

Veil of the Temple

by

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Abstract

I was inspired to write this collection of stories by my experience while serving as an officer in the United States Navy. The military as an organization, in particular the officer corps, is an insular society which operated largely away from the view of the general population, having its own language, social norms, and methods of enforcing those rules.

The military is deified by many in this country and occupies an amoral role in the minds of many Americans, who rarely question its actions or motives. To me, this mystique that the military has is reminiscent of the Jewish priesthood in the New Testament Bible as told in the Book of Matthew—closed, exclusive, powerful. It is my intention to rip open the ‘veil’ of this ‘temple’ and in part reveal what is inside.

These stories are about ordinary people’s lives and the choices they make to deal with the demands of living within this structure. The story *Veil of the Temple* follows a successful African American couple who have attained high rank and status within the military. In the story they are forced to face the fact that their many years in pursuit of this goal has corrupted them and negatively impacted the lives of their family.

The Quality of Mercy is based on a story my father told me about his experience of meeting enemy Japanese soldiers in the jungles of Burma during World War II. It is fiction but draws heavily from the untold stories of the Negro

soldiers, who like my father deployed to the China-Burma-India Campaign during the war.

The Gargoyle uses magical realism to tell the story of what happens to a young sailor who desperately wants to attend the United States Naval Academy and become an officer in the Navy. His future plans are jeopardized when he accidentally loses his military ID card, the punishment for which could put a black mark on his record and ruin his chance to attain his goal.

What Skins We Bear is about the hatred between two naval officers on a ship and how their actions affect their lives and ruin the career of an innocent young officer who unfortunately gets caught up in the bitter conflict.

Writing these stories was at first a kind of self-therapy for me, but later grew into deeper, and I hope, more insightful tales of people struggling to make it within this often pressure cooker of a system.

Table of Contents

Title:	Page Number
1. Veil of the Temple	1
2. The Quality of Mercy	63
3. The Gargoyle	79
4. What Skins We Bear	92

VEIL OF THE TEMPLE

Chapter One

Mattie hated waiting in lines and this one was truly working her nerves and could make her late for a very important meeting. Cars inched their way towards the gate sentry. The archway read “Naval Amphibious Base Coronado.” Mattie drummed her fingers on the armrest as she sat in the back of the taxi watching the meter click and her fare growing.

“I sure wish they would get on with making this gate wider. They have been talking about it for years and every year the traffic gets worse. I’ll be dead and gone by the time they get this fixed,” Mattie said.

“I know,” the driver said. “They need more lanes to keep the cars moving. A lot of the sailors I bring over here always worry that they’ll get in trouble if they report late to their commands.”

“Yeah, it’s a mess. “I’m gonna have to mention this to the base commanding officer next time I see him,” Mattie said.

Mattie’s other hand rested on her expensive Dooney & Burke handbag and her Jheri Curl glistened in the sunlight. Ebony skin contrasted with hair dyed black, but now beginning to fade to gray.

The driver peered at Mattie through the rearview mirror. “I can turn off the meter here since basically we’re at your destination, so you won’t get charged extra,” he said.

“Thank you, young man. That’s very nice of you. I just want to get in here and talk to that

manager at the 'O' Club," Mattie said. "It's just a pain having to depend on taxis or a friend to take me places, because I don't drive."

"Really? So, you never learned to drive?"

"I tried to learn years ago. I got my husband to take me out and teach me, but that didn't work."

"What happened?"

"Well, he just didn't have any patience with me. At that time all we had was a stick shift and San Diego has a lot of hills. I'd be stopped on a hill and take my foot off the brake and the car would start rolling back. I'd get so nervous, the car would shut off, then people behind me would start honking."

"I know what you mean about these hills," he said. "It takes practice to get that timing right when using a foot clutch," he said.

"It was terrible. Carl would get impatient and start yelling. I just said to hell with it."

"So did he have to start driving you everywhere?"

"Yep. He was too cheap to pay for driving lessons."

"Well, maybe you can take lessons now."

"I'm too old now, besides I can find somebody most times, like my daughter. Anyway, I need to come up and see what the club has got planned for my husband's retirement celebration."

"Sounds like fun," he said. He wore an afro, not too long, well groomed, with sideburns. His accent was not American, sounded Latin, but not like people from Tijuana.

"Where you from, son? Mexico? she said. "You don't sound like you're from here."

"No, I am from Cuba. My father moved our family here when I was about ten years old."

"Oh, okay. I would never have known until you spoke. Y'all look just like us."

He chuckled. "We are just like you. We just grew up in a different culture."

"I hope this manager is here. A group of young officers that know my husband volunteered to handle the celebration arrangement, but I am not sure they know what they're doing," Mattie said.

Mattie wore conservative blouse and slacks with a 'Naval Surface Lady' lapel pin attached to her collar. Waiting in lines like this always made her feel trapped and anxious. She chewed obsessively on Altoids, worried that she might have bad breath. Although her husband has recently stepped down from his position as president of the Black Officers Association, Mattie still felt like the defacto matriarch of the group.

In that role she would turn on her motherly charm and masterfully get people to do what she wanted. In conversation, they would open up and share their fears and desires with her. Once she gained their confidence, she'd offer vague promises to help them get what they wanted. Not that she truly had such power, but she loved creating the illusion that she could help them gain higher status within officer social circles, a meeting with a potential love interest, or career advancement.

"Make sure you turn right as soon as you get through the gate," she said. "If you get in the wrong lane you have to go way back in the base before you can turn around."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mattie loved to show off where her husband worked, and this turn would take them past his office building. "Don't drive too fast through this street, baby. My husband works right up there. That's the admiral's headquarters," she said pointing. "Base police will ticket you for sure if you go too fast on this stretch."

They drove slowly past the yellow stucco-covered Eisenhower-era building. A sign out

front read Commander Naval Surface Forces Pacific. Mattie looked out her passenger window at the blue flag with three stars flying atop the flagpole. “Looks like the admiral is in town.”

“What does your husband do?” he asked.

“Honey, my husband oversees all the chief engineers on all the ships in the Pacific Fleet. The admiral hand-picked him for the job.”

“Sounds impressive. I never served in the military, myself,” he said. “But I feel like I have because so many of my passengers are in the service.”

“Yep, Carl’s been doing this for almost forty years. I met him when he was just a lil’ ol’ seaman.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Thirty-eight years.”

Two valets came out as they pulled in front of the Officer’s Club and opened their doors. Mattie rose slowly. Her knees would often lock up or give out after so many years of standing while catering for customers. A group of white women, around Mattie’s age, stood along the sidewalk as they walked up to the entrance. Mattie strode past them like a hen coming to reclaim her roost.

“Hello,” she said, flatly.

“Hello, they replied in unison.

Mattie arrived at the entrance just as two young officers bounded up the walkway engrossed in conversation. She suddenly stopped and turned to them. They looked at each other confused.

“My husband is a Navy Captain. I don’t ever open the door for myself,” she said.

One stepped forward as if vaguely understanding her meaning and opened the door for her and she strode through.

“Thank you, young man.”

Mattie grew up in Palestine, Texas during the Great Depression. Her father, Chollie, worked in a local paper mill, mostly menial jobs, whatever work he could get. When the mill started laying people off, he was one of the first to go. He scraped up what little money he could, doing odd jobs but wasn't earning enough to support the family. Most of the burden fell on her mother Louise, a strong woman who worked as a seamstress. She made dresses for the local wealthy white folks in the town and had a reputation for doing excellent work

Tensions over money grew and sometimes erupted into violence between Chollie and Louise. On one particularly bad evening Chollie came home late and Louise had locked him out. Chollie started banging on the door, yelling to be let in. Mattie got up from the floor where she was playing with her doll and went to let him in.

“Don't you open that doe, girl!” Louise shouted. “Let his ass stay out there for a while. Need to learn how to bring his sorry ass home sometimes. I ain't got no time for this

shit.”

“Dammit, woman. Open this door!” Chollie said. “It's cold as Hell out here!”

“That ain't my problem. Nigga if yo ass like the street so much, you can sleep out there!”

“Come on, Louise.”

“No.”

There was a loud bang, as the door bulged slightly inward. Chollie was trying to break open the door with his shoulder.

Louise had had enough. “Chollie, if you break in my door, I'm gone kill you!”

There was another loud bang. Louise suddenly unlocked the door and swung it open in almost

one motion. Chollie came flying through the door and sprawled out on the floor. Louise turned him over onto his back and sat down on his chest and began violently slapping his face. Chollie was flailing trying to block the blows with his hands. Mattie and her younger brother retreated to their small bedroom.

“I told you about this shit before,” Louise said. “Yo goddam ass know we ain’t got no money for you to be out there drinking with these kids barely having a decent pair a shoes between ‘em.”

“Alright, alright,” he said, pulling what money he had from his pocket. “Just git off me.”

Louise snatched the money from his hand and stood up. She counted it and looked at him with disdain. “This is barely enough for me to get some groceries.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll do better, baby. I promise,” Chollie whimpered.

That was the last he challenged his wife, who towered over his slight frame. Eventually, Louise kicked Chollie out, so he went out west to California to live with a brother and find work.

Louise had little time for her children and worked long hours to be able to feed and clothe them. She was not affectionate towards Mattie at all but would dote on her son Paul. The children were often left alone to fend for themselves, and Mattie deeply resented her mother for being forced to take care of her brother. She felt like she could never be a child herself.

When Mattie started to menstruate, Louise handed her a menstrual cup and said, “Use this when you start bleeding.” Mattie learned how to manage things from her older classmates, as they shared secrets in the back pews of the balcony during church services. There were rules that a young black girl had to learn: never look a white man in the eye because it might be interpreted as insolence or worse - an invitation; stay close to home most of the time; never dress or look too pretty when out and about alone; and never, ever be out alone after dark. There were many

stories of girls being raped by white and black men, where the perpetrator was never brought to justice. Mattie didn't want that to happen to her.

The white girls lived much freer lives. They could dress prettily and be children, oblivious to the dangers of the world. When Louise took Mattie and Paul into town, they would have to step off the sidewalk to allow white women to pass. These women, dressed in their finery, would carry on with barely an acknowledgement, secure in their social position. They may as well have been from another dimension, into which Mattie could never cross.

Mattie's older cousin, Marvin, from New Orleans came to stay with them for a few months. Louise said he had come into some kind of trouble in the 'Big Easy' and needed to get out of town for a while. He was tall, well-groomed, and handsome, nothing like the sloven country negroes in her East Texas, Jim Crow town. His arrival in town created a stir when Louise picked him up at the train station in her wagon. Locals gawked, having never seen a sophisticated looking negro.

Louise warned, "You got to keep a low profile around here, boy. These crackers ain't used to no negro with city ways."

He smiled at Mattie and Paul. "Hey little cousins. I need to show y'all Nawlins. Get you away from all this ignorance. Show you that the world got more than this to offer."

Mattie liked him immediately; it was hard not to. He spoke to her more like a big sister and seemed to know a lot about women. When she asked what it was like for a negro living in New Orleans, he told her that with a little smarts and the right connections, a negro could enjoy many of the same things in life as white folks.

Mattie pictured herself in New Orleans wearing the kind of beautiful dresses she had seen white women wear in her town.

"I'm gonna live there one day," she said.

"Marvin smiled. "Come on. You can stay with me."

Marvin carried with him a trunk, with he kept always locked. One day he opened it to reveal elegant gowns, women's hats, shoes, makeup kits, everything a stylish women would want.

"Where'd you get all this. What's it for?" Mattie said.

"Oh, I am a women's wear salesman," he said. "This is just some of my merchandise."

"Oh, okay.

Marvin let her try on many of the items: jewelry, hats, gloves, even one of the gowns, although it was far too large for her. Paul watched in fascination.

"Can I try one on?" he asked.

"No, boy," Mattie said. "This is for girls. Go play."

Paul sulked away.

Admiring her image in the mirror, Mattie imaged living like the actresses she admired in the movies, like Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwick, and Liv Ullman.

A few days later, Mattie and Marvin were in the kitchen cutting up some potatoes for Louise to use for dinner, when they realized that Paul was nowhere around.

"Paul, where you at, boy?" Mattie said.

A few moments later Paul came out of the room where Marvin's trunk was kept wearing the same outfit that Mattie had worn, including women's shoes. They clopped loudly on the floor as he shuffled along in them. He had smeared lipstick and makeup on his face as well. The evening gown swallowed him up. Mattie and Marvin rolled with laughter.

"Boy, you better not get my merchandise dirty. I'm gonna whup you," Marvin said.

"I was just trying it on like Mattie," Paul said, looking embarrassed.

They heard the door open as Louise arrived home. She looked at Paul, then at Marvin and Mattie. "Boy, what are you doing?" she said.

"Nothing, mamma. I was just playing."

"It's okay, auntie. He just got into some of the merchandise in my trunk."

Louise walked over to Paul and felt the lace fabric of the gown. She pulled the hat off Paul's head. "What merchandise? Marvin, you never told me you was no salesman."

"I just didn't think about it."

Louise went over to the kitchen counter and grabbed a rag and wet it. She called Paul over and began wiping the makeup off his face. "What in the world was you doing messing with this stuff, little boy?"

Paul shrugged. "I don't know."

"Marvin take this stuff off this child. I don't want him growing up to be a sissy."

Marvin removed the garments off Paul and went into the room to put them away, with Louise following.

"Let me see that gown," she said. She held the gown up to her in front of the mirror and looked at herself. "This is big enough to fit me and them shoes is huge. I couldn't even wear them. Marvin who is this for? Did you steal these clothes? Is that why you had to leave New Orleans?"

"No, no. I didn't steal nothing," Marvin said. "Auntie, look, the truth is these clothes ... well they're mine."

"Yours? Whatchu mean, yours?"

"I mean they are for me. I wear them."

Louise's eyes widened. "Wear them for what? You got to be joking."

“No ma’am, I’m not. I wear them for a show that I am in.”

“A show! What kind of show is that?”

“They call it a drag show. I work at a club in the French Quarter.”

“Marvin, I don’t want this kind of stuff around my child. If you some kind of sissy, I sho don’t want to leave you around my boy. Paul is just a kid.”

“Auntie, I’m sorry. I should have told you about this. It’s just what I do, and I make good money doing it. I’m not trying to make Paul into anything.”

“Marvin, you my kin, but you got to go. I don’t want my churrin around this kind of stuff.”

“Where am I gonna go?”

“I don’t know, but you can’t stay here no longer,” she said.

The next day Marvin boarded a train back to New Orleans, trunk and all. As the family rode back home in the wagon Mattie tried to piece together some understanding of the events. What was clear was that if you’re colored, a woman could be a woman, and sometimes had to act like a man to manage things, like Louise. But, a man acting like a woman, could never be tolerated.

About a week later Louise came home with some news. “I got a letter from yo daddy. He’s got a good job and a place to stay. I’m gonna send you kids out to California to live with your daddy,” she said.

“How come, mamma?” Mattie said.

“I’m just barely making it. I can’t afford to give you kids much of a life here. He working in a machine shop. He can give you all a better life than I can.”

It was final. Though Mattie pleaded with her mother to stay, there was nothing she could do to persuade Louise to change her mind. To Mattie, her mother was the strongest person she knew. Though it was hard at home, for the most part, she felt protected under Louise’s wing.

Now she felt abandoned. From that point on, she vowed to never trust anyone, but rather to always think three steps ahead in any situation. She would always be in control. Job opportunities for black people were restricted in California, although in more subtle ways than in the South. Mattie learned how to mimic the kind of behavior that made whites comfortable with having her around.

She laughed at their jokes, mirrored their likes and dislikes, and always made them feel superior. It pleased them to feel that they were helping this 'poor country Negro'. She even became a Republican to the shock of many of her family and friends. Secretly, she despised her white employers and the role she had to play.

After high school, she married a young man who had graduated from college and was working as an engineer in an aircraft manufacturing plant in San Diego, California. He had a promising career, but like her father had a fatal flaw: he was an alcoholic. They often fought and Mattie called the police on him several times and like Louise before her, eventually filed for divorce. After her divorce, she had to become the primary breadwinner for her children. She stepped up to the challenge and started her own catering business and she did amazingly well for a single black woman during the 1960s. But Mattie wanted more.

Despite all the upheavals in her personal life, her reputation as a cook and caterer was well known to many senior officers who had enjoyed her cooking at the Admiral Halsey Club. They would often hire her to cater receptions and dinners in their own homes. Like a sponge, she soaked up and absorbed their lifestyles, noted what antiques they had in their houses, and admired the important people they entertained. She listened to them talk about opening the officer ranks to more black officers.

By the time Mattie was twenty-eight years old, she had a thriving catering business. She had

a reputation around the waterfront as a competent caterer and was often hired to supply food at different Navy sponsored events. She was busy supporting four kids as a single mother, so when a young sailor approached her at party and introduced himself as Carl, she wasn't interested.

He was young, only twenty years old, and eight years her junior. He would be at other events where she and her brother Paul had set up a food tent. Carl would always strike up a conversation. She learned that he was an Electricians Mate with a couple of years under his belt in the fleet. After several rejections, he persisted until she finally agreed to go out with him. Surprisingly, they had a lot in common. Like her, he had ambitions to be successful. His goal was to make the Navy a career. In him, Mattie recognized that together they could help each other realize their dreams. Carl was captivated by her, and she played this to her advantage. They made a formidable team. After years of hard work, Mattie had earned this retirement just as much as he. She planned to make the retirement celebration a grand affair for them both.

Mattie walked through the lobby of the officer club past a beautiful sand sculpture hanging on the wall that depicted seabirds and shells along a shoreline. A receptionist was at a desk outside an office with a sign that read Manager.

"Hello," she said. "I am here to see the manager. I have an appointment."

"Sure, ma'am. Just have a seat and he will be right with you.

A man in a blue suit came in and approached clutching a clipboard approached the reception.

"Is Mark in?"

"Yes, he's in the office."

He quickly walked past her desk and knocked on the door. Without waiting for an answer, he walked right in. Twenty-five minutes passed and laughter could be heard inside the room.

Mattie was irritated. It was way past the time for her appointment.

“Did you inform the manager that I had an appointment?”

“Oh no, I guess I got distracted when the other man came in.”

Mattie’s eyes zeroed in on the young woman. “Well, tell him. I don’t have all day to waste here.”

“My name is Mattie Fleming! I’m here to talk about my husband, Captain Flemings’ retirement arrangements!”

“Oh! You’re Mrs. Fleming. I’m sorry. I thought you were here for a job interview.”

“Young lady you are on my last nerve. Now get that manager on the phone now and tell him I am here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The phone rang inside the office.

“A man’s voice answered and said, “I’ll be right out.” The other man left and then the manager came out.

“Hello, Mrs. Fleming. My name is Mark Andrews. So sorry for the delay and the mix-up.”

“You need to better train your staff,” Mattie said. “My time is valuable, and I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

She offered her hand, not so much as a greeting, but so he could help her up from her seat.

“I am here to see the arrangements for my husband, Captain Fleming’s retirement party.”

“Oh, sure, but I already went over it with Lieutenant Thompson. I thought he was handling things.”

“He is, but I wanted to make sure that they meet my approval,” she said, giving him a stern look.

“Of course. So, we are providing a standard package that includes the setup and cleanup of

the banquet room. We have not yet finalized the menu, but I can show you what we have so far.”

“Good,” Mattie said. “I want it to be something special because Admiral James will be coming.”

“I will be right back with the menu for you to go over. I promise you that we will give this event our best service.” He turned and walked back into his office.

The manager returned with the menus for Mattie to review. She scrutinized everything, making sure to ask questions about things that were not spelled out such as the presentation of the food, and whether it would be served buffet or banquet style. They settled on buffet-style serving, with the food arranged along two long tables adorned with ice sculptures.

“How do you know so much about catering, Mrs. Fleming?” the manager asked.

“Honey, I used to be the head caterer at the Admiral Halsey club!”

“No joke?”

“Yep, ask anybody there who's been around awhile. They all know me.”

“Wow. Well, thanks for your input, ma'am. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Naw, honey. I am going to go to the coffee shop, and I might even try one of those French pastries,” she said.

“Great,” he said and left.

Mattie smiled, feeling quite happy with herself.

#

Chapter Two

The crisp autumn air felt good after Jolie and Marta completed their run. They sipped water and rested on a bench next to the parade field after recording their times. Jolie had finished the

two-mile run in just over fifteen minutes, around three minutes ahead of any of the other women in her company and many of the men. She had also gotten the maximum points for the Army Physical Readiness Test.

Marta was spent. "Damn, girl I almost fainted trying to catch your ass. You're a beast."

