whose idea was this?”

Jessica reminded Adam it was his, and Adam cursed the bunch of them for blindly following. “Since when have you all become sheep to a shepherd?”

“To a Sheep dog, she said. You were determined.

“Yea, we thought you’d bite,” said Lally who afterwards found herself wishing none of them had agreed to this at all.

“You’re supposed to honor me wife, and obey me, but the rest of you can still point out any irrationality I might have.” At the moment the foursome stood in a parking lot looking up at a 729-foot sloping slab of prehistoric bedrock washed by Amicolola Creek. It loomed before them like a megalith. “Jesus,” said Adam, “I’m shrinking fast in front of that thing.”

Dave suggested they at least leave the lot and try the trail. If they got bored, they could search out a similarly prehistoric bar somewhere in town. Three of them joined arms like Dorothy and her companions in Oz, leaving Adam with the back packs. Dave called, “Come on Toto, you bring the packs since you got us into this.”

“Shitheads,” Adam said. “I am the wise and wonderful wizard.....”

He brought the packs to the trailhead, the rest hoisted them on and they headed into the morning mix of people climbing the trail hued out from the surrounding woodlands. They climbed single-file along the right side of the Falls, catching glimpses of it as vegetation allowed, hearing the water crash from outcropping to outcropping, level to level.

“It more like fits and starts than a Niagara,” Lally said when they stopped mid-way for a better look.

They spotted salamanders, a snake or two and eventually crossed over in front of the Falls on a deck-like walk-way. The climb continued on up the left side of the Falls for the final quarter or so.

“Fuck, that’s the second time I’ve tripped,” Adam said. “What’s wrong with these rocks?”

“You okay Adam?” asked Jessica.

“Yup. Fine. Sure-foot is fine. Maybe too much bourbon last night. Who made me drink all that hooch?”

Jessica took hold of Dave’s arm. “If he trips again, let’s take a break. Maybe re-think the long trip.”

“It’s okay, just loose rock. It’s his first time up.”

“It’s not his first time with loose rocks.”

The path rose to the height of the Falls and ended just left of Amicolola Creek, black rock, not more than three feet wide, washed over by an unimposing creek. “I don’t get it,” said Dave, “How does this turn into that,” he pointed toward the edge where the water became foam.

“It’s the fall more than the water,” Lally said. “Or maybe the whole thing together. Little water, big drop offs; it works.”

“Ok, this is the plan,” Adam said. “I’ll lie down across the creek, back from the edge so they can’t see me from below. I figure it will only take one body stretched across it to stop the water. What do you think?”

Dave smiled, nodded.

“The others watch the reactions.” Adam started to take his shoes off. Tourists milled around behind them. “Tell them to stay back, the military has commandeered the site.”

“Please be careful Adam,” Jessica said. “It’s a long way down.”

Lally suggested they keep in mind that wardrobes and bath towels were limited.

“I am not going to roll off, I swear.” Adam took his jacket and shirt off. Would have taken off his pants but Jessica said absolutely no. If they were going to jail it was not going to be for indecent exposure. Adam stretched himself along the top of the Falls and felt the chill feeder-creek building against his back. “Might need you here Dave. Might need a little back-up.”

Tourists were beginning to circle, some looking horrified as if the two men might damage the Falls, others worried the fools might fall over the edge. Others just looked mystified by the antics. Most grabbed their cameras. No one seemed angry, no one yelled for a park ranger. Seemed like everyone was as curious as Adam about what would happen down below when the Falls stopped.

And then they did. Dave twisted his body to shut off one last rivulet and the Falls stopped running.

“Lally cried, “Look, they’re stunned. They’re pointing.” In truth, the only people showing any frustration were those standing on the crossover in front of the falls looking at dripping bedrock.

“Turned off for repair. Just a minute,” yelled Jessica and watched the message being relayed down the path. It was probably just a matter of seconds with the circle of folks at the top yelling and waving and the folks at the bottom yelling and waving back. Others seemed mesmerized by the eerie silence of the mooted Falls.

“Damn, I’d like to see what it looked like at the bottom when the last drops fell,” Lally said.

“They probably think it’s some kind of miracle,” Jessica began. “Could be the second ... Oh Lally, forgive me. I’m sorry pal, I didn’t mean that. It was stupid.”

The backed-up creek built pressure behind the men. “Time’s up,” Adam yelled, realizing they might have done better to plan their escape beforehand.

The gathered crowd didn’t seem to want the show to end though some were concerned a Park Ranger might arrive. Folks at the bottom were sending equally

mixed signals. Those on the crosswalk were beginning to turn back in annoyance, or perhaps for a better view.

“On three,” Adam yelled and waited for Dave’s reply. “On three,” he yelled again and waited. “On three, damn it.”

“On three,” Dave yelled. Suddenly, both men rolled away at the same instant, and the backed-up water plunged over the top. The Falls reclaimed itself as the foursome moved on, shaking hands with onlookers as they did so, as if grateful for their support in completing an assigned task. Both men were soaking wet.

The trail crossed a road and moved into thick forested woodland with good tree cover and dense underbrush of dwarf iris, star chickweed, rue anemone, trillium, the last of the violets, and bluebells. Jessica took a notebook from a side pocket and began noting various trees, flowers and fungi. “This was the trail of tears,” she said. “The whole area was Cherokee. They’d have known what was edible or not. Can you imagine, growing up knowing all of that, like we know brand names.

Lally’s cell phone rang. She lagged behind the others to answer it, finalizing plans for an end-of-week stay-over at Potomac Point with Dave at The Cedars.