Jolie laughed. She had heard that before. "The two mile is not even my thing. My event is the 200-meter sprint. I got a state record in high school," she said.

"No wonder," said Marta. "I thought you had a jet up your butt."

Jolie chuckled. "Shut up."

Jolie was a talented athlete indeed. Her abilities did not go unnoticed. The commanding officer of her battalion had asked her if she would be interested in applying to West Point. Jolie declined. It was not what she wanted to do.

"You obviously have a gift. How come you didn't take it further?"

"I could have...I even had the chance to get a scholarship to run on the UCLA track team," Jolie said.

"No shit! That's big time, girl. How come you didn't? You might have gone to the Olympics."

"Yeah, I could have. I don't really like to talk about it. It was a tough time in my life. I was going through a lot with my grandparents."

"We can talk about something else if you want to."

"It's alright. You are my friend so I can trust you to keep it to yourself," Jolie said sadly.

"Yeah, you know that. So, what happened?"

Jolie recounted the day she and her grandmother Mattie had gone shopping for a prom dress.

Jolie initially tried on a couple of the shorter dresses that many of her friends liked, but these

did not meet Mattie's approval.

"You look like a ho," Mattie said flatly. So, Jolie settled on a beautiful off-white gown that would match her date's outfit.

Mattie nodded her approval. "Now you look like a young lady."

Mattie and Carl had been pressuring Jolie to consider going through the process of having a cotillion ball and getting a proper introduction in society as they saw it. This would involve instruction in the proper etiquette and behavior required for all social occasions. Jolie had resisted.

Mattie walked over to an elaborate ball gown. She ran her hand over the fine lace of the garment.

"This is what you need for your cotillion ball," she said.

"Grandmother, I told you I'm not sure I want to do that. Besides, I don't really have time with my busy track and field schedule."

"Look, I told you. Running track is fine, but you need to think about all your options. You don't even know if you're gonna get that scholarship to UCLA or other schools. A cotillion is a way to connect with people who can help you once you get out of school. There are usually some nice young men who come to the balls."

"I know this is something you and grandfather want for me, just like you did for my mother, but that's just not me. I just want to concentrate on school and my sport. That's enough for me. I mean and really if you and grandfather want to help me, I would rather it be towards my college education," Jolie said.

Mattie scoffed at this. "We did all that for your mother and what did she do? She dropped out of school when she was almost finished. That was a huge waste of money."

“I know grandmother. You told me about that, but I am not her.”

Mattie looked at her Jolie. “Let’s find you some shoes to match that dress. Listen, if you choose to not do the cotillion, we can’t commit to helping you pay your way through school.”

Jolie looked down at her feet for a second. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Just remember what I said,” said Mattie. “That’s the last time I am going to say it.”

In the weeks that followed Jolie had several track meets leading up to a special event which would be attended by track coaches from colleges with top athletic programs. She was nervous and distracted. Mattie had given her an ultimatum about the cotillion ball because the time was approaching for the etiquette course to begin. Also, Jolie was facing the biggest race of her career so far and her nerves were on edge.

During the 200-meter quarter-finals Jolie made a false start, trying to anticipate the starting gun, hoping to get an edge on the competition, any one of whom could win. Her weakness was a slow start, but she would gain ground as they rounded the curve towards the finish line. In the stands she saw Mattie and her grandfather’s friend Roger. She found his presence unnerving, even at a distance.

She tried to concentrate on the race. This time she did not false start, but rather waited for the sound of the gun. Unfortunately, she came in a close third in the race. She felt crushed and thought her chances for a track scholarship to a top school like UCLA were gone. After Jolie’s defeat in this key race, Mattie assumed she had dropped the idea of getting a track scholarship and so began pressuring her relentlessly about the cotillion. Jolie continued to resist, and after high school decided to join the Army with her friend Marta as buddies. They even managed to get to the same duty station in Germany.

Marta was her closest confidant. So, the day that Mattie called Jolie to tell her that Roger

would be visiting her in Germany, everything just seemed to fall apart. Marta sensed that something was wrong. They were roommates so they had become familiar with each other's routines. Suddenly, the normally talkative Jolie had become quiet and introspective. Jolie told her friend that she had named her as the beneficiary on her military insurance policy.

"Why would you do that?" Marta said.

"Well, I had my grandparents, but I really don't think they deserve it. You are really the closest person to me now."

Marta gave her a big hug. "I just don't feel right about it."

"Everything's going to be fine," said Jolie. "I would rather you have it than them." Her eyes had a glassy far-away look.

She left to go to the personnel office to update her record.

Marta went over to see the company chaplain and express her concern about her friend's behavior. The chaplain was busy but promised to look in on Jolie the next day. The company was scheduled for small arms weapons qualifications the next day, so he planned to be there and talk to her.

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The chaplain arrived at the firing range after the training had begun. A long line of soldiers were at the firing line wearing their camouflage uniforms, helmets, with safety goggles. He couldn't identify Jolie. Also, in another area soldiers were lying prone with their weapons aimed at the targets down range. He decided to walk behind the training line to not disturb the range masters as they conducted the training. The head range master acknowledged his presence, as it was not unusual for the chaplain to come by and observe. Something was in the air that didn't feel right.

He asked the company First Sergeant where private Fleming was. All the soldiers were wearing hearing protection and could only hear the yell of the ranger master. "Ready on the right! Ready on the left! Ready on the firing line! Fire!"

Before they could get to where Jolie was on the firing line the air was shattered at the sound of multiple soldiers firing at their targets. Down the line they suddenly saw a soldier with the barrel of their M-16 aimed under their chin. The soldier's head jerk back violently, and the body fell back into the dirt. Soldiers next to the victim screamed, laid down their weapons and waved their arms frantically to get the range master's attention.

"Cease fire!" he yelled over the cacophony.

When the chaplain, the First Sergeant, and the range master arrived Jolie lay with a gaping wound underneath her chin and a pool of blood forming under her helmeted head. A medic came over and checked her. He could detect a faint pulse, but she was aspirating on the blood from the wound. She was transferred to the base hospital where she died a few hours later.

#

Chapter Three

Mattie stared at the list of names she had written down. Family members were easy, but so many people had passed through their lives over the years, it was hard to remember them all. She called Yvette to come over and help. To keep busy, she started dusting their antique dining room table. The piece, a Fleming family heirloom, was said to have been hand-carved by a former slave from a single oak tree. She still marveled at the intricacy of the fierce, life-like ram's heads jutting out from each corner. The tabletop rim was carved to resemble braided rope. Along each wall were the matching China cabinet and buffet, both elaborately carved in the same dark wood.

When she first met Carl's folks, the young couple had been dating for a while. He was preparing to deploy to Vietnam. They arrived in Chicago in early October when the city was still bathed in late summer warmth before cold northern blasts would blow in from Canada across Lake Michigan. The South Shore Line train took them from O'Hara airport to where the Flemings lived. It was Mattie's first time seeing the fall colors of the towering oaks and fiery red Japanese maples that lined the shore. Carl looked sharp in his blue suit and thin black tie and Mattie was stylish and fit in a light pink shift dress with a sweater. She often copied Jackie Kennedy's taste in fashion.

She clutched Carl's hand nervously, palms sweaty, heart racing. They planned to tell his parents that they were going to get engaged before Carl left. They arrived at the Fleming's small two-story brick Tudor home by taxi. Next to their new Chevrolet was in the driveway was an old lawnmower with parts strewn about. Mary Fleming, a small, vivacious, light-skinned black woman in her forties met them at the door.

"Come in, come in," she said.

Carl gave her a big hug. She kissed his cheeks the way she had done since he was a little boy.

"Momma, this is Mattie."

"Hello, Mattie. Nice to meet you," she said, scanning the girl swiftly. "Very nice to finally meet you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fleming. I am glad to finally meet you too."

"Mom, where's Pop? Is he upstairs?"

"No, baby. He had to run down to the hardware store. He's been trying to get that stupid old mower running again. I told him he needs to stop wasting his time and just get a new one."

Carl chuckled. "You know him, he'll choke a dollar to death before he'll let go of it."

“Come on in,” Mary said. “I have some coffee ready. Let’s go into the living room.”

May led them into the formal living room and poured them both a cup of coffee, using fine China.

“Where are you from, Mattie? I hear a southern accent.”

“Yes, ma’am, Texas,” Mattie said.

“Carl, why don’t you put the bags away. That’ll give us a chance to get acquainted,” Mary said.

“Okay, where?”

“So put yours in your old room and Mattie’s can go in your brother’s room.”

“I don’t want to put anybody out,” Mattie said.

“Nonsense,” Mary said. “Paul can use the guest room. He’s got finals coming up at Morehouse, but he is dying to meet you, so he’s coming home. He and Carl are twins you know.”

Carl came back down into the living room. “I see you all are getting acquainted,” he said.

“Yes, sweetie,” said Mary.

Mattie smiled. “My brother’s name is Paul. I’ve been wanting to meet him,” Mattie said.

When the twins were in high school they were told that the family could only afford to help pay for one of them to go to college unless they got scholarships. Paul had the grades and so got the financial help and scholarship money for school. Carl on the other hand, was more into sports and girls. He decided to join the Navy, hoping to make his parents proud on his own terms.”

She turned towards the window at the sound of an automobile pulling into the driveway. “I think that’s your father.”

Carl went out to greet his father, Jacob. After a few minutes they came in.

“Pops, this is Mattie.”

Jacob came in and shook Mattie’s hand, careful not to squeeze too hard, the way a gentleman greets a lady. He had the same distinctive nose as Carl, not pointed at the tip but rounded like a ball.

Both Mary and Jacob owned successful businesses and were prominent members of the black community in the windy city. Mary owned a beauty parlor and Jacob a men’s clothing store. Their businesses survived the Great Depression because they provided essential services.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, young lady. You have to pardon my grimy clothes. I have been trying to get that old mower going,” he said.

His face lit up into a broad smile, flashing white teeth with a gap in the front just like Carl’s.

“It’s no problem, sir,” Mattie said. “I am just glad to finally meet you.”

“Very good. I will let you and Mary talk; I need to get on out here and finish what I am doing. Carl, you want to change? I could use a hand.”

“Sure, Pops. Baby, I will see you in a little while.”

“Okay,” said Mattie. She was hoping Carl would stay and provide a buffer for the questions she knew would come. She hoped that Carl had not revealed too much about their plans together. She sat back down with Mary, who was anxious to find out what this older woman was doing with her son.

Mary raised the coffee pot to Mattie’s cup. “More coffee?”

“No ma’am. I am fine.”

“So, tell me,” Mary began. “How long have you and Carl been dating?”

“About six months,” Mattie said.

“Sounds like you all are getting serious.”

“Yes,” Mattie said. “We have grown very close.” She measured her words.

“Carl wrote to me that you are divorced and have children,” Mary said.

“Yes, I have been divorced from the children’s father for three years,” Mattie said.

“Where is the children’s father now?” Mary said.

“He still lives in San Diego. He works for MacDonald Douglas.”

Mary took a sip then sat the cup down in her lap. She looked into Mattie’s eyes. She was suspicious of this older, ‘darker than a brown paper bag’ divorcee with children, whose east Texas charm was ‘droll and somewhat endearing’. Mattie would not be well received within Mary’s “Jack and Jill” social circle.

“I trust my son’s judgment. He IS grown, but I am concerned about his choices in this matter.” Her face was stern.

“You mean because I am divorced and have kids?” Mattie said.

“Well, yeah. He’s still a young man and I know that young sailors can become lonely being away from home. I have heard about women getting these soldiers and sailors to marry them just before the men ship off to Vietnam, hoping they will become a war widow and get the life insurance money. I don’t if that’s your intent, but I won’t let anyone take advantage of my son,” Mary said.

Here it was. Mattie took a breath, trying to keep her anger at bay. “Mrs. Fleming, I can understand your concern, but I am not taking advantage of Carl. He is a grown man. I work on the base and have my own catering business on the side. I take care of my kids myself, so I don’t need his money.”

“So, what are you all’s plans?” Mary said.

“We have decided to take things slow, especially since he is going to be leaving for the war,” Mattie said. She was lying. She decided not to reveal that she and Carl planned to get engaged before his departure until they could announce it together.

“That’s smart, but I still don’t approve of my son marrying a woman with children. Ultimately, my son will have to make his own decisions,” Mary said.

“I accept that, but I want you to know that I care for Carl very much and I would never do anything to hurt him,” Mattie said.

Mary got up from the couch and went over to the bar and picked up a bottle of fine brandy. “Would you like some?” she said.

“Yes, I would.”

“I think we could both use a drink,” Mary said.

Carl loved Mattie despite all her idiosyncrasies because she helped him overcome his own insecurities.

#

Chapter Four

Yvette arrived and came into the dining room where Mattie was laboring over the guest list. Her skin was the same dark hue as her mother’s, but she had her father’s features. Big-boned and heavy like the Choctaw side of his family, she was often mistaken for a Samoan woman.

“How’s the list coming?” she said.

“Alright,” said Mattie. “I was just taking a break.”

Yvette looked at the list. “How long have you been working on this? That’s not many names.”

Mattie frowned at her. “I’m trying. There’s just so many people to remember.”

“Yvette sighed. “Alright, let me help.”

“Okay, we need to get that list of VIP guests from your father today. I know of at least three admirals, then we need any of his old commanding officers still living, and family friends like Roger.”

“Roger?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember yo’ daddy’s best friend from the Navy? He used to babysit with y’all for us sometime,” said Mattie.

“How could I forget him? He was always over here.”

“What’s wrong?”

Yvette shook her head. “I never liked that man, momma,” she said. “He was creepy.”

“Girl, be quiet. What do you mean creepy?”

“When I was a girl he was always trying to get up in my face like he was trying to hit on me or something. He would act like he was just playing, but Joy and I knew better.”

Mattie shook her head, furrowing her dark brow. “You know that’s Carl’s oldest and dearest friend. I don’t think he meant anything by that. He helped us out a lot by staying with you kids when we had to be gone. He would even come over and babysit with Jolie when you and Joy left the house.”

“Momma, tell me you didn’t leave that child alone with that man when she was a little girl.

Damn, I did not know that.”

“Don’t cuss. Besides, that ain’t yo business.”

The doorbell rang.. Yvette rose to go answer. She opened the door and saw two Army officers and started to stutter as she always did when nervous.

“Mmm..ma..may I help you?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am, I am Chaplain Steven Swan, and this is Sergeant First Class Reeves. We are here to see Mrs. Mattie Fleming. Are you Mrs. Fleming?”

“No, that’s my mother. I am Yvette., her daughter. Won’t you please come in. Momma, there’s someone here to see you!”

“What, what Yvette? Who is it?”

“Momma come down, it’s important!”

Mattie came down the hallway mumbling to herself and straightening out her robe. “I’m not even dressed...” She stopped mid-sentence when she saw the chaplain.

“What’s this about?”

“May we sit down?”

“Yes, yes,” she said as she led them into the formal living room. She sat down on her antique chaise lounge and the two men sat on the expensive couch across from her. Chaplain Swan started to place his hat on a side table next to several Hummel figurines and crystals, but decided it was better to put it on the floor.

“Mrs. Fleming on behalf of the United States Army, we regret to inform you of the death of your granddaughter, Private Jolie Fleming.”

“What! No, that can’t be right! Are you sure because she seemed alright on the phone a few days ago? What happened to her?”

The chaplain came over and sat next to her and took her hand. “Mrs. Fleming, she took her

own life this morning. It happened while she was firing..”

“Nooooo!!” Mattie bent forward and buried her face in her hands sobbing.

Yvette clutched the front of her dress and not knowing what else to do went quickly into the other room to find some facial tissue. The chaplain patted Mattie on the back to try and console her. Mattie’s sobs turned into mournful howls. Yvette returned to the room.

“How did it happen?” asked Yvette.

“It was a self-inflicted gun-shot wound to the head,” he said.

“Jesus.”

Mattie suddenly jumped up from her seat. “I can’t do this. I need to lie down.”

“Okay, let me help you, Momma. Chaplain, please excuse us. I will be right back,” said Yvette as she led her mother up the stairs and into her bedroom.

“Certainly, we will be right here.”

The two men looked at each other and sat quietly for a moment.

“This is my least favorite part of this job,” the Chaplain said.

“Padre, what should I do with the paperwork for Mrs. Fleming to sign?”

“Give them a minute for things to settle down. We’ll talk to the daughter about the paperwork.”

Yvette returned to the living room, wiping her red swollen eyes.

“Ma’am,” the chaplain began. “I hate to bring up paperwork at this time, but we have an important matter that requires the family’s attention.”

“What’s that?”

“We need Mrs. Fleming’s signature on the paperwork to authorize the Army to ship the body and personal effects of the deceased.”

“Okay,” said Yvette. “Could you just leave them, and I will get her to sign the papers. Just show me where she needs to put her signature.”

“Of course, Sargent Reeves will be your local contact Casualty Officer. He will give you his contact information so that once the papers are signed, we can complete this process with the least amount of stress on the family.”

Reeves went through the papers with Yvette, gave her his card, then walked to the door with the chaplain.

“Please give me a call as soon as you have the papers ready, and I will come over.

“Thank you,” she said. When they had left, she went up to check on Mattie who was lying in the bed with her head under a pillow.

“Momma, they left. How are you doing?”

“Not good. Call your father, honey. Tell him I need him to come home immediately.”

“I will, Momma. Hopefully, he is not in a meeting or something.”

#

Chapter Four

Carl gazed at the PowerPoint briefing being given by one of his subordinates, trying to look interested. It was difficult to muster the same enthusiasm for the complexities of naval engineering after 38 years. At least one of the valves in his sixty-year-old heart was blocked and the others were deteriorating.

Carl’s deeply lined face sagged at the jowls. His earlobes swollen with fluid and hung like marble-sized earrings. Doctors at the veteran’s hospital said they were possibly caused by exposure to agent orange while in Vietnam. Nobody could really say for sure. A life spent in

naval engineering plants also meant constant exposure to toxic chemicals from fuels, oils, and solvents.

A lieutenant quietly entered the room and handed Carl a note that his daughter was on the phone needing to talk to him urgently. He instructed the officer to relay that he would call back as soon as his meeting was over. What could it be, he wondered. Some self-inflicted crisis of Mattie's making? Did she curse out another neighbor? Was she complaining that some gate guard did not render her the proper respect? Or maybe she had retreated into a closet when an impending Pacific storm triggered her anxieties. Underneath Mattie's confident exterior were deep wounds and fears of abandonment.

When his meeting was over Carl took the rest of the day off. He had become accustomed to such disruptions ever since he and Mattie got married. She could be a bit of a drama queen. When the two oldest of his stepchildren Joy and Sam were ages fourteen and twelve they did not readily accept him. Whereas the older kids rebelled, Yvette age six and Patrick age two accepted him.

The oldest children never stopped referring to him as a stepfather, for which they would receive a slap in the mouth by Mattie. Sam would get into fights at school or be detained by the base police where they lived for breaking some rule and then being defiant. Joy began experimenting with drugs while in middle school. This was long before she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She would often skip school to go smoke pot with her friends somewhere off campus. Carl attributed their behavior to the fact that their biological father, Samuel, was an alcoholic. Mattie had divorced him to get away from their abusive marriage.

To Carl the 'apple did not fall too from the tree' and would often tell the children, "You are going to be just like your no-good daddy."

To which Joy would reply, "I'm going to tell my daddy what you said about him." If Mattie heard this, it would trigger a fit of rage. She would pick up the nearest object, an extension cord, a belt, a book, and strike them with it.

When Carl entered his house, he was met by Yvette, eyes swollen from crying.

"Oh, daddy. We got some terrible news today."

"What happened?"

"It's Jolie. She's gone. Dead."

Carl slumped down in the nearest chair. "What the hell!? How did this happen?"

Yvette walked over and hugged him. He got up and walked across the room trying to compose himself.

"How did you find out?" he said. "Where's your mother? Does she know?"

"Yes, yes. She knows. I was here when an Army Chaplain came by and gave her the news. She's upstairs in bed."

Carl started up the stairs to the bedroom. He stopped and turned around, "You better call Jolie's dad? He should know about this."

"Okay, daddy."

#

Chapter Five

"Yvette?"

"Yeah, Momma. What's up?"

Mattie was silent for a moment, not her usual talkative self. It was unusual for her to call this

early, and she sounded distracted.

“Whatcha up to?”

“Nothing much. Just finished getting these knotty-headed boys off to school. What’s going on?” Yvette said, a bit more concerned.

Mattie sighed. “Well, this package came this morning from the Army. It’s from Germany. I think it’s Jolie’s personal belongings. I expected them, but just can’t bring myself to open it. Could you come over and go through the stuff today?”

“Sure, maybe in a couple of hours after I run some errands.”

“Okay, baby. See you later.”

Yvette hung up the phone. It would be good to go through the items, feel her niece’s presence once again. It had been a couple of years since she had seen Jolie. Better understand what had gone on in the young woman’s life after she left home to join the Army. As she went about her errands, Yvette tried to push aside the thoughts of how her long-running feud with Joy, Jolie’s mother, had poisoned their relationship. This animus had also put a wall between her, and Jolie and the guilt gnawed at her gut. She always felt that their parents indulged Joy far more than the other kids in the family.

Yvette secretly envied her older sister, who matured physically early and was allowed to go out with high school boys even while in middle school. Big boned and heavy all her life, Yvette was never comfortable with the easy sexuality of her sister and would decline when Joy invited her to go out with her and her friends. She felt vindicated that she had been a debutant and a virgin until she was a married woman.

Jolie had lived under Mattie’s heavy hand the same way as Yvette and her siblings. Yvette stopped helping her parents care for Jolie, because she was too busy playing the role of the

dutiful military wife. Her only focus was maintaining the façade of a perfect family life, only socializing with other Navy wives. And she never missed an opportunity to flaunt her ‘success’, particularly when Joy was around, while her older sister's life descended into chaos and drug addiction. Still, Yvette could not ignore her own insecurity about her marriage. Many of the other wives always seemed to be thinner, prettier, and better educated than Yvette and Benjamin would not hide his admiration for some of them.

The Fleming's bungalow was situated on a quiet street on Coronado Island, across the bay from San Diego, CA. Signs of wealth were everywhere in this exclusive community where many senior military officers retired. Mattie and Carl were renting the place from a retired naval officer. Carl did many improvements to the main house and a pool house in the back hoping that one day the owner might sell it to him.

Mattie noticed Yvette walking up to the entrance through the living room window and got up to let her in. Yvette hugged her. “Hey, momma.”

“Come on in, baby.” Mattie's face was drawn with concern.

“Where's the box?” asked Yvette as she searched the room.

“I got it in the kitchen on the table. You want some coffee?”

Yvette walked in the kitchen where a medium sized shipping box was sitting on the table. Beside it was a boxcutter.

“No thanks, I just want to look at what's inside here,” she said as she picked up the tool and began cutting away the shipping tape and opening the box. Neatly packed inside the box were all Jolie's earthly belongings: a small purse, some jewelry, her diary, several dresses, some shoes, and her coat. An inventory listing indicating that this was one of four boxes to come. Also, there

was an envelope with Grandmother and Grandfather written on the outside.

“Momma, here’s something addressed to you and daddy,” she said as she handed the envelope to Mattie.

“What?” Mattie took the envelope and read it.

Grandmother and Grandad,

I am writing you this letter to explain myself. By now I am sure you know that I am gone. I have had enough. I am sorry for the sorrow and pain that this will cause you both. I have been thinking about this for a long time. When I received the call from my grandmother that Roger wanted to visit me in Germany, that was too much for me. I thought I had gotten away from him for good. Something snapped and I realized that leaving this Earth was my only solution..

That man molested me when I was little, and I can’t bear the thought of him being anywhere near me. I thought I had left all that behind me and had gotten counseling here. I found out that my unit would be going to the firing range to do our annual training and made up my mind to do it there. I knew it would be quick.

You don’t know what kind of man Roger is. He threatened to hurt me if I ever told anyone about his abuse. Every time you allowed him to babysit me so you all could go off for your weekends, he would touch me and force me to do things I did not want to do no matter how much I cried and protested.

I wanted to tell somebody so badly, but I could not tell you because I knew you would not believe me. Roger took my body, but you took away my voice. You were always slapping me in

the mouth if I said anything you didn't like or called me 'stupid'. I was always scared to say anything to you or granddaddy because I knew you would come down on me hard. I had heard how grandmother treated my aunts and uncles when they talked back. I learned to just keep my mouth shut. I hated Roger, but I hated you more.

Jolie

Mattie handed the letter to Yvette without a word. She clutched at her chest and began to cry.

Yvette grabbed the letter and began to read frantically. Her eyes widened with disgust and shock.

"I cannot believe this shit," she said, shaking her head. "Are you going to tell, daddy?"

"I can't believe she would do something like that. My heart can't take this mess," said Mattie.

"Momma, she's the one dead. Are you going to tell daddy?"

Mattie rose and walked to the window. Outside the few trees in her yard had begun to drop their leaves. The smell of fresh cut grass was blowing in and the yardman was starting to rake the leaves into a pile. She was silent for a minute, then turned to Yvette.

"This is terrible. How could she do such a thing to us?"

"Momma, this is not about you! What are you talking about?"

"I can't break this news to Carl right now. It would kill him. He's got enough on his mind."

"Momma, you can't be serious.. and that man Roger is supposed to speak at the retirement dinner!"

"I know that. Besides, we don't even know if this is true, do we?"

Yvette sighed heavily. "Why in the world would Jolie make up something like that and then

kill herself? That makes no sense.”

Mattie shook her head. “Right now, we got to handle this one step at a time. I gotta let your father know so we can plan the funeral. After the retirement, I can worry about when to break this news to him. He doesn't need any more worries.”

“So, you're just gonna sit on it? I just don't think that right,” Yvette said.

“Well, it's what's right for right now.”

“Yeah, so what's right for Jolie? Huh.”

“That's it, Yvette. I don't want to talk about this anymore,” said Mattie, the muscles of her neck straining. “This whole thing has got my blood pressure sky high as it is.”

“Whatever, momma.” “Do what you want to do. I gotta go.”

Yvette walked out of the room and slammed the front door as she left.

Mattie watched her leave through the front door. She walked into the living room reread the letter, then clutched it to her chest as she softly sobbed alone. Mattie's next-door neighbor, the wife of a retired admiral came out of the house when she heard the raised voices. Mattie reached over and drew her curtains closed.

#

Chapter Six

The house was quiet when Benjamin arrived home from work. The smell of chocolate chip cookies filled the air as he entered the kitchen from the garage. He walked over and pressed himself against Yvette who was bending over checking a tray of cookies in the oven.

“Surprise!”

“Damnit, man, be careful. You're gonna make me burn myself!” she said.

"I'm sorry," he said laughing. "I couldn't help myself."

"Well, you need to stop playing around. Sometimes people ain't up for that foolishness."

"What's the matter, Vette? Something wrong?"

"Nothing, just go on about your business and let me finish what I am doing."

"Alright. Okay."

He looked at her quizzically as he set down his briefcase and went into the bedroom to change clothes. When he returned Yvette was hand rolling cookie dough into small balls for the next batch of cookies.

"Mmmm, damn that smells good," he said. "How ya doing? You alright?"

"I'm fine Benjamin," she says, with her back to him. "I'm fine. Did you get my message on the ship?"

"Yeah, but I was really busy all day, since they didn't say it was an emergency I decided I would just talk to you once I got home."

Yvette shook her head and frowned. "See that's what upsets me about the Navy. Did they even tell you that it was important for me to talk to you?"

"I mean yeah, they gave me the message, but it didn't sound urgent. What's wrong?"

"Benjamin, it doesn't have to be an emergency for you to know that if I call the ship it must be for a good reason. I know your job is stressful. My dad has been going through it for years."

"Okay. I didn't mean to upset you, but I am here now. What's the problem?"

She walked over to the counter and began washing the cookie dough from her hands. "Never mind. Forget it. I will start working on dinner."

"Come on. I'm listening. Please tell me what is going on!"

"Alright. Yes, I am upset," she said. "Momma really pissed me off today."

“What about?”

“Momma found a suicide note from Jolie today.”

“What did it say?”

Yvette sat down at the kitchen table and began to cry. “Benjamin...that poor baby.”

“What happened?” he said.

Yvette sobbed into a handkerchief. Finally, she said, “Benjamin...it was Roger. She killed herself because of that bastard.”

“Really? Why?”

She looked at him. “When she found out from Momma that Roger was coming over to Germany to see her, she couldn’t handle it.”

Benjamin looked confused. “I’m not following.”

“Apparently, she was in such an emotional state that she took her own life.”

“You talking about that creepy looking old dude that I met? Did he do something to her.”

“Yeah, he molested her when she was little. Momma and stepfather used to leave her with Roger to babysit for them?”

“That’s fucked up.”

Yvette dried her eyes and cleared her throat. “Yeah, no shit. Every time they allowed him to stay with her -which was often, he took advantage of the situation. I can’t imagine how she must have felt, being all alone in that house. Goddamn! I want to throw up every time I think about it.”

“Yvette, I’m so sorry,” Benjamin said.

“I understand why she never told them. They wouldn’t have believed her, especially something bad about their precious friend, Roger. He could do no wrong in their eyes.”

Benjamin shook his head. "And he did right it under their noses. That's messed up."

"I used to baby-sit with Jolie when I was in high school, up until the time I left for college. That's when they started using Roger. I feel guilty, like I abandoned her."

"But it was not your fault. So, your parents never suspected anything was wrong?"

"No, I don't think so or they just ignored the signs. I think Momma is feeling guilty herself. They are responsible."

"Didn't your sister Joy try to fight them for custody of Jolie when she got out of rehab?"

"Yeah, Joy got her shit together, got clean and sober, and filed for custody of her child, but lost."

"Why?"

"She also had bipolar disorder. My parents used that against her. Those people are awful."

"Wow," he said, rubbing his chin.

When Joy lost custody of Jolie, her life spun out of control. Momma would complained to her friends how big a sacrifice it was for her to save her grandchild from an unfit mother. If it was such a sacrifice why did she give the child back to Joy?"

"I know. That makes no sense." Benjamin grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and sat down at the table.

"Momma just wanted the attention and sympathy from her friends. Jolie told Momma that she didn't like being left with Roger, but Momma dismissed what she called 'funny acting' as a personality flaw Jolie probably got from her mother, Joy."

"I suppose this was going on when they were spending much of their time at Navy functions?"

"That's no excuse," Yvette said. She jumped up suddenly. "Shit, the cookies!" She ran over

to the oven and flung open the door. Carefully she removed the pan of blackened circles. “God damn.”

Benjamin cringed at the sound of the swearing. “It’s alright. They’re just cookies.”

“I know. I just hate to waste food.” She dumped the burned cookies into the garbage and put the other tray into the oven.

She looked at Benjamin. “Being busy with the Navy is no excuse for not making sure that your children are let in safe hands.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to imply...”

She shook her head. “It just always seems like you’re defending my parents. You don’t have a clue. Yeah they sacrificed alright, but that little girl’s safety, was not a priority to them. They did with us when we were kids. All they ever cared about was his Navy career.”

Yvette sat down and began rolling cookie dough with her hands to make another batch.

“Well, I’m not going to argue with you about that. I didn’t grow up in your house.”

“Exactly. You don’t really have a clue what went on in our house. They used to beat us and berate us, especially stepfather. He seemed to get off on criticizing everything we did wrong, just because. It was fucked up.”

“I remember you told me a lot about that. I don’t minimize it, I just tried to consider that they did the best that they could under the circumstances.”

“For them the public perception of our family was most important. They wanted everyone on base where we lived to think we were some kind of black Brady Bunch, especially when he became an officer.”

Benjamin chuckled at that image.

“My parents were always telling us that we were never going to be anything but bums like

our 'no-good father'."

"Damn, that's cold."

"No shit. And I hated them for it. I loved my real father. Yes he was a drunk, but he was a kind-hearted man. He died of cancer when we were teenagers. My mother really didn't even want to go to the funeral."

"Where did he die?"

"Here in San Diego. He was originally from Oklahoma. I think Daddy's death really contributed to Joy's decline. She died a couple of years after Daddy."

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah. Momma and stepfather would always criticize her for being overweight. Whenever they got into an argument with her, they brought up the fact that she lost custody of her child to them, and they had to raise Jolie."

Yvette sat down heavily on the kitchen chair. "Stepfather called us fat pigs. They have a lot to answer for."

Benjamin walked over to the oven and opened it to check the cookies. "I think these are ready," he said.

Yvette removed the tray from the oven and set it on the stove top to cool.

"I don't know why I got off on that tangent," she said. "What I really wanted to tell you is that momma told me not to tell stepfather about why Jolie killed herself. I couldn't believe it."

"Why?"

"She said that the shock would be too much for him because he has too much on his mind right now with his retirement and the suicide."

"Well, they do have a lot on their plate," said Benjamin. Yvette rolled her eyes.

“Nobody told them to try and outdo everyone else with this retirement. C’mon, why do they have to have a banquet, a prayer breakfast, and then a retirement ceremony? He’s not the president of the United States.”

“His career has been an inspiration to a lot of young black officers. They looked up to him and wanted to do something special,” he said.

“Yeah, well a lot of this was Momma’s idea. She pushed the idea on to them through the wives. And the irony is that even though these guys are beholden to Carl Fleming, he would not have lifted a finger to help them if he didn’t have more to gain from doing so.”

“What do you mean?”

“So, check this out. Do you remember my friend, the ensign who went to Prairie View A&M?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, he got into a bad situation on his ship that was not entirely his fault, but the command decided to lay all the blame on him and punish him.”

“Go on.”

“He asked stepfather for help, but Carl Fleming didn’t lift a finger. My friend said that all he did was criticize him about his mistakes and offered him no direction.”

“Didn’t that guy go AWOL?”

“Yes, I guess he felt like he had no one to support him. Stepfather was afraid helping my friend would taint his reputation as a ‘company man’, so he did virtually nothing. He didn’t care.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Benjamin said.

“Like, what?”

“Are you going with me to my Naval Academy alumni club gathering this Saturday?”

“I don’t know Benjamin. I just don’t feel up to it. Those are you friends.”

“A lot of people bring their spouses,” he said.

“I know, I just don’t want to be around those trophy bitches. I always feel like it’s some kind of competition. A lot of those people are phony,” Yvette said.

Benjamin frowned. “Yeah, some, but not everybody is like that.”

Yvette was having no part of it. “You go ahead to your little gathering. I’ll stay home. I just don’t want to deal with Momma, Stepfather, or anybody until the retirement dinner. It’s just too much for me right now. I don’t feel like frontin and acting like everything’s alright when it isn’t.”

“Okay, I understand.” Benjamin went into the garage to wash his car.

#

Chapter Seven

Beautiful bouquets and the finest silver arrayed white tablecloths. Funk, jazz, and soul music filled the room as a US Navy band entertained the guests. Naval officers in elegant mess dress uniforms maintained their best behavior. Yvette closed her eyes listening to the amazing contralto voice of the young woman singing Anita Baker’s song ‘Sweet Love’. She nudged her cousin sitting next to her.

“That girl is amazing,” she said.

“I know,” said Jackie. “This is quite a show”.

“They better be good, otherwise you know they’d hear it from, Queen Mattie.”

They laughed.

“Girl you know your momma would have a fit if she heard you say that.”

“Y’all need to behave over there,” Paul said.

“We’re just playing, Uncle Paul,” Yvette said.

“That’s a good band,” Jackie said. “I didn’t know the Navy had such talented musicians,” said Jackie.

“They do. It’s amazing. I have seen this band play before. That singer can even do Whitney Houston’s songs - quite a range”.

Jackie touched the sparkling sequins of Yvette’s dress. “Girl, I like that gown you got on. Where’d you get it?”

“Thanks. I got it from Momma’s closet. She got enough of them, but she acted like I asked her to give up a kidney,” Yvette said.

Jackie laughed.

“She had the nerve to tell me I needed to lose about 20 pounds to fit it. I said okay and did put in an effort, then I decided fuck it and had it let out. And would you believe it was only a minor adjustment?”

“Aunt Mattie is something else.”

Yvette shook her head. “She thinks she’s tiny. So, where did you get your hair done?”

“You remember that place we always used to go to on National City Boulevard in the hood?”

“Oh yeah, yeah. I didn’t know it was still open. Momma used to take us there all the time when we were kids.”

“Yep” Jackie said. “They are still open, making that money.”

Benjamin was wearing his winter mess dress blues, with the short waist coat and cummerbund, while Paul was wearing a tuxedo.

Jackie smiled at the men. “Benjamin, I love that uniform and look at you daddy. You still got game.”

“Ain’t never lost it girl,” Paul said.

“Aunt Mattie and Uncle Carl seem to really be in their element. They bounced back fast since Jolie died.”

Yvette took a sip of wine and leaned over to Jackie. “Uh-huh,” she whispered. “...a little too fast. I don’t think they were as torn up about it as they wanted everyone to think, especially not Momma.”

Paul overheard her comment. “Now Yvette, don’t be so hard on your momma. She never was one that showed her emotions. I’m sure she grieved over it.”

“Maybe Uncle, sometimes I just wonder where their priorities are.”

“You think she put on a show?” Jackie said.

“Of course, girl. You know I am telling the truth. You know how she can clown. All she cared about was the attention it brought her, everybody sending her flowers and people constantly coming over to check on her,” Yvette said.

Benjamin shot her a dirty look. He gestured for her to keep it down.

“Benjamin, I am not making a scene. Just chill! I’m not going to embarrass you or my parents. I don’t care about what these people think.”

Yvette was getting more intoxicated with each glass of wine she downed, and the alcohol was loosening her tongue.

“Look I know how you feel, but this is a big deal for them. Can you just put all that aside for

one night,” Benjamin said.

“Don’t try to tell me how to act. You’re not my father. My father is dead. It feels so phony, so overblown here.” Yvette looked over at the head table. “And that sure ain’t my daddy.”

Yvette looked at Jackie. “You want to know what momma was most concerned about? It was when she found out Jolie designated her friend Marta to receive the premium from her military life insurance policy. Momma went nuts and tried to get the Army to change it and accused Marta of committing fraud.”

“Really?” Jackie said.

“Yep.” Yvette took another sip of wine. “She got to where she is today on the backs of her kids.”

“How so?”

“For one thing, when we were kids, they had a contract to clean military housing units for families who were transferring and moving out. The quarters had to pass inspection before a move was approved. Momma and Daddy would get us up around 3:00 a.m., many times on school days to clean houses.”

Jackie nodded. “I see what you mean. It must have been hell trying to be alert in school after that.”

“We were just kids. At first we thought it was fun, then it got to be a real drag. And the worst part is they never paid us anything from the money they got for the jobs.”

“That’s messed up.”

Paul looked surprised. “I’m sorry that was going on, baby. I didn’t know my sister treated y’all like that. If I had, I would have said something to them.”

“Thanks, uncle. Momma said we were just earning our keep.”

Yvette took another sip of wine.

“Daddy was still enlisted, but he would make sure that he cleaned the houses of officers who might help him in his career. It was all part of their plan.”

Yvette wiped her eyes, her voice quivering. Everyone at the table was listening intently to her story.

“When we would bring home bad grades from lack of sleep, Carl Fleming would just call us ‘stupid’. Momma would beat us. They never tried to help us or encourage us in any way or, consider that making us work late at night contributed to us making bad grades.”

Jackie touched Yvette on her shoulder. “I remember you used to tell me about what y’all were going through when we were kids.”

“All the while we had to keep up this facade that we were the perfect Navy family.”

Benjamin looked at his wife. “Do you want to go home?” he said.

“No, I want to see this whole thing through to the end. I’ll be alright.”

“Okay.”

At the head table, Carl and Mattie chatted jovially with their guests. Carl, with his uniformed adorned with more medals than anyone else present, except his boss, was a gracious host. Mattie reminisced with Roger about the old days but was not so engrossed in conversation as not to notice Yvette’s stare from across the room. Roger got up to speak, entertaining the crowd with tales of his and Carl’s adventures during the war and on their first ship. Everyone laughed except Yvette.

Roger sat down next to Mattie. “Is that Yvette over there?”, he said, gesturing with his chin.

“Yes, that’s her and her husband Ben. He went to the Naval Academy.”

“Oh, impressive,” he said and leaned over to his wife. “Honey you remember Yvette don’t

you?”

“Vaguely,” said Diane. “I think I met her once when we came to visit. She was just a girl then.”

“Look at her now. Married a Navy man like her daddy,” said Roger. Carl smiled.

When Roger and Carl were chief petty officers, stationed on the USS Kitty Hawk, Carl applied for the officer commissioning program and got picked up. Roger chose to remain enlisted and eventually retired as a master chief. They had remained friends throughout their careers.

After dinner the band started playing dance tunes. Roger rose from his seat and went over to Yvette and Benjamin’s table. Yvette gave him an indifferent look.

“How y’all doing?” he said.