Jessica waited.

“Sorry,” Lally said.

“No problem. So, a Cherokee woman lived so deep in the woodlands she didn’t know the others had left. She wasn’t found until eight years after the others were all herded up in 1838. Can you imagine that, being the only one of your kind left. Just like that. You know bad things are coming and then, overnight, your people are gone, rounded up without you.”

“We’re set,” Lally yelled up to Dave.

“Come on” she urged Jessica, “come with us this once. You’ll like it. And if you don’t, what’s to lose, you’ll have a weekend in the country.”

“Country? You don’t mean farms and hay bales do you. You mean estates and landed gentry, gated communities.”

“It’s a prayer center for God’s sakes.”

“It’s not a prayer anything Lally, it’s an agenda, I just haven’t figured out if it’s political or economic, or both. But it’s not for me.”

“You’re wrong. It’s quiet time and Bible Study. Come on Jess, its restful and...

“It’s folks looking to skip rungs on the career ladder and wanting God’s blessing doing it, but mostly it is an ungodly mix of military and religion. I don’t buy it.”

“So go shopping instead.”

Jessica stared at her. “Let’s not argue. You like those folks go for it. Dave, call your wife off.”

“We’re due in by 3:00, Thursday afternoon,” Lally called.

“Perfect,” Dave yelled back, and waved at her over his head.

“Oh that,” Adam noted. “That again.”

Don’t start,” Dave said. It’s just a little rejuvenation. You could use some yourself.”

“My wife rejuvenates me, thank you.” And with that Adam stumbled over a rock.

“That Cherokee woman,” Jessica told Lally, “when the Georgia Guard came back through here in 1838, clearing out the stragglers from the long march, they missed her even then. It’s true.”

Lally picked a sprig of milkweed and chewed on it. The two chatted about the ceremony, assignments, families, the men a-ways ahead, but still visible. Seldom did the foresome meet anyone else on the trail. They walked in silence, then something changed in the atmosphere around Jessica.

“What?” asked Lally.

“God’s not on the battlefield, Lally. That is why it’s hell. God has nothing to do with it. You have to stop the romanticism. We’ve probably more in common with the enemy than we’d care to know. Scares the shit out of me.”

“Okay Jess, thanks. I appreciate it. We just don’t agree.”

“But it’s more than that. It’s what it’s doing to you. Don’t let them make you see in black and white. We get enough of that from the military. We better get some balance from God.”

“Okay Jess, thanks.” Lally said again and walked on ahead. “Adam, your wife is driving me crazy.”

“Me too,” he said, “but for different reasons – I hope.”

Jessica watched Lally catch up to Adam and tuck her arm under his. It was all in fun, they walked arm and arm, talking, laughing now and then. It was a good day. Birds of prey rose up from an unseen nest and rattled the breeze with their wings. Something rushed by in the underbrush unseen.

Lally felt immersed in it all. Pebble and stone set loose by hikers on an upper trail rolled down the embankment to her right. Some hit the trail, then more. A rock followed.

Adam jerked back from her then pushed her hard into the wooded embankment where she bounced against a tree before toppling into the underbrush. He turned in the direction they had come and crouched down on the path, his low guttural sounds a warning to stay clear. Lally saw Adam’s right foot slip over the top of the cliff, a shear Paleozoic drop into God knows what. She watched him there, saw in his face that he had already left them.

Jessica did not go to her husband. Dave was closer, the one in a position to help. “Stay right there,” he said to her. “Don’t move.” He looked at Lally who signaled that she was fine.

Both women knew better than to make any noise, send any sound back through the filters of time and space to Adam, hunched down, staring through opaque eyes, growling, balanced on a dirt path narrower by far than Amicolola Creek. This was more than a bad war memory, the kind made dramatic in war movies. This was a full flash back. Adam had entered another reality, was embedded in the hell of another time and place, of other sounds and smells. He had left Amicolola Falls, the Appalachian Trail, Springer Mountain.

“Adam, buddy,” Dave said, kneeling a distance from his friend. “You’re here. In Georgia. Jessica just graduated. She’s here waiting for that wreath of roses.” Adam couldn’t hear him and Dave knew it. He positioned himself between Adam and the cliff without reaching for his friend’s foot. He wouldn’t lift it back onto the cliff

for fear Adam might start defending himself and Dave had no idea how this flashback would act itself out. Still, he needed to be squarely between the man and the cliff, ready to push them both back from the edge if necessary. All the while Dave kept up the patter so he could tell the second his friend began to return, registered awareness. And then the patter would turn serious.

“So, here we are in the middle of nowhere with these two lovely women, walking along, and we’re going to be fine buddy. It would help if you cooperated. If you brought your foot back from the cliff. And if you don’t snap out of it soon, your wife’s gonna have my head.” Nothing, no sign of recognition or awareness, but no physical movement either.

Jessica neither spoke nor moved closer. Her instinct was to go to Adam, to drag him further from the cliff side, but she knew better. Dave was the first responder. He was in charge. When he needed her he’d let her know.

Something passed over Adam’s face. Dave could not tell if it was awareness or a shadow. But there was a change, however imperceptible, he was almost sure. Something passed over. “It’s okay Adam, you’re safe. We’re safe. Can you hear me?” Another slight movement of the lidded eyes. A tremor of the hand.

“You can hear me now can’t you? Jessica would sure like you to talk to her. She’s right here.” There was a jerking motion, a release of tension or the wish to harm? Dave braced himself, half stood, then Adam’s eyes opened and he began to focus.