“Good. I’m Benjamin, Yvette’s husband,” he said as he rose and shook the man’s hand.

“Yeah, it’s good to see you again. I’m Uncle Roger. Hey there, Yvette. How’ve you been?”

“I’m fine Roger. Is that Diane, your wife?”

“Yep, she didn’t want to miss this.”

“She looks different from how I remember her.”

“Age changes us all,” said Roger. “How about giving your uncle a dance?”

“I don’t think so, Roger. I’m not feeling it tonight,” she said. She looked over at Benjamin for support.

“I don’t mind. Go ahead, but it’s up to you,” said Benjamin.

Yvette gave him a ‘that’s not what you were supposed to say look’.

“Alright, Roger, one dance.”

Yvette rose from the table and followed Roger out onto the dance floor. Everyone was

moving, doing their own thing. Roger started doing something that he must have learned in the 1960s. Diane watched the two from the head table. Yvette maintained a respectable distance from him.

Roger danced over closer to her. "What's wrong? Why are you being so cold towards me?" he said.

"It's nothing, Roger. I just wish you would stop telling people you're my uncle. You know we're not kin."

"That's what y'all kids used to call me back in the day."

"That's because Momma made us and would beat us if we didn't."

"Your momma was a pistol back then."

"She was hard," Yvette said.

"I think she meant well," he said. "I am sorry to hear about what happened to Jolie."

Yvette stopped dancing. "I'm sure you are," she said and walked towards the exit of the ballroom. Roger followed. At that moment Benjamin and Mattie saw the two leaving and got up to see what was wrong.

Outside the ballroom Roger caught up with Yvette and grabbed her arm.

"Yvette, please tell me what this is all about! You must still be upset about Jolie."

Yvette jerked her arm away. "Roger, I don't want to hear a damn thing you have to say about that child."

He released his grip.

"Benjamin came out into the lobby. "Yvette, you all right?"

"Benjamin, I guh, guh, got this," she said. She was now clutching her chest, tears were forming in her eyes, she struggled to catch her breath, oblivious to the other guests mingling in

the lobby and looking aghast.

“First of all, Roger, I don't give a damn about what you and my parents think. Yes, I am upset about Jolie.”

“Yvette, what in the hell is going on!” yelled Mattie as she burst into the lobby.

“Momma, shut up!” Yvette said. “I'm gonna say my piece and then I'm gone.

She turned to Roger. “She mentioned you.”

Suddenly a frightened look came across Roger's face, then he quickly composed himself.

“Really? Why?” he said.

Yvette could not contain herself. She lunged forward and pushed him in the chest as hard as she could. Luckily for Roger, he was close to a wall which kept him from falling.

“Son-of-a-bitch, I know about your shit!”

Mattie ran up, grabbed her by the shoulders and started shaking her. “You stop this right now! Benjamin, take her home!”

Yvette pulled away from her. “This is all your fault, Momma, all yours,” she said, her voice cold, resolute. Mattie slapped her across the face hard.

Yvette clutched her face which was now contorted with pain and horror.

“You're drunk. Now go home. You've done enough damage for one night.” Mattie said.

Benjamin wrapped his arm around Yvette's shoulders and walked her out to their car. Mattie walked over to Roger. “Are you alright? There's no excuse for her behavior.”

“Yes. She was so upset,” he started to say.”

“Don't worry about what she said. She was drunk out of her mind. Let's go back inside. This is Carl's big day. I don't want any more distractions to mess this up for him.”

When she got back to the head table Carl was visibly concerned. “What was that all about?”

“It was nothing. Yvette is still really grieving over Jolie. She had too much to drink. Roger, bless his heart, went after her to try and help,” she said with a soothing smile.

“Is she going to be alright?” Carl said.

“Oh yeah. I just told Benjamin to take her home. She’ll be alright. I will call her in the morning.”

“Okay,” said Carl, satisfied for the moment and too busy with his guests to pursue the matter.

#

Chapter Seven

All night Carl could not sleep. It was Saturday morning. Mattie was still asleep as he rose early and went downstairs to make some coffee. He was tired from the week and the retirement festivities. He had one more thing to do - the prayer breakfast tomorrow - and then he could relax. The events of the night before were tugging at his mind. Obviously, something serious had happened during the dinner last, something bad enough for Mattie to send Yvette home. But Mattie had been evasive when he asked her about it once they got home. She even became angry when he pressed her, so he let the matter go.

This morning he planned to call Yvette and talk to her himself. He found her number and dialed it. He checked the time: 8:30, not too early to call.

“Hello.”

“Hello Benjamin, this is Pappa Fleming. How’re you doing?”

“I’m fine, Pops. What’s up?”

“Is Yvette there? Is she up? I need to talk to her.”

“Yessir, she is, but she told me that she didn’t want to talk to anybody right now.”

“Tell her it’s her father and I really need to talk to her.”

“Okay, I’ll see if she’ll come to the phone.” After a few minutes, Carl could hear someone pick up the receiver, breathing heavily.

“Hey daddy,” said Yvette.

“Hi baby, I was just calling to see how you were doing.”

“I’m alright. I just wasn’t up for talking right now.”

“I can understand, but please tell me what happened between you and your mother last night. She wouldn’t tell me much.”

“She didn’t? That’s not like her. I would have thought she would have plenty to say about what happened,” she said.

“She wouldn’t tell me anything, so I am asking you.”

“Look, daddy. There’s a lot that you don’t know about what happened to Jolie..”

“What? Like what?”

“Daddy, momma told me not to say anything. I think it’s best that you talk to her.”

“I don’t know a damn thing. I wish somebody would tell me what’s going on!”

“I’m sorry daddy, but I am not saying another word. Last night Momma slapped me over this whole thing..”

“Alright, I won’t press you anymore, but goddamnit I’m tired of being in the dark over this shit. Goodbye, honey.”

He hung up the phone and went upstairs to the bedroom. Mattie was in the bathroom, so he waited patiently for her to come out. It took all his effort not to bang on the door. What the fuck was she hiding from him. Why would she go so far as to forbid Yvette from talking and strike

her. A wave of apprehension swept over him. Finally, she came out. She was startled when she suddenly noticed him sitting on the bed.

“Damn, Carl. You scared me to death. Have you been sitting there the whole time? Do you need to use the restroom?”

“No,” he said. “I need to talk to you.”

She sat down on the bed next to him. “Okay. What about?”

“Tell me what the hell is going on between you and Yvette?”

“Well, there was a letter in Jolie’s personal effects, a suicide note. I didn’t want to upset you, because you already had so much on your mind with the retirement and all.”

“When were you planning on telling me?”

“I was going to get around to it when things settled down.”

“Dammit, Mattie! Where is the letter? I want to see it now!”

“Okay, alright. I’ll get it,” she said. She went to her dresser, fished an envelope from under some of her clothes, and handed it to Carl.

He grasped the letter and opened it. As he read, his eyes began to water. When he finished he laid down the letter and rose from the bed without speaking.

Finally, he turned to Mattie. “You had no right to keep this from me.” Then he turned to leave the room.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to call Roger. I need to know what he has to say about this.”

Roger was Carl’s closest and dearest friend. They had been buddies since they first met in Vietnam, where they saw combat while patrolling the Mekong delta on Navy riverine boats. When they got leave they would make their way to their favorite brothel in the little town of

Olongapo, outside Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines.

“I like ‘em eight to eighty, blind crippled or crazy,” Roger would say, but always seemed to prefer the young girls.

“How come you always robbing the cradle?” Carl would ask him.

Roger would reason that asian women always looked younger than their age.

“Maybe so,” Carl said. “But I want a woman to look like a woman, not a little girl.” He never brought the matter up again, but now things were starting to make sense to him.

When they finished their tours in Vietnam, they got assigned to the same command stateside. They watched each other’s back and helped each other advance in rank.

Being single Roger would often volunteer to watch the kids for Carl and Mattie to give them time off. He eventually married and raised his own family. Carl went into the dining room and looked up Roger’s number. Mattie followed.

“Mattie, I want to talk to him alone.”

“Alright,” she said and went into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee from the percolator pot her mother had given her years before. She listened to Carl’s conversation in the other room.

“Roger, this is Carl. I need to talk to you.”

“Hi, Carl, what’s up?”

“It’s about last night and what happened between you and my daughter.”

There was a long silence on the phone. “Carl, I didn’t do anything to Yvette. She just started screaming at me for no reason, then she assaulted me.”

“Yes, Yvette’s behavior was out of line, and I apologize for that,” said Carl. “But it’s not her that I want to talk about. I want to talk about why she was upset.”

Roger got quiet on the phone for a moment. “Okay.” Carl could hear the tension in his voice.

Carl could hear the hesitancy in Roger's voice.

"I found out today that when Jolie killed herself, she left a suicide note," Carl began. "She wrote that the reason she wanted to end her life is that when she learned you were going over to Germany to see her, and she could not bear the thought of it."

"Why would she say that?" said Roger.

"I think you know why, but I will spell it out for you. She said that you had raped and molested her when she was a little girl." Carl's voice was trembling with anger.

"No, no that's not true!" said Roger.

"Why would she say that then and take her own life? Goddamn Roger, you're supposed to be my friend and I trusted you!" His voice was breaking up.

Carl could feel his heart pounding, his hands sweaty, and his underarms wet.

"Carl, I have made a lot of mistakes in my life, but I can assure you that I am not responsible for this." His voice was strangely calm.

"Don't lie to me, God dammit! I feel like I am just as responsible because I left my children with you...!"

From the kitchen Mattie heard a thud on the tile floor. She came into the dining room and there was Carl staring blankly, tears in his eyes, mumbling something incoherent.

"Carl!" She said as she ran over to him and quickly.

"Mattie! What's happening," Roger asked over the line.

Mattie picked up the receiver from the floor.

"Something is wrong with Carl. I gotta call an ambulance," she said as she hung up the phone.

Carl's mouth was drooping to one side, and he was trembling. She quickly picked up the

receiver and called 911.

#

Chapter 8

“Hello.”

“Yvette, this is Patrick.”

“Hey, what's up, Scamp?” Everyone else in the family called him Paddy, but this was her own nickname for him.

“Vette, it's about daddy.”

The sound of his serious tone changed her mood. “What about daddy?”

“He's had a stroke. He is in Balboa Hospital.”

“What? How did you find out?” she said.

“Momma called me. She asked me to call you.”

“Okay. When did it happen?”

“Sometime this morning. I'm not sure.” said Patrick.

“How is he? Are we allowed to visit him?” She asked.

“He is in bad shape. They have him in intensive care. Momma said he also had a heart attack.”

“Oh Jesus! Why didn't Momma call me?”

“I don't know, sis. Is she still not speaking to you after the party? Are you going to see him?”

“Of course, as soon as I get dressed. I'll deal with Momma when I get there.”

“Okay, I will see you later. I am on my way there now.”

Commented [1]: Another smooth POV shift

“Okay, bye.” Yvette hung up the phone with a feeling of dread growing in her gut. She got up to find Benjamin. She called for him, but he did not answer so she checked the garage. He was working on his car.

“Benjamin?”

“Yeah, baby what’s up?”

“I just got some bad news. Daddy had a stroke sometime this morning. He’s in Balboa Hospital.”

Benjamin slid out from underneath the car. “Really? Damn. Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, not necessary. I don’t want to have to wait for you to clean up. Just meet me there later. I will call you when I know the room number.”

“Alright,” he said. He was just about to loosen the pan bolt to change his oil, so he made sure that it was tightened.

Yvette arrived at the sprawling medical complex located next to San Diego’s Balboa Park and went straight to the admissions desk. When she asked for Carl Fleming, the desk clerk asked who she was.

“He is my father.” Yvette was impatient with this formality.

“He was in the emergency room, but it looks like he has been moved to the intensive care unit. I’m sorry to ask who you are, but we are only allowed to admit family members to see patients.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Yvette left the desk and sprinted down the hall following the signs. When she came to the intensive care unit, she had to go through the same ritual at the nursing

station. They showed her to the room. There was Mattie sitting on the side of the hospital bed wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. Chaplain Morris, an old family friend, sat next to her patting her back.

“Hey baby,” Mattie said briefly. Yvette went over and kissed her cheek.

“Hey Momma. Hello Chaplain.”

“Hello sweetheart,” he said. He was in uniform even though it was his day off.

Carl was asleep with tubes inserted all over his body, a respirator mask covering his nose. An IV and catheter delivered and removed fluid from his body. All these attachments were connected to a large monitor, the only signs of life flashed on a screen.

“How is he Momma?” Mattie shook her head and moaned covering her mouth.

[“He’s in bad shape, had a stroke then a heart attack. They have him in an induced coma until his condition stabilizes,” Chaplain said.]

Commented [2]: Oh no, testament to the stress

Yvette walked around the side of the bed and touched Carl’s hand. It felt cold. He did not look like she remembered even from the day before. Now just a body clinging to life.

“He feels cold,” she said.

“Yes, the doctor said that is normal because so much is out of whack from the stroke and heart attack, that his body must reset. They are keeping him like this until his vital signs improve.”

Yvette got a chair and sat for a while. She got up to call her husband.

“Momma, I’m gonna call Benjamin.”

[Mattie nodded. Yvette left the room mainly because she did not feel comfortable around Mattie. It was still very awkward.] She called Benjamin and told him that she was coming home.

Commented [3]: good tension

“Why are you coming home so quickly?” he asked.

“It’s too awkward being around Momma right now.”

“Okay. If I don’t catch you there, I will see you when I get home.”

Yvette hung up the phone and went back into the room. “Momma, I am going to go back home and come back tomorrow and see how he is doing. Maybe, I might get a chance to see the doctor.”

“Okay,” said Mattie. “It’s best to come first thing in the morning when he is making his rounds. That’s what the head nurse told me.”

“Okay, I will see you later. Thanks for stopping by Chaplain,” Yvette said.

Yvette turned to leave, and the Chaplain got up. “I will walk you out.”

He followed Yvette out into the corridor and to the elevators.

“Your mother said that you and she had a bad argument last night at dinner. I don’t want to get into all that now, but I just wanted to make sure you are alright.”

“I’m fine,” she said.

He looked at her incredulously. “It’s not my business to pry, but she seemed to imply that you may have been the cause of him having his stroke.”

Yvette stepped back from him; her eyes fixed on him with surprise, then anger. “That’s a horrible thing for her to say. I had nothing to do with daddy having a stroke. If anything, he had the stroke because Momma finally told him the truth about what happened to my niece.”

[The chaplain looked confused. “Jolie? That was the granddaughter that killed herself, right? That was a terrible blow to your family.”]

“Yes,” she said.

“What happened?”

Commented [4]: call back well-placed

“Chaplain, Jolie left a suicide note in her personal effects. Jolie told why she killed herself and Momma kept it a secret from Daddy.”

“What?”

“Yes. Jolie said that Daddy’s friend Roger had molested her repeatedly when she was a little girl. Daddy probably couldn’t handle the shock and guilt because I’m sure he feels responsible, because they let Roger babysit the child.”

The chaplain placed his hand over his heart, a horrified look on his face. He went over and sat down in the elevator lobby.

“No wonder,” he said.

“Yes, Momma handled it in the worst way possible. She has no one to blame but herself. This is on her head, not mine.”

Commented [5]: wow, true to character

The down elevator door opened, and she went inside. “Maybe, I’ll see you tomorrow, Chaplain. I am going to try to come when Momma’s not here.”

“I understand,” he said as the elevator doors closed.

End

The Quality of Mercy

The night before their mission the rains came with a vengeance. Sargent Earl White lay awake in his cot listening to the sound of rain and mosquitoes eagerly trying to get inside his insect net. His boxers and t-shirt were hung up to stay dry, and relatively clean for the next day's work – a small luxury.

Monsoon season in the Burmese jungle claimed everything: clothing rotted, equipment rusted, and radios failed. At times you could feel your own sanity dripping away bit by bit. Earl thought about his conversation with First Sergeant Galliano after receiving his orders. The mission: locate a lost convoy of trucks that had been washed off the road in a flash flood sometime within the last forty-eight hours. On the morning of the mission, a sanguine sky to the east boded more rain, and a heavy mist shrouded the Patkai Mountains as Earl prepared his team for their patrol.

He had requested that his team have a couple of military police along to provide extra security. Just two weeks prior, a group of Earl's soldiers from Company Foxtrot of the 45th Engineering Service Regiment had come under attack from Japanese snipers. The 45th was part of a force of 9000 colored soldiers deployed to northern Burma to work on the Ledo Road project.

First Sergeant Galliano said no, his squat frame, and belly pressing against his uniform. He spent most of his time with the officers in the command area. Earl had insisted. He towered over the First Sergeant and his arms and back were well muscled from growing up on a farm and performing Army calisthenics with his men. A scar was etched across his face, running from below his right eye, down the cheek, to his lip. Galliano looked at Earl's copper-brown face, then away nervously. The scar turned red when Earl got angry, and the blood rushed to his head.

Before the injury he had been called handsome, now the disfigurement made him feel like a monster. Monster or not, most white soldiers cowered at his glare, and it usually got Earl what he needed when other Negroes were denied. Not this time, though.

Galliano shook his head, “Can’t do it, Sergeant. Captain Mitchell won’t allow any additional security to go out. He says they are needed for the camp and the road work.”

Earl knew that recently the military had stepped up security to protect the 6000 white soldiers assigned to the project. Sniper attacks had quieted down, but most assuredly would resume when the Army patrols stopped.

“That’s interesting,” Earl said. “I see all kinds of guys providing security for the white boys of the 209th. My troops are lucky to get any protection at all.”

“Nothing I can do, Earl. We’re doing everything we can for everybody.”

Earl spit on the ground, shook his head and sighed. “Yeah, sure you are.”

He and his men would have to go out without any extra security and hope for the best. Besides Wendell, Parsons, and Graves, the team included ten Indian coolies to carry back supplies and spare parts they might find at the crash site. A large group of Indian workers were hired in Ledo, a small railroad town in India just across the border from Burma at the starting point of the road. It was rumored around the camp that the coolies seemed to know when Japs were around...could smell Japs before they saw them. To them the Japanese had almost mystical powers because of their ability to elude the Americans. Many of the GIs would say, “If the coolies get spooked and run off, grab your weapon”. Earl was glad to have them along.

Earl took time to make sure each of his men had the supplies they would need for the dangerous mission. They would be on their own out beyond the fence line. The team seemed unusually quiet that morning. Earl expected this of Wendell, a great Quartermaster who kept on

top of supply needs.

Earl paid particular attention to Parsons, who was as animated as a Jack Russell terrier. A wild card, he seemed to be wrapped just a little too tightly and could be jumpy when stressed. He smoked Naga ganga to calm his anxieties. Though small, he was tenacious in a fight.

Earl turned to Graves. "Did you bring quinine?"

Graves wiped the sweat from his dark forehead. His hair was smooth, almost straight. The guys nicknamed him 'Mudfoot' because he had Choctaw blood. He certainly looked it with his black eyes and aquiline nose.

"No Sarge, atabrine."

"Atabrine? No more quinine?"

"Naw, I checked. Headquarters Medical said there's a shortage of quinine. When the Japs invaded Java, that cut off our supply. It comes from a tree that grows on the island," Graves said.

A trained medic, Graves was himself recovering from a recent bout of malaria. Always calm and serious, he was invaluable at treating wounded soldiers on the battlefield.

"Ain't that a bitch," Earl said. "Let's get going."

He finished his equipment checks and looked up at the sky as they set off down the road, not knowing how far they would have to trek. Smoking the weed was all a lot of the guys had to help them cope so Earl mostly overlooked the habit if it kept up the men's morale until this shit war ended. They were constantly dealing with stinging ants, malaria mosquitoes, leeches, and poisonous snakes.

The road was soft and soggy, barely able to support the weight of a man. They left footprints

as they walked over the gravel. In a dryer climate the gravel, created by blasting rock from the side of the mountain would be sufficient. After about an hour the men found a 200-yard gap in the road. Where there was once gravel, now deep channels ran downhill, exposing loose rocks. Earl surveyed the damage. It was hard to believe that a week's worth of hard labor could be wiped away in minutes and it would all have to be rebuilt somehow.

It was too much to contemplate and the immediacy of the moment required their attention. The flood and boulders had cleared trees as they tumbled down the mountain. The group backtracked and found a path they could follow down into the valley and made their way to the crash site. The whole mess of debris had been stopped just above where the trucks were by a group of large boulders. The temporary dam looked as if it could give way at any time. Earl's team would have to keep a watchful eye to avoid being crushed should the rockslide break free. The smell of diesel fuel and death hung in the moist air as they approached. Like dead elephants, the two-and-a half ton trucks lay on their sides, the contents of their stomachs strewn about.

Flies swarmed around the body of a young man whose legs had gotten caught by the roof of a truck and crushed. Private Graves donned his medical mask and stepped forward to examine the body, that was already swollen and blackened by the heat and humidity. The other men stood back. With gloved hands, Graves removed the dog tags. James Martin, it read. Graves pulled back the man's bloodied shirt, revealing an empty abdominal cavity. "Some predator got to him...vital organs are gone."

Earl and the others wrapped bandanas around their faces to block some of the smell. Since being sent to Northern Burma, Earl had seen many men die. Deaths from equipment accidents, Japanese snipers, malaria, and rockslides were common, almost one casualty per month. The sight of the body brought up images of his own death. In a dream he saw the side of his head

explode from a round fired by an anonymous sniper and he woke up screaming. The memory of the corpse with the gaping wound would stay with him for the rest of his life.

“See if you can find something to cover that up until we can figure out how to bury him,” Earl said.

Wendell gagged. “Lord have mercy. I would rather take a sniper bullet to the head than die like that, being trapped knowing you’re probably gonna die while the mosquitoes have a field day feasting on you.”

“Don’t dwell on it man,” Graves said. “This is just another way to die in this shithole place. I hope this poor bastard died quickly. Looks like he was...no claw marks on the hands. He didn’t put up a fight.” He carefully removed the man’s dog tags for identification.

The wind picked up and the smell of light rain began to move into the valley. The men welcomed this, hoping it might dissipate the stench of the corpses a bit. Bird calls and monkey screeches echoed off the sides of the cliffs. Earl touched a lit cigarette to the leech that had attached itself to his calf, and winced. The slug shriveled and fell off into the mud. After a year his Army uniforms were rotted and threadbare. They gave little protection from the jungle plants or insects. Fear and misery cannot occupy the same vessel for long. So far Earl had managed to keep both at bay, but it was getting harder every day. He scanned the forest along the hillside. Their position exposed them to sniper fire.

The Indian coolies had hung back from the scene. Earl motioned for them to come forward to try and free the body trapped under the truck, bury it, or cover it up if it could not be removed. The coolies were nervous. They kept looking at the pile of debris on the hillside above and talking excitedly amongst themselves. Often those in their group who could speak English would complain that they were never told their lives would constantly be at risk in this active war zone.

They were on a ledge that stretched out for about 25 yards, then there was another drop, about twenty feet. Earl looked over the edge.

“We got another truck down there,” he said.

The soldiers tied ropes to nearby trees and started over the cliff, their weapons slung over their shoulders.

“Parsons, you stay up here and supervise the coolies,” Earl said.

Below the cliff lay the third truck amongst a beautiful field of pink and white rhododendrons. In the birch trees, magnolias gleamed in the muted light. Hoolock gibbons, eating fruit, regarded the soldiers with curiosity as the men descended. Black eyes, rimmed with bright white fur made the apes look like wise old men. This ‘council of elders’ hung their small bodies from the branches like chimpanzees with long spidery arms, unaware of a twelve-foot-long Burmese python waiting patiently on a lower limb for one of them to come close enough to catch. It was well hidden, but Graves noticed it.

As the men surveyed the wreckage, there were no bodies in sight. “Tigers or leopards probably dragged the bodies off into the jungle,” Earl said.

Graves took wide steps through the tall grass to avoid the tree with the snake. He felt something soft and mushy beneath his boots. He lifted his heel and saw that the soles were covered with stinking brown feces.

“Goddamn monkeys.” He reached for a stick and hurled it at the hoolocks, which screamed and climbed to higher branches.

Wendell smirked at him. “It ain’t God’s fault.”

“Whose fault is it then, preacher?” Graves said as he scraped his boots against the tree. He had completely forgotten about the snake. “Fuck God.”

Wendell shook his head. "I don't mess around with that. That kind of talk..."

Graves scoffed. "What? Might get me struck down? Look around you, man. We here in this nasty ass jungle searching for corpses and dodging monkey shit. That would be a relief. Ain't that right Sarge."

Wendell waved him away. "You and yo injun ways. You don't know shit." It was futile to argue.

Earl had been watching the exchange, letting it play out. They needed to blow off steam to relieve the tension. A noise from the upper ledge caught his attention. The two soldiers had been so wrapped up in their conversation that they had not noticed at first the loud rumbling above them, the rustling of feet, of men screaming and running for their lives. Suddenly a cascade of rocks and boulders poured over the cliff towards them.

"Look out!" Earl shouted.

He and Graves pressed their backs against the cliff wall underneath an outcropping just big enough to shield them from the falling rocks. Wendell managed to scramble up a large birch tree off to the side. A huge cloud of dust was everywhere. The men covered their eyes and noses as best they could. Then there was silence.

"Thank God for this overhang," Graves said.

Wendell came down. He looked at Graves. "I see you changed your tune."

Graves rolled his eyes.

Earl listened. "Parsons! Are you alright up there?" No answer.

It was strangely quiet. A low moan was coming from the ledge where they had left Parsons. The ropes Earl and the others had used were gone so they had to climb back up using the roots and trunks of trees on the steep slope. When they found Parsons he was semi-conscious on the

ground surrounded by rocks. His leg was twisted at a weird angle and the ankle appeared to be broken. Graves gave him a shot of morphine and started preparing to reset the fractured leg.

Suddenly Earl had the feeling that they were being watched. He looked up to see five camouflaged figures with their weapons trained on them. At first, they appeared to be Naga, the small dark people of the forest, hostile to foreigners, that practiced headhunting. But, these men did not carry the square-bladed swords that were used for lopping off heads. Their skin was brown, almost black like the Naga, but the faded five-pointed-stars on their helmets signified that they were in fact imperial Japanese soldiers. The Americans stood and raised their hands. These trees who were men, or men who were trees looked to have foliage growing from their bodies.

Earl decided to take the initiative. "What do you want?" he said.

The figures stood silent, then moved forward and took the American's weapon. Wendell tried to shoulder his M-1 rifle. Before he could raise it to fire, one of the Japanese soldiers lunged forward and viciously knocked him down with the butt of his rifle.

"Oh shit! Wait!" yelled Earl as he knelt to help his man. "

The Japanese leader, his hand perched on the hilt of his sword, shouted an order at his soldier who was standing over Earl with his bayonet ready. Then in perfect English he said, "You may attend to your wounded, but my men will not hesitate to kill you if you try anything else. Consider him lucky." His soldier backed away.

The Japanese set the Americans' weapons out of reach.

"We are not here to fight you," said the Japanese leader. His voice inflection sounded faintly American.

Earl was satisfied for the moment that the situation was stable, but aware that it could

escalate quickly if they made the wrong moves.

“Then what do you want? Are we your prisoners?” Earl repeated.

“That depends on you. I have not decided,” the Japanese officer said.

“What are you planning to do?”

“You are no threat to us, except if we let you go, you might give away our position and bring more troops. I cannot take a chance on that.”

“I would not do that. My concern is for the safety of my men,” Earl said.

“We could have killed you from a distance, but I told my men not to.”

“Why?” Earl looked at their long rifles, built more for long range shots than close in jungle fighting.

“I do not consider you our enemy. We could kill you now and save ourselves a lot of trouble, but I don’t think is it the right thing to do. I know about your people in the United States.” A rain squall began to pepper the trees.

“How do you know about Negroes in my country?” asked Earl. He was skeptical, suspicious that this man was trying to manipulate him, yet he had no choice but to let it play out.

The leader looked at Earl side-ways. “You call it ‘your country’, but it does not seem so. Why do you fight for them?”

“America is my home. It’s all that I know, and we are soldiers. We do as we are told,” said Earl.

“I can respect that, but I still don’t understand,” the leader said.

“What are you called?”

“I am Yoichi and these are my men.”

“Why are you here?”

“We were a part of a larger unit. Six months ago, they retreated and we stayed to harass the Americans to keep them from following our unit.”

“I remember that big firefight,” Earl said.

Yoichi sighed. “It was effective for a while until more and more GI’s started flooding the area looking for us. Success for a sniper in dense jungle like this, is short lived. After one shot your position is compromised and you spend much of your time evading capture.”

“Doesn’t sound like a well thought out plan,” Earl said.

“No. It was made in haste as our unit retreated.”

Yoichi looked around at his men and motioned for them to lower their weapons.

He squatted a short distance away. His pants, rotted away at the knees, revealed thin legs covered with insect bites and ugly sores from leeches. The other soldiers removed their helmets. It was clear from their skin, thin as parchment paper and their gaunt faces, that they were near starvation. Two of them appeared to have head injuries from the falling rocks. Yoichi removed an old picture from his shirt pocket and handed it to Earl.

“Family,” he said, pointing to the picture. “Uncle live in United States. Yoichi visit United States.”

Earl lit a cigarette then looked at the picture of a Japanese couple dressed in work clothes. Nearby two young boys flanked a sign that read Watsonville Strawberries. Yoichi pointed to one of the boys and then himself.

“Damn,” Earl said, as he passed the picture to his men.

“I know that place,” said Graves. “It’s northern California.”

Earl offered Yoichi a cigarette. “Where did you learn English?”

“Thank you. I learn from Cousin Taka,” said Yoichi. His hands were skeletal, and the nails

had turned black.

“What do you want from us, Yoichi?”

“We just want some food and perhaps medical supplies. Two of my men got hurt when the rocks came down.”

This was Earl’s chance to develop some rapport with the man. “We have medical supplies that we can share with you,” Earl said.

The rockslide had buried much of the truck on the ledge. Below them, the other truck was still more accessible.

“You can have whatever you can get from either truck, but as you can see it won’t be easy,” Earl said.

Yoichi nodded. “Yes, we will get what we can.” He directed two of his men to start gathering supplies.

“Do you mind if we get back to tending to our injured?” Earl said.

“You may,” Yoichi said. He took a long draw from his cigarette.

“Will you allow us to get him back to our camp?” Earl said.

“If I let you go, you must promise me that you will not betray us.”

“I would be very grateful,” Earl said. “We would keep our mouths shut. I promise. Right guys?”

Graves nodded. “Yes, sarge, of course.” Wendell sat rubbing his shoulder where he took the blow from the rifle butt.

They created a makeshift splint for Parson’s leg and a stretcher to carry him along. After about an hour, they heard voices.

“Hey! Sergeant White!” A voice called down from somewhere on the road or up the trail.

The Japanese soldiers quickly disappeared into the jungle undergrowth.

“Remember, your promise,” Yoichi said as he too disappeared.

Earl nodded.

It was a relief to hear other American voices, until Earl saw it was Sargent Byers, a former supervisor at a West Virginia coal mine, now in charge of the Military Police. Byers did not hide his disdain and showed little respect to Negro soldiers regardless of rank or position. Earl really hated this man, but he knew he had to keep his composure otherwise the situation could go to shit fast.

“Down here,” Earl said. He and Wendell were removing rocks from the trail so they could get Parsons through on the stretcher. Graves continued to provide aid to Parsons who was now sitting up awake.

The platoon of soldiers burst through from the trail led by Byers. He looked around the scene, covering his mouth as he smelled the rotting corpse nearby.

“God damn. What a mess” he said. “We came runnin’ from up yonder when we heard the rumbling and figured it was a rockslide. Then we saw your coolies come back without you, so we came to see what happened.”

Yoichi and the other Japanese soldiers were hidden in the nearby brush with the barrels of their guns trained on the group. Earl tried to appear nonchalant.

“They took off like a bat out of Hell when it all came down. Parsons here got injured by the falling rocks. They probably ran over him trying to save themselves,” he said.

“How’s your boy doing?”

“Broken ankle, possible internal bleeding. We need to get him back to camp.”

“Yep, looks bad,” Byers said casually.

He was not interested in Parson's injury. He started walking around looking at the rubble. He walked over near where the Japanese were hiding completely clueless that they were there. Earl held his breath. The whole thing balanced on a razor's edge as Byers stopped for a closer look at the body of the deceased soldier. Only the head was still uncovered.

"Looks like this guy got fucked up pretty bad."

Earl was concerned that the Japanese soldiers might become impatient. It was best to get rid of Byers as soon as possible.

"Sargent Byers, could you guys get Parsons here back to base?" Earl said.

Byers knew his men were watching him closely to see how he would behave. Though he was intimidated by Earl, he had to show who was boss. "Why? There're at least two of you still able bodied. You brought him out here. You need to get him back." He turned to leave.

Earl persisted. "Then, would you take these dog tags that we got off the body back to headquarters?"

"Earl, I came out here to see what happened. Now I did that. I don't have time to babysit. First Sargent said you were one of the smart ones, but so far I am not impressed," Byers said.

Earl bit his lip but kept his cool. Parsons looked confused trying to grasp what was happening.

"Take care of your own men, Earl. Show us you're worthy of those stripes." Byers said over his shoulder.

"Fucking asshole," Graves mumbled.

Byers turned around and looked at Graves; his eyes narrowed. "Earl, you better put a lid on your boy. I'll send his ass to the stockade real quick for disrespect! Just try me, boy!"

Earl got between them. Byers gave him a dirty look, but Earl persisted. "Will you at least

send the coolies back to us when you return to camp?"

Byers backed away and turned to leave. Over his shoulder he said, "Git 'em ya' damn self. My daddy always said that without us niggers act like lost children. You better get your sorry asses back before some Jap sniper takes you out or the rest of this hill comes down."

Earl winked at his men, and they smiled at the thought. After a time, Yoichi and the others came back into the clearing. Earl put his finger up to his lips and looked to make sure the MPs were gone.

"Thank you," Yoichi said.

"It's nothing," Earl said. "I feel ashamed that you had to see that."

Yoichi nodded. "Just as I thought, you fight a war within a war."

"We need to go now," said Earl. "We need to get Parsons back to camp."

"Yes, of course," Yoichi said.

He and the other Japanese gave Earl and his soldiers their weapons.

After they had gone a short way up the trail Wendell turned to Earl. "Sarge, did we do the right thing? Should we go back and try and capture them? We would probably get medals for it."

Earl looked annoyed. "Hell no, man. Just leave well enough alone."

"So, we just let them go? Do we report this, then?"

"You're missing the point. We are lucky to have gotten out of there with our lives," Earl said. "Those Japanese showed us mercy. That's a hell of a lot more than Byers would have done. As far as I'm concerned it didn't happen and we keep our mouths shut about the whole thing. Understand."

"But..."

"But nothing," Earl said. "Just what the fuck are you going to say? And how are you going to

explain that we didn't tell Byers about the Japs? They're gonna look at us as collaborating with the enemy."

"I guess that wouldn't go over too well," Wendell said.

"You fucking right it wouldn't. Just leave it be. That goes for everybody. Those Japs are just men like us trying to make it."

"Dumb ass Byers will never know that you probably saved his life," Graves said.

Earl smiled to himself.

"These white boys don't have a clue. I knew the best way to get rid of them was to ask for their help. That bastard couldn't get out of here fast enough. The situation could have gone to shit in an instant. If the Japanese started shooting Byers and the MPs, we would have been obligated to help our troops, except we didn't even have our weapons," he said.

They all agreed to keep the incident to themselves. Low clouds silently slipped over the mountains, shielding them from the sun as they made their way up towards the road and camp.

The Gargoyle

Charlie woke up shivering, surrounded by the sound of young sailors snoring. He swung his feet over the side of his bunk and carefully climbed down, making sure he didn't step on the guy sleeping in the bunk below. It was early, before reveille. His toes curled up when his feet landed on the cold steel deck. He put on socks and sniffed the air. His nose wrinkled at the rank smell of the cramped berthing compartment.

During the night something happened to the air-conditioning and the room became hot and stuffy. When the cooling problem got fixed – God knows when – the room became a refrigerator. Charlie reached for the flashlight that was wedged next to the mattress of his coffin bed.

His fingers slipped under the lip of the metal frame holding his mattress and lifted, then braced it open the way you would the hood of a car. The shallow chest below the lid contained almost everything he owned, except his dress uniforms. In the dim light he gathered his toiletries and went into the head. Though cramped and lacking privacy, Charlie knew his quarters on the ship were far better than the conditions his father endured on a World War II era destroyer while serving in the Navy during the Vietnam War. On the old ships there were no real toilets or stalls, instead simple toilet seats lined up over open holes where one would take a shit into a common trough. Human waste was washed away and overboard by water from the fire main system.

Today could be a real shit storm so he decided to get up and get dressed early. The shower felt good, and he was able to shave before the rush of everyone trying to get ready at once. Over the 1MC loudspeaker a bos'n whistle sounded – tooeeyoo! A voice boomed, “Reveille, Reveille! All hands heave out and trice up. The smoking lamp is lighted in all authorized spaces.”

Commented [CB6]: Nice paragraph. This could be the start of the section, then you could find a way to move to the past. Maybe something about the AC and the temperature could remind him of growing up in Houston (?).

In an hour, he would be at a disciplinary hearing with the Executive Officer. If the XO was in a bad mood and decided Charlie should be officially disciplined for accidentally destroying his military ID card, he could kiss his plans to attend the prestigious United States Naval Academy goodbye. Every year a few sailors and marines from the enlisted ranks, who showed leadership potential, were chosen to attend the military academy, and later be commissioned as officers. To be considered, they had to have a spotless record. Charlie needed to be on the ball today. He went to the galley, quickly got something to eat, and returned to his berthing where he retrieved the manila envelope containing his academy package. It's a long way from Operations Berthing to officers' country so he needed to hurry.

The first set of stairwells – called ladders onboard the ship - was secured because someone was stripping the deck the next level up to put down new wax. Normally it was a straight shot up to the 06 level where the Executive Officer's cabin was, but now he had to take a detour.

He had spent too much time spit shining his shoes, to have them ruined by stripper. He needed to look inspection ready as he navigated his way through hatches, the handles of which had been lubricated by silicone. The ship was divided up into separate compartments and each section could be isolated by securing these hatches. Sailors often tripped and were injured while moving fast through these openings during drills.

Charlie grew up in Third Ward, Houston, Texas. The inner-city neighborhood, bordering the University of Houston and midtown, was mainly African American. His father, Pete graduated from Jack Yates High School and got drafted during the Vietnam War, then joined the Navy to avoid going into the Army Infantry. Like his father, Charlie always wanted to join the Navy, and aspired to go to the Naval Academy. Unfortunately, his high school didn't offer the

required science and math courses he needed for admission and his SAT scores weren't good enough. So, he enlisted, eventually working his way up to Second Class Petty Officer.

On O-6 level the tile changed from green to blue indicating Charlie had entered officers' country. Officers' country on the USS Peleliu was one level below the flight deck. Here corridors run hundreds of feet inside the length of the ship and are painted stark white. These bulkheads reminded Charlie of the brilliant limestone walls of an Egyptian tomb. No sunlight penetrated these catacombs and it felt cold. The ancient Egyptians believed that they would live for eternity in what was called 'The Field of Reeds'. Yet, before they could arrive there, they had to undergo a series of tests, beginning with facing judgment by Osiris, the god of death and resurrection. Unlike burial chambers, here on the ship, there was no Book of the Dead, nor spells or incantations displayed to guide one along the way. Charlie did not know what to expect at the end of his quest.

The lights went out unexpectedly, which often happened when the engineering section was running tests. It could be disconcerting to the claustrophobic. It did not help that sailors love to tell ghost stories. Stories abounded when a shipyard worker was dragged to his death by a massive deck grinder and fell thirty feet. Sailors reported hearing a loud thud in the area when doing their security patrols late at night but found nothing when they investigated.

Charlie waited for the red emergency lights to flicker on. The passageway took a sharp left turn as he entered where the senior officers - commander and above - had staterooms. Another turn led past the command passageway. Across the opening hung dark blue curtains adorned with white stylized eagles like those on the captain's collar. These 'veils of the temple' marked the point beyond which few sailors ever ventured.

Commented [CB7]: These paragraphs of backstory are important but they don't yet quite feel carefully integrated into the story. Maybe you can begin this section with Charlie waking up and then something specific in the scene can serve as a transition to backstory.

Commented [CB8]: Nice patient work with setting in these pages. Good job of creating suspense.

The 1MC announcement speaker crackled above his head as the Messenger of the Watch keyed the mike on the quarterdeck announcing the time, quarter till the hour. He had to hurry for the hearing starting at 09:00.

Finally, Charlie stepped through the hatch near his destination. Outside the executive officer's stateroom, in the dim light, was the Chief Master-at-Arms (CMAA), with his two jackals – Master-at-Arms petty officers. On one side of the passageway, were khaki-clad chief petty officers and ensigns. Facing them were the accused – sailors waiting to see the executive officer for various offenses. The CMAA motioned for Charlie to take a place in line then entered the stateroom.