“He’s all yours,” Dave motioned to Jessica and moved out of the way. “He’s all yours love. Your buddy’s back.”

The four of them sat scattered on the embankment for more than an hour, killing time with small talk, avoiding a decision. “So what’s the plan,” Jessica finally urged. “We want to continue, take a break, what?”

“I’ve said I am fine,” Adam insisted. “The cabin’s still a ways off, we need to get going,” He stood and hoisted his pack. Jessica looked at Dave. “You had a bad time there for a moment,” he said. ”How’s your energy?”

“Fine, I’m fine. A little tired maybe but fine. Let’s get going.” The others weren’t so sure.

“Come on,” Adam started walking, annoyed with them. He tripped over a root, Jessica startled, gasped. “Fuck this,” he yelled. I’m moving out.”

“He’s going to tire out,” Dave said, “and I don’t want to spend the night in the woods.”

Jessica agreed, “And he’s in one bitchy mood.”

“Catch up with him, Jess,” Lally suggested and we’ll figure something out. See if he’d consider turning back after a few more miles. At this point, I’d sure prefer a hotel tonight rather than a cabin.”

Neither man’s clothes were entirely dried out and what had felt refreshing hours ago had become the slog of walking in soggy pants mixed with mud.”

“Fuck it,” Dave said. “He’s a good man who deserves to get clear of this.” They walked the trail in fear of a shout from Jessica, their arms around each other. “Look Lally, this trip is over. Let’s be honest. He’s embarrassed, we’re spent, he may get mad, but there’s worse things that could happen tonight.”

And Adam did get mad, furious at himself and the others. Still, the majority ruled and he couldn’t overcome that argument. It was as much for their sake as his, they said, and Dave admitted the soggy pants had gotten old, a little too much like work.

The two men led the way out, in silence at first, then gradual conversation. At times one man’s arm would be around the other’s shoulder. At times one would smack the other’s back or head. There was some laughter but not much. Not much at all. They walked the miles like this, crossed back over the Falls, the coming sunset a beautiful distant setting of the sky. Crossed back in front of the Falls. “Think of the power we had today,” Dave said. “We stopped the Falls. We survived a flashback. Not bad at all for one day.”

“The first was easier.”

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it.”

“But wetter.”

Humor was health to Dave. “You’re a good man, Adam. Jessica owes you a wreath.

Behind them Jessica was in tears and perhaps that was why Dave had taken Adam on up ahead, to give her leeway. Perhaps she wasn’t supposed to need it, this watery release of terror, this washing from her eyes, at least, the site of her husband’s foot slipping over the side, but she did. “This is going to continue,” she said, “this is going to be a part of our lives.”

“Is he on meds?”

“Yes, and therapy. See how effective it all is. Sorry to take the gloss off graduation.”

“Dave says the enemy keeps killing even after they’re dead. He says that’s the sign you got a bad guy, when he keeps killing.”

“Takes your breath away.” Jessica said, crossing back over the top of the Falls. “That was good, wasn’t it, stopping the Falls.”

“Feels like all the water is in the air now. No wonder their clothes didn’t dry.”

“What if it’s not the bad guys who keep killing?” Jessica asked. “What if it’s the good guys? Like the Cherokees? We were the bad guys then?”

They saw the two men walk the crossway below, stopping and looking this time toward the lower section of Falls. Lally had the fleeting thought to throw something down to get their attention then just as quickly caught herself. “Will you stay on tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’ll leave that up to Adam. It will be good for him to make the decision.” Jessica looked out from the top of the Falls to see beyond the mountains to the piedmont, an entirely different geology thrown against the continent by the same fracturing force that helped form the Atlantic Ocean. “We are so small,” she said, “and asked to live so large. It’s not fair, do you think? Who needs the dead to kill us, we do it to ourselves.”

8. Advanced Training I

2001

Jack and Karen’s 10 year old twin Molly won her place at the National Spelling Bee with the word “*casquetel*.” When the student before her missed, Molly says, she knew exactly where he’d gone wrong. “*Casquetel*,” she repeated after the judge, then paused. Someone sneezed, another coughed; the audience always did these things in the empty moments when tension was at its worst. Molly says she heard her twin, Sarah, giggle.

“*Casquetel*,” she said again and spelled out “*c-a-s-q-u-e-t-e-l. Casquetel*,” she repeated. There was a pause as the audience made sure, then a burst of applause.

All these months later, Molly is making up a song about casquetel as she and her Dad wait at Chicago’s Union Station for Grandpa Hank. “*Casquetel*,” she sings on three notes, “I can tell if you can tell and if you can’t then go do hell.”

“Molly,” her Dad says, “Knock it off.” He draws her to him with one hand and with the other crinkles the wrap on a newly purchased package of sliced pepperoni in his jeans pocket. It is the weekend of the big Bee-Off as he calls it much to Molly’s disgust, the finals. He knows she is nervous. Today they pick up Hank at the train station. Tomorrow they will go to Chicago’s O’Hare to pick up Rita flying in from Florida and Lally from Colorado Springs. The pepperoni is for her.

Hank’s train is late. No matter how many times Hank’s train is late, he insists on travelling by rail. Jack remembers when it meant the end of family vacations. Seemed like every train they rode as kids went through Chicago’s Union Station for the sake of a connection. No one wanted to waste time in Chicago when they lived in St. Louis and were heading to New Orleans. But Hank loathed civilian airports, always had. It was the cattle-drive atmosphere, he said, the herding into shoots. Pretty soon they’d be knocking passengers on the head to daze them for the final search. Give him the tracks.