If Charlie was lucky and the executive officer didn't think the case needed to go to the commanding officer, he could receive a minor punishment that would not become a part of his permanent record. That was the best hope. Outside in the passageway no one spoke. A moment later the CMAA stepped out of the stateroom and looked around. "Petty Officer Perkins, you're next."

Yes, chief."

The guys who had come early and waited the longest gave Charlie a dirty look. His chief and division officer entered first, then he followed. Charlie stood in front of the executive officer's desk. Commander Gargoyan stared at Charlie without expression. He scratched his large head which was covered in thick black buzz cut hair, growing down the back of his neck into his collar. Gargoyan crossed his hands in front of his belly. His heavy mass seemed to fill the room and vibrated with an esurience that repelled. Charlie just wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. Being in the presence of such energy was difficult to endure.

Perhaps he was giving off some strange pheromones that Charlie's olfactory could detect, but his mind could not name. Or, perhaps, the commander was channeling something inherited from his ancestors, a people who had been captured, tortured, and left to die in the Syrian desert by the Turkish army. He removed his thick navy glasses, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, and massaged his temples.

Charlie's mind went blank, and he couldn't recall any of the rehearsed lines he had prepared. Sailors had been known to almost piss themselves when Gargoyan screamed in their faces at close range.

"Attention," barked the Chief Master-at-Arms. Charlie came to attention. "Uncover." He placed his hand on his white sailor hat.

"Two." Charlie removed it and brought it by his side in one crisp motion.

The commander already had his file open. "I'm surprised to see you here Perkins. I've always heard good things about you. "Lost your ID?"

"Actually sir, I accidentally put it in the wash."

The officer smirked. "Same difference. How'd that happen?"

"I don't know."

The executive officer sat back in his chair. "I wouldn't expect that kind of carelessness from a second-class petty officer. You're supposed to be setting the example for the junior sailors." His gaze was fixed on Charlie who shifted his weight nervously trying to remain composed.

"I know, sir. I guess I had a lot on my mind."

"Having a lot on your mind goes with the job, boy. When I was in Vietnam my river boat came under enemy fire. We lost everything. You know what didn't get destroyed? My ID card.

We had to swim and crawl through muck, probably two miles to get to friendly forces, but I didn't lose that ID, because I knew it was important. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

The whole story sounded absurd. Charlie's ID turned to mush in the washing machine. How could a person breathe while holding a paper ID card in his mouth, much less keep it dry while swimming in a river through enemy territory? Seems like you would have more important things to think about like not getting your ass shot off. Besides, isn't that one reason they came up with dog tags in the first place?

Commander Gargoyan stared at the envelope in Charlie's hand. "What's that in your hand?"

"It's my admissions package. I am applying for an appointment to the Naval Academy."

"Is that what has got you distracted?" the executive officer said. "You know that as an officer you have to be able to handle a great deal of stress and still perform your job."

Charlie listened considering his words carefully.

"You think you've got what it takes to make it at the Naval Academy?"

"Yessir, I believe I do if given the chance."

"What do you want from me?"

"If I could speak plainly, I was hoping you might take into consideration my overall performance and my application to the academy. I know that you typically levy a fine on sailors for losing their ID's, but it would disqualify me."

His division officer and chief looked at each other confused. Charlie had not told them he would bring this up.

“I appreciate your honesty, but you know the policy around losing or destroying an ID card. It’s government property. I don’t like to give the impression of playing favorites,” the executive officer said.

“I understand, sir.”

“Let me think about it. I will suspend my judgement. Come back after lunch and see me.”

“Yessir.” That was not what Charlie wanted to hear. It was Tuesday and he had lost an entire three-day weekend after putting his ID through the wash the Friday before. He really needed to get away from all this but would have to wait to learn his fate.

#

At lunch he ran into his friend, Jesse from Atlanta. “Why do you want to go to the boat school and be an officer anyway? You don’t want to be enlisted no more?” Jesse said.

“No, that ain’t it. Nothing wrong with being enlisted. It’s just what I have wanted to do ever since I was a kid. I figured the time is right.”

Jesse rubbed his chin. “Hmm, check this out. Maybe you left your ID in your pocket the other day on purpose,” he said... “maybe deep down you’re having some doubt.”

“No, no that ain’t it, Shithead Freud,” Charlie said. “Why you hatin’ on me just cause I want to do better in my career?”

“All right, all right. Don’t get all righteous on a brother,” said Jesse. “It’s yo life. You gotta do yo thang.”

“Then what’s the deal?”

Jesse shrugged. “For me, I wouldn’t want to be a zero. As a brotha, numba one you are always being watched. Numba two, any mistake you make is gonna be noted and not forgotten.

I've seen a lot of young black officers go overboard trying not to show favoritism to one of us and wind up shittin' on us worse than the white dudes. That never gets questioned."

"Yeah, I have noticed that" Charlie said, nodding.

"But check this out. If a brother comes down on one of these white sailors for doing something wrong, they manage to go around him and complain to the higher ups. Next thing you know the black officer's judgement is questioned and the white boy gets off easy."

Charlie pushed his tray away in frustration. "Man, I haven't even got the appointment yet and you already being negative. I thought you were my friend."

Jesse chuckled "I tellin' you this cause I am your friend. I just don't want you to forget who you are."

"Me neither. Right now, I just need to get pass the XO.

"Good luck, baby," Jesse said as he saluted.

After lunch, Charlie found his way back to the XO's cabin. Commander Gargoyan was waiting for him. His visage seemed to have softened a bit from the morning.

"Come in, Perkins," he said.

.....
Charlie came in and sat down in a chair opposite the desk. He held his breath.

"I do understand what's at stake for you. You seem genuinely sincere about doing this. So, I might grant your request under one condition," Gargoyan said.

Charlie exhaled, feeling relieved. "What's that?" he asked.

The commander leaned back into his chair. "You see this pile of paper on my desk?"

"Yes."

“It’s the same old things, sailors doing stupid shit. It gets old. I already know what practically everyone is gonna say before they say it.”

Charlie nodded, still not following.

“Your case is unique. So, I’m gonna give you a chance for a better deal...that is... if you can make me laugh.”

“What?!! Charlie stammered.

“That’s the deal and I don’t have all day. Make up your mind. Times a ‘wasting.” The executive officer folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. Charlie began to sweat profusely. Fuck it. He cleared his throat.

“Did you know guys on the ship call you The Gargoyle,” Charlie said.

“That’s old news.” The executive officer looked at Charlie for a long moment then his face twisted into a smirk. He leaned forward and in a low voice asked, “Do you think I look like a gargoyle?”

Here’s my opportunity, Charlie thought. “Actually, if you were in a gargoyle ugly contest, you would probably win.”

Charlie paused, waiting for a reaction. He didn’t know why he said it. He was trying to be funny, not sound like a smartass. He was never very good at snappy comebacks on the fly. Everything he hoped for was about to be pissed away. He just felt stupid. Maybe this was all a bad idea. He felt like he was suffocating; his chest hurt; and sweat began to soak his back. He was shaking and wanted to run, but could not move, like a captured animal.

The executive officer gave him a ‘you little shit’ look, then let out a deep guffaw, that was drowned out by the roaring in Charlie’s ears and brain. The dim red, emergency lighting was still on and seemed to accentuate just how ugly Commander Gargoyan was. Even in mirth, this

man was truly a scary beast. His eyes began to stretch beyond their orbits, like a frog. Dry psoriatic hands grew long claws. His mouth opened revealing rows of sharp pointed teeth; his laugh had a deep reptilian rasp and his breath smelled acrid. He rose from his chair, revealing enormous leathery black wings behind him and grabbed Charlie's arm with the vice grip, the claws digging into his skin.

"Come with me," hissed the creature.

The creature pulled him through a door that led to the back part of the stateroom. Rather than having a bed, the room was empty except for something covered by a drape in the shadows.

Pointing towards the draped object, "There," the gargoyle said.

Charlie moved forward, hands trembling and started removing the drape. It was a cage, with a creature squatting inside with the same scaly skin as the gargoyle/executive officer, though smaller. A sign on the cage read 'Amor Fati'. As the creature inside the cage turned its head, Charlie saw his own face, and gasped.

The gargoyle observed Charlie's reaction. "You see the words on the sign 'Amor Fati'? Do you know its meaning?"

Charlie did not know what to say or what he was committing to. Finally, "No sir. It looks Latin."

"Yes. It means love you fate. If you follow this path you must have your whole heart in it."

"I do."

"Very well."

The gargoyle came towards Charlie, whose body was frozen as rigid as if he had broken through the ice on a lake. It extended its finger towards Charlie's face. A sharp nail felt red hot

as it seared the skin of Charlie's forehead and sank deep into his skull. He screamed in pain but was paralyzed.

"Now you have my mark, and you are bound to me forever. You can never turn back, and your life will not be the same," the creature said.

Tears were running down Charlie's face and after a few moments he was able to move and wipe them away.

"Return to your post."

Charlie walked out of the room, every muscle in his body ached, felt sore, depleted the way one feels after a bad bout of muscle cramps. As he came around the front of the executive officer's desk the lights switched from red to the regular florescent white. The executive officer was sitting at his desk in his human form. Charlie touched his forehead but felt no blood or any mark.

The executive officer was laughing. "Didn't expect that one, but you got me Perkins," he said. Then seeing Charlie's unease. "Are you alright?"

"Uh, I think so," Charlie said shakily.

"Don't forget what I put on your mind," Gargoyan said, with a wink. "Now get back to work."

"I don't think I ever will forget this."

"It's a gift, something that many people never obtain. Put in your application and I will give my endorsement."

Charlie nodded as he stepped out of the stateroom with a feeling of doom in his gut, yet relieved that his Naval Academy dream was still alive.

#

After his meeting with the executive officer, Charlie was down in his berthing and went into the bathroom to examine his forehead. Had he imagined the whole incident? Suddenly it made sense why Gargoyan made Charlie come back to talk to him. He did not want anyone else to witness his transformation.

Charlie suddenly remembered his friend Giles, a Quartermaster who had worked in the Navigation Division, directly in the executive officer's chain of command. He was kind of short, chubby, and good-natured, but got picked on a lot by other sailors. He had a unique talent as a caricature artist and kept a sketch book with him in the charthouse behind the ship's bridge when they were underway.

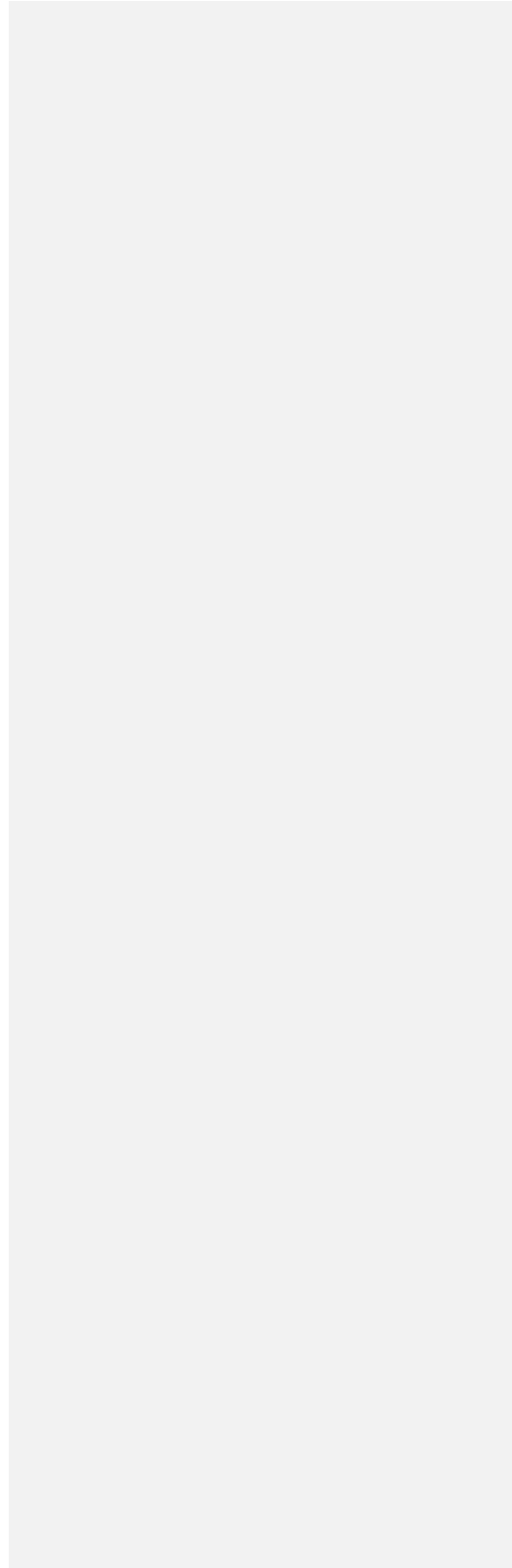
Giles would show Charlie caricatures he had drawn of all the officers and chief petty officers who were assholes on the ship. In one drawing, Giles seemed to capture Commander Gargoyan's essence. The scene depicted the captain sitting in his chair on the bridge, looking stately, ruling by presence alone. In the middle of the bridge, next to the gyrocompass stood the Officer-of-the-Deck, small and obsequious, with binoculars to his face trying to look in charge.

On the left side of the bridge, wearing a ball cap with the letters XO, sat a gargoyle perched atop the back of his bridge chair, his claws digging into the backrest, glowering at everyone. He looked ready to pounce on any sailor foolish enough to catch his gaze. It was funny and a little **frightening**. One day Giles was suddenly transferred off the ship and sent back to the states.

Had Giles discovered Commander Gargoyan's secret or seen his true form? Up until now, his departure didn't make much sense. Charlie clutched his belly, went to his bed, and laid down to calm his nerves.

End

Commented [CB9]: Great image. And great inventory for the story. This is nicely imagined and it gives you more material to work with.



What Skins We Bear

Eric Frazier was excited to be back in San Francisco. The beautiful old architecture mixed with gleaming modern skyscrapers, the hills, the Bay Bridge, the night life brought back good memories. It was the first day of Fleet Week and he was on liberty from his ship the USS Peleliu looking for a nice restaurant where he and Bob France could later meet, away from prying eyes. Discretion was critical, made difficult by an order that required all military personnel to wear their dress blue uniforms.

He had a change of clothing and planned to stop off at the local YMCA, leave his uniform in a locker, then meet Bob for dinner, later he would retrieve the uniform and return to the ship. An elaborate scheme, but an officer and enlisted man having dinner together would undoubtedly attract unwanted scrutiny. Earlier, as he left the ship, two of his lieutenants, Jim Marks, and Donovan Spann, looked at him questioningly as he passed them carrying a gym bag. Also inside his bag was a naval officer's hat to give to an old friend, Seneca, who operated a bicycle taxi for tourists.

People crowded the deck outside the Ramp bar marveling at the USS Peleliu and the USS Carl Vinson, berthed at Pier 32 two miles away. The mammoth aircraft carriers were adorned with decorative lights stretching from their masts down to the bow and stern. Jim Marks and Donovan Spann observed the scene from their weathered Adirondacks and nursed their beers.

The 1985 Fleet Week was one of the crown jewels in the United States Navy's annual public relations campaign. Such spectacles helped convince the taxpayers that Ronald Reagan's push to increase the naval fleet to 600 ships was worth the massive budget deficits that followed. Rather than feeling a sense of pride, Jim Marks could only think about how much he hated his life.

The bar's deck, built over an old pier and boat ramp, attached to a former bait shop, was now filled with patio tables. Semaphore flags arranged along the outer rail of the deck spelled the letters: Romeo, Alpha, Mike, and Papa. The top of the rail had some of the original cleats from the old pier. Party lights were hung along the roof and tiki torches stood at each corner of the deck.

Jim pointed towards two clean shaven young men, with short haircuts on the other side of the deck with gym bags under their feet.

"Look at that shit, man. Those are sailors," he said. "Little bastards probably stashed their uniforms in those gym bags after going on liberty. We should give them some shit."

"Leave em' alone," Donovan said. "You know squids are gonna find a way around the rules. They don't look like ours anyway. Probably off the Carl Vinson. Besides, right now I am just a tourist."

Jim smiled mischievously. "What kind of officer are you anyway?" he said. "You need to turn in those lieutenant bars right now."

Donovan really didn't care. He just wanted to relax and enjoy the night. Sailors' traditional crackerjack uniforms are made to fold up and be stored in small spaces. Officer's service dress blues were not. The officer hat alone would be difficult to stuff in a small bag.

Jim raised his glass. "I don't think it's necessary to wear dress uniforms on the first day of liberty, but I guess it's worth the free drinks."

The crowd on the deck was a mixture of tourists, young professionals from the financial district and older retirees. The two men stood out amongst the boy-girl, boy-boy, and girl-girl couples. Many of the women wore jeans and fashionable sweaters; the men favored the popular Eisenhower style jackets with jeans.

"Fleet Week is supposed to be a liberty port visit," Donovan said, making quotation marks with his fingers. "It's a production, a show. You know that. The Navy is giving the public what they want to see."

Jim shrugged. "I guess that's what we're here for. Sucks though."

Each year American and foreign navy ships converge on San Francisco and New York City for the celebration. As a tribute to the armed services, David Letterman started a tradition on The Late Show of filling his audience with sailors and marines during Fleet Week. It was always a highlight of the week.

A breeze began to blow from Oakland Bay and the crowd started to retreat inside away from the cool October air. Donovan took a sip from his beer and looked at his watch.

"It's late, man. I need to go."

"Why? You don't have duty tomorrow," Jim said.

"No, but don't you?" Donovan said. "I just need to be there because I've got two contractors coming on board to test and calibrate the air radar. I gotta make sure that my men have everything set up for the workers."

Jim smacked his head. "Fuck! That means that dickhead Frazier's gonna be onboard."

“Yep. He took somebody else’s duty to oversee the ship when the captain leaves for liberty.”

“Why don’t you take my duty? You’ve gotta be there anyway. Shit, I’ll even pay you,” Jim said.

Every third day one-third of the crew had to stay onboard the ship for twenty-four hours, standing watches, operating the ship’s engineering plant, and providing security.

Donovan shook his head. “Sorry, no can do. I don’t want to deal with Frazier any more than you do. I see him enough just like you. After my tests are done, I am gone.”

“Don’t ever ask me to do you any favors. Did you see that smug little bitch Frazier when he left the ship today? He didn’t even acknowledge us!”

“Yeah, he seemed to be in a hurry. How come you hate him so much?”

Jim sighed. “I never told you this, but he really fucked me on my last evaluation. Remember how he told us that he was only allowed to recommend one officer from his department for promotion?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, I found out that he lied,” Jim said with disgust. “He could have recommended both of us, but he only endorsed you.”

“Damn. I’m sorry, man.”

“I don’t blame you,” Jim said. “What gets me is that he couldn’t tell me to my face. Since I won’t get promoted, I have to get out of the Navy.”

“Oh, shit. I didn’t know that.”

“That faggot likes to ride my ass whenever I have duty and he is in charge.

A group at the next table stopped talking and looked over at them.

“Chill, man. Remember where you are.”

Jim looked around and waved his hand dismissively.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Frazier’s always strutting and preening whenever the captain or executive officer are around.”

“I know, it gets on my nerves too.” Donovan turned his attention towards the music inside the bar, hoping to change the subject.

“Let me tell you something. He’s not as bullet-proof as he thinks,” Jim said. “If he keeps fucking with me, I’m gonna blow his shit right out of the water.”

Donovan looked at Jim annoyed. “What the fuck are you hinting at?”

Jim threw out more breadcrumbs. “You’ll see.” Then, “Don’t you think it’s a little strange how he fraternizes with Petty Officer France?”

“Whatever. It ain’t my business,” Donovan said.

“But, it is your business.”

“How so? Yeah, France does work for me, but if it’s a case of fraternization between an officer and an enlisted man, that’s for the command to deal with, not me.”

Jim leaned in a little bit. “It’s not that simple, buddy. You can’t just turn a blind eye to it. It’s against Navy regulations.”

Donovan shook his head. “Fuck that. I am not getting involved in that shit. You think I’m crazy? I still have to work for Frazier at least another year and a half. Besides that, you’re getting out. Why do you care?”

“I don’t care really, but he better not fuck with me anymore or he’s gonna regret it.”

“Whatever man,” Donovan said. “Just leave me out of your little personal vendetta.”

“I’m not worried. I’ll be out of the Navy soon and he won’t be able to touch me.”

Though he relished the thought of getting back at Frazier, Jim never thought that his Navy career would end like this. He had little less than a month left in his service. It was too late to change things now, and he knew it, but he also had to admit that things had turned sour between him and his boss a long time ago.

“It just kind of blows man. I am getting out just when the Navy is expanding. That means more jobs, more opportunity to advance. I won’t be able to take advantage of any of that.”

“You could always join the Navy Reserve.”

“I wish I was in Olongapo,” Jim said. He loved Subic Bay, Philippines where getting a girl was so easy, no sexual politics. You could go to a bar, find a girl that you liked, buy her a drink, pay her bar tab, and spend the night with her no strings attached.

“Well, you ain’t. When I finish this drink, I’m gonna walk back to the ship.” Donovan sat down his glass. “I have to take a piss.”

He rose from the table and carefully brushed some crumbs of the popcorn they’d eaten from the front of his uniform before heading to the men’s room. Jim sipped his beer, lost in thought, with the jacket of his service dress blue uniform unbuttoned and his tie loosened, listening to the music from the jazz band inside the bar. Donovan returned to the table and put on his navy hat.

“You’ve had too much to drink, and I am tired of babysitting you. Face it, buddy. This is San Francisco, not Subic Bay.”

“Ain’t that the truth. That place is a sexual Disneyland. I guess you gotta be a gay man to get some action around here,” Jim said. “Not my cup of tea.”

Donovan nodded, putting on his hat. “Look you can stay if you want, but I’m outta here.”

He turned to leave, and Jim followed. Outside people walked along the Embarcadero wearing coats and scarves against the weather. The water behind the bar was black, save for a white reflection of the Oakland Bay Bridge lights. Donovan looked down the Embarcadero towards the ship, then to his friend.

“Good band, huh?” he said, gesturing towards the bar.

“Not bad,” Jim said. “Who’s supposed to be playing tomorrow at Pier 32? I’m glad I’m not the Officer of the Deck for that.”

“Somebody named Stevie Ray Vaughn.”

“Did you say Stevie Wonder?”

“No, douchebag, Stevie Ray Vaughn. Supposed to be a blues man from out of Texas.”

Across from the bar a bicycle taxi waited for a fare. Donovan walked over to the man who was dozing on the passenger seat.

“Hey, do you need a fare?” he yelled.

The man sat up startled and turned towards him.

“You scared me,” he said. “Hell yeah, you know I’m ready to make some money.”

“How much to Pier 32?” Donovan asked.

“Normally, ten each, but I’ll take you both for just fifteen,” he said gushing. He climbed onto the driver’s seat and reached down next to him and retrieved a Navy officer’s hat and placed it on his head. Under a gray jacket, he wore a pink t-shirt, white shorts and knit leggings of the type worn by Jane Fonda on her videos.

Jim looked surprised and annoyed. “Naw, naw. I think I’m just gonna walk,” he said.

“Why? We got a ride here,” Donovan said.

Jim looked at the driver up and down. "Funny way to dress for this weather."

"I'm fine. It's a little cold, but I warm up as soon as I start moving. You don't like my outfit? It's fly, baby!" he said.

"Whatever man," said Jim as he and Donovan climbed into the passenger seat.

"How ya like the fleet invading your town?" Donovan said.

"Oh, today's been great," the man said. "I've made more money going back and forth between the ships and bars than I usually do in a month."

"Have the sailors behaved themselves?" Donovan said."

The man nodded. "Yeah, yeah for the most part they were polite and courteous. But there have been some that turn their noses up at you."

"Why?" Jim asked, pretending not to know the obvious.

The driver became animated. "I just stare right back at 'em. Let 'em know they're in the wrong place to be lookin' at me cross-eyed and crazy. Shit, this is my town. If anything, they're the ones out of place."

"Where'd you get the hat?" Jim said.

"From a friend, an officer like y'all," he said.

"You know it's against the law to wear a military uniform item if you're not in the service," Jim said. Donovan looked at his friend, knowing it was not true.

The driver looked surprised. "Oh, really?"

"Your friend should have known better. What's his name?" Jim said."

"I can't tell you that."

"What ship is he on?"

The driver stood frozen for a moment looking at Jim, then began fidgeting with the handlebars of the bike as he climbed into his seat.

Jim smiled, smelling blood. “Well?”

The driver looked at him. “Look if it’s as big a deal as you say, then I’m definitely not gonna give you my friend’s name. I don’t want to see him get in any trouble.”

As the bike began to move, the knit leggings swished against the bike frame with each pedal stroke and the chain made an awful clicking noise. It really needed oil. The driver chatted cheerily about the sailors and marines he had met during the day. It all grated on Jim’s nerves as he stared at the USS Peleliu in the distance.

“I really do not want to have to deal with Frazier tomorrow,” he said. “Little faggot.”

The driver stopped pedaling, turned around and looked at him for a long moment. He was about to say something but stopped himself. He shook his head and then resumed pedaling.

Jim noticed the man’s gaze.

“No offense.”

The driver said nothing, just stared straight ahead.

Donovan and Jim had reported to the Peleliu at around the same time as ensigns and took over jobs working for Eric Frazier in the Combat Systems Department. Jim took over the job of Gunnery Officer. His job was to keep accurate records of the expenditure of training ammunition by the ship’s crew so they could onload more rounds once stores were low. Donovan oversaw the Electronics Technicians who maintained the ship’s navigational and air search radar systems. Donovan felt bad for Jim. Although they weren’t close, they hung out together because their schedules often coincided.

“Dude, sometimes I think you’re only happy when you are miserable,” he said to Jim. “Then you have to make everybody else as miserable as you.”

Jim’s face lit up with a satisfied smile. “Misery loves company,” he said. He wished the knit leggings got caught in the spokes. He was so relieved when they finally reached Pier 32. The driver parked outside the gate manned by a sailor standing pier sentry. He climbed down from the bike and came around to offer a hand to help his passengers down. Donovan took his hand and stepped down.

Jim raised his hands and shook his head, “No thanks,” he said.

The driver smiled. “What’s the matter? I’m just trying to make sure my passengers get on and off safely.”

“It’s nothing,” Jim said. “Forget about it.”

The driver looked him up and down, then raised an eyebrow.

“I think I know what the problem is. Listen, if you’re worried about being queer bait, don’t. You don’t rate a three in my book.”

Donovan was standing next to Jim. “I got the fare, man,” he said.

As Donovan was fishing out his wallet from his back pocket, Jim suddenly lunged at the driver, landing a hard left hook to the man’s jaw. The driver spun around and fell against the bike hitting his head.

In shock, Donovan yelled, “What the fuck, man!” He pushed Jim aside and reached down to help the driver to his feet. Jim stiffened up as if about to throw a punch at him. Blood was pouring down over the stunned man’s face from a gash over his left eyebrow. The officer hat that he had been given was on the ground. Jim walked over, picked it up and casually tossed it into the water.

“You fucking asshole! I’m gonna cut yo fucking ass!” screamed the driver. He was fuming, as he attempted to pull something from his shorts pocket, but Donovan restrained him. His leggings were ripped from the fall. Jim grinned, continued towards the ship, and never looked back as he walked up the brow and across the quarterdeck. The pier sentry witnessed the altercation, but seeing it involved two officers did not intervene. He immediately contacted the quarterdeck on the ship.

The officer on watch ran down to the pier, passing Jim. When he reached the pier, he saw Donovan holding onto the man from behind. The driver struggled to break free, his face now covered with tears and blood.

“What happened here?” he yelled at Donovan. “What did you do?!”

The pier sentry intervened, “No sir, it wasn’t him. It was Lieutenant Marks,” he said, pointing up towards the ship.

“Let me go! I want that son-of-a-bitch arrested for assault! That was uncalled for!” the driver screamed.

“Okay, but first please let us help you.” the duty officer said, taking one arm. Donovan was on the other side.

The driver shook his head. “Why would he do something like this?” he said. “It’s not right.” He pulled away and buried his head in his hands and cried. He looked pitiful and the two officers stood for a moment not knowing what to do.

Finally, the man stopped crying and said, “Thank you. I want to call the police.”

“Yes but let us first give you some medical attention. You can use our phone on the quarterdeck,” the watch officer said. He radioed the quarterdeck to wake the duty Hospital Corpsman.

They escorted the driver shakily up the brow and onto the ship. The duty corpsman, half-asleep, was waiting on the quarterdeck.

“I need you to treat this man for a head injury, cuts and bruises,” ordered the watch officer.

“Yessir, I can take him down to medical,” replied the corpsman as he led the man away.

“Bring him right back here when you’re done.”

The corpsman nodded.

“We’ll take your statement when you come back up, sir so the Navy can handle this properly.” He then turned to Donovan. “You need to hang tight here on the quarterdeck so we can get a statement from you as a witness, and I am sure that the Command Duty Officer would like to talk to you too.”

“Who’s the CDO?” asked Donovan.

“Lieutenant Commander Van de Veer. I know he’s gonna want to see Lieutenant Marks tonight too,” said the watch officer, shaking his head. “This shit makes no sense.”

The next morning Jim was in his office working on papers when his Growler phone rang. His department head, Eric Frazier summoned him to his stateroom.

He arrived at Frazier’s stateroom in the senior officer’s passageway. A sign on the door read, “Combat Systems Officer” atop a seal depicting all the weapon systems and sensors onboard the ship. He knocked.

“Come in.”

On the walls were the charts of fleet operating areas on the west coast where ships conducted naval gunfire exercises. His bookshelves were packed with classified notebooks on weapon systems and radars. Frazier scowled at him from behind his desk. Jim’s uniform looked like he

had slept in it, wrinkles everywhere and he wore an old t-shirt with a frayed collar, plus he had not bothered to shave or shower.

“You look like shit,” Frazier said. “Did you sleep in the street?”

Jim put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his feet. He looked up with blood-shot eyes, “No sir, I just had a bad night. I was up late making a statement to the command duty officer about...I guess you’ve heard what happened.”

“According to the command duty officer, you had worse than a bad night. The report says you were drunk and disorderly, assaulted a civilian, and were uncooperative with the investigation. These are very serious charges. What do you have to say about all this?” Frazier sat back into his chair and crossed his arms.

“No explanation, sir. I just got drunk, and things got out of hand.” Jim Took his hands out of his pockets and stood shoulders squared towards Frazier, a defiance stance.

“Just got drunk ain’t gonna fly, Lieutenant. Damn it this is Fleet Week, you idiot! Do you have any idea how damaging an incident like this could be to the ship’s reputation if this thing blows up. I can’t believe you could be that stupid!”

“Sir, may I sit down?”

“No! You stay right where you are.” Frazier read further into the report. Suddenly his eyes caught something, the muscles of his face tightened, and his eyes widened with a mix of dismay and fury. He leaped to his feet and slammed his hands on his desk.

“How in the fuck could you punch out a civilian, destroy some of his personal property, and do it right in front of your ship. Are you fucking insane!”

“I...lost my temper when I saw that he was wearing a naval officer’s hat and that’s unauthorized.”

“Well, fuck me. So, you decided to take matters into your own hands. Who the fuck do you think you are?!”

“Well sir, it was a naval officer’s cover. I didn’t think he should be disrespecting our uniform by wearing it as a prop.”

“It’s not your right or jurisdiction to act like some kind of vigilante just because you see something you don’t like.”

It was clear that the man Jim assaulted was Frazier’s friend Seneca. It felt like a personal assault on him, but he could not reveal that he knew the man. Jim remained silent. He was not sorry, and only wished it could have been Frazier he had punched in the face.

Frazier said, “I spoke to the CO this morning. There’s too much happening right now with the ship’s Open House starting today and through the weekend. When we get back to Long Beach, you will have to answer for this behavior. Until then you are not allowed to leave the ship. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then get the fuck out of my office.”

Saturday there was already a long line waiting for the opening of the ship tours, when Gerry and his family arrived at the Pier 32 public parking lot around 12:30. The gate would open at 1 o’clock.

“I thought we were early,” said Gerry as they sat in the car for a moment. They were aghast at the enormity of the navy ships.

Gerry had seen the aircraft carriers from a distance when he drove around North Island Naval Air Station, but never this close. His mother and two cousins Ursula and Birdie had only seen

them on television. On the Peleliu, sailors patrolled along the perimeter of the sixty-foot flight deck with automatic weapons. There were also armed patrols underneath the flight deck along the catwalks, normally used to move about during dangerous flight operations.

“That’s where you are going to be working, son?” His mother sounded a bit frightened.

“Yep.”

“When you go there, be careful son.”

Gerry nodded. He tried to appear confident, but inside he felt small, insignificant, and unprepared despite his months of training. Everything on the ship was built to a massive scale that dwarfed the sailors onboard. The anchors were tucked partially inside the bow of the ship: each was massive enough to crush a tank. He remembered reading that each link of the anchor chain weighed about 450 pounds and there were hundreds per chain.

All around families with children were excited to be able to see a real US Navy ship. His mother and cousins were giddy as well. The line snaked from the security gate of Pier 32 to the pier and into the Peleliu through a cargo door at the lower end of the aft hull.

The tour route traversed up a long ramp into the cavernous hangar deck where there were displays of equipment and posters explaining the ship’s mission with the US Marines.

Eventually they were led down from the flight deck, through the hangar to the quarterdeck where they would disembark from the ship. The quarterdeck watch stood beside a large wooden display board with pictures of all the senior officers on the ship with the Captain and Executive Officer on the top row.

The Lieutenant standing watch as Officer of the Deck wore the nametag: Lieutenant Marks Gunnery Officer.

Gerry turned to his mother and cousins. “Y’all go on down. I will be there in a minute.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” his mother said.

Gerry walked over to the officer. “Excuse me, Lieutenant Marks?”

The officer glared at the young black man in front of him.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“I’m Ensign Lambert. I am going to be taking over the Gunnery Officer job.”

The lieutenant looked him up and down. “You?”

“Yes.”

“How come you are not in uniform?”

“Well..I’m..I’m still on leave. I just wanted to bring my family to visit the ship.”

“Didn’t they teach you how important it is to make a good first impression? You need to step up your game. You’re not in college anymore, this is the fleet.”

“I guess I didn’t think it was a big deal since I am still on leave, just visiting.”

“It’s a big deal to me! I just hope you are ready to take over this job when you do come onboard. When is that?”

“In three weeks, sir.”

“Won’t be soon enough for me,” Jim said.

Gerry turned and left the quarterdeck as quickly as possible. The two sailors on watch exchanged a look and shook their heads.

It was late afternoon when Gerry reported onboard the USS Peleliu, in uniform. In the military one’s uniform must be perfect; tailored to fit, clean and pressed, insignia worn must be perfectly positioned in relation to each other, to within fractions of an inch; haircuts must be according to regulation; beards must be clean shaven; and one must be physically fit. As an

officer, every person you meet will judge you by these standards every minute of the day without regard for who you are as a person.

Gerry had been too anxious to eat all day. Now he was starving and felt of nausea at the same time when he went to eat dinner in the officer's wardroom. The next morning, he awoke to the sound of the ship preparing to get underway. The ship's engineers had already lighted the propulsion boilers. Steam powered equipment droned all over the ship. The quarterdeck was making announcements of the countdown until going out to sea. Gerry found his way to the Combat Systems Office located on the ship's island above the flight deck. The air inside the passageways was cold and smelled faintly of diesel fuel. A refueling barge alongside the ship was topping off the emergency diesel tanks.

The door of the Combat Systems Office was decorated with a graphic with the same graphic as that on Eric Frazier's stateroom. It inspired a sense of pride at being assigned to this department. As he entered the space, he was greeted by an older lieutenant sitting behind a desk.

"Good morning, ensign."

"Good morning, sir."

"I'm Dan Jones, the departmental admin officer. This is Lieutenant Commander Frazier."

Gerry walked over. The officer rose and briefly shook his hand. His grip was surprisingly delicate.

"Did you get settled in your stateroom and everything?" he asked.

"Yessir."

"Good. As you can see the ship is getting ready to get underway. We will be serving as a test platform for the AV-8 Harrier jets. We bought them from the British for the Marine Corps because of their vertical takeoff capability. There's still a lot of testing to be done."

“Sounds interesting.”

“Yeah, hopefully. For you, I want you to concentrate on doing your turnover with Lieutenant Marks. He is being discharged on Friday, so you need to get all your requirements done by then. Understand?”

“Yessir, I am ready to get it done.”

After a few formalities, Gerry was escorted down to the Gunnery Office by a Gunners Mate in greasy coveralls. The office was located below decks. Inside the office Jim Marks was sitting behind his desk signing some reports as a petty officer in dungarees waited patiently. He looked up from his work.

“You’re finally here. Good. Just a minute. I need to sign these reports to verify that everything on the gunnery side is ready to get underway.”

He finished and the petty officer took the papers and headed off to the Combat Systems Office.

“Are you ready for a tour?” asked Marks.

“Yeah.”

When they first met, Jim spoke to him with disdain. Now he was not hostile, not friendly, but neutral - a snake that Gerry did not trust. Jim led him through all the spaces on the ship over which he would be responsible as well as the accounting of the ship’s training ammunition.

They toured the gun mounts. The sailors proudly displayed their guns, demonstrating how the rounds and ammunition were automatically loaded into the breach of the gun. Jim looked at his watch.

“The quarterdeck is going to be calling everybody to their stations to get underway here in a minute. I need to go.”

Since Gerry was new onboard, he didn't have a station for the underway operation and so wandered up to the flight deck to watch the evolution. There is an old saying that on ships officers eat their young. Without a war to focus on, some senior officers made it their business to root out any perceived weakness from the ranks of their junior officers – creating a zero-defect environment. Many ensigns – the lowest rank of officers - felt the constant pressure not to make mistakes, which was impossible.

Once underway, Gerry met Jim at the armory and set about counting the training rounds bullet by bullet. When Gerry finished, the combined counts of the M60 and .45 caliber rounds were off by about 1000 rounds from what the ledger showed should be on hand. He recounted three times and it became clear to him that Jim had not been keeping up the ledger, never subtracted the expended bullets, and now the numbers were not accurate. This was serious.

He decided to tell Lieutenant Commander Frazier right away. He went to his boss' stateroom which the officer often used to get work done away from the noise of the Combat Systems Office.

“Commander?”

“Yes, what is it, ensign?”

“Sir, I need to talk to you about the turnover.”

“Why?”

“I don't feel comfortable with this because there are discrepancies with the count. It looks like the records weren't updated to subtract the rounds that were shot so the count is short.” Sweat began running down Gerry's armpits.

Frazier put down his pen, sat back in his office and glared at the young officer.

“Listen to me, ensign. Come Hell or high water, on Friday Jim Marks will be a civilian. So, whatever problems you find better be resolved by then. Do you understand?” He did not want to wear the stain of any more problems related to Jim.

Gerry recoiled, felt trapped, and did not know what to say.

“Yessir.” It was all that he could muster because it was clear that the senior officer was not going to budge. Frazier was two ranks above him and seemed godlike to an ensign.

“Whatever it is, unfuck it. Now go.”

Gerry departed the stateroom. He was too afraid of what Frazier would do if he pushed the issue or went over his head to the Executive Officer. He went back to the armory and found Jim Marks hanging around. Gerry brought up what he had found, and Jim pretended to be surprised.

It was clear that Jim was nervous but tried to hide it. “Maybe you miscounted. Do it again,” he said. Gerry just walked away. He wanted to scream to lash out, but just left the office deflated.

Every time Jim saw him, he would pressure him, asking about the progress of the turnover and when he would finish. Finally, at the end of the week, Gerry agreed to take over the ledger as is, but noted that there were discrepancies in his official turnover letter. It was Gerry’s last shot at letting it be known that he took over a sloppily kept record.

When Frazier saw the letter, he tore it up and would not accept it. He did not want to know how many rounds were missing. It was almost as if Gerry’s findings were an affront to him.

“Change it,” he said. “I told you that you better have all the discrepancies resolved when you turn over. Don’t come back to me until you have.”

Gerry had no alternative but to do as he was told. He decided to resolve the issue by later adding in the missing rounds to the count of ammunition expended after each future training shoot. He hoped the ledger would eventually match the actual count. His plan seemed to work

for a time, until six months later when the ship underwent a major inspection. Gerry knew the problem would be discovered and it was. He was punished and charged with falsifying an official government document. Lieutenant Commander Frazier wanted him kicked out of the Navy.

The ball was in Gerry's court and it exploded like a grenade filled with shit. He took responsibility for his actions but explained the no-win position he was put in. In the fleet reputation amongst commanding officers is everything. Being the commanding officer of a flagship, required the captain to exact a 'pound of flesh' so Gerry was given a punitive letter of reprimand that became a permanent blot on his military record.