Jack must have been around Molly’s age when his Dad, quite without warning as far as he can remember, drove to Baltimore’s train station rather than the Baltimore-Washington Airport everyone else thought they were going to. Dad said something like, “You don’t mind, do you Hon? I mean I’m not gonna get in that much later than you and the kids and you won’t have me complaining about everything under the sun the whole trip.”

Living in Maryland at the time, the family was headed to North Carolina for vacation. Hank got out, grabbed his bag from the trunk, and leaned into the open passenger window.

“Stop kidding around and get back in the car,” Rita said as if she thought it was a joke. “We’ll miss the flight.” She smiled back at the kids.

“I just can’t do it Hon.”

“Can’t do what?”

“The airplane.”

“You bought the tickets.”

“I’ll get a refund. I just can’t jam my legs behind one more damn plane seat with a complete stranger reclining between them. I just can’t.” He knew when his train left, Jack could tell, the way he was already half turned toward the train station. He’d been rushing to catch his train all along, the rest of them rushing to board their plane.

“What about me and the kids at the airport, on the plane? Mom asked and hissed something just between the two of them. “You could have told me before we bought the tickets. Or maybe before we climbed in the car,” she added.

“I know, I know. I’d kill me if I were you. But there’s no time. I’ll make it up. I owe you.”

“You go to hell and get your own self from the station to the hotel on the way.”

“Can I go with Dad,” Jack asked from the back seat. “Please, Mom.”

“You kids hop-to,” Dad said in his most commanding voice. “Help your Mom out. I’ll meet you at the hotel and its ice cream and a swim for desert.”

“Oh,” said Lally, “treats.”

“Treats,” Jack repeated. “Dad is so cool.”

For the next two summers Mom refused to go on family outings, even weekend overnights. It’s part of the family lore shared at reunions over camp fires and deserts. “I’ll just wait for you here,” she’d say.

They’d no doubt tell the story again this weekend once everyone was together, that and plan the miniature golf outing. Hank would insist on finding a place to play,

even near Chicago. He could beat anyone at miniature golf. Rita on the other hand talked a good game but was more of a putter. She’d flick and fluff at the Astroturf, talk to parents waiting for their kids to play through, drink her wine-cooler in a Styrofoam cup. It could take her eight strokes on a par five hole.

“He missed. He missed,” Jack remembers Lally shouting that same North Carolina Vacation, dancing around on the green like a stupid fairy princess. Made him look like a fool until he’d stuck a putter between her ankles. She was down before the gasp in her throat turned into a scream, her two front teeth hitting hard against the edge of the cup.

He’d sensed a thickening in the air behind him and then a hand connected with his right ear. Before realizing it was his father, Jack was up and swinging. Hank grabbed him, tossed him toward the lodge. “Git going and don’t even look at the pool. Get a bath and get to bed. I see you again I won’t be so nice.”

Mom stood by pressing the Styrofoam cup against her lips as if to keep them shut. She shook her head, looked like she wanted to say something but couldn’t or wouldn’t. Say he’s an idiot, Jack thought. Say he didn’t know the whole story. She could get back at Dad like that if she wanted to. And Jack thought she might want to.

Jack saw her hold a wad of tissues to Lally’s upper lip. “We’ll stop the bleeding, honey, then take a look at those teeth. They’ll be fine, you wait and see.”

Sometime later Hank asked Jack if he wanted to swim laps and the boy agreed, sensing a truce, liking the withdrawal of the pool ban. But there was no apology from Hank. Nothing to let Jack off the hook. Nothing to show him they could be wrong together. No shared emotion as they separately swam.

“Who wants pizza” Hank asked when they got back to the lodge. Rita was rocking Lally, drippings from the plastic-covered ice cooling the girl’s shoulder.

“With extra pepperoni?” Jack insisted.

“Yes,” lisped Lally.

“With extra pepperoni!” Dad said.

Later, in his dreams Jack saw the biggest slice of pepperoni ever. It hung from a branch that hung from a tree. This surprised him. He hadn’t known pepperoni grew like that. The whole tree was filled with slices but this one was the biggest. He knew he could eat it if he wanted. It was there for him, he wouldn’t get in trouble. But when he tilted his head back to take a bite he had no teeth. They were gone. And then more fell out which really scared him. Then Lally was there biting some meat off and handing it to him. She didn’t ask, just took over. The two of them rolled themselves up in the biggest slice, laughing and laughing and rolling and rolling.

Jack and Lally recount this dream on the rare times they get together. It’s gotten so that Lally remembers it as her own. Later, at the airport, he’ll give her the package in his pocket. She’ll give him one as well.

The train arrives, a mammoth nose heading around a curve, metal screeching, whistles blowing. Jack sees Hank among the descending passengers salutes then tries to hug him, misses and everything is awkward. They shake hands. “Car’s this way,” Jack says pointing. “How was the trip?”

He’d gained weight since Jack saw him last, but was fairly taught and trim. He moved slower, probably because of his ankle more than age. Hank wore his trade-

mark chinos and tan crew-neck sweater over a dark T-shirt, and loafers. He looked more dignified than commanding, Jack thought.

“And here’s my Molly,” Hank said. “I’d never have recognized you after two years. What are you, ten by now, eleven? And still shy?”

She shook her head but her eyes were hesitant and her feet cocked as if ready to run. She didn’t look like she remembered him.

He swooped her into a bear hug. Jack heard the air gasp from Molly’s lungs. “Hang on Molly,” he cried. This is your grandfather. You may not remember him.”

A noise came from Molly’s direction. Jack thought she’d said “hi,” but maybe it was “help.”

“Okay, Dad, she’s gotta breathe. Remember to breath, Molly.” Jack patted his father on the back. “Thanks so much for coming, Dad. Molly is thrilled.”

“If we don’t spend time with her soon, she’ll be grown and gone before we know it. Ain’t that right Miss Spelling Bee?”

“Luggage,” a Porter called and signaled Hank. The two shared a laugh, money, and an old clasp-top brown leather bag appeared. “It was great. It’s always great,” Hank said. “Don’t know why more folks don’t travel by train.”

“Their always late,” Jack suggested.”

“Life happens late. Never killed anybody to wait a few minutes.”

Jack was tempted to respond but didn’t. His reservations about this family visit keep interfering with his genuine pleasure. It means a lot to Jack that his family is coming in for Molly’s big day. He wants them to know that.

That evening Hank takes Molly to an empty room in the family’s hotel suit to

practice her words. “Ok, tell me how this works,” he says.” And she does. She explains how she’ll be given a word to spell, how it will be repeated, how she can ask for it to be used in a sentence or defined.

“And where are the other bees sitting?”

“They’re students, Grandpa, not bees. They sit behind the speller. The speller has to come up to the microphone and the rest of us are behind them on risers.”

“So you can’t see their faces when they spell? And they can’t see your face either, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Molly’s eyes widened and her tender brows arch.

“OK kiddo, then we have a two-pronged mission. It’s like a war, them or us, black or white. That makes everything else simple, right? First we work on attitude, then on strategy.

“Work on your body language. Don’t worry about your face. No one is paying attention to your face. But your backside’s gotta show you’re a winner. No fear, psych ‘em out. Got it?”

“Got it Grandpa.”

Molly began to walk as if her balance was off; her chin jutted out and high, her shoulders straight, her back arched. With every step her arms swung with attitude. Hank told other family members the rough edges would wear off. Jack grew increasingly concerned not wanting Molly to appear as if on dress parade at the spelling bee.

“Sorry, you’re out,” cried Hank. Next, please,” and Molly walked toward the jerry-rigged mic on a broomstick. “Irascible” said Hank, “irascible.”

“Irascible,” Molly said.” I-r-r-

“Heads up. Up.”

“a-s”

“Back straight. Look me in the eye. Right here, see my fingers, look right here.”

“a-b-l-e.”

“Hands at your side. None of this picky stuff. Pull your butt in. Leave your skin and clothes alone. They’ll notice that. It gives them courage. You wanna psyche ‘em out don’t ya? No fear.”

“Irascible.”

“Great.”

“For God sakes, Dad, she spelled the word wrong.” Jack stood in the doorway, snuck up behind them after Hank had declared strict privacy. Jack was out of bounds.

“You’re out of bounds, son. You know the rules. Want us to find someplace else to practice?”

“I want Molly relaxed enough to spell the words she already knows and to learn the ones she has trouble with. And I want her to enjoy herself, to be as relaxed as possible for the preliminaries tonight and the finals tomorrow.”

“I want her to win. Don’t you want to win, Molly?”

The child stared at the space between her father and grandfather, arranged herself and walked straight through the space and out the door, her arms swinging and her gait more of a parade marshal’s strut. “I’m hungry,” she said.

9. Advanced Training II

2001

Jack watches Lally walk toward him from the far end of O’Hare’s Concourse “E”. Her gait is awkward, like Molly-in-training. Her face is uneven, out of kilter. She gives the appearance of being entirely crooked. When she reaches Jack she extends her hand as if to warn him off. “Mending rib,” she says and blows a kiss. Jack pulls the package of pepperoni from his pocket and at the same moment Lally motions for him to reach into her fatigue jacket. “Get it, will you,” she asks. There is magenta crinkle ribbon curled and hanging from the top of the pocket. He pulls at it, gives her a kiss, and they exchange their gifts. It may be silly but the ritual gives them time to adjust to each other. Jack unwraps his and they begin eating the salty slices of meat.

They’ll playfully argue during the weekend about whose dream it really was. It may be the one piece of common ground between them. They may not have spoken in years, or written, but they will greet each other with their gifts first thing, before saying hi, or giving the ritual, distant hug. For both of them, the exchange seems to wipe away the interference since the last time they were together.

Still, family events are not Lally’s strong point. She feels drained by the unspoken expectations of her parents, and Jack’s unexpressed judgments. It isn’t a welcoming feeling and this time she has arrived with a muddy sense of failure already in place.

“How are the folks?” she asks a little too quickly, forestalling Jack’s questions about her injuries. She does not ask about Karen. She has learned not to. How Jack could have married someone so prone to illness Lally has yet to understand. And yet Jack insists there is no difference between what he has to deal with and what Lally’s husband, Dave, has to deal with; both wives are safe at home one minute and in danger the next. But in Lally’s case, Jack insists, it is by choice, by her own free will. Lally knows Jack will remind her of this at least once over the weekend.

She thinks Jack will never understand how duties can be in conflict but still honorable. Nope, he’d say, join the army or get married and have children. Not both. Not another generation of broken-families thinking they are whole. Thinking they are normal.

Lally understands this. She knows where it comes from, where it settles in Jack when he looks at her children, how it riles his views of right and wrong and family. But she is tired of explaining herself and resents the expectation that she should. So she no longer asks about her sister-in-law, it doesn’t take the conversation in a good direction. She’ll wait till she sees Karen. By themselves, the two women are fine.