The reason Gerry had to wear a scarlet letter was the shame brought upon the ship due to his misjudgment, not the minuscule value of the ammunition.

After the disciplinary hearing was over, the ship's captain called Gerry to his stateroom for a meeting and told him, "I want to let you know that I don't have an adversarial relationship towards you. I think you have value as an officer, but you must turn this thing around."

Gerry left the meeting feeling better but could not deal with the stares and comments from other officers in the wardroom. One evening after work he walked up to the flight deck and looked down at the pier below and wondered if a leap off, sending him headfirst onto the concrete would end it all. He then realized it would be a selfish act and did not want to cause his family any pain. He decided instead to leave the ship for good. He could have possibly requested a transfer but didn't want to wait. He went down to his stateroom, stuffed his few civilian clothes and personal belongings into his seabag, and saluted his way off the Peleliu for good.

Thirty days later...

“Boss, the admin officer sent down the package on Ensign Lambert. They need your endorsement on proceeding with his discharge paperwork.”

Lieutenant Dan Jones patiently waited for a response from Eric Frazier, who was engrossed in planning the department’s operational schedule.

Jones placed a copy of the Plan of the Day (POD) in each cubby hole for the division officers or chiefs to pick up.

“I can draft up the response for your signature,” he said.

Eric Frazier did not speak, but instead raised one finger, the way one would command a dog or child to not disturb them. Slightly built, at five foot eight, Frazier always projected authority and control. The dynamics amongst the senior officers on the ship was hyper competitive. The practice of overtly or covertly undermining one’s peers was an accepted, though twisted ethos.

There is an old joke about how ship officers stab each other in the back the way they are taught to use the ship’s weapons. When targeting an enemy, the tactical method used is shoot, shoot, look, shoot (fire two shots, assess the damage, and fire again).

Onboard the ship officers would aim their figurative knives at the backs of their peers: stab, stab, look, stab. Frazier prided himself on his ability to often stay one step ahead of his peers and be designated as one of the top officers on the ship.

Today he was doing something he enjoyed: preparing to spend time with Electronic Technician First Class Bob France, his secret lover. France stood next to his desk because they were about to do a routine equipment maintenance inspection.

Finally, Frazier answered Lieutenant Jones, “Yeah, do that. We need to get the ball rolling. If we get this personnel request in fast, do you think we could replace Gerry Lambert by the next deployment?”

“Possibly.” Jones considered the options. “I’ve seen it happen before. Since he’s been gone 30 days the command will declare him a deserter. It takes time, but if everybody from the captain up through the Navy Personnel office moves quickly, we might get a new officer on board in time.”

Frazier nodded, “Seems like we just went through this rigmarole when Lieutenant Marks was first getting out. Now we’re back at square one.”

“Yeah, and one more thing; Mark called for you this morning,” said Jones.

Frazier and France listened closely.

“So,” Frazier said, his voice dropping, appearing disinterested.

Jones persisted. “I think you need to hear this.” He looked at France briefly but focused on the lieutenant commander.

“Okay,” said Frazier.

Though Frazier was the senior officer, he knew that tone, a voice he had come to trust. Lieutenant Jones made sure things moved smoothly within the large department of over one hundred sailors. He was a Vietnam veteran and enlisted man for over twenty years before being commissioned. The senior lieutenant still held superior officers in high regard and his opinion garnered respect.

“The quarterdeck patched Marks through to the office. Luckily, I was early. Marks wanted to talk to you, but I told him you weren’t in yet,” Jones said.

“What did he want?”

Jones stopped for a moment. “France why don’t you wait for the commander out in the passageway. He’ll be out in a minute.”

France nodded, “Sure, sir.”

As the sailor turned to leave he and Frazier exchanged a subtle glance. He stepped through the door and out into the passageway. Jones turned to Frazier.

“Marks said to tell you that he knows where those lost rounds of ammo are. He was joking about what happened to Ensign Lambert. One of his buddies in the wardroom must have told him.”

Frazier frowned. “What!?”

“He said he knew where the missing ammo was. What a fucking dirtbag. Why would someone make such a provocative statement?” Jones said.

Frazier shook his head. “I’m sure he does, that piece of shit. It wouldn’t have been missing had he done his job.” Frazier rubbed his temples. A migraine was raging inside his head.

“That takes some balls.”

“I know,” Frazier said. “This call was aimed at me for the bad performance report I wrote on him after that incident in San Francisco.”

“He should have been convicted of assault after punching out that queer bike taxi driver. Instead, he got off with a lesser charge of disorderly conduct.”

“I think the captain made a mistake for not sending him to a court-martial,” Frazier said. “I guess the captain believed it was better to let the civilian courts handle the matter, since it happened off the ship.”

Jones sighed, “Marks was pretty much worthless after that incident. I know you were glad to show him the door.”

The commanding officer had punished Marks with a financial fine, but there was little that could be done to an officer whose career was already in the toilet and who was soon to be discharged from the Navy. Raising the offense to the level of a court martial would have delayed getting rid of the offender.

Frazier nodded. "You know it. Just have the paperwork on Lambert ready by close of business today. Just ignore Marks if he calls again. Tell the quarterdeck not to patch him through anymore."

"Alright. Hey commander there's one more quick thing I really need to talk to you about."

"More bad news?" Frazier furrowed his brow.

Jones nodded. "Yesterday several of the Combat Systems chiefs asked me to come down to their mess to talk. They were upset."

"About what?"

"They feel like Petty Officer France gets special treatment. They wonder why he got to be Sailor of the Quarter when other sailors got high marks during the last inspection. They got navy achievement medals, but no recommendation for Sailor of the Quarter," said Jones.

"Sounds like sour grapes to me," Frazier said. He had grown to love Bob France, but could never openly show that on the ship, so he kept it discreet, or so he thought.

"Maybe. But, if you think of it from their point of view, it looks like favoritism. They don't understand why France was chosen. I'm just the messenger," Jones said, shrugging.

"Alright. Thanks for letting me know. I'll check back with you after the department head meeting," said Frazier, ending the conversation.

Jones nodded and turned to his work. Frazier unlatched the door to the combat systems office and stepped out. Lieutenant Jones had seen a lot of young officers come through the navy in his

time. Junior officers in the department often came to him for advice when they were afraid to ask Frazier a question. He opened the manila envelope and began separating official documents about Gerry's military record and his background.

When Frazier came out of the office, he looked concerned.

Bob France was waiting. He was leaning against the opposite wall of the passageway, his hands in front of him on his clipboard. France moved towards him.

"What's wrong?", he asked.

Frazier said nothing but pointed to the ship's ladder down the passageway.

"Let's go to the antennae room," he said.

France turned. He didn't like the sound of his friend's voice and was not sure he wanted to go up the ladder now, but he had no choice. He climbed up the ship ladder three levels to where the antennae equipment rooms were. Frazier followed, looking around to see if anyone was in the passageway ahead.

Up here, the carrier's island felt quiet, clean, and cool; far different from hot, gritty, spaces below the flight deck. On the lower decks, the faint smell of JP5 jet fuel and sweat seemed to be everywhere.

France had been a cross country runner in high school. He had come in the Navy at age nineteen, having dropped out of college after his freshman year. He was a competent electronics technician, good enough to make first class petty officer after six years. He looked good in uniform.

France stopped in front of the antenna room, but Frazier walked Down the passageway. Frazier lifted the handle to a fan room, opened the hatch and entered. Fan rooms, so named because they contained giant fans connected to a large ducting system that ran throughout the ship. These fans pulled in large amounts of air from the outside of the ship's hull and created a pressurized atmosphere inside the sealed behemoth. Outside the fan room you could hear nothing but the drone of the motor. France entered the fan room, the knot in his stomach growing tighter.

"What was that all about with Marks?" France asked.

"That fucking asshole! He called and made jokes about the whole ammunition cluster fuck," Frazier said. "It was his fault, and he knows I can't touch him now."

"What a jerk. What's the point of fucking with you now?" France said.

"Remember the time he walked in on us in my stateroom?"

France remembered. It was a quiet, normal Sunday afternoon. The ship was underway. He was in Frazier's stateroom, looking at pictures of the baby his friend and wife had adopted. It was a sweet moment. France had placed his hand on the nape of Frazier's neck head and unconsciously stroked his hair. He kissed his cheek. It was a sweet moment.

Marks knocked on the door and rushed in without waiting for an answer. France pulled his hand away quickly. Marks stood staring at them for a moment, smirking.

"I'll come back," he said and left.

"I don't know what he saw," Frazier said. "Don't remember, but right after that he started giving me these looks all the time like he knew something." He stopped for a moment thinking.

"He was always an asshole," France said. "I do remember after that he started acting really shitty with me. When I had to go down and talk to the gunners-mates they would stare at me strangely. I'll bet he told them. What do you think he plans to do?"

“I don’t know, but I won’t allow him to jeopardize my livelihood,” said Frazier. “I wish this had never happened. I wish Marks had just come forward and said we needed to clear up the discrepancies in the record and turn over a clean ledger to Lambert. He just didn’t care. He just wanted to spite me. What a waste.”

“Did the ensign tell you that the count in the armory was short of the ledger when he took over from Marks?”

“I guess. He did try to tell me something was wrong during his turnover, but I wasn’t listening. I thought he was just whining. I just wanted Marks gone.”

France looked at his friend but didn’t respond. There was judgment in his silence.

“Don’t look at me that way,” Frazier said.

“What way?”

“I know you think it’s my fault and maybe it is. Maybe I should have been more careful and scrutinized what Marks was doing more closely. I just wanted him out of my sight.”

France nodded. “That’s understandable. It’s just fucked up how Ensign Lambert got screwed. He was just trying to do his job.”

France listened closely to Frazier’s words. “Why’re you so worried about Lambert? He’s toast. History.”

France shrugged. “It’s just fuck up, that’s all. Marks got off Scott free.”

“Lambert’s young. He can recover and get a new career on the outside. I’m the target of this shit. I could see twelve years of hard work go down the toilet and my family would suffer. And don’t forget you could get kicked out for this also,” Frazier said.

Frazier looked down contemplating his options. “There is one good thing about this.”

“Go on.”

“As long as the focus is on Lambert, then no one will pay attention to Marks if he tells the command about us. Everybody knows he’s a dirtbag.”

“True, true.”

“Lambert will be forgotten as just another stupid ensign who got in over his head. It happens all the time. On the other hand, if they start listening to Marks this could open a whole can of worms..”

“Even though Lambert is gone. Marks is still a problem,” said France.

“No shit. As a lieutenant commander, I could be looking at a court-martial: I’d be charged with ‘engaging in ‘homosexual activity’; fraternization with an enlisted service member; conduct unbecoming an officer; and adultery. You would probably be looking at an other-than-honorable discharge, maybe a general.”

France shook his head. “Not good.”

“That’s why Lambert’s loss is our gain. Funny thing is my wife doesn’t even care about our relationship, especially since she got the baby. That’s our arrangement. As long as I bring home the bacon, she’s happy,” Frazier said.

“I’ve always liked Carol,” France said. “So, what do we do?”

“Nothing now. Let me think about it. I do know we need to get you a transfer off the ship.”

Bob France jumped at this chance to get as far away from the situation as possible. “I will start talking to my assignment officer and see what jobs are available for me at other commands. I’ll take anything.”

“Great. I have to get my shit together for the next department head meeting coming up. Let me have that clipboard and I’ll just sign off that I completed the inspection. I’ve got too much on my mind right now.”

“Okay,” said France.

“We’ll talk later. Be careful. Don’t talk to anyone about this.”

“I won’t.”

They embraced briefly, then Frazier departed the fan room. France waited a few minutes just in case anyone was around. The fan room now felt small and hot. He felt sick with guilt. He opened the hatch and returned to his workspace.

Over the next several weeks, the Peleliu was out at sea almost constantly preparing for the next deployment. A battalion of infantry marines and an aviation squadron were on board for flight operations. The high tempo of operations meant a tight schedule for Frazier. Along with the amphibious training, his department had to shoot the big guns for naval gunfire support qualifications.

The ship returned to port and went into the Long Beach Naval Shipyard to refurbish the flight deck. For three weeks the ship reverberated with the loud zrrrghh of large metal grinders. They were used to remove the existing flight deck non-skid down to bare metal.

The noise rattled everyone’s nerves. When Frazier got time off the ship, he would spend time with his toddler strolling around the base. To his surprise, he began to notice that every time he was on base, Jim Marks seemed to be around: at the base exchange, credit union, administration building or even the park along the marina.

One day while at the exchange he had stopped in the food court and went to a table to check his child’s diaper for wetness. As he was lifting the eighteen-month-old from his stroller, he noticed Jim approaching from across the room.

“Commander Frazier! What’s up, sir?” His voice was loud and obnoxious.

Frazier looked at the grinning man suspiciously.

“What the hell are you doing here? I thought you got out of the Navy.”

“I was for a short while, then I decided to come back to the Navy Reserves.”

“Where are you assigned?”

“I got a reserve unit right here on the base in port operations. I started drilling about three months ago. They needed somebody to do an extended active duty, so I volunteered.”

“Good for you,” said Frazier, not meaning a word.

Jim flashed a smile. “Just wanted to say hello and see how things were going on the Pel.”

“I’m sure you already know what happened.”

“Yeah, I heard that the ensign didn’t work out. Too bad,” he chuckled.

“Fuck you, Marks you know you left us a real pile of shit. You are one lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

“Lambert took over the job. It was his responsibility at that point.”

Eric had had enough of the games. “I have nothing to say to you. Just fuck off.”

“Sure, commander. By the way, how is Petty Officer France doing?”

“Why ask me? I don’t know!”

“I thought you might,” Marks said smiling.

“Look, I’m trying to just enjoy my off time with my son. What are you insinuating?”

“Don’t worry about me. I would never do anything that could hurt your career, not like what you did to mine. I’m sure you have a bright future - command and everything.” He turned to walk away.

“Marks...!” Eric started to say something but looked down at the child whose wide eyes were beginning to water. He picked up the baby and began to pat his back.

“I’m sorry, little buddy. I’m not mad at you. It’s going to be alright.”

Bob France had transferred about a month earlier. Things seemed to be stable. Frazier really did not need this aggravation.

The crew was mustered in formation on the freshly cured non-skid surface of the flight deck awaiting the daily instructions. Frazier had to strain his ears a bit to hear the Executive Officer over the loud creaking and hissing of the shore steam. The ship was in that lull of quiet a month before they would be leaving for deployment overseas. Soon the number of people onboard the vessel would swell from 800 to around 3000 when Marines embarked.

The executive officer finished and motioned for Frazier to come over.

“Eric, the Captain wants you to stop by and see him after you are done going over the plan of the day with your people.”

“Yessir.”

After briefing his assembled department, Frazier proceeded below to the command passageway. He was greeted by the captain’s steward at the door, who led him to where Captain Christianson was sitting on his couch reading some naval messages. He rose and shook Frazier’s hand. There was something distant in his look, not his usual friendly manner.

“Good morning, Eric. Please have a seat. Would you like some coffee?” he said.

“Yessir, black with sugar.”

Captain Christianson nodded to his steward who served the coffee in fine china. Christianson’s large Norwegian features, etched by many years of service, were softened by closely cropped white hair. He inspired respect and loyalty from his sailors, because he always

looked out for them and would often say, "There is nothing that we do in peacetime worth risking men and equipment."

He looked at Frazier, his expression serious. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Sure. Is it about gun mount number one? It'll be up and running long before we leave."

Frazier was nervous but tried to appear calm. It was unusual for the CO to request a private meeting with one of his officers.

The captain began, "No, nothing like that. I trust that your people will have everything ready. I want to talk to you about Ensign Lambert. I got a letter from him a couple of days ago."

"Really?"

"Yes, the administrative office had sent him a letter prior to the end of his thirty days AWOL informing him that if he did not return, he would be considered a deserter and receive an Other-Than-Honorable discharge from the Navy. He responded with a personal letter saying that he could not return and asking that I reconsider that discharge and recommend he get a General Discharge."

"What was his reasoning?" asked Eric. "He understands the magnitude of him leaving."

"I know," agreed the captain. "He asked that I take into account that an Other-Than-Honorable discharge would make him ineligible for any of his benefits as a veteran. A General would at least allow him that. I would like to know what you think."

"Honestly, sir when this first happened I would have said no. Now I think maybe the kid deserves a chance."

Captain Christiansen looked surprised. "Oh. Why the change in heart? You were pushing for the maximum punishment when he ran off."

Eric nodded. "I was, but now I have begun to feel otherwise."

“How so?”

“Sir...I feel like his failure was also a failure of my leadership. The Gunnery Officer job is a lot for a brand-new ensign, and I never gave him the guidance he needed to perform it.

The captain’s eyes widened. “That’s quite a damning admission.”

“He could have been successful had I done my job. I let him fall on his sword and then crucified him for it,” Frazier said

“I admire your honesty,” said the captain.

“Yessir, I believe he deserves a second chance.”

“I agree. I wish we could have done that here. I will let Naval Personnel know that we recommend a General discharge for the ensign.”

Captain Christiantook a sip from his coffee, then reached for a manila folder next to him on the couch and opened it.

“Regarding a more serious matter. I need you to see this,” he said as he handed Frazier the folder.

He handed the paper to Frazier. It was a personal letter with the watermark that read For Commanding Officer’s Eye’s Only. It was his biggest fear: the letter was from Jim Marks accusing him of having an inappropriate relationship with an enlisted man, Bob France, who had been assigned to the ship. His heart sank. “When did you get this?” he said.

“I received a letter about two months ago and have been sitting on it, trying to decide what to do about it.”

Frazier read through the letter several times.

“You understand that these are very serious allegations but, I know that there was a lot of animosity between you and Lieutenant Marks. I had heard some complaints in the past about you

and Petty Officer France, but I ignored them because no one had any concrete evidence. Now it's come up again."

Frazier nodded, his throat tightening as he struggled to measure his words.

"Yessir, Marks was a disgrace. Yes, Petty Officer France and I were friends, just friends, nothing more. I tried my best to be discreet and not allow the friendship to impact the workplace," He said, trying to sound convincing, but his hands were shaking and clammy.

The captain looked grave. "I am glad to hear that..., but there is something else here that raises great concern for me."

The Captain took another sip of his coffee. Frazier waited..., then the other shoe dropped.

"Lieutenant Marks claims that he has information that Petty Officer France is HIV positive and that you may be also."

Frazier suddenly gasped while sipping his coffee and began to cough uncontrollably. He grabbed a napkin to try to catch a spray of liquid that erupted from his mouth. Captain Christianson closely observed his reaction. Frazier fought to compose himself.

"Are you alright?" the captain said.

"Yessir. A little coffee went down my windpipe," Frazier said hoarsely.

"Take a moment. I'll be right back." The commanding officer got up and went into his toilet.

Frazier felt faint, his vision blurred, sweat soaked his armpits. Could this be real? Was Bob France HIV positive? He had said nothing about that the last time they had spoken. Frazier had not been with anyone else.

Captain Christianson returned.

"Better now?"

"Yessir."

“Have you been in contact with France in any way since his transfer ?”

“No sir. Absolutely not.”

“The last thing the Peleliu needs is a scandal. I can ignore the rantings of a disgruntled former service member, but I cannot afford to take this thing lightly. Since the Navy found bar girls HIV positive in Subic Bay, we have to take this health threat seriously.” said the Captain.

“Yes, sir. I understand. What do you want me to do?”

“Before I put this letter from Marks to bed, I want you to get yourself tested for HIV to be sure. You can go to a private physician. It is better not to involve the Navy. Bring me the results as soon as you get them.”

“Yessir, absolutely.”

Captain Christianson was silent for a moment, then he said,

“If nothing happened between you and France, then you have nothing to worry about.”

“Yessir, that’s true. Is there anything else?”

“No, just keep me posted. Let’s put this whole ugly business behind us. There’s too much work to be done and I need you not to be distracted.”

Frazier turned and left the captain’s cabin and went up to the flight deck. He was shaking, struggling to compose himself against waves of remorse and fear. He felt flushed as he breathed the fresh air from the harbor. What if it was true? His naval career would be over in an instant and his family life would be turned upside down. A group of his sailors were working on some equipment nearby as he passed them, oblivious to their presence. He walked over to the edge of the flight deck. All his darkest fears came rushing at him at once. He had no way to contact France without it drawing suspicion, not would the other command give him private information on the man’s medical status. The brow creaked as the ship moved in and out from the pier and

for a moment, he thought how quick and easy it would be to leap the distance between the concrete pier and where he was standing and end it all right there.

End