“Mom’s in baggage,” Jack says. “We’ll pick her up and get a drink. What happened to you?” Trying to be helpful, he takes her shoulder bag and her ribs rebel from the shifting weight.

“Careful, careful!”

Jack grimaces. “Sorry.”

“You’ve bagged Mother? For God sake’s Jack, where’s your normal subtlety?” Lally looks him straight in the face for the first time in this as yet brief visit and smiles.

Dave is not with Lally. Who knows where he is. He is often someplace other than with his wife, it’s become a source of concern for her parents. If he’s not with her, no one asks where he is because Lally says she doesn’t know and whether or not she does, no one wants to put her on the spot. It is always the polite, “is he well? Yes? Okay then, let’s move on.”

Jack tells her the Queen Bee is all a-dither. “The rest of us drones are doing our best. Mom has been an unexpected gem.”

“Something will happen, just wait, there will be a crises,” she says.

“Could very well be. So what happened, and when? It knocked you off kilter didn’t it?”

It happened when Commander Joe Block eased himself into Lally as if exhausted by the force of his own foreplay, or suddenly soothed by his control of her as his body weight bore down. His right hand tight around her throat, lifted her chin,

closing her mouth, his left pushed against her shoulder for leverage and a final, if unnecessary, measure of control. “Fucking bitch,” he repeated. “You fucking bitch.”

With her head pushed back by Block’s grip, the blood from Lally’s nose seeped into her throat. She twisted and coughed to keep from choking, slightly spattering his face. When she had the chance, she bit his forefinger. He slapped her hard, pulled her head back further by her hair and engorged the violence within her.

He was coming again. His rigid body a battering ram against her own, his flesh pouring over her. His mouth was by her ear, his animal grunting deafened her. She tried to turn her face. It was like being enveloped by a snake, all muscle thrusting to devour her. She did not dare open her eyes for the sight of him. He had already flooded her senses. Now his arms closed around her head pressing it down into his chest as if she were his sport and he the quarterback.

“Clean up,” Block said afterwards, tossing down a hand towel and indicating a series of spots on the plank floor. He locked the door when he left his tent-office in bombed out Bosnia. Lally lay on the floor though she wanted to get up, to be gone in case he returned. It was as if her body and will had disconnected, as if they no longer could communicate.

Her right arm was useless; it lay as if sprung from its hinge sending shock waves through her at the least movement. She assumed a rib was broken as well from the sharp stab of bone against body when she tried to sit. She leaned over and vomited on the spot Block had told her to clean up, the physical retort sending her back again against the floor.

Lally sensed no one would come to the door, no one would knock or enter. The clerks knew, she thought, they know what he does in here. What she didn’t know was when he would return.

“A training accident in Tuzla,” she tells Jack, in northern Bosnia, and laughs it off in her usual way. “On the bright side, I’m stateside for the big Bee-Off.”

“How was Bosnia otherwise?”

“Never got out of Tuzla. We were support mostly. The NATO-led Stabilization Force after the Dayton Agreement. By the time I got there we were *Operation Joint Forge*. Did my usual logistics with contract workers. We were restricted to base a lot so I didn’t see much else, didn’t want to really.”

As Jack and Lally move with the crowds, she notices passers-by glancing at her, giving a nod in support or a shake of the head in disgust, as if her uniform itself defined her. Some wave, a few say “thanks,” some curse. It’s all projection. Everything is projected onto the uniform, whatever the onlooker already believes. She wonders if Jack notices, if he sees the mixed signals, if he even cares.

“Tuzla must have been magnificent,” she says. “It was their educational center, the industrial core, some of the streets were mosaics. There’s a salt lake in the middle of its central park. Do such places ever recover?”

Jack pulled Lally by her arm toward a walk-way to Concourse D. She came near to pushing him into the wall. “Jesus Jack, watch it will you.”

He was noticeably embarrassed. “What a fuck-up,” he said. “Jeeze Lally, I’m sorry, my mind’s on the Bee. You want to sit for a while, take a break.”

“Let’s just get out of here.”

They found Rita sitting near the appointed baggage carousel and Lally shifted into a pain-free, more pliable self. “Okay Mom, there was an accident. I’m recovering. I’m stateside. I’m here. Stop imagining the worst.”

They hugged, barely. Lally stepped back. “I want you checked out by a doctor, Rita said. “Come back to Florida with Dad and me and let our doctor check you out.”

“Yeah,” said Jack, grinning. “Do that.”

“Not going to happen,” Lally said. “I will tell you exactly what is wrong so you won’t be making things up in your mind. Broken nose, dislocated jaw and shoulder, bruised eyes, cracked rib. That’s it. Three months ago and healing on schedule.”

“Well, I don’t know, said Rita. Don’t like the looks of it.”

“She doesn’t like the looks of it,” said Jack.

Lally asked where Miss Bee was. “She didn’t come with you?”

“At the hotel,” Jack said, “In training with Dad. We gave her the option to come but the two of them have something going. She skated through the preliminaries last night. Then Dad apparently saw some rough edges at the semifinals this morning so the two are working through lunch. Molly seemed okay with it. You may find her behavior a little odd. She’s been with him a lot this week”

Two weeks before the rape Lally had complained to Block about a soldier stripping naked on a mess hall table and dancing, and, she said, there were continual

problems at the women’s shower and on guard duty at night. She could let some of this kind of thing go, she’d told him, but there were limits.

He’d shown her she was wrong, there were no limits.

From her position on the floor, Lally turned onto her side, coaxing herself to a sitting position by grasping the leg of an upholstered chair. She caught site of herself in an over-turned desk mirror, the blood, the broken nose, the tilted jaw. There was no way to fix this, to hide it. Eventually she left through a jerry-rigged back hallway. Folks might see her and figure she’d had an accident or been in a fight. She’d keep her head down and wave them away.

Three women and sixty men shared her canvas tent barracks. Hardly anyone was there in the middle of the day. Cots were in rows an arm’s length apart. Pornography was the favored wall art and sexual harassment the common language of the men. It reminded Lally of Jack and his friends in high school and was no different from basic training. The first time in basic when a drill sergeant yelled, “Does your pussy hurt or something?” Lally literally froze in mid-step, tripping up two people behind her. The marching rhymes were even worse.

Somehow she’d thought it would be different during deployments. It wasn’t. Deployments were just more or less of the same. But in Tuzla, for the first time, she’d actually felt endangered.

She headed for her bunk. Ivory Pearle from Newark was the only person close-by.

“My arm, careful,” Lally said as Ivory helped her lie down.

“Who did it, Lally? Just like this, in the middle of the day? Who the fuck did it?”

“My rib and my arm. It was a training accident.”

“My first was in Somalia” Ivory said. “And her’s was in Germany.” She nodded toward Jennifer Raines’ bunk. “I don’t know about the other women on base, but let me tell you Honey, if they say it never happened to them, their lying.”

“It was an accident.”

“Idiocy,” said Ivory who Lally did not think liked her much. “You on contraception?”

“No,” Lally said. My husband and I have a pact, he doesn’t use anything when he’s deployed, and I don’t either. It’s added protection from messing around.”

“Well, that’s a new one. You want the morning after pill or something. Your pact won’t help you at the moment. You religious or something, Honey,” Ivory asked, you spends a lot-a time with your bible. Thank God you weren’t on the battlefield, that’s worse.”

“What?” Lally asked. What . . .

Twenty minutes later a Medic arrived who Ivory called Sista. As soon as the Medic saw Lally, she knew.

“You must think I’m some kind of fool, girl,” she said after hearing Lally’s accident routine. The others may be but I’m not. Don’t you think I’ve seen this all before? You think you’re the first. She examined her internally, carefully. None of this was easy, but it could have been much worse. Lally knew Pearle must have made sure the medic would be a woman.

“Did he threaten you if you said anything?” the medic asked.

Lally was silent.

“You want a morning after pill?”

“She doesn’t like pills,” Ivory said.

“I need you to sit up now, come on. Let’s have a look at that jaw. I’ll straighten your nose and bandage it, but the jaw may need a visit to the hospital. And you have a decision to make, Captain. The sooner the better. Ivory can help you in the shower. I don’t want you in there alone.”

The medic bound her broken rib then stood behind Lally, reached her arm around in front of the crumpled woman’s chest and said, “Hold tight now, hold onto my arm.”

Before Lally could respond the medic wrenched her shoulder back into its socket. She’s, she’s ripped it off, Lally thought before the searing suddenly collapsed into relief. But her rib seemed to burst her side. She gasped. Tried to catch her breath, and passed out.

Lally considered reporting the rape. Ivory Pearle said she might not want one bad experience to ruin her career. But really, her career was not the problem. Dave was the problem. He would kill Block. She continued to blame her injuries on a training accident and put in for a transfer based on the visible, verifiable ones. As required, the request went to the first person in her chain of command, Joe Block.

And so she would continue for an undetermined amount of time seeing Commander Joe Block every day. Reporting to him as required. Following his orders.

Chicago’s Carrollton Suites was a new addition to the Gold Coast in 2000. For some reason that escaped Jack, the Spelling Bee organizers felt a simple motel, say the Travel Lodge or the Holiday Inn, would no longer do. “If you like neon, you’ve love this,” Jack said as he, Lally, and Rita entered the posh foyer. “Dad and Molly have commandeered a conference room for their own use. We’ll stop in and surprise them if they’ve not already been evicted.”

Grade school children, some in uniform, some not, flooded the lobby, the elevators, the halls. Teachers and parents too tired to keep up dragged themselves behind their wards. “How do you spell relief?” Jack asked. “No kidding, I just saw the sign on the pharmacy window.” He quipped that every school with a participating Bee must have let out for the day. “Who can afford all this? Not us, that’s for sure. But somehow we do. Somehow we all do. Do-Bees.”

Their bags went on ahead by way of a bell-hop dressed like medieval royalty. The threesome walked down a hall to the left of reception along a burgundy carpet bordered in bronze. Mahogany-framed store windows lined the left wall, punctuated by polished glass. Shoppe windows displayed evening wear, books, a walk-in humidor, a wine shop, snacks and sodas, a pharmacy. The second over-seized mahogany door on the right opened onto Conference Room B, a large, spacious area more like an auditorium than a conference hall. A distance in front of them stood Molly, center stage yelling letters out to a nearly invisible Hank Beckham motioning to her from just behind the third row of chairs. Sarah sat on the stage behind her sister pretending for the millionth time to be the other spellers. Grandpa was paying her an hourly wage for this.

“She doesn’t like us to call her a Bee,” Jack said. “So be warned.”

Karen greeted them from the back row. The four waited until Molly finished the word *subterranean* and in return for her correct spelling, they burst into applause and headed toward the stage. Sarah jumped off her stool and met them halfway.

Rita, spokeswoman for the family, announced that Aunt Lally had been in an accident, but was okay. “We’ll have to save our hugs for later, but kisses are fine.”

“Miss Bee,” yelled Lally, then caught herself. “Molly, you’re doing great.”

“I’m not the Bee, the contest is the Bee. Hi Aunt Lally. What happened to you?”

From the stage Molly watched her family come together in hugs, hoots, and back slaps. She gave them enough time and then called, “Don’t forget me,” at which point the entire huddle eased its way onto the stage and around the Queen Bee herself.

“I am so proud of you,” Lally said. “Don’t get mad at me, but you are my very favorite Bee.”

“You can call me a Bee but no one else can.”

There is something in Lally that will not let her assign blame to authority, military or religious. They have too much responsibility, she thinks, or too much stress, too many people depending on them, or those with greater power give contradictory orders, or God is testing them, or, or, or. These alternatives feed on themselves until she is the only one left who bears any responsibility. But most of all, most of all, everything that happens is God’s will, otherwise it wouldn’t happen.

Stateside she regrets not talking to Block about the incident. She should have gone back and given him a chance to explain himself. It could have been resolved that way she thinks. Everything would have changed. But now, really all that has changed is that Lally doubts herself.

Reporting the guy dancing on the table was just too much for Block to deal with, more than he could handle. He’d been trying to get things pulled together on the ground, packed up and shipped out. Maybe she’d come on to him. Maybe she owes him an apology. He was as nice as could be before and after. It was like nothing had happened. If it weren’t for her physical, touchable injuries, even she might have believed it hadn’t.

She has not told Dave, and never will. He would kill Block and she knows it. So does Block, which she thinks is why he was not afraid of her. He knows she won’t report him. For the rest of her life, however, Lally will fear that some night, in some darkened bar in God knows where, Dave will find out.

Nor has she told anyone else. She’d be thought a women’s libber. She might as well give it up if that happened. You were either a pussy, sissy girl, bitch, dyke, faggot, or worse, a women’s libber. And really, Lally was not interested in being any of these. She almost went to the Chaplain, but she couldn’t tell him something like this, nor any of her male friends either, and she just wasn’t sure how her female friends would react. Anyone could make her fodder for the military grape vine. There was no one safe enough to talk to, just at the time she needed it most. Anyway, she worried she was making too much of it. Ivory made it sound like it was pretty normal, pretty much the way things were.

It is clear to Lally that she will not have much time with Molly Bee until after the 7:00 p.m. finals. She watches Hank put her niece through her paces and is both annoyed at him and proud of Molly, but the girl has the oddest walk.

“*Pneumonia*,” says Hank.

“*Pneumonia*,” say Molly. She stands center stage, hands and arms at her side; she looks straight into Hank’s eyes. What a darling, such innocence and hope. She believes she can win and she very well might. Sarah comes down the aisle from the stage and climbs into Lally’s lap. She is near weightless, just a shadow for Lally to hold. “How’s Audrey,” Sarah asks.

“Oh, she is so sad not to be here. She misses you and Molly. I bet you’ve been helping your sister a lot, right? I bet you’re the one who helped her the most.”

There are 13 finalists that night. When the actual time comes and the real word is missed by the boy just before Molly, she stands, walks to the microphone, and looks as if she’s about to salute the judges.

“*Ichthyolite*,” the judge says.

“*Ichthyolite*,” Molly says. “Can I have the definition please?” Molly uses the time to think. “*Ichthyolite*,” she says. I-C-H-T-H-.... She knows the right ending but feels the pressure of time passing and it scares her. She re-focuses by looking at Sarah and continues.

Lally closes her eyes to listen to the sweet spelling voice of her niece and sees a man there, ready to grab the girl. Molly screams but the man muzzles her. All that matters to him is the pleasure of the power he seeks. He would kill to get it. He is

addicted. He does not need an excuse. After Molly he will find someone else and rape again, and again, and again. He will rape he own daughter Audrey and Ivory and the medic.

Suddenly the audience exhales in one great gasp, and Lally opens her eyes.

“No, I’m sorry,” says the judge to Molly who turns and leaves the microphone.

Lally is amazed by the child’s strut. She tears up with pride for this little girl’s moxie.

Later, Sarah and Molly take turns holding the huge stuffed panda bear Karen magically made appear. The family celebrates the twins for the rest of the evening. The next day they’ll do sightseeing, specialty eating, and saying over and over again how proud they are of them.

“Sarah helped me too,” Molly says. “When I couldn’t think, I’d look at Sarah and I wouldn’t be confused anymore, except tonight.” When Molly cries, Sarah brings her the panda.

“But we practiced th....” Hank begins and Rita sinks her elbow into his ribs. Lally winces at the sight.

For the rest of the evening Lally grew quiet, simply observing the girls, their individuality, their sameness. The softness of themselves together and apart; a kind of cohesion between them and within them, a lovely kind of mirroring.

She offered to put them to bed when it was time and promised a story. She’d tell them Audrey’s favorite, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* which, they said, they knew quite well but wouldn’t mind hearing again. In the bedroom the three chatted

and shared stories and other remembrances, and Harold didn’t even have his chance to go adventuring before the twins nodded off.

Lally left them lying side by side in brand new night gowns, one blue and green, one pink and orange, all tucked into fresh bed sheets. She sat for a while, watching them.

Karen came in and put her hand on Lally’s shoulders. “You okay?” she asked. “You don’t seem yourself.”

“Oh, I bet bourbon will do it. And some time off. Thanks for asking.”

The two joined the others in the family room of the suite and the celebration continued. Later, before going to her own room for the night, Lally checked on the girls. Fast asleep, each lay on her stomach, head turned toward the middle of the bed, an arm around the great panda now lying between them, taking up all the covers.

It was this that began to undo her.